

Prologue The First Victim



Kip stopped brushing Midnight and leaned against the horse's flanks for a moment. He just didn't feel good today. He was grateful to have a place in the stables at Dol Guldur, the fortress above his village. The wages were good, and he didn't want to be dismissed for slacking.

"Kip, don't just stand around, get a move on!" Old Tom cuffed him on the side of the head, then, more gently, touched his face. "You're burning up, lad. Go lie down while I fetch the healer."

The healer was one of the soldiers in the fortress who also sewed up wounds and mixed draughts for fevers, but when Old Tom came back a few minutes later, instead of the healer, he brought one of the black cloaked creatures that ran this place. There were two or three of them at least, servants of the Necromancer, but Kip had never seen one up close before.

The creature filled the doorway, blocking the light. It entered the room, and the muggy air in the stables suddenly felt cold.

It took a step forward and knelt beside him. He closed his eyes and turned away. Icy hands touched his face, then probed under his jaw, his armpits, and low on his belly. The creature's touch was expert, and surprisingly gentle. Kip felt the fasteners of his shirt being undone and the fabric lifted aside.

"Do you see that rash? Each spot is surrounded by a rosy ring," it said.

"What does it mean?" asked Tom.

Please no please no please no ...

It's Plague," said the creature.

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“I want to go home! I want my mum and dad!” Kip struggled to twist free from the creature.

“We can’t risk of infecting them, too,” it said.

“I’m sorry, lad, I know. It’s hard,” said Tom.

Day 0 **Waiting**



Ever since the Plague claimed its first victim a week ago, the leadership of Dol Guldur met every day, to plan how they would fight it.

Akhôrahil, the fifth Nazgûl and an able physician, slipped into the room and took his place at the table. Caring for victims of the plague kept him so busy, he was almost always late to these meetings.

Akhôrahil saw his Master at the head of the table, his face covered by a steel mask. For as long as they'd been in Dol Guldur, his Master kept his identity hidden. He concealed his face, spoke in a whisper, and forbade any of them to speak aloud any of the names he'd ever used. To the rest of the people in the fortress and the village below it, he was the Necromancer, a masked figure with no other name and no past.

His Master's gloved hands were steepled as he listened to a clerk giving a report. Akhôrahil turned his attention to the speaker.

"We finally figured out how the plague got into Dol Guldur. The first victim was a boy who worked in the stables. His duties included buying grain and produce from local farmers. The next two victims also went outside the fortress walls. One hunted deer in the forest, and the other was courting a girl in the village."

The man finished his report and got up to go. After he left the room and they bolted the door behind him, their Master pushed back his hood and removed the mask he always wore in public. The only people still in the room were Nazgûl.

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Sauron didn't need to conceal his face from his most powerful servants, who already knew who he was.

Akhôrahil spoke next. "It's possible the plague will infect everyone within these walls.

"Everyone who's mortal. I don't think the Nazgûl can get it," said Sauron.

Akhôrahil wasn't so sure. He wore a cloth over his face whenever he was working on the ward as a precaution against contagion.

"And I never get sick," said Sauron.

Akhôrahil thought about the fever that came through a few years ago. Sauron went to bed in the middle of the afternoon and didn't come downstairs at all the next day. *But of course, I'm familiar with his habit of improving the truth*, Akhôrahil thought.

"I heard that," said Sauron, glaring at him.

"What news of the plague can you tell us?" asked Khamûl.

"So many have fallen ill, we had to move the plague ward from the Infirmary to the Great Hall. But even though we have enough space now, we don't have enough healers to care for them," said Akhôrahil.

If they were going to cope, they would have to run the ward with the efficiency of a military operation. Akhôrahil stood before the Council and explained his plan. The healers were setting up apothecary's workbenches at regular intervals throughout the ward where they could prepare infusions, elixirs, and salves to fight the plague. Each workbench would be stocked with medicinal plants, a charcoal hearth for boiling and distilling, and all the tools of the herbalist's trade.

They were also setting up cupboards at central locations for the patients' linen. A large supply of sheets and nightshirts would be needed because Akhôrahil planned to have them burned after they were used.

"Make them as cheaply as possible. I'm the one who's paying for this. And if you think I'm rich, think again," said his Master.

Akhôrahil presented his best idea last. The healers would write down everything about a patient, fever, symptoms, fluids

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taken, medicines administered, and a general impression of how they're doing.

"That sounds like more work, not less," said Sauron.

"It's more up front, but it saves work in the end. Every shift change, it takes the healer a while to figure out how each patient is doing. But if there's a written record, they can learn everything there is to know about a patient in a few minutes," said Akhôrahil.

"Couldn't you just group all the patients with the same symptoms together? Then you'd know their condition based on their location in the ward," said Sauron.

There was a knock on the door, and the Chief of the Nazgûl entered the Council Chamber. He was tall, and the heavy wools and furs he wore made him look even bigger. He'd just come from Carn Dûm, his fortress in Angmar. In the far north, especially at high altitude, bare rock and ice persisted even in summer.

A steel crown sat upon his brow. This was the first time Akhôrahil had seen him wear one. Most of the Nazgûl had been kings in their own right, but their Chief, the younger brother of a king, became one himself only recently, when Sauron sent him into the far north to establish the Witch Realm of Angmar.

Sauron crossed the room and embraced him warmly.

"Er-Mûrazor! How long has it been, fifty years?" said Sauron.

"Closer to a hundred," said the Witch King.

"You're earlier than expected. You must have left the moment my summons reached you."

"Things were quiet in the north, so I was able to get away promptly."

Sauron sat down at the foot of the table, and motioned the Witch King to sit at his right hand.

"Tell me everything. How is your mission going?"

Khamûl, a gifted military tactician, moved to the foot of the table and sat with them. *This just turned into a military strategy session. Maybe I can slip out unnoticed,* thought Akhôrahil.

Waiting

“Carn Dûm dominates the North. The three splinter realms of Arnor have fallen, vanquished by the Witch Realm of Angmar,” the Witch King said. “Gondor no longer has a northern ally,”

“I did well when I made you the Witch King of Angmar,” said Sauron.

“Mairon, may I ask a small favor from you, as a reward?”

Akhôrahil cringed. He couldn't believe the Witch King had called their Master by his given name, as if they were friends.

“I'd like to be known by my title from now on,” said the Witch King.

“I should call you, ‘The Witch King of Angmar’? That takes a long time to say.”

“Angmar, then,” said the Witch King.

“Done. Now tell me about your second mission. The one that's more secret, and more important,” asked Sauron.

“I regret to report I've learned nothing. Isildur and his sons left Gondor carrying a great heirloom, but as far as I can tell, they never reached Arnor. There's no local story that tells what happened to them. They vanished somewhere along the way. There's no reason to think the heirloom ever made it to Arnor,” said Angmar.¹

“Sometime soon, I may have another mission for you,” said Sauron. “The Great Plague devastated Osgiliath last year. The King of Gondor and both his sons died from it, along with half the city. Osgiliath was so weakened; their watch on Mordor was relaxed, and then abandoned.

“When I judge the time is right, I want you to capture Minas Ithil and occupy it. It controls the road leading into Mordor, and once we have that, we can regain control of Mordor itself.

“You're in hiding. Won't that draw attention to you?”

“Not if I play it right,” said Sauron.

¹ At that moment, the Ring was in the Gladden Fields near Dol Guldur. It wouldn't be found for another 825 years.

Day 1 Denial



Akhorahil was trying to talk to Sauron about fighting the plague. Akhôrahil needed people, but he also needed cots, linens, food, medicine, and basins. Sauron was more irritable than usual. Finally he threw up his hands.

"Fine! Do whatever you want, just don't bother me. I don't care."

"But I need for you to decide ..."

"I don't care. Make whatever bad decision you want," Sauron turned on his heel and stomped out of the Council Chamber.

You didn't have to yell at me, Akhôrahil thought.

An hour later, Akhôrahil went into the Keep and climbed several flights of stairs to his Master's study. Climbing more than one flight of stairs at a time was difficult for him, with his bad knee. The iron-bound door stood open, and the shutters over the arrow slits were folded back, but even at this height, there was no breeze to catch.

The furnishings of the room, the rug in front of the fireplace and the tapestries that made the room so comfortable just seemed oppressive in this heat.

He found his Master sitting at the table, writing. The top two or three fasteners of his shirt had been undone and his collar was open, exposing the scar on his throat. Akhôrahil thought he saw something and did a double take.

"What's that?" he asked.

"What's what?" said Sauron.

"Your neck. It looks like you have a rash," Akhôrahil moved closer to see.

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“No, I’m fine. You’ve done nothing but deal with the plague since it arrived, and you’re seeing plague symptoms everywhere. I don’t think I could get it anyway.”

“Humor me. Let’s go to your room, and we’ll have a look.”

Sauron sighed. “When you’re acting as my personal physician, the only way to get rid of you is to do what you want. All right then, make it quick.”

Akhôrahil followed Sauron out of the room and up the spiral stairs to his bedroom, one level above the study. Sauron spoke a few words to pull back the bolt and the door swung open.

The room was whitewashed and had large windows recessed into the wall. A fireplace dominated the far side of the room, and a small candle holder hung from the ceiling in front of it. A simple bedstead stood against the wall, with a wooden chest at its foot. There was a table and chair near one of the windows, but there wasn’t a rug or tapestry or a lacquered box anywhere, but other than the wrought iron latch on the door and the dragon-headed candle holder that hung from a chain in the ceiling, both of which looked to be Sauron’s own work, there wasn’t a single decoration in the room.

His Master shut the door behind them and latched it. He went to the window where the light was better and took off his shirt, dropping it on the window seat.

Akhôrahil saw a scar on his Master’s back, a small vertical line on the left side below the ribs that looked like a sword thrust. He wanted to ask his Master about it, but physicians are discrete, and it was none of his business.

Akhôrahil joined his Master at the window. He examined his neck, but couldn’t tell what he was looking at. It could have been the earliest stage of plague rash, but the characteristic spots were absent; so were the telltale rings around them.

Furthermore, his Master didn’t have a fever, and he said he felt fine. The redness might be from the scar on his throat², and have nothing to do with plague. Akhôrahil considered what to

² The duel with Lúthien Tinúviel and Huan at Tol Sirion in the middle of the First Age.

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do. The early stages before the symptoms appeared were the most contagious.

Akhôrahil made a decision. "Look, I want you to stay in your room for a couple of hours. You might be contagious, so I don't want you to be around other people until we know whether or not you're getting sick," he said.

That afternoon, Akhôrahil returned to check on his patient. Before he entered the room, he tied a kerchief over his face which covered his nose and mouth. Only his eyes showed above the fabric.

He found Sauron sitting on his bed, complaining about having been confined all afternoon when he had better things to do.

"And I'm not sick, by the way," he said.

"Let's have a look at you," Akhôrahil said.

Sauron undid his shirt at the neck and lifted it over his head. The barely noticeable rash Akhôrahil thought he saw earlier had become darker, and it covered a larger area of his Master's chest. The spots and red rings characteristic of plague had also begun to appear. Before, Akhôrahil suspected it might be a plague rash. Now, there was no way to convince himself it wasn't.

Akhôrahil chose his words carefully. "I'd like to move you to the plague ward. We're better able to take care of you down there," Akhôrahil simply wasn't able to be the chief physician in the plague ward and his Master's personal physician at the same time.

"I'd be more comfortable in my own room. I'd rather to stay here," Sauron said. "Anyway, there's no reason to think I'll get sick with it. I don't have a fever, I just have the start of a headache."

"The Plague is a fast moving illness. You can get very sick very quickly. I'd rather you went downstairs while you can still walk. You're heavy, and carrying you on a stretcher would be difficult. The hallways aren't a problem, but I'm concerned about the spiral stairs in this tower."

Sauron was silent. Akhôrahil pressed his advantage.

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“Look, let me have a bed prepared for you in the ward. I’ll see that you have something in a private corner, behind a screen. When it’s ready, we’ll walk down together. Like I said, this is a fast moving illness. If you haven’t fallen ill by nightfall, you can go back upstairs and sleep in your own bed tonight. What do you say?”

Sauron crossed his arms and scowled. “All right, set it up. I’ll come down and have a look, and then I’ll decide whether to stay or come back up here.”

Akhôrahil bowed slightly and turned to go.



Akhôrahil stood in the doorway and studied the Great Hall. There was a raised dais or stage at one end of the Great Hall where they set up the High Table during feasts and the celebrations at Yule. Wooden screens at the back of the stage concealed the servants’ doors used by those who waited on the High Table.

Akhôrahil chose the area behind one of the screens to create a private space for his Master. He tried to make it as comfortable as possible by bringing in a real bed and placing a chair next to it for visitors. The servants’ door behind the screen led to the main corridor, so visitors could enter and leave without having to walk through the ward.

He had an orderly bring in a small table on which to put medicines and tools. He covered the instrument used for bleeding with a cloth, so the patient wouldn’t have to see it until the last minute.

Akhôrahil stood on the stage and looked out over the ward. The Great Hall had been transformed. Walls made from sheets divided the different sections, and separated men and women. Everything in it had been removed, replaced by row after row of cots that filled the length and breadth of the Hall. It reminded him of Mordor’s armies in the Second Age.

When Akhôrahil returned to his Master’s room, he found him wrapped in a cloak and shivering, on one of the hottest days of the year. They both knew Akhôrahil would insist he go

down to the ward right then. Sauron didn't feel well enough to argue.

Sauron got to his feet. Before they went descended the stairs, Akhôrahil tied a kerchief around his Master's face to cover his nose and mouth. The early phase of the malady was the most contagious. It was dangerous and irresponsible to let an infected person pass a healthy person in the corridor.

Akhôrahil noticed his Master was unsteady on his feet. He abandoned the plan to take a discrete route where they wouldn't be seen. Instead, he took him by the shortest, most direct route, which took them across the courtyard. Even so, his Master had to stop and rest several times. It was a slow, difficult trip.

Akhôrahil walked beside his Master, holding his arm to keep him from stumbling. He opened the servants' door onto the stage and led him to the bed behind the screen. Akhôrahil was grateful for this private entrance which let them avoid walking through the ward. He knew his Master didn't want to be seen. Also, the smells of the ward were pretty bad, even with every window shutter and door open to catch as much cross ventilation as possible.

Sauron sat on the bed. It was made up with two pillows and a grey wool blanket. The bedclothes crackled as if there were an oilcloth or tarpaulin under the bottom sheet. He turned back a corner of the blanket to see what was making the sound.

"Am I mistaken, or is there something stiff under the sheets?" Sauron asked.

"There is. It's there because it's waterproof. Otherwise we'd have to burn the mattress afterwards," Akhôrahil explained.

"And there appear to be three or four sheets on the bed."

"There are. The healers change the sheets multiple times per day, and it's easier if they can just strip one off and have a clean one underneath. The patient doesn't even have to get up, which is a mercy for those who are too weak to stand."

Akhôrahil went to the foot of the bed and picked up a board with sheets of paper attached it. He noted the date at the top of the page, then wrote down the information they took for every new patient.

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Race:	Man? half-Elven?
Age:	in prime
Height:	7'
Weight:	17 stone ³

Below, he made the first entry in the medical record.

Symptoms:	First appearance of plague rash midmorning, significantly more developed by early afternoon, headache.
Fever:	Low to moderate. Shivering.
Observations:	Irritable. Unsteady on feet.

Akhôrahil didn't know his Master's race. He resembled the Men of Númenor, but that didn't explain his extraordinary age, which Akhôrahil knew to be 5000 years or more. Only the Elves lived that long. But he didn't seem Elven either, because he was more muscular than they usually were, and he had to shave. Most Elves can't grow a beard until they're very old.

Akhôrahil sent the healer out of earshot on an errand, then sat down on the edge of the bed with the pen poised over the board on his knee.

"This is medically important, so please answer as accurately as you can. What race do you belong to?"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm guessing you're half-Elven, is that right?"

Silence.

"I'm asking so I'll know how to treat you. What you tell me will affect what drugs I give you and their dosage, and what treatments I administer or steer clear of," said Akhôrahil.

Akhôrahil didn't know why his Master was being secretive about his race, but he could guess. Whenever a patient was evasive about the circumstances of his birth, it usually meant he

³ one stone = fourteen pounds

was illegitimate. It was possible Sauron didn't know who his father was. He might not even know his father's race.

"You don't know?" Akhôrahil asked gently.

Sauron looked away. He seemed uncomfortable having this conversation.

"We both know you're not normal. You're a shape-shifter, you don't age, and you've come back from the dead at least twice," Akhôrahil said.

"I'm a spirit clothed in a physical body, just as you are. Almost everything that's true for anyone else is true for me," said Sauron.

"Tell me about the differences."

"I can go longer without food and sleep."

"And water?"

"No, that's the same. I rarely get sick. I heal quickly, and I can endure more pain."

"Is that all? If you think of anything else, let me know."

"There is one other thing, but I don't think it's important," said Sauron. "I can't have children."⁴

"Have you tried?" asked Akhôrahil.

"No. I have little interest in the matter."

Akhôrahil waited, but his Master would say no more.

"I'm going to step outside for a few minutes to let you get undressed," Akhôrahil said. He put a plain white shirt on the bed beside his Master. "Please remove every stitch, and put this on."

"Why?"

"We've found it's easier to take care of patients that way. We run the ward like a machine, and it's just one more of our efficiencies."

Sauron picked up the shirt and studied it. "I admire good craftsmanship, and this is not it. I know I said to make these as cheaply as possible, but this shirt has no fasteners, the stitching is uneven, and the edges haven't been hemmed."

⁴ "The great Valar do not do these things: they beget not, neither do they eat and drink," J.R.R. Tolkien, *Osanwe-kenta* (c. 1959-60)

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“They have to be cheap. They’re worn once and then burned,” said Akhôrahil.

Sauron made a face at the offending garment and tossed it aside.

Akhôrahil had a greater concern, He knew how quickly the illness could progress, and that people with high fevers were not mentally competent. He also knew there was a possibility his Master could die. They needed to name a Regent to take over while Sauron was incapacitated.

“Why don’t you summon the Witch King? If there’s anything you need to discuss about the Regency or Succession, now is the time to do it,” Akhôrahil urged.

“Don’t be silly. I just have a headache and a little bit of fever. I don’t even feel all that bad.”

Akhôrahil went and found Lord Angmar himself. He was amused to note that Angmar had abandoned the furs he’d arrived in for the lightweight summer clothes they all wore in this heat. He told Lord Angmar how serious the situation was, and urged him to come right away. They paused in the corridor outside the servants’ door. Akhôrahil cautioned Angmar about contagion.

“Don’t get within three feet of him, don’t touch him or anything he’s touched, and keep your mouth and nose covered at all times.”

He gave Angmar a kerchief and showed him how to fold it diagonally and tie the corners in the back. Then he gave him a container of aromatic salve and had him rub it on his upper lip. That way, he would breathe the medicinal fumes while he was in the ward and be protected against contagion.

When he showed Angmar in, they found Sauron sitting cross-legged on the bed. He was still wearing his ordinary clothes, and he looked cheerful. The kerchief was on the bed beside him. When he saw them, he picked it up and tied it over his face without being reminded.

“I’ve started to feel better already. The fever’s gone, and the headache too,” Angmar looked relieved. Akhôrahil did not. He knew this malady ebbed and flowed. What looked like a retreat was more like the windup before a devastating blow.

Plague

A healer knocked and came around the end of the screen. "I've come to trim your nails," He explained that the first thing they did when a patient was admitted to the ward was trim their nails to the quick. The rash could itch so badly that patients scratched themselves raw. They might also scratch the healers by accident and infect them.

Sauron said, "Give me the penknife, I'll do it myself," He sat on the bed trimming his nails while he talked to Angmar.

"The most important thing you need to do while I'm out of commission is defend Dol Guldur against attack. There are those who wish us ill, and if they get word that the Plague is here, they may strike. I'd prefer to stand and fight, but if I have to come out of hiding and fall back to Mordor, I will.

"The next thing you need to do is manage everything having to do with fighting the Plague. It's possible everyone in Dol Guldur will fall ill with it. Of those, a significant number will die. You have to think about burial and about running this place with a skeleton crew who already have their hands full taking care of the sick. Mass burials must be done in secret because we need to conceal from our enemies how hard the Plague hit us.

"I'm planning to be out of here by nightfall, so hopefully you'll only have to run things for half a day, but it's possible I'll be out for four or five days. We'll just play it by ear. Either way, you can always come in here and consult with me."

Akhôrahil rolled his eyes. His Master had no idea how sick people with plague could get.

Akhôrahil asked, "Just for the sake of argument, what would happen if you succumbed to the malady? How long would it be before you took form again?"

"It could be over a thousand years," said Sauron. "Possibly more. It's not easy to take form. When I had the Ring, I could do it quickly, but I can't now."

"At any rate, we don't want anything to happen to you. Promise me you'll cooperate with the healers here, and let us help you get well as soon as possible," said Akhôrahil.

"Oh, and there's one more thing," Akhôrahil picked up the board from the foot of the bed and turned to a fresh sheet of

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paper. He handed it and a pen to his Master. "I think it's time you named a Regent,"

Sauron wrote a few lines and signed his name below them. He folded the paper and handed it to Angmar.

Akhôrahil excused himself to let them talk in private, and left to make his rounds on the ward.



Akhôrahil had meant to check on his Master sooner, but more than an hour had passed before he mounted the steps to the stage and looked behind the wooden screen. The bed was empty.

He blinked in surprise. His Master had promised to cooperate. Akhôrahil couldn't believe he'd run off already. Agitated, he stepped into the corridor and looked around. *Where would he have gone?* Akhôrahil started off toward the Council Chamber at a brisk clip. Almost right away, he ran into his Master.

"Where were you?" Akhôrahil was furious. "I found your bed empty."

"I just went for a walk," said Sauron.

"You shouldn't go off by yourself until we're sure you're not getting sick," said Akhôrahil.

As if I have the power to make him do anything, Akhôrahil thought. I'm a Nazgûl, his slave. Even Angmar, who has more free will and is more independent than any of us, is his slave. Our Master can read our thoughts and overpower our wills whenever he wants. But he's contagious. I can't have him leaving the ward.

Akhôrahil picked up the board and added a note, "Patient felt well enough to get up and go for a walk."



That afternoon, Akhôrahil called a meeting to tell the others their Master had been admitted to the Plague Ward. The mood in the Council Chamber was solemn. They each sat in their

accustomed places. Sauron's chair at the head of the table stood empty.

Akhôrahil told them what he knew. Their Master showed symptoms of the disease, but hadn't fallen ill. He was contagious, so he couldn't leave the ward. He couldn't have visitors, either, unless Akhôrahil brought them in himself.

"He's not in danger, is he?" asked Khamûl.

"We don't know yet," said Akhôrahil.

Akhôrahil told them Sauron signed the papers to make the Witch King his Regent, but it was just a precaution.

When the meeting broke up, Akhôrahil asked Angmar for a word in private.

"Lord Angmar, do you know what race our Master is?" said Akhôrahil.

"He's never said," said the Witch King.

"I need to know for medical reasons. But he won't tell me if he's Man or Elvish or a mixture of the two," said Akhôrahil.

"I don't know why he'd be secretive about it," said Angmar. "Unless ... Wait! You don't suppose ... do you think he's one of the Holy Ones?"

Akhôrahil snorted. "I've examined him and I am completely sure there's nothing supernatural about him. He eats and drinks like everyone else, with the same natural consequences. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but from a medical point of view, he's human."

"But he came back from the dead," said Angmar.

"He's a very powerful sorcerer," said Akhôrahil.

"Sorcerers can extend their own lives through magic, but I never heard of a sorcerer who came back from the dead."

"They can if they're Elves. The point is, I think I can spot someone who didn't come out of a woman's belly. It's not hard, they lack a navel.⁵ There's nothing about our Master that's out of the ordinary."

Except for the pupils of his eyes, Akhôrahil didn't add. But that could have been a flaw present at birth.⁶

⁵ A commonly held belief about the Holy Ones, but wrong.

⁶ A racial trait common to the Holy Ones.



It was late in the afternoon. Mairon lay on top of the scratchy blanket thinking about how much he didn't want to sit in the plague ward from now until evening, doing nothing. He hated being idle. He didn't even like the idea of staying in his own room for the rest of the day, not when he had more important things to do.

On the other hand, most of what he did involved talking to other people. Akhôrahil was worried about contagion, so Sauron was probably going to be confined to quarters until the rash cleared up, anyway. He didn't like his options, but he didn't think Akhôrahil was wrong, either.

He listened to the fragments of stories and gossip he could hear from his comfortable perch behind the screen. In spite of being in a large public room, he really did have a lot of privacy, and he was reasonably far away from the hubbub of activity in the open spaces of the main ward.

He got up and walked around the end of the wooden screen to look into the ward. He could see over the walls of sheets into Sections Two and Three because the stage was several feet above the main floor, and he was tall.

He was surprised by how many cots were occupied today. The ward was close to full. Two days ago, over half the cots were empty. He planned the ward and looked in on it from time to time, although most of his information came from the daily status reports Akhôrahil made during their daily meetings in the Council Chamber. But he hadn't appreciated how aggressively the malady was claiming his people.

The ward was reasonably quiet, given how many people were there. He could hear the murmur of conversation as patients talked among themselves. The least sick were in the section closest to the stage. They still felt well enough to sit on their cots playing cards or dice to pass the time. The illness made people irritable so occasionally, fights broke out, particularly among the orcs.

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He returned to his bed and lay down on top of the blanket. He closed his eyes for a few minutes and listened to the sounds of the ward coming from the other side of the screen. He heard the sounds of footsteps and soft voices, and the clink of metal against metal. The ward rang with the clatter of something heavy being dropped, followed by a soft curse and someone laughing.

Without intending to, he fell asleep. He slept all afternoon and well into the evening. When he woke up, it was dark and he didn't know where he was. He did know he had a really, really high fever. And when Akhôrahil came in to check on him, he said,

“I am in serious trouble.”

Akhôrahil stepped into the main ward and came back with a healer. Without asking his Master's permission, the two of them undressed him and put him to bed. He was too sick to protest.

Day 2 Fever



Mairon lay in bed in the middle of the night, listening to the sounds in the ward, too anxious to sleep. In his heightened state of alertness, he saw potential threats in every person he didn't know, every sound he couldn't identify.

He was helpless. He was too ill to stand without help, forced to trust strangers to take care of him. It meant giving up control. He hated that.

Mairon knew he was a tyrant. He ruled by fear. Although he didn't normally think about it, it was possible he was surrounded by people who wished him ill. Most of the medical staff were people he didn't know, and unlike the Nazgûl, he couldn't read their minds. He had no way of knowing how they felt about him. This one might have been punished harshly in the past. That one might have a brother who'd been put to death.

Right now, he couldn't defend himself. Anyone could do him in with no risk of being caught. They could look like he died of the plague.

Stop it. No one's trying to kill you, he thought.

It would be easy, a pillow over the face or a dose of poppy syrup large enough to make him sleep forever. And when being bled for a fever, it's normal to pass out. You have to trust the surgeon to loosen the tourniquet and apply pressure to the wound. But if he let you bleed until your heart stopped, you'd never know.

Mairon knew what it was like to bleed to death. It's pleasant, in a way. You feel sleepy, and your whole body feels warm.

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Soon you're not conscious anymore. You don't even know it when death comes, or when someone hacks off your finger.

He summoned Akhôrahil, who practically ran into the room, a robe thrown on over his nightclothes.

"I have new instructions. I won't allow myself to be bled, and I won't take any medicine while I'm here,"

Akhôrahil listened politely. His face was neutral. Mairon focused his will upon the Nazgûl, and with effort, read his thoughts.

"... obey you because I have to, but...still think...being a moron."

"I'm concerned about my safety," Mairon told him.

"I've imposed restrictions on who can get close to you, based on their personal loyalty to the Necromancer. Furthermore, I identified one or two among the staff who were not your friends. I assigned them to work in the village. They're not allowed in the fortress anymore.

"Besides, no one on the ward knows who you are. Your name isn't on your records. No one here has ever seen you before, except behind black robes which they assume covers something hideous," said Akhôrahil.

"I'm getting special treatment, better than anyone else in the ward. Won't that attract attention?" asked Mairon.

"It does, but I pulled aside one of the most well-connected orderlies and told him in strictest confidence that your father paid for my medical education. Now everyone on the ward has heard the story," said Akhôrahil.

Mairon nodded with admiration. Even by Mairon's standards, Akhôrahil was good at palace intrigue.

Mairon wondered when he'd stopped trusting people.

He trusted Akhôrahil. He trusted all of the Nazgûl, although he controlled them and monitored their thoughts, so maybe they didn't count.

He trusted Eönwë and Ilmarë, his closest friends when he was young. They'd never betrayed him. He trusted both Aulë and Melkor. Neither one ever hurt him, unless you counted the occasional belt or back of the hand, but that was expected, and he didn't attach any importance to it.

He thought his wariness must have started with Celebrimbor. They were close friends, but Mairon avoided telling him anything about his life before the Gwaith-i-Mírdain. He let Celebrimbor believe he was a Noldo Elf educated in Valinor.

Celebrimbor, for his part, ignored the letters from Lindon warning him about the visitor whose story didn't quite add up. Celebrimbor must have guessed there was something shady about Mairon's past, bad enough to get him banned from Lindon. However, Celebrimbor was eager to acquire the knowledge Mairon learned from Aulë. He looked the other way and didn't ask too many questions, for which Mairon was grateful.

Even so, Mairon always had to watch what he said. He couldn't talk about specific names, events, or deeds. He had to be careful not to say anything that would reveal his age or race, or the side on which he'd fought during the Rebellion. He could never relax around people.

The secrecy kept the friendship superficial. He would have liked to confide in Celebrimbor. One day, he took the risk. He didn't tell Celebrimbor everything, but he told him enough to put the pieces together and guess his identity.

"Sauron Gorthaur," Celebrimbor had spat out the words.

He wasn't one of the Noldor Elves who studied under Aulë. He was a Maia, Aulë's apprentice, Melkor's standard bearer. Celebrimbor was silent for a long time. Then he said, "Get out."

It was devastating. It was the first stroke in a feud that ended with Celebrimbor's death.

After that disaster, Mairon hesitated to confide anything about his past to anyone. He was vague about his background even with the Nazgûl. He rarely told them anything personal about himself. He allowed them to believe whatever they liked about how he came by his powers and his long life.

He did reveal a few things to them indirectly. The walls of Barad-dûr were decorated with a series of murals depicting the Forging of the Ring and the short-lived Conquest of Arda by Sauron the Great, events which occurred before the Nazgûl were born. There was another series of murals with scenes from

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the life of Melkor, in which Melkor looked as beautiful as he had been in life.

The murals were gone now, reduced to rubble when Barad-dûr was pulled down after he lost the Ring. But based on those portraits, the Nazgûl must know their Master was a follower of Melkor. However, he never told them he had known Melkor personally, or that he had been Melkor's second-in-command and standard bearer.

He told his people in Dol Guldur even less. He was a sorcerer called The Necromancer. That was all.

Now that Angmar was back, Mairon realized how much he'd missed him. Angmar was a close friend. He had few friends, in spite of how outgoing he was. He longed to confide in someone about Utumno, Valinor, and even his life in the Timeless Halls where he lived before the earth was created, but he couldn't. It wouldn't be wise.

But it would be such a relief to stop guarding his words all the time, to stop concealing his past. He was beginning to think it might be worth the risk.



The next time Mairon woke up, it was still dark in the ward, although there were pools of soft lamplight here and there. He remembered there was a chamber pot under the bed, as there was under every cot in the ward. He started to get up, but the room spun so violently he thought he would be sick. He clutched the sides of the bed and cried out in alarm. A healer appeared around the end of the screen.

"I need help."

"What can I do for you?" asked the healer.

"I .. um .. I have to use the privy, but I can't get up by myself."

"If I helped you up, do you think you could sit on the edge of the bed?"

"No, the room is spinning. If I lift my head, I'll be sick."

The healer disappeared for a moment and came back with a glass jar. He lifted the sheet, saying, "I need you to put your

knees apart," He positioned the jar and said, "I'll just step outside for a moment. Call me when you're done."

The healer came back in a few minutes and took the jar. Mairon noticed how visible the contents were through the clear glass and wanted to die of embarrassment. Couldn't it have been made from ceramic or metal or anything opaque, to leave me with one tiny shred of dignity? But the jars in the ward were clear for a reason.

On the other side of the screen, Mairon heard the healer say, "Somebody wake Akhōrahil," When Akhōrahil arrived, he heard him say, "Yes, you're right, this has blood in it, quite a lot, actually. It's a common plague symptom, I'm afraid. If he gets any sicker, he may start to bleed from the ears."



Akhōrahil left the stage and descended the three or four stairs into the ward. He walked by Section One but didn't stop. The patients here didn't receive medical attention, as they were contagious but not yet sick. Akhōrahil noticed there were more of them here today than there were yesterday. Not good.

He walked into the ward and stopped at Section Two. These were the patients he was most able to help. He looked around the Section with a practiced eye. There were many people here who were miserable, but one or two who were in grave danger.

He located the chief healer and went over to speak to him. The healer showed him a patient who was debilitated from vomiting. Akhōrahil picked up a board from the end of the patient's cot and read through the pages attached to it.

This was the third day of the patient's illness. He hadn't eaten since the fever began, and had terrible pains in his arms and legs. Akhōrahil thought the pain was caused by starvation.

"Can you check him for fever?" Akhōrahil asked the healer. Akhōrahil had trouble judging. To him, all of the living felt fever-hot.

"Medium high. He's shivering, so it's on its way up," said the healer.

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Akhôrahil rubbed his hands together to warm them before he examined the patient. His fingertips moved over the patient's belly. With his eyes closed and his mind focused, he was able to see beneath the skin.

Akhôrahil became a physician because it was one of the few professions open to the blind. He'd grown up expecting to become a ship chandler or a money-lender like everyone else in his family, until a fever robbed him of his sight. He apprenticed himself to a physician instead.

His family was descended from minor nobility. They weren't wealthy, but they had a few connections. A second cousin, Adunaphel's father, was able to secure him an appointment as a court physician in Annúminas.

Soon he was treating people far above himself in rank, people he never would have dared approach on the street.

It was the nature of his profession that a noble would seek him out and confide in him deeply personal things of a medical nature. Perhaps it was the trust people put in physicians, but they often confided other secrets in him as well. He learned of political schemes and maneuverings at court he never would have guessed at otherwise.

He discovered he had a talent for court intrigue. The loss of his sight made his hearing keener, and he heard nuances of meaning that others missed. That gave him the ability to hear truth and falsehood in a person's voice, which the sighted normally missed.

Nothing he learned in his medical studies could restore his sight. Hoping to regain his vision, he began to study sorcery. He learned to 'see' with his mind, which let him see where the sighted couldn't, in the dark, behind himself, and inside closed cabinets.

Being able to see with his mind didn't restore his sight, but it made him a better physician. When he put his fingertips on a patient's belly, he could see inside the patient's body. He could diagnose blockages, tumors, and pregnancy with ease.

He became a powerful sorcerer. But when he was invited to wear one of the Great Rings, it wasn't for his skill as a physician, it was for how well connected he was at court.

And something amazing happened when he put on the ring that made him a Nazgûl. His sight returned.

Akhôrahil picked up the board, added a few notes of his own, and hung it back on the end of the cot.

He went over to one of the large work tables where an antidote for nausea, a vile-tasting potion, was prepared and measured out. The healers joked that the smell alone was bad enough to make a patient sick.

Akhôrahil brought the potion back to the patient, and the healer helped him drink it. It came up again almost right away, with more violence than usual. While the healer cleaned up the patient, an orderly mopped off Akhôrahil's face and hair and helped him change his smock for a clean one.

Vomiting and flux were symptoms of the plague, and they could dehydrate a patient enough to kill him.

The danger was, when a patient couldn't keep fluids in, he couldn't absorb medicine in time for it to work. The irony was, the dehydration itself could cause vomiting, and start a vicious cycle they couldn't break. Akhôrahil tried to give doses of the bitter potion early and often, but the malady moved so fast, it was hard to stay ahead of it.

"Who else needs my attention?" asked Akhôrahil.

"We have someone who has the flux so badly he's wasting away before our eyes. His mouth is dry, and he can't spit," said the healer.

Akhôrahil examined the patient and immediately saw how much danger he was in. He decided to move him to Section Three, which was better equipped to care for him.

Akhôrahil washed his hands and changed his smock for another clean one before going on to Section Three.

The healers there looked up when he approached. Section Three had the most healers, and was the place where the healers were the most highly skilled.

Akhôrahil heard an anguished wail from the middle of the section. "What was that?" he asked.

"He's out of his head with a high fever. He thinks spiders are crawling on him," said one of the healers.

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They led him to the bedside of a patient raving with delirium, screaming and clawing at his own face and eyes.

"He'll hurt himself," said Akhôrahil. "Bind his hands to the side of the cot. But wrap bandages around his wrists first, so he won't rub himself raw against the restraints."

Another healer approached them, looking anxious. "We have someone here who needs your help."

They led him to the bedside of a young woman they hadn't been able to wake. Akhôrahil pulled back her eyelids and used a mirror to steer sunlight into her eyes. Her pupils didn't react. He looked up at the healers and shook his head.

"There's nothing you can do? She was brave and cheerful, and we all liked her. We hoped she would make it," said the healer. He blinked hard.

"I'm sorry. She's beyond our help now," Akhôrahil said.

He knew what would happen next. Orderlies would carry her cot to Section Four, at the very back end of the ward. Patients in Section Four didn't receive medical attention, other than having the dead removed and thrown into mass graves just outside the fortress walls.

The truth was, they really couldn't do much for their patients. They could give them food and water, keep them warm, and give them drugs for the symptoms, but they had no way to fight the plague itself. It had to run its course in each patient. All the medical staff could do was make them comfortable while they waited to learn their fate.



When Mairon woke, it was light again. He was drenched in sweat. Strands of hair were plastered to his face, and his shirt stuck to his chest and back. He peeled it off and tossed it on the floor. It landed near the wool blanket, crumpled on the floor where he'd flung it during the night. He kicked off the sheet too, but even naked and spread-eagled, he was still too hot.

Akhôrahil came around from the other side of the screen. "There's someone here to see you, but I doubt he wants to see

that much of you," he said, and pulled the sheet up to Mairon's middle.

Akhôrahil called, "You can come in now," Mairon twisted on the bed to see who it was. The waterproof cloth under the sheet made a rustling noise when he moved.

The door opened, and Angmar came in.

When Angmar saw him, he put his hand over his eyes and turned away. Mairon was aware the sheet had slipped when he moved, but he felt too ill to care. *So now he knows I have pubic hair, big whoop.*

A healer discretely twitched the sheet an inch higher. Angmar kept looking at the wall, apparently finding the woodwork interesting. Finally he looked back, keeping his eyes fixed on Mairon's face and nowhere else. But almost right away, he forgot his embarrassment.

"You're bleeding!" Angmar cried in alarm. "There's blood on the pillow, and, in your hair."

Akhôrahil hurried over to look. He put a hand on Mairon's cheek, pushed his head to one side, and lifted his hair. He did the same thing on the other side.

"He's bleeding from both ears. I didn't notice earlier, because it was covered by his hair. It's one of the symptoms of the Plague. I'm afraid the severity of the disease has been exactly the same for him as it is for everyone else."



Angmar came back a few hours later to check on his Master. Akhôrahil spoke to him in the corridor before he went in.

"He may not recognize you," Akhôrahil warned him. "He's not lucid, he doesn't recognize anyone, and he doesn't know where he is,"

They went in. Mairon stirred, and opened his eyes. He was shaking with fever.

Akhôrahil asked him very gently, "Do you know who I am?"

"Someone who takes care of me," Mairon answered.

"Do you know who this is?" Akhôrahil indicated Angmar.

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"Someone good. A friend," he answered.

Angmar maintained his composure until they left the room, but outside in the corridor, he leaned against the wall with his eyes closed, and whisper

Day 3 Thirst



Airon woke up knowing he was about to be sick. There was a bucket beside the bed, but he was too weak to lean over it. All he could do was turn his head to the side. The warm liquid soaked into his pillow and hair, but he didn't care. He closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

Later, someone shook him awake and held a handkerchief to his mouth. "Spit," He couldn't do it. He wasn't sweating anymore, either, no matter how high the fever climbed.



He awoke confined in an iron cage in front of the ornamental fountain in the marketplace in the center of Valmar.

Unrepentant, he leaned against the bars, an arm draped casually over his knee, sneering at the people who had gathered to stare at him and reproach him for his crimes.

By the second day, he was less cocky. A headache made him bad tempered, and his mouth was dry. He lay on the floor of the cage, preoccupied with thoughts of water. He heard the music of the fountain, and felt its spray whenever the wind blew from its direction. When a kind-hearted person smuggled him a sip of water, he fell on it, his pride gone.

"Don't give him that!" The guard came running over, but not in time to stop her.

"For shame! Have you no pity?" she scolded back.

"No, you don't understand. You'll just prolong his suffering. If you do nothing, it will be over quickly."

Plague

I can't do this for one more day.

He screamed in frustration and kicked the door of the cage as hard as he could. The iron grating rang under the repeated blows, but the hinges and padlocks held. He kicked it until he was exhausted, then lay on the floor of the cage, his eyes closed and his breathing labored.

The hot afternoon sun beat down on him. He searched the faces in the crowd for another kind face, his eyes pleading. People stared at him, but did nothing. He reached his fingers through the bars and begged them.

"Please, please..." he said to no one in particular.

He lay with his eyes closed, unable to lift his head. He thought he heard a commotion outside.

"No! This is wrong. Stop it," said a deep and commanding voice.

"Aulë!" He mouthed the word, but his voice was gone. He turned to look, but even though his eyes were open, he couldn't see. Strong arms lifted him up. *Where was the cage?* A cup touched his lips and he tasted water. He grabbed at it pulled it closer, spilling on himself.

"Easy there," said the healer.

"More," His voice was a croak.

He drank deeply. It all came back up again. He wanted to weep with frustration, but no tears came.

"Do you want me to leave the cup on the chair, where you can reach it easily?" the healer asked.

"No, take it away. I don't want to see it there, mocking me," Mairon turned toward the wall. After the healer left, he gave himself over to silent hiccoughing sobs.



Akhôrahil spoke with the Witch King in the corridor outside their Master's room.

"He's not doing well. He's dehydrated, but he can't drink anything because he can't keep it down. The trouble is, dehydration itself causes nausea. It can be hard to break the cycle."

Akhôrahil hesitated before continuing. "I'd like to try something. He's a fighter, and I think he can survive the plague, but he'll need a little help. You know him better than anyone does; I want you to tell me if he would agree to it."

"What do you want to try?" asked The Witch King.

"I've tried and tried, but I can't get anything into him by mouth, so I want to try something else," Akhôrahil said. "I want to inject fluids into the lower gut. As far as the body is concerned, it doesn't matter how they get in, just as long as they do. I'd like to do the procedure right away. He's suffering, and as soon as we do this, he'll start to feel better," said Akhôrahil.

The Witch King shook his head. "I have the impression he's modest about his body and wouldn't want that."

Akhôrahil snapped. "Don't you get it? He's drifting in and out of consciousness. He's about twelve hours away from coma and death. That's the course of this illness. I'm trying to prevent him from slipping into a coma, because if he does, it's unlikely he'll come out again. Nobody likes having this procedure done, but what of it? It will save his life."

The Witch King was silent.

Akhôrahil made a decision. "Your objections to the contrary, I'm going to do it. If I don't, there's a good chance he'll die."

"Try to obtain his consent first. Tell him what you told me, and let him decide for himself," said the Witch King.

"Lord Angmar, you don't understand how ill he is. He doesn't recognize people, he doesn't understand what's being said to him," said Akhôrahil.

"Then treat him as though he's extremely dangerous, and don't do anything to provoke him. If he feels threatened, he might strike you dead, or collapse the roof of the building."



Mairon stirred when he heard the door open. Two people entered, their faces hidden behind kerchiefs. They seemed familiar, but he couldn't remember their names. The tall black-haired one knelt beside his bed. Only his eyes showed above

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the fabric. He spoke slowly and deliberately.

"We're trying to get you through the next twelve hours. You're in great danger, but we think we can save you."

Mairon didn't understand what was being said to him, and he didn't care. He just wanted to be left alone. He could no longer speak, and it hurt to breath. He closed his eyes and turned away.

"Mairon. Look at me," the black-haired man said.

In a moment of clarity, Mairon recognized him. Angmar.

"Please, you need to do this," Angmar said.

Mairon didn't understand what was being asked of him, but he remembered that Angmar always gave good advice, and that he usually took it. After a pause, Mairon nodded. Angmar looked up at Akhôrahil. "He consents."



Mairon's eyes were closed, but the sounds of activities nearby still reached him.

"Lord Angmar, would you leave the room please?" someone said.

Mairon heard the scrape of boots against the floorboards, and the thump of the door as it closed. He heard someone walking to the door, and a click as the bolt slid home.

He heard a voice. "Healer, can you make up a pitcher of warm water, with some sugar and salt stirred in? And could you send in a couple of orderlies?"

A few minutes later, he heard them approach. "Drape a sheet between the screen and the wall, and come in here when you're finished," Mairon heard the rustle of fabric just beyond the foot of his bed.

He watched the first one lay a cloth on the worktable and arranged medical instruments on it. When the other healer came back with a pitcher, he took it from him and set it down. Then he uncapped a small phial and tipped it into the pitcher. "For nausea," he told the other one.

"Test the temperature for me, will you? It should be as close to body temperature as possible. Make sure it's not too hot,"

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The other one put his fingers in the water and let a few drops fall onto his wrist.

The first one scooped ointment from a small jar. Then he picked up an instrument from the table and approached the bed. "All right, let's get started,"

Two men approached the bed. One folded the bedclothes back and the other turned him on his side, facing the wall.

"Do you want me to take the shirt off him?" he asked.

"No, just pull it up,"

Mairon shivered when the cold air hit him. They spread towels under him, moving him as carefully as possible. The abrasive fabric was prickly against his bare skin. They pulled the bedclothes up to his neck, and he started to feel warm again.

The first one approached the bed and touched his shoulder. When he did, Mairon felt his thoughts and recognized him. Akhôrahil.

"You'll feel a pinch. But tell me if it's any worse than that," he said, lifting the bedclothes. He put his arms underneath and began to work.

The fever started to climb again. As it spiked, Mairon drifted in and out of consciousness. He dreamed Melkor grabbed him and shoved him facedown against a heavy table, twisting his arm behind his back. Melkor was stronger than he was, so even though he fought as hard as he could, and begged him not to do it, .. His eyes snapped open. "Okay, it's in," Akhôrahil was saying to the healer. "Bring the pitcher. You can start now."

Fully awake now, Mairon tried to focus on the wall in front of him. He fought a rising panic, until a strong hand gripped his shoulder and pressed him down.

"Breath in, count to ten, breath out," Akhôrahil said.

Somehow, Mairon got through the next few minutes without going to pieces, and almost right away, he started to feel better. He wished they'd done it earlier.

A little later, Akhôrahil held a handkerchief under his mouth. "Spit," he ordered, and this time, Mairon could do it. Akhôrahil looked pleased. When the healer brought him water, he drank it and kept it down. Mairon had made it through the

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worst part, and now he was on the mend.

Akhôrahil stepped around the screen to check on his patient. His Master was sleeping, curled up facing the wall. The sheet covered him to the waist, but above it, his back and shoulders were bare. The hospital shirt lay discarded on the sheet beside him.

The afternoon was warm and muggy. Even without a fever, it was enough to make sweat glisten on his skin. At least he was able to sweat, that was a good sign. Akhôrahil watched his breathing. It was slow and regular. Good. Then he frowned. *What was that?*

A thin white line, four or five inches long, ran diagonally across his Master's shoulder blade. If the light hadn't been just right, and if he didn't have a trained eye, Akhôrahil never would have noticed. Then he saw another one, lower down. He kept looking. A dozen or more crisscrossing lines covered his Master's back. They were almost invisible, but definitely there. There's only one way to get marks like that, but Akhôrahil didn't have a valid medical reason to ask him about it.



Later that afternoon, Akhôrahil arrived at the Council Chamber for the daily meeting. He was on time for once, and found himself alone with Angmar.

"Lord Angmar, I was just thinking. When our Master was a prisoner on Númenor, do you think he was ever mistreated?"

"He was held hostage for almost four years. I don't think he was ever locked in a cell, although he was confined to the palace and accompanied by guards at all times. In his own apartments, his rooms were searched for any scrap of paper bearing his handwriting, and the walls had ears. And at night, the door was locked from the outside. That ended when he became the king's chief advisor, of course."

"Beyond the indignities of being a hostage, do you think he might have been abused in any way?" asked Akhôrahil.

"It's hard to say. When he was taken prisoner at Umbar, right after they bound his hands, I saw Ar-Pharazôn strike him

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across the face. It's possible he was abused on Númenor, but he never mentioned it, so he couldn't have attached any importance to it," said Angmar.



After the procedure, Marion felt better. The fever was in remission all day. He was sure he was getting better. But the fever came roaring back during the night and gave him vivid, surrealistic dreams.

It started to rain sometime during the night. Even without waking up, he could hear it drumming against the roof of the Great Hall.

He was walking up and down the corridors outside of the Great Hall, looking for the washroom near the main doors. He found the place where it should have been, but it had been replaced by a large ornamental fountain with a top tier overflowing into the tier below. In desperate need, he ran up the many flights of stairs to his own room, where at least he knew where the privy was.

He woke with a start when he realized the bedclothes were soaked, and so was the shirt he slept in. The hem was plastered to his legs. Even the blanket over him was damp.

"Melkor's chains!" he swore loudly.

The healer stuck his head around the screen.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's just that, I...um...nothing," Marion fumbled for words.

"Would you like to have the sheets changed?" the healer asked.

"Yes, please," he said meekly.

The healer returned a few minutes later with two orderlies who stripped and remade the bed with him still in it. When they tossed the old sheets on the floor, they made a sound like wet laundry that hasn't been wrung out yet. The orderlies removed his wet shirt by tearing it down the back and pulling it from his arms. He was relieved they didn't try to lift the sodden hem over his face.

The new sheets were more comfortable. The orderlies pulled

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the bedclothes over his bare shoulders. He closed his eyes and was asleep before they left the room.

When he opened them again, he saw Akhôrahil standing over him. "The healers tell me you had an accident."

"Can you say that a little louder? I don't think everybody heard," Marion said.

"For a while there, you couldn't keep anything down, and you lost the ability to piss. That's not good. It meant you were dying. But we managed to get fluids into you, and you started to feel better almost immediately. The healers woke me during the night to tell me you'd soaked the sheets."

"You mean, in addition to setting fires and torturing small animals?" Marion asked.⁷

"Anyway, it's good to see you getting better," said Akhôrahil.



Marion was still feeling well the next morning, when the clatter of metal trays let him know the orderlies were serving breakfast on the ward. An orderly set a tray down in front of him: tea and toast and a cup of clear broth. The portions were small, but he couldn't finish them. Still, he convinced himself that because he could eat again, he'd be back to normal soon.

He looked up when a healer entered the room. "You're new. Where is the healer who was taking care of me these last few days?"

"He fell ill during the night. He's a patient in Section Two today."

"Oh," Marion fell silent, troubled by the news. "I'm sorry to hear that. He was a good man."

⁷ A set of three traits, wetting the bed, setting fires, and cruelty to animals is associated with psychopathy. Sauron is not a psychopath, he is a malignant narcissist.

Day 4 Delirium



hamûl sat at the table in the Council Chamber with the rest of the leadership of Dol Guldur. Khamûl wished Sauron was there. Lord Angmar, in the role of Regent, sat in Sauron's place at the head of the table, but for all practical purposes, Akhôrahil was in charge.

Khamûl asked him, "How is our Master?"

"He's been fighting this fever for four days and he's exhausted. He can't lift his head from the pillow. He sleeps most of the time. He'll wake up for a few minutes if somebody talks to him, but otherwise, he's asleep. He wasn't like that even yesterday.

"The thing is, we can't fight it for him. He has to do it for himself. And if he decides he's too tired to go on, he's in great danger,"

"I want to see him" said Khamûl.

"That won't be possible," said Akhôrahil. "I'm trying to limit the number of visitors he has. I've decided the Witch King may see him, but no one else."

Khamûl outranked Akhôrahil as a Nazgûl, and shouldn't have to take orders from him. But Akhôrahil the Physician outranked him on the plague ward. Khamûl held his tongue and fumed with frustration.

"Our Master isn't well enough for visitors," said Akhôrahil. "He needs all his strength to fight this. He can't afford to spend it on anything else. He wouldn't recognize you anyway. I'm sorry."

Khamûl stood before the main doors leading into the Great

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Hal, where rows of cots stretched from one end of the room to the other. The ward was divided into sections using sheets. He could tell the sections apart just by looking. In the first section, the patients were sitting on their cots, talking. In the last section, they lay motionless under blankets, waiting for death. The healers were in the middle two sections, where people were sick enough to need them, but no so sick they were beyond help.

Khamûl looked around for Akhôrahil. He spotted him near the windows in Section Two with his back to the door, talking to a group of healers-in-training. He was showing them the bench where medicinal herbs were brewed into teas and poultices. It looked like they would be awhile. Khamûl took a deep breath and stepped into the ward.

Because his Master had entered the third phase of the malady, he knew to look for him in Section Three. He assumed his Master would be easy to spot on the ward because healers would be standing over him, or his cot would be set apart from the others, something obvious that would draw the eye.

But the cots in Section Three were arranged in even rows just like they were everywhere else, and the healers were evenly distributed as well. If his Master was on the ward, Khamûl couldn't find him.

Khamûl couldn't see past the sheet barrier that separated the men from the women, but didn't think there was any point in looking there. He didn't sense his Master's presence nearby, in any case.

An orderly touched his arm. "Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to wear this."

The orderly gave Khamûl a kerchief, and showed him how to fold it diagonally and tie it behind his head. He then produced a small jar and asked Khamûl to apply aromatic salve to his upper lip. Khamûl had a keen sense of smell, and the powerful fumes brought tears to his eyes.

"Is there anything in particular you were looking for?" asked the orderly.

"I'm looking for Lord Akhôrahil's kinsman," said Khamûl.

"Let me show you where he is," The orderly pointed toward

the stage. "On the stage, there are two wooden screens. Do you see the one on the same wall as the main corridor? His bed is behind it," A patient cried out, and the orderly excused himself to go to him.

Khamûl walked along the wall in the direction of the stage, still keeping an eye out for Akhôrahil. He saw him on the other side of the room, his back to Khamûl, getting some supplies from a cabinet. Khamûl walked quickly in order to reach the stage before Akhôrahil turned around and saw him.

Khamûl mounted the steps and approached the wooden screen. Right away, he sensed his Master's presence. He tapped on the screen. When there was no answer, he stepped around it and entered the small space.

His Master was sleeping, but restlessly. He looked like orc crap. He was unshaven, there were purple shadows under his eyes, and his hair was stiff with whatever had dried in it.

Khamûl pulled over a chair and sat down. A ranger in life, Khamûl was used to waiting for long periods, to listening and keeping still.

Khamûl studied his Master. His arms and shoulders were bare, and the scar across his throat was visible. His breathing was shallow and irregular, and sometimes he moaned softly, or sighed.

After a while, he stirred. He saw Khamûl, but didn't seem to recognize him. Khamûl pulled down the kerchief to let his Master see his face.

"I've seen you before," said Sauron.

Khamûl nodded. Anyone else would have supplied their name, but Khamûl just waited and listened.

Sauron reached out his hand, and Khamûl took it. Sauron's eyes closed, and he appeared to have fallen asleep, but he kept holding Khamûl's hand.

Khamûl heard Akhôrahil's voice on the other side of the screen and froze. There wasn't time to slip out without being seen. Then Akhôrahil stepped into the small space. He saw Khamûl and stopped in his tracks.

"Khamûl! What do you think you're doing?" Akhôrahil said. Khamûl froze.

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"I told you not to visit, and you ignored me. I see you chose to ignore a number of basic rules, as well. Like keeping your face covered whenever you're in the ward, staying at least three feet away from the patient, and never, ever touching him."

Khamûl lost his temper. "You're lecturing me about following the rules? You're the one who married his own sister."

"A rustic like you couldn't be expected to understand the ways of the Númenorian nobility," Akhôrahil shot back.

Khamûl wasn't a rustic, he was born a prince in Rhûn, as Akhôrahil well knew. Khamûl was about to retaliate, but held his tongue. To be fair, Akhôrahil was pressured into the marriage by his family, and never had any children by his sister.

"I'm going to ask you to leave now," said Akhôrahil. "You need to wash your hands before you do anything else. There's a lavatory right beside the main doors. Use the lye soap and the nailbrush you'll find there."

Reluctantly, Khamûl let go of his Master's hand.

Akhôrahil ushered Khamûl out into the corridor and all but slammed the door shut behind him.

"And Khamûl?" said Akhôrahil, "Don't ever pull a stunt like that again."



Khamûl stood in the corridor, restless and agitated. He wasn't sure what to do next. He wandered aimlessly through the fortress, and eventually found himself in the kitchens.

Officially, the nobility had no business being in the kitchens. But it was warm there, and there was food, and company if you wanted it. The upper ranks found their way to the kitchens as often as the soldiers and stable hands, so Khamûl's presence attracted no more than a passing glance from the kitchen staff.

An enormous wolf slept on a blanket near the hearth. She lay on her side, nursing a row of puppies. Khamûl sat on the floor beside them and reached over to pet one of the puppies. He put a finger in its mouth to unlatch it from the teat and gently picked it up.

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With his face buried in its fur, he tried to push away all the scary thoughts that haunted him. Khamûl's element was the forest, and he felt an affinity for all the animals that lived there.

A thought struck him. His Master liked dogs. He stood up, the wolf puppy still in his arms. Now that he knew his way around the ward, he could find his Master without attracting attention. He tapped on the door in the hallway, then opened it just enough to slip through.

His Master was sleeping. Khamûl sat quietly, watching his chest rise and fall.

Khamûl put the wolf puppy on the bed next to his Master. It squirmed against him and licked his hand. Khamûl watched as his Master's fingers moved slightly. He wondered if the motion was a fever spasm, but no, it was repeated, and the puppy pushed back against his hand.

Khamûl noticed a healer standing at the foot of the bed. "He can't be left alone. The fever's dangerously high," the healer explained.

Khamûl saw his Master's hand twitch. His hands and arms began to tremble, and a shiver traveled the length of his body.

The healer went rigid. He stepped into the ward and shouted, "Get Akhōrahil. Now!" He turned back to Khamûl. "I'll have to ask you to leave."

"Is it bad?" Khamûl asked.

"It's not good," said the healer.



Marion heard footsteps crossing the stage. They stopped beside his bed.

"Do you see it? His hands are twitching, his feet, too. That's an early sign of convulsions," the first on said.

The man touched his face, then lifted his wrist. He felt his own pulse against the man's fingertips. "His pulse is irregular. So is his breathing," Marion's hand was placed back on the blanket. His fingers plucked at the scratchy fabric.

"Is he in any danger?" asked the other one.

"Some. If the fever spikes, he could go into convulsions and

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die. But usually, the fever breaks before that happens, and the patient is fine. We'll just have to watch him carefully," Marion heard the first one say.

"What if he goes into convulsions?" asked the other one.

"Then we step in and drive the fever down as hard as we can. If there's an emergency, come get me, whatever the hour," said the first one.

"The first thing we do is wrap him in a sheet soaked in ice water or alcohol. Under the table, do you see the bucket with the sheet in it, and the jug beside it? The jug contains aquavit, almost pure alcohol. Empty the aquavit into the bucket. When the sheet is soaked, drape it over his bare skin. Most patients scream when it touches them, it's that cold.

"The next thing we do is bleed him, at least two pints, enough to make him faint. The equipment's already laid out on the table. In the basin there's a tourniquet and that nasty looking device with the blade," said the first one.

"Doesn't it hurt?" said the other one.

"Yes, but it can't be helped. I try to make it quick. It should break the fever almost at once."

"He's twitching. Should we try to bring down the fever now?" said the other.

"I'd prefer to let it resolve itself by crisis. A high fever can drive out the disease. No other medicine or treatment can do that," said the first one.

Marion understood what they were saying, but wasn't disturbed by it. He didn't think they were talking about him. He heard them leave, their voices getting softer as they got further away. Soon he couldn't hear them at all.



The next time he woke, Marion was burning up. His ears were ringing, his teeth ached, and the backs of his eyes felt hot. Things that were supposed to be straight and solid, like door frames, wavered like mirages in the heat.

"Aulë?" he called.

A man leaned over his bed. "Can I get someone for you?"

"Yes, could you please get Aulë? I need to see him," Marion said.

"Who is he?"

"My Master."

"He's not here. Is there someone else you'd like to see?"

"He is here. If he's not upstairs in his study, then he's just outside in the Forge. Please, tell him I need him," said Marion.

Marion was never able to remember what happened during the next few hours, except that the fever climbed and climbed. He was ice cold and soaked in sweat, all at the same time. His limbs shook uncontrollably. He saw things that weren't there: vines like tentacles, faces in the walls, people he'd wronged who weren't alive anymore.

He didn't know where he was. He didn't recognize the people around him. He ached all over, and his hands twitched on top of the blanket.

Someone laid a cold cloth over his eyes. He sighed.

He heard voices, but he didn't know who they were, and didn't understand what they were saying.

"He's delirious. Are you going to tie his wrists to the headboard? That's what we usually do for someone this far gone," someone was saying.

"For most patients I'd say yes, but for him, it's a bad idea," said someone else. "We don't want to do anything that would make him feel threatened. If I need to restrain him, I'll use a sleep spell."

"The fever is climbing. What should I do?"

"Watch closely, and see where it goes. Call me if there's any change."



Akhôrahil had been asleep for just a short time when he felt someone shaking him. "Lord Akhôrahil! Come right away!" The healer was shouting. "Your kinsman is seizing!"

Akhôrahil was awake in an instant. He threw back the heavy coverlet and pushed aside the bed curtains. As soon as his feet hit the carpet, he pulled working clothes over his silk nightshirt and ran down a flight of stairs, the healer at his heels. They ran

up the steeply sloped courtyard to the door leading into the Great Hall.

They passed the Gatehouse and labored up the hill toward the Great Hall. Akhôrahil considered taking a shortcut through the kitchens, but that involved stairs, so he stuck with the door into the Great Hall next to the Keep. It opened onto the main corridor, which went past the servant's door to the stage.

Even from the corridor, he heard the sound of raised voices and a crash as something hit the floor.

He burst into the space behind the screen. The bedframe shook, and the headboard banged against the wall. At least four people crowded around the bed. Akhôrahil pushed his way between them and took over.

"I want someone on each side to hold him down, and somebody sit on his legs. Put a gag in his mouth so he won't bite himself," *Or us*, he didn't add.

"See that jug under the table? Dump it on a sheet. When the sheet is soaked, drape it over his bare skin,"

Akhôrahil found a tourniquet. "Could two of you hold down his arm?" Akhôrahil wrapped and knotted the leather cord. Then he picked up the instrument with the blade. An assistant held the basin.

Akhôrahil planned to take two pints, but the basin was almost full before the seizures stopped. Akhôrahil undid the tourniquet and applied pressure to the wound. His Master lay perfectly still, his face the color of tallow.

The others were congratulating themselves because they stopped the seizures and broke the fever. Akhôrahil didn't share their good mood. He bent over his Master's unconscious form to make sure he still had a pulse.

Akhôrahil shook his Master. There was no response. He slapped him a few times, lightly at first, and then harder. He was unable to wake him.

He went to the table that held medical instruments and found a phial of ammonia salts. "What's that?" an orderly asked. Akhôrahil removed the cork and put it near the man's face. He jerked his head back, eyes streaming. Then Akhôrahil held the phial directly under his Master's nose. Nothing, not

even the flutter of an eyelid.

Akhôrahil cursed himself. He'd planned to let the fever resolve itself. He was so sure the danger of seizures was manageable, if he just could break the fever before the convulsions started. But he miscalculated. He forgot how far his rooms were from the ward, or how long it would take him to get dressed.

The convulsions had already done their damage by the time he got there. He should have told them to start without him. No, he should have found an empty cot and slept on the ward.

Then Akhôrahil looked at the basin used for bleeding. The three pint mark was submerged. He'd never taken so much blood from a patient before. It sometimes happened that a physician accidentally bled let a patient to death.

I did too little, or else I did too much, Akhôrahil thought.

During his apprenticeship, Akhôrahil was taught that a physician should never second-guess himself. Medicine is an art, and even the most skilled physicians make mistakes.

Do your best, you can do no more.

Akhôrahil was out of options, and he was exhausted. "Keep him warm, and call me during the night if there's any change," he told the healers. Then he excused himself and went to bed.

Day 5 Crisis



hen Akhôrahil woke, the sky was already pale with the first light of dawn. He sat up with a start, unsure if his Master survived the night. But then he realized no one called him. That meant nothing had changed.

He pulled on clothes and went down to the ward. Here and there, yellow light from the oil lamps broke up the pre-dawn darkness. He mounted the stage and looked behind the screen. The healer told him, "There's been no change. He hasn't moved at all since the seizures stopped,"

Akhôrahil examined the patient. His Master lay on his back, motionless. He was cool to the touch, and Akhôrahil had a hard time finding a pulse.

Akhôrahil opened his instrument case and selected a mirror made of polished steel. He sat on the edge of the bed and used the mirror to steer a patch of light into his Master's eyes. He pushed back an eyelid with his thumb, and watched the almond-shaped pupil narrow to a slit. He repeated the test on the other side, and observed the same reflex. There was still hope.

Akhôrahil sent for Angmar and Khamûl, and spoke to them in the hall. "During the night, our Master went into convulsions. We did what we could for him, but it wasn't enough. Since then, we've been unable to wake him."

"But he'll be all right, won't he?" asked Khamûl.

Their Master was in Stage Four. Almost no one in Stage Four survived.

Akhôrahil chose his words carefully, "Other patients as sick as he is now have died. We need to be prepared for whatever happens next,"

"I want to see him," said Angmar.

"So do I," said Khamûl.

"Angmar may see him, but just for a few minutes. I'm sorry, Khamûl. He's not well enough for visitors right now," Akhôrahil said.

Khamûl looked away.

"You aren't missing anything," Akhôrahil said kindly. "He wouldn't know you were there,"

Khamûl turned on his heel and walked off.



An hour later, Khamûl stood outside the small door in the corridor and listened for voices inside. He heard none, so he tried the latch. It lifted easily. He pushed the door open and slipped inside.

His Master lay on his back with his hands by his sides, like a tomb effigy. His face was still. A sheet covered him up to the chest. Khamûl watched closely, but didn't see him draw breath.

The stillness worried Khamûl the most. Sauron was usually so restless, always drumming his fingers on the table or pacing around the room. Khamûl watched him closely, and finally saw the tiniest of motions, a slight intake of breath, followed by a small sigh.

His Master looked so vulnerable. Above the sheet, his shoulders were bare. Khamûl saw bruises on his wrists and arms, and there was a linen bandage wrapped below his elbow.

Khamûl pulled over a chair and sat down. He touched his Master's hand. The fingers were ice cold. He squeezed them, but there was no response.

An image began to form in his mind, faint and far away. Everything was white, and so bright he couldn't make out either structures or people. He slowed his pace, then stopped entirely, feeling the ground ahead of him with a toe

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to make sure there was still something to stand on. He'd never been this close to the edge of the Void before.

He took one more step and leaned in, stretching his arm as far forward as he could reach. His fingertips disappeared. He pulled back, and they were whole again. He moved a few inches forward and was about to go up to the forearm.

"Mairon, stop! It's not safe," Eönwë called from twenty paces behind, almost frantic.

Reluctantly, he turned away from the edge.

Without speaking, Khamûl asked his Master, *What were you thinking of just now?*

My home, he said.

Are you going back there? Khamûl asked.

I expect so.

Khamûl knew his master was dying, and was already planning the journey. Khamûl deeply feared losing him, but if his Master had decided to go, then Khamûl had to let him. He ached with sadness.

"Khamûl! What are you doing here?" Akhôrahil said. Khamûl looked up, started.

I came to say goodbye.

Without a word, Akhôrahil yanked open the door and pointed to the corridor. Khamûl slipped out, and heard the door slammed shut and bolted behind him.



Khamûl wandered the hallways, agitated, trying to decide what to do next. He wanted to do something for his Master, but he didn't know what. When he ran into Angmar in the corridor, he asked him, "You're the one who knows him best. How would he want to be buried?"

Angmar was silent.

"We need to talk about it," Khamûl wanted to shake him.

"I can't. I just can't think about it yet," Angmar said.

"Why don't you let me handle the details? Just give me a few ideas and I'll take it from there," Khamûl said. Angmar nodded, grateful.

“What do you think he would want to wear while lying in state? Something formal, like ceremonial robes, jewelry, a circlet?” said Khamûl.

“Something simple. Black robes in cashmere wool, finely made,” said Angmar.

“What would he want to be holding? A sword? A mace?”

“I don’t think so. Even though he’s a warlord, he sees himself as a blacksmith. I think he’d rather hold a hammer,” said Angmar.

“Would he rather be buried or burned?” asked Khamûl.

“He wouldn’t want an elaborate tomb. I think he would prefer a funeral pyre,” said Angmar.

Khamûl nodded and went off to make preparations. He had to select the room in which his Master would lie in state. There wasn’t an audience chamber or a throne room in Dol Guldur, since Sauron was in hiding and didn’t receive official visitors.

They did have a tiny sanctuary where they made sacrifices to Melkor. It was too small to hold everyone at once, but if they put the bier in front of the altar, then people could line up and file past.

The next task was to pick out the clothes his Master would wear to lie in state. He went upstairs to his Master’s room. He looked around and found the wooden chest where his Master kept his clothes. He lifted the lid and felt through neatly folded stacks of garments, linen and leather and wool.

On top, he found his Master’s everyday clothes: shirts and tunics, leggings and mantles. They were clean, but plain and somewhat threadbare. Further down were the seldom worn garments, worn only on special occasions. In this layer, he also found some letters and diaries, and a stash of gold coins. He was careful not to disturb them.

At the very bottom, he found a set of ceremonial robes. They were sable black, made of silk and cashmere. Khamûl pulled them out and laid them out on the bed, praying they wouldn’t be needed.

Khamûl was glad to have something to do, even though it was a sad task. They were playing a waiting game now, and waiting was hard.

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Marion stirred and opened his eyes. He felt well for the first time in days. He sat up, and found himself naked under the sheets. He put his feet on the floor, found his clothes under the bed, and got dressed.

He was just pulling on his boots when an orderly stuck his head around the end of the screen. The man fussed and said something about needing permission before he could leave. Marion ignored him.

Marion stepped into the corridor and went down the hall to the washroom. While he was there, he filled a sink with water and dunked his head in it. His hair was stiff from days of being sick and lying in it until someone noticed and cleaned him up.

He took off his shirt and washed under his arms. He'd been sweating from fever, and hadn't bathed since before he fell ill, so he smelled about as bad as expected. Once he felt presentable, he went down to the kitchens to see if the cooks were baking bread this morning.



Angmar tapped on the door to his Master's room.

"Marion?" he called.

There was no answer, so he pushed the door open and stepped inside. He saw a bare mattress, stripped of sheets and blankets. Marion's clothes and boots, which had been under the bed, were gone too.

Angmar blinked with surprise, trying to understand what it meant.

Oh no, No NO!

His heart hammered so loudly he could hear it. He fought down panic. If his Master had died, surely someone would have told him, or he would just know because he was a Nazgûl. Angmar didn't sense anything different.

An orderly rushed into the room. Akhōrahil was right behind him.

"He's gone," said the orderly. "I mean, he left. I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen. He finished dressing and said he was going to look for something to eat."



Marion sat at a table in the kitchens near the fireplace. A kitchen maid set another platter in front of him.

"There you go. Bread and butter, cheese, soup, cold meat, apples, and milk. And stop feeding the dog under the table," Marion was about to protest, but the dog had its head on his knee, so it was pointless to deny it.

There was a commotion in the corridor. He looked up. Three or four Nazgûl stormed into the room with Angmar in the lead.

"I found your bed empty. I thought you had died," Angmar snapped.

"Well, I haven't," said Marion, putting his hand over his face and answering with his mouth full.

"Do you have any idea how sick you were? We spend this morning planning your funeral," said Angmar.

"That was foolish of you," said Marion.

"You should have told me before you got up. And if you were hungry, I could have had a servant bring you something," Akhōrahil had his hands on his hips.

"Stop fussing. I'm fine," Marion refilled his plate. He'd barely eaten in four days. He was trying to make up for lost time.

"You're not fine. You had a stratospheric fever yesterday. You were out of your head," said Akhōrahil.

"I was not," said Marion.

"You were calling for your Vala."

"Which one?" Marion asked.

"Don't play dumb with me, Servant of Aulë," Akhōrahil said.

"But...I thought you followed Melkor," said Angmar.

"I serve two Valar," said Marion.

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"But that must mean," said Angmar. He dropped his voice to a whisper. "You're not...are you Sauron Gorthaur, Melkor's second-in-command in the First Age?"

Marion's head snapped up. He looked around the room to see if any of the kitchen staff had overheard.

"What are my rules in Dol Guldur?" he hissed. "I am in hiding. I am concealing my identity. No one must know who I am. You will not speak my name, or write it, or use it in any form. I am the Necromancer, and that is all you know about me," Marion practically spat out the words, he was so angry.

"I'm sorry. I forgot myself," Angmar hung his head, chastised. Several minutes of uncomfortable silence passed before some of the others picked up a different thread of conversation.

"Yes," said Marion.

"What?" Angmar looked up, not understanding.

"The answer to your question is Yes,"

Afterwards Burial Rites



After that day, Akhōrahil hurried toward the Council Chamber for the afternoon planning session. He was late, as usual. Even from the corridor, he could tell the meeting was already in session. He could hear Angmar's voice, although he couldn't make out the words.

Akhōrahil slipped into the room as quietly as possible and pushed the door shut. He looked around the room. Angmar was sitting at his own place, to the right of Sauron's empty chair.

"...I officially resign the Regency as of, let's make it retroactive to ten o'clock this morning," Angmar said, and signed his name to an official-looking document.

"How is our Master?" said Indur.

The door banged open and Sauron swept into the room, his sable robes billowing behind him. He took his place at the head of the table, saying, "Let's get started."

Someone jumped up to bolt the door. Sauron pushed back his hood and took off the steel mask. He had shadows like purple bruises under his eyes, but other than that, looked like his ordinary self.

"Didn't you promise you'd take it easy today, and not try to do too much? I thought you were going upstairs to lie down," said Akhōrahil.

"I did go upstairs. And do you know what I found? My most formal ceremonial robes were laid out on the bed,"

"That was for, uh, in case you wanted to make a sacrifice to Melkor, you know, in thanksgiving," said Uvatha.

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"You already told me you were planning my funeral," said Sauron.

"The formal clothes were for lying in state. Afterwards, there would have been a funeral pyre," said Khamûl.

"And there were supposed to be speeches, except Angmar never wrote his. The whole time you were out, he was walking around looking stunned. He was pretty useless," said Indur.

"Why didn't you just plan the same funeral you gave me last time?" said Sauron.

Angmar looked embarrassed. "We didn't give you a funeral last time,"

"Because of the chaos of war?" Sauron asked.

"Because there was nothing left to bury. We found your clothes, but they were empty. Someone said that when you were killed, your body crumbled into dust and vanished with the first gust of wind," said Angmar.

"We tried to find the Ring. I thought it would be with your clothes, or fallen into the gravel beneath them. Some soldiers from the Last Alliance spotted us and headed our way. I had, at the most, one minute to find it. I forced my mind to be still so I could sense its presence. But it wasn't there,"

Sauron looked at his injured hand. "Then I must have still been alive when it happened."