

PRISONER



Halwn blew on the dice for luck, then shook the cup and sent them tumbling across the barrelhead.

"A two and a three. Ossë's stiff cock!"¹

"Oh, bad luck!" Forsa scooped up Halwn's coins and pocketed them. Halwn felt sick. A soldier's wages weren't much, and he'd already gambled away more than he could afford.

Forsa was already dropping the dice back into the cup. "I'll give you a chance to win back everything you've lost. We'll play again, double or nothing."

Halwn considered the odds. He'd rolled so many low numbers in a row, the next one just about had to be a six. Think how bad he'd feel if he quit now and someone else got the winning numbers that should have been his.²

"Don't do it," Cuinn said from the sidelines.

Cuinn liked to watch the gaming although he didn't wager himself. He had a new baby at home and was putting aside as much as he could.

Halwn, on the other hand, had already lost all the wages he'd earned on this expedition, and then some. Unfortunately,

¹ Ossë is a sea god, and the Númenorians are a seafaring people.

² "He'd rolled so many low numbers in a row, the next one just about had to be a six." If I believed it worked like that, I'd get kicked out of the ASA (American Statistical Association) and rightly so.

there wasn't much for a soldier to do off duty other than gamble.

They'd sailed from Númenor months ago. Since then, they'd landed at the Haven of Umbar and marched across the deserts of the Haradwaith. Halwn was proud to be part of the largest army ever assembled. Their king, Ar-Pharazôn the Golden, didn't do anything by halves.

The King of Numenor, the most powerful man in Arda, had come here to avenge an insult. The Lord of Mordor was calling himself Lord of the Earth, a title that should have been Ar-Pharazôn's alone. The king launched this expedition to put the upstart warlord in his place.

As they approached the mountains encircling Mordor, the soldiers in the armies of Númenor prepared themselves for the hardest fighting of their lives. The Lord of Mordor, called Zigûr, or wizard, was a powerful sorcerer in his own right. It was said he could summon storms from a cloudless sky, cause the earth to tremble beneath their feet, or lay a curse on soldiers to make their courage fail.

But there never was a battle. According to the stories around camp, the Enemy's forces took one look at the Armies of Ar-Pharazôn, dropped their weapons, and ran. Halwn wished he'd seen it. Lord Zigûr had been about to charge the Númenorian line, but when he looked over his shoulder, expecting to see rank upon rank of Orcs right behind him, there was only an empty field sprinkled with abandoned helmets and shields.³ Númenorian soldiers quickly surrounded him and would have killed him on the spot, had not the king decided their captive was worth more as a hostage than a corpse. If Zigûr did have magic, it hadn't helped him. Ar-Pharazôn was taking him back to Númenor in chains.

Halwn snapped to attention when Kyran, the Captain of the Guard, pushed his way through the crush of men around the barrelhead.

³ A departure from canon. In this battle, Sauron's army dropped their weapons and fled, but Tolkien didn't say whether Sauron was with them.

"Who wants to earn double their usual wages? It's guard duty, so it's light work. All you have to do is stand in the tent and watch the prisoner."

Halwn frowned. There was already a ring of guards surrounding the prisoner's tent. Why did they need any more?

"If it's just guard duty, why does it pay so well?" asked Cuinn.

"They're having trouble finding anyone who will stay in the tent with him. There's a rumor going around that he can look into your eyes and steal your soul, or some such nonsense," said Captain Kyran.

"But isn't he a sorcerer? A real one? Couldn't he put a curse on you or summon up demons and such?" Cuinn shifted from foot to foot.

"If he was dangerous, we couldn't have captured him so easily. He makes people uneasy, that's all."

Forsa laughed. "He can't scare me. I used to go out with his sister."



It was grey twilight when Halwn and Cuinn reported to the tent where the prisoner was being held. It was surrounded by ten or more soldiers in mailcoats and helmets, each of them heavily armed.

"Halwn and Cuinn reporting for duty," Halwn said to Kyran, the Guard Captain.

Forsa shoved open the tent flap and came outside, making the sign of the evil eye. "That's it. I don't care what you pay me, I'm not doing another shift." The guard who'd shared the duty with him, a spotty-faced youth, looked just as rattled. Halwn watched them hurry away.

Kyran gave them their orders. "Both of you must watch the prisoner at all times, but don't get too close. He's restrained, but even so, keep a distance of at least a fathom⁴."

"Because of the evil eye?" asked Halwn.

⁴ A fathom is the length of a man's outstretched arms, used to measure the length of rope.

"No, so you won't get kicked or spit on."

They followed Captain Kyran into the tent, Halwn first with Cuinn right behind him.

The prisoner was sitting on the ground against the center pole with his arms behind his back. His chin rested on his chest, his features were hidden beneath the hood of his cloak. One knee was bent, the other leg stretched out before him. A rust-colored smudge on the ball of his foot surrounded what looked like a deep cut. He must have stepped on a rock after they'd stripped him of shoes and weapons. He stirred, which raised a clinking sound from the chain connecting the irons around his ankles.

"There he is. 'Hail Zigûr, Lord of the Ring, Lord of the Earth.' Not so proud now, are you?" said Kyran.

The prisoner lifted his head and muttered a curse. The hood fell back, revealing symmetrical features framed by reddish-brown hair. He looked at Halwn the way a predator studies prey, impersonal, calculating. Halwn didn't believe all that nonsense about soul stealing, but even so, he kept his eyes off the prisoner's face.

"All right then, he's all yours 'till sunrise. If he gives you trouble, just shout, there's a dozen soldiers right outside." With that, the captain of the Guard lifted the tent flap and disappeared into the night.

Halwn and Cuinn took up positions on either side of the tent flap. Halwn leaned on their spears and settled in for a long night. It was as cold inside the tent as it was outside. He could see his breath.

The prisoner lifted his head and tried to catch Halwn's eye. "I'm hungry. Those last two didn't bring me anything to eat." His voice was low and harsh. Halwn didn't answer. A minute later, "Some water, then?" Halwn ignored him.

An hour crept by. The prisoner moved from time to time, as if trying to get comfortable. He raised one shoulder, then the other. He curled his neck forward, then arched his back. His cloak slipped and fell between his body and the tent pole, and he swore softly.

Uvatha the Horseman

"Can someone get that for me?" He hunched over, shivering, and his breath came like wisps of smoke. Halwn pretended not to hear.

The night wore on. Cuinn shifted from foot to foot, breathing like someone who was badly frightened.

"I can't shake the feeling that something's happened to the baby and I'll never see him again. And that it was something horrible, like he was crushed under a cart wheel or snatched from his cradle in the night by an animal. Why would I be worried about that all of a sudden?"

"There aren't a lot of wild animals in Armenelos. I wouldn't worry about it," said Halwn.

Midnight came and went. It was pitch dark outside. The prisoner hadn't moved in some time. Even his constant complaining had stopped. He sat with his forehead resting on his knees, his breathing slow and even.

Halwn began to think about fountains in courtyards, rain water in the gutters, the whisper of waves beneath the prow of an oceangoing vessel. Two guards were supposed to watch the prisoner at all times, but surely one of them could step outside for a moment if need be.

Halwn turned to Cuinn. "Can you hold down the fort? I need to go drown some ants." He lifted the tent flap and went out. One of the perimeter guards stepped inside and took his place.

Halwn returned a few minutes later and entered the tent. The stench was indescribable, something between a bowel accident and the metallic odor of blood. He wasn't sure what he was looking at, at first. Men were sprawled on the ground and there was a lot of red. One man's throat had been torn out, another had been ripped almost in half, the pink viscera hanging to his thighs.

Cuinn was lying on his back in the middle of the tent, his unseeing eyes staring upward. His mailshirt had been torn open, exposing the pale skin beneath. The prisoner crouched over Cuinn on hands and knees, his face buried in Cuinn's upper arm, worrying it like a predator with its kill. With each shake, there was a tearing sound.

A strangled cry rose from Halwn's throat. The creature lifted its head, its mouth and chin smeared with gore, strips of flesh hung from its teeth. A section of Cuinn's arm was gone, and a length of bone showed white where the bicep had been.⁵ Whatever that thing on top of Cuinn was, it wasn't human. Halwn's stomach heaved. He clamped his hand to his mouth to hold in the sick, and it came out his nose.

What about the chains that should have held the creature? Links lay on the ground, broken and twisted. The iron fetters were not so much opened as exploded. The thing growled, a low vibration forming deep within its throat. Its eyes locked onto Halwn's, and words in an ancient tongue formed in his head, *You're next*.

The spear slipped from his fingers and clattered to the ground. He tried to back away, but his feet felt like they belonged to someone else. He screamed. Half a dozen heavily armed soldiers poured into the tent, the Captain of the Guard among them. He pushed between the soldiers, reached Cuinn in a few long strides, and backhanded the creature across the face.

"Stop that!" Kyran's voice could have carried across a field of battle.

The creature's head snapped back. A red mark appeared on its cheek, the impression from each finger separate and distinct. It bared its teeth and hissed.

Halwn tried to run, but found himself caught in a rough embrace, his arms pinned to his sides. He struggled to get free, but the grip tightened. "Easy, easy there." Cuinn's voice was gentle and soothing.

Halwn blinked. Torchlight reached every corner of the tent. The prisoner sat with his back against the center pole, his wrists bound behind it. A length of chain stretched between the fetters that bound his ankles. His cloak lay where it had fallen earlier.

⁵ In the *Silmarillion*, Sauron took the form of a wolf and ate some of the first-born Elves. It has also been suggested that the wolf that ate Beren's men in the dungeons of Tol Sirion was probably Sauron, as well.

Uvatha the Horseman

Kyran was standing over him with clenched fists. "I've had just about enough of your crap."

The prisoner looked up at him, a corner of his mouth twitching. Kyran grabbed him by the front of his tunic and lifted him off the ground. There was a sound of fabric ripping. The Captain slammed him against the tent pole and leaned over until their noses touched.

"One more stunt like that, and I personally will beat you until you can't hold yourself to pee. Do you understand?" Spittle flew from his mouth.

Over the Captain's shoulder, the prisoner caught Halwn's eye and smirked.

Author's Note - In writing this, I was greatly influenced by the amazing story, "Elegy for Númenor" by elfscribe, who came up with the idea that Sauron could control people by putting images into their minds, as well as the wonderful curse words involving Ossë.