

Year 1 The Eve of Battle



Er-Mûrazor¹ climbed the spur of rock at the edge of the Cirith Gorgor, a gap in the Encircling Mountains and the only route through which a large force could enter Mordor.

He reached the peak of the ridge and looked north to the Plain of Dagorlad². The plain was dotted with lights, the campfires of the enemy. Overnight, the camp had almost doubled in size, reaching further west than before, and almost touching the marshlands.

How had their forces grown so fast? Perhaps Elendil, the King of Gondor, had joined Gil-galad, High King of the Elves. If Men and Elves had combined forces, Mordor was in serious trouble.

Er-Mûrazor stood and stared for a time, then turned and clambered down the slope. He went directly to the Command tent, his personal quarters as well as the headquarters from which he directed the armies of Mordor.

A guard lifted the tent flap for him.

“Good evening, General. The others are inside, waiting for you.”

Within the tent, his advisors clustered around a makeshift table covered with maps. An oil lamp hanging from the tent poles overhead threw light on scrolls depicting Udûn, Cirith Ungol, and Dagorlad were held unrolled with small sandbags at the corners. Lead tokens in the shape of foot soldiers, archers,

¹ Er-Mûrazor, The Black Prince, later known as the Witch King of Angmar

² Dagorlad means battlefield although technically, it wasn't called that until after the battle.

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and mounted swordsmen represented the armies belonging to each side, black for Mordor, grey for the Elvish forces. A senior tactician moved tokens from Udûn through the Gap into Dagorlad to show how Mordor's troops would fall upon the Enemy tomorrow.

They looked up when Er-Mûrazôr walked in and silent."

"I climbed the ridge just now and looked down on the enemy encampment. It's twice the size it was this morning. It appears the Men of the West have joined the forces of Gil-galad. I estimate their combined strength to be at least 100,000."

"And ours is 250,000. We still outnumber them," said the most junior of his captains.

"That's 250,000 semi-trained foot soldiers against 100,000 professional warriors. It's not good," said another.

"We're starting from a position of weakness. How can we shift the balance?" asked Er-Mûrazôr.

"We have the high ground, that's got to be worth something," said a battle scarred warrior.

"There's marshland above Dagorlad. Can we split the Elvish forces in half and drive them into it?" asked a young lieutenant.

It was a shame Khamûl wasn't here. He was a gifted tactician, but was guarding the pass above Minas Ithil, western entrance into Mordor, just as Er-Mûrazôr was defending the northern entrance.

A dispatch from Barad-dûr lay on the edge of the table. It hadn't been there when he left. Over the last few days, the dispatches had come more and more frequently, a measure of his Master's rising anxiety.

Er-Mûrazôr broke the seal. The words were in his Master's careful handwriting, giving instructions on every aspect of the war. There was no detail so small that his Master was willing to delegate it to another. When Er-Mûrazôr finished reading, he took the letter to the brazier. He meant to lay it on the coals, but on impulse, he put it with his personal papers instead. Hoping no one had noticed, he returned to the table.

Er-Mûrazôr made his decision. The surest way to win a battle was to strike first.

Siege

“Before first light, we’ll pour through the Gap onto Dagorlad and attack them while they sleep.”

On the map, he showed his commanders where he wanted them to be at the start of the attack and what they should do once they were through it. The attack would begin hours from now.

Sometime past midnight, the oil lamps sputtered and died down. He dismissed his captains for the night and urged them to get a few hours’ sleep.

After they left, he had a final look at the weapons he would be using tomorrow. His two-handed broadsword had been sharpened recently, but there was still a notch in the blade. It was an old weapon he’d used it in battle before.

He pulled his dagger from its sheath, a Morgul blade forged with sorcery, and deadly poisonous. Er-Mûrazor touched the symbol imprinted where the blade met the hilt, the hallmark of Mairon Artano, the High Smith. It was among his most prized possession because Mairon³ had made it for him.

If he lay down now, he could get three or four hours of sleep. Er-Mûrazôr peeled off his outer garments and dropped them on a camp chair. He sat on the edge of his cot and pulled off his boots, then lay down in his shirt and hose. Most men would have stripped to the skin before going to bed, but Er-Mûrazôr had never done that, his natural modesty prevented it.

Gil-galad was out there now, on the plain of Dagorlad. It was possible to win this battle, but it required the Enemy to make a mistake. Several mistakes. Er-Mûrazor knew he might fall in battle tomorrow.⁴ He didn’t fear it, death in combat was an honorable end.

He stared into the darkness. The strangest regrets came to him. He’d never been with a woman. He didn’t know why, he was the black-haired son of the twelfth king of Númenor. Either his athletic build or his high rank was enough to turn a

³ Mairon = Sauron

⁴ Almost 2000 years later, Glorfindel would predict, “*Not by the hand of man will he fall*” but there’s no reason to think Er-Mûrazor ever knew of the prophecy.

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girl's head. A marriage had been arranged for him once, but the political winds had shifted before the ceremony could take place.

Later, at a Yule banquet, a girl caught him alone. She had touched his cheek, and his hair, and her lips brushed against his. He hadn't kissed her back, but he hadn't pulled away, either. It had only lasted a moment, and it was the sum total of all the experience he had.



[The battle of Dagorlad resulted in the loss of almost the entire army of Mordor. The remnants that survived fell back through the Gap into Udûn. The forces of Gil-galad pursued them and slaughtered most of the survivors, then pressed on and surrounded Barad-dûr itself.]



Er-Mûrazor stood in a hallway deep within Barad-dûr, staring at the closed doors to the council chamber. It couldn't be put off any longer. He took a deep breath and stepped inside. Heads swivelled in his direction. *There's the general who lost our army.*

He drew himself to his full height with his chin lifted, and kept his eyes straight ahead. *Earth, swallow me up.*

People near the door squeezed aside to make a path for him. He shouldered between them to reach the foot of the table, where a map lay unrolled, its corners held down with weights. It showed Dagorlad, the scene of the disaster. He cringed.

Mairon's highest-ranking advisors and stewards occupied every place around the table. Minor officials, aides, and scribes stood against the walls behind them. Er-Mûrazor clenched his teeth. He'd rather stand before this company naked than explain how he'd lost the battle, but it couldn't be avoided, a general was required to make reports.

Mairon sat at the head of the table. His reddish-brown hair hung over his face, concealing his features. He didn't invite Er-Mûrazor to sit.

Siege

Er-Mûrazor studied his Master. Mairon looked different than he did before he was killed. After Númenor was destroyed, he returned in a new body, but he was no longer beautiful. He could still shift shape, but the only forms he could take were monsters. In human form, the best he could be called was plain. It didn't matter, to Er-Mûrazor, Mairon would always be beautiful.

"Tar-Mairon..."

"Just tell me what happened." His Master looked at him, his face still, his eyes cold.

Er-Mûrazor described how the armies of Gil-galad and Elendil defeated them at Dagorlad. The survivors retreated into Udûn, where they should have been safe within Mordor's natural defences, but Gil-galad's forces followed and wiped them out.

His Master stood up and leaned on the table, his weight on his hands, fingers splayed, and the glint of gold. Er-Mûrazor dreaded whatever came next. At the very least, there would be screaming abuse, at worst, an order for his arrest. He held his breath and waited.

Without a reproach or even an acknowledgement, his Master turned on his heel and left. The door slammed shut behind him.

Er-Mûrazor stared at the door. The tension before the battle, the intensity of combat, the horror of their losses, it all came back to him at once. Anger rose in him like a living thing. He yanked open the door and ran after Mairon's retreating form.

"Don't you walk away from me!"

He caught up with his Master and seized him by the arm. Mairon tried to shake him off, but Er-Mûrazor slammed him against the wall. Er-Mûrazor screamed at Mairon, his nose an inch from his Master's.

"We were overwhelmed! There was nothing I could do!"

Mairon stared back, his eyes without fear. Er-Mûrazor tightened his grip. His thumbs sought out a nerve, high up under the arm, and dug in as hard as he could. Mairon gasped, and the pupils of his eyes narrowed into slits.

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Unhand me.

The words rang in Er-Mûrazor's head, although Mairon never moved his lips. Er-Mûrazor released him and stepped back, still glaring. Mairon didn't meet his eye, he was looking at something behind them. Er-Mûrazor turned around. A crowd had formed in the hallway and stood motionless, watching them.

Mairon put a hand on his shoulder. "Come with me,"

All the fight had gone out of him. He allowed himself to be led. Mairon took him into a tavern that was part of the dining hall, nearly empty in mid-afternoon, and steered him to a booth. "Wait here."

Mairon returned a minute later with two cups of wine and set one in front of Er-Mûrazor, red wine and citrus in the style of Númenor, his home. Mairon slid into the booth opposite, jostling his knee. Chills ran up his spine.

"Talk," said Mairon.

"I already gave you my report."

"Tell me everything else."

Er-Mûrazor looked into his wine cup, trying to frame his thoughts. He didn't speak right away, but when he did, the words spilled out unbidden, and wouldn't stop. Mairon sat and listened, and for the first time since they'd known each other, he didn't interrupt.

Year 1 The Nameless Pass



Khamûl hiked up the narrow path, breathing hard in the thin air. The road was little more than a footpath up here, rutted and strewn with broken rock. It was a dangerous trek. A near-vertical face of granite rose hundreds of feet above the road on one side and a shear drop fell away on the other.

In the shelter of the rocks, the air was still. A few snowflakes drifted on an unseen current of air, and his breath came like puffs of smoke. High above, the wind whistled through pinnacles of granite. It was cold up here the mountains, even though in the lowlands it was still summer.

The road tilted sharply upward. Khamûl cleared the next rise, and there it was, a deep notch in the encircling mountains framing a wedge of blue sky in the West. The Nameless Pass.

A few days ago, the skies over Mordor were black, the fires of Orodruin burned brighter than he'd ever seen them before. The low-hanging pall was being pushed back by winds from the West, the sky was already blue overhead. Something was wrong.

He hiked up the road to its highest point, a saddle between two jagged peaks. The watchmen stepped aside. He stood in the center of the wedge, a hand against the rock on either side. The wind caught him full in the face and whipped his hair into his eyes. His clothing flapped like sailcloth.

He looked west. The plain of Ithilien stretched out before him. From here, the road descended into a high valley and passed in front of Minas Ithil, fortress of Isildur. The fortress glowed in the dim light of the shadowed valley. The stone smiths of Gondor had sheathed its walls and towers in white

The Nameless Pass

marble, which glowed with a silver phosphorescence. It had been built to control the road from Osgiliath, capital of Gondor, to Lugbúrz, capital of Mordor. Whoever controlled the road controlled the western entrance to Mordor.

Until a few weeks ago, the white fortress had been controlled by Mordor. When Sauron decided to invade Gondor, he ordered the Nazgûl to seize Minas Ithil in preparation for marching on the greater prize, Osgiliath. They swooped down from the Pass and captured the fortress and captured it almost without effort.

But the attack provoked a more aggressive counterattack than expected. The Nazgûl tried to hang on to their newly captured prize, but they were overwhelmed.

When the fortress fell, less than a quarter of the defenders were left alive. More were lost during the retreat to the Pass. Of the original two hundred, only thirty-eight made it through the Pass to safety.

Gondor hadn't pursued them into Mordor, the Men of the West seemed reluctant to set foot in the Black Land. And if they tried, Khamûl was here to stop them.

When they captured the white fortress five years ago, it had been undermanned, almost deserted. Now, it seemed to be garrisoned with as many men as could fit inside it, and more were arriving all the time. Silhouettes of men moved on the ramparts, and as he watched, a line of soldiers, rank upon rank, moved up the road from Osgiliath. They crossed the bridge, and the main gate opened to admit them. Khamûl bit his lip. Something was happening.

When he'd seen enough, Khamûl turned and descended back to camp. The smell of smoke from the cooking fires reached him before he reached the camp. He rounded the final bend. Eighteen or twenty tents were pitched beside the road, their white tent canvas flapping in the breeze that whistled through the Pass.

An Orc napping in front of the tents one had a bandage over his eye, another with an arm in a sling poked at the cooking fire with his left hand.

Siege

"Chief, a messenger just arrived." Khamûl's second-in-command, a battle-scarred Orc with multiple body piercings, pointed to a horseman at the lower end of camp.

The last dispatch had described the host gathering above Cirith Gorgor, the gap between the two mountain ranges encircling Mordor. When Khamûl received the news, it was two or three days old. What was happening now? What might already have happened in the last day or two?

Khamûl approached the horseman. The chestnut stallion tossed his head and danced from foot to foot, its eyes rolling back in its head. Its rider stood up in the stirrups and sawed at the reins to control it. Khamûl backed off a few steps and the animal quieted down. The messenger swung a leg over the saddle and dropped to the ground, tossing the reins to a soldier.

"Lord Khamûl?"

Khamûl acknowledged him with a nod.

The messenger pulled a folded parchment from inside his robes. It was decorated with a heraldic design in black and red, the Lidless Eye. He approached Khamûl, bowed slightly, and handed him the document.

Khamûl studied the seal. It was unbroken, the red tapes were intact.

"You can't imagine what's happened, Lord Khamûl. Lord Mûrazor suffered a terrible defeat at Dagorlad. He fell back into Mordor, but the forces of Gil-galad pursued them. There was a second battle, and most of the survivors were slain. Gil-galad chased the remnants of Mordor's army to Lugbûrz itself, but failed to break through the gates, so they surrounded it on all sides and settle down to wait. The Dark Tower is besieged, no one can get in or out."

Khamûl broke the seal and read a single line in his Master's handwriting. *Return to Lugbûrz.*

Deafened by the roaring in his ears, he clutched the letter, then folded it carefully and put away.

He sent an Orc to retrieve Shadow from the corral of stacked boulders where they kept the horses and pack animals. The Orc

returned leading a dark bay stallion by the reins. Khamûl checked the girth, then swung into the saddle.

He turned to his second-in-command. "You're in charge. I've been summoned to Lugbûrz."



Khamûl descended the mountain road carefully, but when it leveled off approaching the plain of Gorgoroth, he urged Shadow to a full gallop. At Orodruin, he paused at a fork in the road. To the right was the causeway leading to Lugbûrz. To the left was the path called Sauron's Road which would take him up the cinder cone to the Sammath Naur.

On impulse, he turned left. He climbed high above the plane of Gorgoroth as the path circled the Burning Mountain. When he rounded the northern face, the Tower came into view.

It was huge. Built high on a promontory of volcanic rock, it looked unassailable.

The fortress was encircled by besiegers. Khamûl's heart sank. On the plateau below, thousands of tents had been set up by the occupying forces.

Khamûl didn't know what to do. He knew what he should do, go into the fortress and join his Master. There was a secret entrance, he knew roughly where it was. But he could also go somewhere else and wait until the siege was lifted. Khamûl wasn't really needed in Lugbûrz, he'd just be an extra mouth to feed.

Lugbûrz had been built to withstand a siege, although in its two thousand year long history, it had never been put to the test. On the other hand, his Master had been through the Siege of Angband, which lasted a hundred and twenty years. A five year siege would be nothing to him.

Khamûl could go into hiding and wait. He pulled off his ring, the ring which extended his life and magnified his powers as a sorcerer. It lay in the palm of his hand, beautiful but useless. He closed his fingers around it. If he lost it, or if for any reason he couldn't put it back on again, he was dead.

Siege

Now that he wasn't wearing his ring, Sauron had no power over him and couldn't summon him back. On the other hand, Khamûl was worried about his Master's safety. He wanted to see him and make sure he was all right.

What do you want to do? Decide now.

He put his ring back on.

Khamûl approached the promontory on which Lugbúrz perched. Orodruin was at his back, and the camps of the besiegers lay between him and the Fortress. Most of the campfires were out at this time of night, but there were still sentries patrolling the perimeter.

The thorn bushes that used to grow around the base of the promontory were gone. They must have cleared them away. They were building earthenwork fortifications around the besieged fortress, as well. If anyone tried to leave the fortress, they'd have to climb an earthen wall with no cover to hide behind.

He thought the entrance to the tunnel was just outside the earthenwork fortifications. It was near the road, but not so near it would be found by accident.

Flickering orange light from a campfire nearby cast deep shadows on the heavily bouldered landscape. He couldn't risk being seen, or Shadow making a noise and giving them away. As much as he regretted it, he couldn't take Shadow any further. He undid the girth to loosen the saddle, then removed the bridle.

When he'd removed the last of Shadow's harness, he slapped him across the haunches and watched him trot away. With luck, someone in the besiegers' camp would find him and take care of him.

With his horse gone, it was time to get rid of everything that made him visible to the living. He undid the clasp on his mantle and let it fall to the ground, then tossed his gloves on top of it. Even though he was invisible, he couldn't walk through the enemy camp because the more powerful Elves would be able to see him.

He found the concealed entrance behind a steel door at the

back of a deep crevice in the rock. The door was crafted to look like stone, and was held shut by enchantments. He was afraid he wouldn't remember the counter-charm, or wouldn't be able to lift the door, or that the hinges would scream and give him away, but when he whispered the spell, the bolt clicked and the door opened easily.

Once inside, he sealed the door behind him. He didn't want to be followed.

Inside the tunnel, it was completely dark. He could see in the dark, but not in absolute darkness like this. He took out a mogul blade and made it glow. The light was weak, but it was enough.

The floor of the tunnel was sandy and climbed upward, in some places, there were stairs. He had to crouch to avoid hitting his head, and sometimes he had to turn sideways to squeeze through. Finally the passage widened into a small antechamber with a heavy door on the far wall. He pulled it open and entered a second chamber, then barred the door behind him. He'd never been here before, but it appeared to be a sally port for one person.

He used the hilt of his sword to bang on the inner door. He pounded again, then noticed a pull chord. After a few minutes, someone slid back the hatch over the eye-level grating and addressed him through the grid.

"Who goes there?"

"Khamûl the Easterling, Second Chief of the Nazgûl."

"I can't identify you. I can't even see you,"

"Fetch someone who can. Any of the Nazgûl will do."

After Er-Mûrazor came down and vouched for him, Khamûl climbed the stairs to the main level of Lugbûrz, where he would be received by his Master. The heavy doors of the audience chamber were opened for him by the elite soldiers who were his Master's personal guard.

He stepped into the room. The first step into the chamber that held the Dark Throne was always thrilling, he never got tired of it. He walked toward the dais with confidence.

"Khamûl! You're back!"

Siege

His Master stood before the Dark Throne. It was an impressive sight. Khamûl knew he rarely sat during audiences because the black marble pulled the heat out of his body.

Khamûl reached the base of the dais and bowed to his Master. When he straightened up, Sauron gathered him in his arms and embraced him.



The battle of Dagorlad had been won, although at great cost. The attacking forces had broken the gates of the Morannon. Gil-Galad and Elendil sat in Gil-galad's tent with their advisors, discussing their next move.

"No one ever broke through the Black Gates before. We'll press on and assail Barad-dûr itself," said Gil-galad.

"And when we get inside the Dark Tower, then what?" said Círdan.

"Remember why we launched this campaign. This time, we don't want to defeat Sauron. We want to kill him," said Gil-galad.

Elendil agreed. "We can't accept his surrender. He's too dangerous to leave alive. Remember when Ar-Pharazôn took him hostage. It cost him his life, the lives of most of the Númenorian people, and the island of Númenor itself. I don't plan to make the same mistake."

"Is it even possible to kill him? They say he's not human," said Anárion.

"I was in Númenor when they marched him through the streets as a prisoner. At court, he was docile and submissive, but I thought there was something off about him. Then he induced persuaded Ar-Pharazôn to make human sacrifice to Morgoth, and I realized he was a monster. But he's a monster of the human kind. He can be killed," said Elendil.

"You're wrong, he's not human. He showed himself in his true form at the battle of Sarn Ford. He was black and terrible, with flames running over his skin," said Gil-galad. "

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“Even if he is a demon, demons can be killed. Kosomot⁵ was killed in the Battle of Gondolin, and he was Sauron’s equal,” said Elrond.

⁵ Kosomot = Gothmog, Lord of Balrogs

Year 1 The Black Gates Are Breached



Mairon motioned Er-Mûrazor to address the Council.

“Enemy forces have already crossed Udûn and are about to reach the Gorgoroth plain,” said Er-Mûrazor.

“What forces do we have in Gorgoroth?” asked Mairon.

“We have some, but not enough. Most of the army has been slaughtered,” said Er-Mûrazor.

“We’ve never suffered a military defeat of this magnitude. Before they overrun us completely, I’m going to see if we can’t reach a diplomatic solution.”

“Meaning?” asked his Chief Ambassador, one of the Black Númenorians.

“I’m going to ask for terms. If they agree to withdraw, I’ll agree to stay within Mordor and not attack them again. If necessary, I’ll give them my oath.”

“If they don’t accept your offer, what then?” asked the Chief Ambassador.

Mairon kept his eyes straight ahead and clenched his teeth.

“If they cross Gorgoroth and reach the gates of Lugbúrz, I might agree to do obeisance to one of their kings to retain control of my lands. Make it Elendil. The oath that makes me his vassal will expire when he dies, and unlike Gil-galad, he has a mortal man’s lifespan. Within three hundred years, he’ll die, and I’ll be free again.”

“If you agree to become his vassal, he’ll expect you to pay tribute. Can you afford it?” asked the Chief Ambassador.

The Black Gates are Breached

"If it's in copper and gold, then yes; if it's in grain and horses, then no. We're not a wealthy nation." Mairon paused to consider.

"And if they won't accept vassalage and tribute?"

"Then I'll offer to become a hostage again. But I won't make that offer until they break down the gates," said Mairon.

"Don't do it. Whatever happens, you must not let them take you prisoner," said Er-Mûrazor.

"Why not? Ar-Pharazôn took me hostage. It was unpleasant, but he didn't hurt me."

"Ar-Pharazôn made war against you when you called yourself Lord of the Earth. You were a rival warlord, he had no grudge against you. This is different. The King of the Elves wants revenge for what happened in Eregion, and the King of Gondor holds you personally responsible for the destruction of Númenor."

"What do you think they would do to me?" asked Mairon.

"I don't know, but I don't think you would like it," said Er-Mûrazor.



An emissary came to Gil-galad's tent under a flag of truce. He was dressed in black and wore the badge of the Lidless Eye, like all officials of Mordor.

"I am the Chief Ambassador for Mordor. My Master sends you greetings."

He pulled out a thick bundle of parchment, with red tapes threaded through it, and sealed with official looking seals. A watercolor decoration of a heraldic device, the Lidless Eye, decorated its surface.

"I have come to discuss terms. If you depart this land, my Master agrees to stay within its borders as defined by the encircling mountains," he said.

"How do we know he'd keep his word?" Gil-galad asked.

"He is prepared to give his oath."

"Give us a few minutes to discuss this in private."

After the ambassador left the tent, they discussed Sauron's

offer. Erester was buoyant.

"We've won! Remember the last time, when Gil-galad pushed him back into Mordor after the Battle of Sarn Ford, and Tharbad? He retreated into Mordor and stayed there for seventeen hundred years," he said.

"And bound by an oath, he might be contained within Mordor indefinitely," said Thranduil.

"Not good enough. We don't just want to defeat him this time, we want him gone," said Gil-galad.

They called the emissary back.

"The terms are unacceptable. I regret you've come here on a fruitless errand," said Gil-galad.

"I have a second offer." The ambassador pulled out another parchment bundle with the same red tape and heraldic decorations as the first.

"In addition to remaining within Mordor, my Master will do obeisance to Tar-Elendil for his realm, and pay tribute in gold."

"Would you like to hear the terms we would accept?" asked Gil-galad.

The ambassador nodded.

"Hand him over. If you do, we'll depart this land and leave the rest of you in peace,"

"Our quarrel is not with you, it's with him," said Elendil.

"It would be wise to accept. We plan to march on Barad-dûr, break down its gates, and slay every living creature within. Every member of the nobility will be hanged, including yourself and your family," said Gil-galad.

"He doesn't have to come willingly," Elendil said. "Let's say he failed to put the interest of his people before his own. And if cooler heads prevailed and took matters into their own hands...well, that would satisfy our requirements too,"

"Or suppose resolved itself on its own. What if he died of natural causes? Suppose he slipped on the stairs, drowned in the bath, or fell from a high wall. Just show us his body, and we'll leave. If he dies, none of the rest of you will be harmed."

"I think I've heard enough," the emissary said stiffly. He got up to leave.

The Black Gates are Breached

Back inside the walls of Barad-dûr, the Chief Ambassador reported what had been said to his Master.

“They rejected the first offer, and didn’t even listen to the second one. They want only one thing, to make you their prisoner,” he said.

“Did they say anything else?” Mairon asked.

The Chief Ambassador looked uncomfortable. “Only minor things, insults not worth repeating.”

Year 2 Taking Stock



Khamûl walked through the empty spaces where Dwar used to kennel his dogs. He heard his footsteps echoing off the bare stone walls. He thought back to that Council meeting not long after the siege began. Their Master sat at the head of the table. Every seat was filled, and lesser nobles stood against the walls.

“Let me deliver all the bad news at once. We’ll have to reduce the number of people within these walls. In battle, we need as many forces as possible, but in a siege, we’re defended by the fortress itself. The fewer mouths to feed, the longer we can hold out,” said Sauron.

Khamûl thought of the wells in every courtyard in Lugbúrz. They were said to reach a thousand feet into the earth. They’d never be thirsty here.

“How will you reduce the numbers?”

“We’ve been fighting a lot of sorties, and experiencing the usual amount of attrition through losses. If necessary, we can increase the number of sorties. Also, we can no longer afford many domestic servants, but I expect they’ll be allowed to pass through enemy lines unharmed.”

“Will you negotiate their safety ahead of time?” asked the Chief Ambassador.

“No, a request for safe passage would be refused. Besiegers always want to increase the numbers inside the walls, not decrease them.”

Khamûl remembered how, when the Black gates were broken and they first fell back to Lugbúrz, the attackers drove the remnants of the army toward the fortress. But Sauron

Taking Stock

ordered the gates sealed. He watched from the walls as their own people were cut to pieces by enemy forces, within a stone's throw of safety.

It was then that Khamûl understood, for the first time, how utterly ruthless his Master really was. He had looked at him then, and felt fear.

He went to speak to him later, but found him distant and inaccessible.

"We'll keep the horses until their straw runs out. Let's not feed them grain, though. We'll have to save their oats for ourselves."

The only two horses left were the Witch King's big warhorse, which they needed for sorties, and Uvatha's racehorse, the fastest they'd ever had.

"We can keep the chickens a while longer, as long as they're laying eggs and can fend for themselves. But we can't afford luxuries like pets anymore," He looked at Dwar. "I'm sorry," Dwar nodded stoically, and no more was said about it.

Khamûl liked animals, and liked to visit the kennels where Dwar kept his hunting dogs. Luna had a litter of puppies, and he knew all their names. He didn't know whether he should go to the kennels to say goodbye to them, or harden his heart and not think of them again.

"There's one more thing. We won't celebrate Yule this year. Yule means twelve days of feasting. Until the siege is lifted, we can't afford it."

They moved on to routine matters. Sergeants came in to give reports on the results of sorties. Clerks gave reports on the inventory of food, which, given the current number of people within these walls, would last for almost two years.

"Not good enough. Let's aim for five years," said Sauron.

Khamûl, a skilled tactician, computed the smallest number of soldiers needed to defend the fortress. Another clerk provided the number of domestic servants, and an estimate of the smallest number they could get by with.

"Four years, ten months," said the clerk.

In the middle of the discussion, Dwar shoved back his chair

Siege

and fled the room. The High Nazgûl rose to follow him, but Sauron put a hand on his arm.

“Leave him be,” said Sauron.

Khamûl entered one of the storerooms, following a clerk. They were going to inventory the contents of the room, and repeat the inventory periodically, to make sure supplies weren't disappearing in an unexplained way.

The barrel vaulted chamber was filled to the ceiling with barrels. Contents and weight was painted on the lid of each, flour, sugar, tea, oats, barley, dried peas, dried fruit, cabbage in vinegar, lard and cooking oil. Almost year into the siege, there were still a few apples, turnips, and potatoes. With luck, they would last for several more months.

They'd never expected the Black Gate to be breached, or to be driven back across Udûn so quickly. Yet they were well provisioned. The storerooms held provisions for another four years, and possibly even more if they rationed carefully.

A day later, Khamûl was summoned by the clerk, who was in a great state of agitation.

“The cook opened a barrel of flour, and found it was full of sand. We opened up several more, and they were the same, sand.”

“We need to find out how many are like that. And if it there was just one cheating merchant, or if it's a widespread practice.”

There spent the next several days opening every cask in every storeroom. There were eight barrels filled with sand, all from the same merchant. However, it was discovered that some of the barrels had spoiled. They'd gotten wet, or had never been sealed properly, and the grain they held was black with mold.

Year 3 Propaganda Rocks



Khamûl stood beside his Master, who was leaning with his elbows on the battlements, looking at the besiegers below. Their camps were spread across the plane of Gorgoroth, far below the foundations of the fortress of Lugbûrz.

Khamûl sensed danger, a shadow? a whistling sound? He flung himself against his Master, making him stagger.

“Khamûl, what the ..!”

A spray of stone shrapnel struck Khamûl in the back. Someone screamed.

Sauron, bleeding from a cut on his cheekbone, stared at a spot over Khamûl’s shoulder. Khamûl turned around. About ten feet away from them was a pile of broken rock, surrounded by smaller fragments. White stone dust rose from the pile like smoke.

One of the soldiers said, “A stone fell from the tower above us. It must have come loose somehow.”

Fist sized rocks landed within the fortress, with notes wrapped around them. Khamûl picked one up and unwrapped it. The message was written in Black Speech.

“Save yourself and your family. Open the Main Gate or a sally port and end the siege. You will not be harmed.”

He was about to burn the note in a torch, but then he noticed more rocks wrapped in paper on the walkway. He asked one of the soldiers if he’d seen rocks with paper and string wrapped around them.

“Aye, there have been lots of them, for some weeks now. I can’t read, though.”

Siege

A few days later, Khamûl found two more.

"End the siege. Kill the Wizard."

"It's easy. Stab him. Poison him. Push him off a wall."

His mouth went dry. He gathered up the sheets of paper and looked for his Master.

"The High Nazgûl wants to see you right away!"

Khamûl followed the soldier who'd come to fetch him to the Main Gate, where Er-Mûrazor and a number of others were examining the lock and barring mechanism.

"Look at this. It's been sabotaged," Er-Mûrazor said.

Khamûl looked at the place he was pointing. He didn't see anything.

"This piece of metal has been cut, and so has this one. At this point, only two brackets hold this bar in place. I'm worried we'll see the same thing at the attachment points for the other two bars."

"I'll keep looking. Go wake our Master, and tell him what happened."

Khamûl hesitated. Because of his rank, Er-Mûrazor was the one who woke their Master when they needed him during the night.

"Or I could look for damage to the Gate, and you could wake him," Khamûl said.

"Do you even have the ability to interpret what you saw?"

Khamûl admitted he didn't.

"Just go. You know where his private quarters are. The door at the back of his study leads to his bed chamber. And just so you know, he's hard to wake." He turned his attention back to the sabotaged gate.

Khamûl hiked through the warren of streets inside the curtain wall, and entered the Dark Tower through a huge arched gate. Inside, he climbed staircase after staircase to reach the upper levels of the tower. He found the right corridor, and located the door leading to his Master's study. He'd been here before. Sauron summoned him to this room sometimes, when he wished to speak to him alone.

He tapped on the door and listened for an answer. He tried

again, only louder. He waited until he was sure there would be no answer, and then tried the latch. The door pushed open under his hand. He stepped into the room, feeling unsure of himself.

The room was dark, except for the faint orange light from embers glowing in a fireplace. He looked around. It was as he remembered it. Every wall was lined with scrolls or apparatus, and near the back wall was the heavy table his Master used as a desk.

Behind the desk, Khamûl saw the door Er-Mûrazor described. He'd seen it before, but hadn't known where it led.

Feeling shy, he crossed the room and went around the desk to reach the door. Don't snoop, he told himself. Even so, his eyes strayed to his Master's desk. Sheets of paper littered its surface. He didn't touch anything, but he leaned over to look. Lists, addition, and sketches, and some writing in a language Khamûl didn't know.

He came back to the task at hand. He knocked, even though the door was ajar. There was no answer. He pushed the door gently, and it opened just enough to let him to slip through into the room behind it.

Khamûl had never been in his Master's bedroom before, much less seen him asleep. It was awkward.

The window on the far wall was dominated by the view of the Burning Mountain. Orange light filled the room. It flickered, making it hard to see into the shadowed parts of the room.

When his eyes adjusted, he saw a table, a chest, and crumpled sheets on a narrow bed. The room was small and plainly furnished, the quarters of a servant. At first, he thought he was in the wrong place. Then he saw a bare shoulder, and dark hair tangled across the pillow.

"My Lord? My Lord Zigûr? Something's happened,"

Khamûl waited, then walked over to the bed. He put a hand on his Master's shoulder and shook him. Nothing.

"Lord Sauron, wake up." His Master hated that name. Khamûl hoped it would reach him through the depths of sleep,

but it didn't. Khamûl shook him again.

"Mairon."

"Wha...?" He stirred, and Khamûl saw the glint of gold on his hand.

"The Main Gate has been sabotaged. It was discovered just before it swung open."

"Toss me my clothes," he said, pointing to the foot of the bed.



The leadership met in the Council Chamber at Noon the next day.

"We found the traitor who sabotaged the Gate. He revealed the names of his co-conspirators. They're about to be arrested," said Er-Mûrazor.

"I conducted the interrogation, and Lord Zigûr witnessed it." Uvatha, the cruelest of the Nazgûl, was good at his work. In fact, it was said that he enjoyed it.

"What was the traitor's motive?" asked Khamûl.

"He read one of those propaganda messages and thought he could end the siege early," said Ren.

"I knew it had something to do with those rocks. If they weren't being heaved over the walls all the time, our people would never have gotten the idea," said Khamûl.

Uvatha addressed the group. "I will interrogate the conspirators when they're brought in, but I have a favor to ask. If you're squeamish, don't watch. I don't want to be stepping over your body when you faint."

"I did not faint. I lay on the floor to avoid fainting," said Sauron.

"If you say so," said Uvatha.

"That leads me to another point. The rocks carry two messages, 'Open the Gates' and 'Assassinate Zigûr'. We ignored them up until now, except to clean them up and get rid of them. But after this incident, I think we need to start taking them seriously," said Er-Mûrazor.

"Meaning?"

“Conduct yourself as if someone’s trying to assassinate you. Limit access to your person. Lock and your bedroom door, and post a pair of your most trusted guards outside. Take precautions against poison. Wear mail under your clothes. And Mairon, whatever you do, don’t go anywhere near a steep drop.”



Khamûl sat in the Common Room in the evening, playing chess with Akhorahil. People who were good at court intrigue tended to be good at chess. Khamûl was losing badly. He looked up when servant approached them.

“Lord Akhorahil? Lord Zigûr requires you.”

Akhorahil got to his feet and followed him. Khamûl trailed in their wake.

“What happened?” asked Khamûl.

The servant lowered his voice. “Lord Mûrazor is with him now. He thinks it’s poison.”

They climbed several flights of stairs and came to a communal washroom. Their Master was lying on the floor, curled up and clutching his stomach. Er-Mûrazor was kneeling beside him.

Akhorahil went in and took over. He examined their Master while grilling him about the symptoms of poison.

“What did you eat? Are your ears ringing? Are you seeing double? Look at the light, let me see your eyes.”

“Prince Tindomul?” Er-Mûrazor looked up. “Has he had seizures? Become disoriented? Been unconscious?”

Akhorahil had known Er-Mûrazôr in life, at his father’s court in Armenelos, and still called him by his given name.

Akhorahil turned back to the servant. “Sirrah, will you ask one of my assistants to bring me a mortar and pestle, and a quantity of charcoal? And castor oil, and some ipecac root. And bring me a basin,”

“Khamûl, will you please excuse us? As soon as I know anything, I’ll send word.”

Khamûl retreated down the hallway a few paces. Why did

the Chief of the Nazgûl get to stay? He was a general, not a medic.

Khamûl stole a look into the room. His Master was still on the floor. Er-Mûrazor was kneeling beside him, holding his hand.

A medic pushed past Khamûl and handed Akhorahil a glass of powered charcoal dissolved in milk and some phials, the remedies for poison.

"I'm sorry, this is going to be unpleasant," Akhorahil said to their Master. He started to open the phials.

A servant approached Khamûl and bowed to him. "Lord Khamûl, do you know where Lord Akhorahil is? He's needed right away. A dozen people downstairs have fallen ill."

Akhorahil came out and spoke to him for a few minutes.

"It's Ptomaine poisoning. The cooks opened a barrel of beef this morning that was spoiled. They thought it would be safe to use if they cooked it long enough. I'm afraid this will happen more and more often, as we start to open more casks that are spoiled."

He gave the phials back to the medic.

"It looks like we won't need these, after all."

Akhorahil returned to the washroom and said to their Master. "You're in no danger. Do you want to be helped to bed, or stay here?"

Sauron started to lift his head from the flagstones, but laid it down again and shut his eyes.

"I think he prefers to stay here," said the Chief of the Nazgûl.

Year 4 **Waiting**



hamûl watched Sauron playing chess against Akhorahil. Akhorahil looked up when one of his medics approached him. He turned around and they spoke of medical matters for a minute or two.

While Akhorahil was busy, Sauron touched one piece, and then another, as if considering his next move.

The man left, and Akhorahil turned his attention back to the board.

“I adjust,” Akhorahil said.

He took a bishop from among the captured pieces at Sauron’s elbow and put it back on the board. Khamûl expected his Master to object, but he didn’t. The game resumed.

I’m not sure what just happened, but I think Akhorahil just accused Sauron of cheating. But, master politician that he is, he did it so politely our Master didn’t take offense.

But I was watching him the whole time. How on earth did Sauron get that piece off the board while Akhōrahil’s back was turned?

[Akhorahil, the politician, is very well connected, knows everything that’s going on in the kitchens and barracks.]

Year 5 Disease

[diseased body catapulted over wall]

Year 6 **Insurrection**

Year 7 Single Combat



Ugubúrz had been under siege for seven years. They had been living on harness leather and nettle tea these last few months, but even that ran out several days ago.

Sauron summoned his most powerful servants to the Great Council Chamber to discuss their options. Khamûl looked at his Master, who was leaning against the door frame. His eyes were too big for his face, and his clothes had been taken in, and taken in again, but were still too loose.

"We can't hold out any longer," said Sauron.

"Will you ask for terms?" said his Chief Ambassador, a Black Númenorian. "Perhaps you and your lieutenants would be granted safe passage, in exchange for yielding the fortress."

"No, they don't want the fortress, they want me," said Sauron.

"You can't let them take you prisoner. They want revenge," said the Chief of the Nazgûl.

"He's right. Tar-Elendil holds you responsible for the death of his son Anárion last year," said the Chief Ambassador.

Sauron drummed his fingers on the table. Khamûl's eye was drawn to the flash of gold. Then his hand was still. He looked like he'd reached a decision.

"What then?" said the Chief Ambassador, his pen over a sheet of parchment.

"Ask Gil-galad to meet me in single combat, a duel to the death. I'm stronger, I can beat him. Even if he knows it, he won't refuse me. It would be a stain on his honor.

Sauron stood up. He swayed and grabbed the edge of the table, his face pale. If he doesn't get something to eat before

going out to meet Gil-galad, it will end badly, Khamûl thought.



Gil-galad looked up when one of his lieutenants entered the tent.

“My Lord, we’re almost completely out of water.” He held a sheath of papers covered with columns of numbers. “We’ve been on half-rations for weeks. The troops are starting to complain.”

Gil-galad considered their situation. It hadn’t rained all summer. He had been counting on at least one good cloudburst. It rained in the mountains to the east of here, but not on the plane of Gorgoroth itself.

If they ran out of water completely, they won’t be able to march out of here. The men knew it, and they were getting restless.

“How much longer can we last, and still have enough to make it back to the marshes?”

“We can keep going, although there’s a possibility you’re about to have a rebellion on your hands,” If there was mutiny in the ranks, they’d have to lift the siege. He regretted it deeply. All those lives lost, after they’d come so close.



An emissary from Mordor approached Gil-galad’s camp under a flag of truce. Gil-galad sent for the other leaders, Elendil, Thranduil, and Durin, as well as their advisors. When they arrived, he admitted the emissary.

“I come to discuss terms. My Master will yield the fortress. In return, he requests safe passage for himself and his lieutenants.”

Gil-galad looked around the table. Almost imperceptibly, Elendil shook his head no. So did Thranduil. Someone laughed, and disguised it as a cough.

“Let me make you a counteroffer. Turn him over, and the rest of you will go free. Refuse, and we will sit out here until

every living creature within the fortress dies of starvation," said Gil-galad.

"He doesn't have to agree to it. The rest of you outnumber him," said Durin.

"What will you do to him?" asked the emissary.

"He'll be put to death," said Gil-galad.

"Is this about revenge?" asked the emissary.

"We don't want revenge, we just want him gone. He won't suffer much, if that's what you're worried about," Elendil said gently.

"It's about securing the peace, once and for all," said Gil-galad.

"In that case, my Master challenges you to single combat. The outcome of the duel will determine the outcome of the siege."

Gil-galad was surprised. He had always believed Sauron was a coward. This must be a measure of his desperation.

"Let us confer. Wait outside, and I will give you my answer when we've discussed it," Gil-galad told him.

After the emissary left the tent, they all began to talk at once.

"I think I can beat him," said Gil-galad.

"Maybe you can. But win or lose, you may die, too," said Círdan.

"Glorfindel fought a Balrog and won. Glorfindel died. Fëanor fought Gothmog and lost. Fëanor died. Fingon fought Gothmog and lost. Fingon died. Ecthelion fought Gothmog and won. Ecthelion died. There's a pattern here. Win or lose, your own life is forfeit," said Elrond.

Gil-galad was torn, but the water situation forced his hand. They'd all given ten years of their lives to this campaign. In just a few days, they'd have to give it up and admit defeat. Sauron couldn't know it, but this challenge was a gift. It gave them a chance to resolve the matter once and for all, even if at great cost.

Elendil spoke. "It might happen that he defeats you. Suppose we issue two challenges, one to be fought right after the other?"

Single Combat

There was sense in that. If Sauron won the first challenge, he'd be tired, and possibly injured. He might not be able to win a second duel, so soon after. It was their best chance.

They called the emissary back.

"We offer a counter-challenge. Your Master will meet each of us in single combat, first Gil-galad, then Tar-Elendil." Gil-galad's voice was grim.

"I will give him your offer. If he accepts, he will meet you tomorrow morning on the slopes of Orodruin."



Throughout the siege, they sent sortie after sortie out through the sally ports to harass the besieging forces. After a while, killing enemy soldiers was not the only reasons they went out. They were also trying to capture their food supplies.

Khamûl went down to a sally port to meet a party of orcs returning from a raid. They carried the body of a fallen Elven warrior.

Khamûl started yelling at them. "What were you thinking? Do you plan to ransom his body back to his family?"

The fallen soldier wore armor, so his family must be well-to-do, but he hadn't been a nobleman or a great lord. Besides, money was useless now. Khamûl would have passed up a handful of gold coins for one piece of bread and butter.

The orcs looked embarrassed. "It was the Chief of the Nazgûl orders. He said to bring back as many of the fallen as we could."

"Did he say why he wanted...oh!"

Khamûl turned on his heel and went looking for Angmar. He found him on the curtain wall, looking down as the machines of war flung stones at the attackers.

"Explain yourself," Khamûl demanded.

"Excuse me?"

"Our Master is about to go out to meet the Elven King to fight a duel that will decide all our fates when he's fainting from hunger. Perhaps you took it upon yourself to do

something about it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Angmar, his voice neutral. He stared straight ahead.

“Well then, how would you tell the story?”

“When we took Dwar’s dogs for the stew pot, he hid one of them from us. We just discovered it today.”

“Just make sure you tell Dwar, so he’ll know he had an extra dog,” said Khamûl.



Early on the morning on the day they would leave the fortress to meet the challengers, Sauron followed Er-Mûrazor out onto the courtyard used for sword practice. Er-Mûrazor was one of the finest swordsmen in Mordor. When his other duties allowed him some free time, he conducted the practice sessions for advanced fighters.

“I really don’t think this is necessary. I know how to use a sword. I led a conquering army across Arda before you were even born,” said Sauron.

“We’re not here to try new techniques. We’re here to decide how you’re going to fight this particular duel.”

Er-Mûrazor knelt to tighten the straps of Sauron’s armor. He pulled the straps so tight they hurt. Sauron protested, but Er-Mûrazor just said, “Stop complaining. You’ll get used to it in a few minutes. In combat, you won’t even notice.”

When Er-Mûrazor fastened a buckle high up on the inside of his thigh, Sauron said, “If you keep that up, we’ll have to announce our betrothal,” Normally his servants laughed at his jokes even when they weren’t funny, but Sauron’s second-in-command just kept working. He could have been tacking up a horse, for how much attention he paid to his Master.

Er-Mûrazor was one of Sauron’s closest friends, but lately he’d been formal and distant. *I might as well be out here all by myself*, Sauron thought.

Sauron went to the stand where they kept the practice weapons, blunt-edged replicas of cold steel, with the heft and feel of live blades. He chose one of the heaviest two-handed

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swords. He approached the straw dummies. Er-Mûrazor called out all the normal components of a swordsman's repertoire, slash, thrust, undercut, backhand, side. Sauron executed each of them with confidence.

"Go through the sequence again" said Er-Mûrazor. "And when I say stop, freeze where you are," Sauron began again, but Er-Mûrazor called a halt almost right away. His second-in-command studied him, frowning. He made some small adjustments to Sauron's stance, lifting his chin and turning his wrist outward to an uncomfortable angle. *It's like he's sculpting clay. He's forgotten I'm here.* Sauron thought.

They repeated the drill a third time. When he was done, Sauron lowered his practice weapon and looked up, breathing hard. He felt satisfied with how well he'd done. Er-Mûrazor looked at him with a critical eye.

"I'm trying to say this in the nicest possible way. You're not very good," he said at last.

Sauron started to argue, but Er-Mûrazor held up a hand for silence. "There isn't time to retrain you. We'll identify your best moves. Those are the only ones you'll use in the contest today."

Er-Mûrazor picked up a practice weapon. He stood before Sauron and saluted. They raised their weapons. When Sauron struck a blow, Er-Mûrazor blocked it. When he feinted, Er-Mûrazor saw right through the deception. When he defended himself, Er-Mûrazor went around his defenses. *It's like sparring with Eönwë.*⁶ *No wonder I'm getting thrashed,* Sauron thought.

Er-Mûrazor was beating him easily. Sauron was unable to predict where the attacks were coming from, whether they were real or feint. He tried to probe the thoughts of his most powerful servant, but Er-Mûrazor called him on it. "Stop that. You won't be able to read your opponent's thoughts in combat, so don't try to do it in practice."

The bout ended when Er-Mûrazor sent his weapon flying. Sauron was soaked in sweat. He rested the tip of his sword on the ground, his arm shaking with exertion. As far as he could

⁶ Eönwë was the greatest swordsman in Ea.

tell, Er-Mûrazor wasn't even breathing hard.

Er-Mûrazor regarded him dispassionately. "You have no finesse at all. That means you can't do feints, complicated parries, and subtle evasive moves, at least not well. Stick with direct attacks and blocks.

"And there's one more thing. You're leaving whole regions of your body undefended. Your opponent could land a blow right here," Er-Mûrazor said, touching him just below the ribs. "But there's not time to fix it now. Just stand at an angle so you don't expose your left side."

"But I think we have enough to work with. You're strong, and extremely aggressive. You strike hard and fast, and you keep on striking." Er-Mûrazor handed him a wooden mace. "Try this."



It couldn't be put off any longer. Mairon left through one of the sally ports, his head held high, jaw clenched. A wall of besiegers ringed the fortress, blocking his way. He glared at them and they shrank back, opening a path for him.

Er-Mûrazor⁷ walked before him carrying his standard, but otherwise he was alone. Because Gil-galad had issued the challenge, it was Mairon's right to name the place where the duel would be fought. He chose the slopes of Orodruin, where his power was greatest.

This contest was the climax of tensions that had been building for centuries, and Mairon welcomed it.

As the enemy drew closer, Mairon thought he recognized their leader, Gil-galad. They had met once before, at the border of Lindon, where Gil-galad had barred the gates and turned Mairon away from his realm. The Elven king was hiking up the slope with his second-in-command, Elrond Peredhel, who carried Gil-galad's standard, a yellow star on a blue shield. Another warrior followed close behind them, Círdan the Shipwright.

⁷ The Black Prince. 1300 years later, he would be awarded another title, The Witch King of Angmar.

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Gil-galad carried a lance tipped with a scimitar-like blade. Its cutting edge glittered razor-sharp. Mairon knew of that weapon, Aeglos, the Icicle. The two parties stopped at opposite sides of the small ledge, the only level place on this slope. Gil-galad acknowledged Mairon with a nod.

Mairon sized up his opponent. He and Gil-galad were almost equally matched. Gil-galad's finesse and skill would be pitted against Mairon's strength and aggression, Gil-galad's flexible steel against Mairon's heavy mace. It would be close, but Mairon thought he could beat him. Gil-galad's grandfather challenged Melkor to single combat, and was slain. This duel shouldn't be any different.

Gil-galad issued the formal challenge. "Lord of the Black Land, I challenge you to single combat for possession of this realm. What say you?" called Gil-galad. His voice echoed from the stones around them.

"I accept your challenge." Mairon was enjoying this.

This was single combat, so according to ancient custom, their supporters were not allowed to remain close, for fear they might aid the combatants. Er-Mûrazor went back the way they'd come. On the far side of the ledge, Elrond and Círdan retreated down the slope in the direction of their own camp. When they'd reached the required distance, they stopped and turned around to witness the duel. Mairon didn't look over his shoulder, but he sensed that Er-Mûrazor was doing the same.

The combatants stood across from each other. Gil-galad crossed his fist across his body in a salute, and Mairon returned it. They circled each other, their weapons held at the ready.

Gil-galad lowered the tip of his lance to hold Mairon off at a distance. Mairon kept just out of range and smacked the tip of the lance with a blow from his mace. He dodged under the wicked-looking blade and closed the distance between them. The lance should have been useless at close range, but Gil-galad choked up on the shaft and held it close to the base of the blade.

Gil-galad drew his sword, but Mairon struck first. Gil-galad twisted his body and narrowly avoided the heavy mace. At the

same time, he slashed down with his flexible blade. Mairon moved to block it, but at the last minute, Gil-galad flicked his wrist and came under Mairon's defenses. Mairon felt the blow land harmlessly on his hauberk. It rattled him. He shouldn't have fallen for such an obvious feint.

Mairon was less agile than Gil-galad, and couldn't outmaneuver him or deceive him with a feint, but he was stronger. Mairon swung the mace, but missed. Gil-galad had an uncanny ability to dance out of the way.

Mairon was thinking about where to strike on the backhand swing when Gil-galad darted in on his left side and struck Mairon in the stomach so hard it made him stagger backwards. It didn't hurt, but it surprised him. The complicated blade must have caught in Mairon's armor. Gil-galad yanked on the shaft, unable to free it. Mairon laughed.

The mace was useless at such close range. They were almost face to face. Their eyes met through the eye slits of their helmets. Mairon thought Gil-galad would be terrified of him, but there was no fear in Gil-galad's eyes, only determination.

Mairon pulled out a dagger and stabbed his enemy in the face through the eye slits. Gil-galad shrieked and jerked backwards with such force, the tip of his lance pulled free. The last ten inches of the blade looked red, where mirror-bright steel reflected the fires from Orodruin. Mairon brought the mace down as hard as he could, and the wooden shaft of the lance shattered under the impact.

Gil-galad stared at his ruined weapon, stunned. He dropped his defenses for just a moment, but it was enough. Mairon swung the mace and struck the sword arm between shoulder and elbow. The bone snapped. His enemy collapsed to his knees, clutching his injured arm. His fingers flopped uselessly, and his sword fell to the ground.

Under normal circumstances, the victor would have asked, "Do you yield?" and the vanquished one would have said "Yes", or if he were beyond speech, would have nodded. Then it would be over. But this contest was to the death. Had the outcome been reversed, Mairon felt sure Gil-galad would not

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spare him.

Mairon walked up to his vanquished foe. *Let's finish this.*

Gil-galad was still clutching his arm. His chest was heaving. Mairon watched him. Gil-galad kept his eyes on the ground. His lips moved in prayer. Mairon paused for a moment. Then he gripped the mace with both hands, lifted it high above his head, and brought it down with all his strength.

The contest was over. He had won. He let the mace slip through his fingers and fall to the ground. He stood there, breathing hard. He looked around for his people. Er-Mûrazor and several others were approaching from the distance.

But before his own people reached him, a huge man raced up the slope and knelt beside Gil-galad's motionless form. A standard bearer caught up with him a moment later, carrying a banner with seven stars and a white tree. Mairon guessed the man was Tar-Elendil, King of Gondor. He must have witnessed the duel with the Elven King, although Mairon hadn't seen him arrive with Gil-galad's group.

Elendil looked up at Mairon with hatred. "Remember the terms of our agreement. The Leader of the Black Land and the Leader of the Last Alliance will meet in single combat. But the Alliance has two leaders, Gil-galad and myself. You must defeat us both before you are declared the victor."

He wasn't wrong. Legally, the agreement could be interpreted that way. Mairon could have argued against it, but there was something else. He didn't want to refuse with his own people watching him, and he thought he could win. Gil-galad was the greatest warrior in the Alliance, and Mairon defeated him. He would defeat the King of Gondor as well.

"I challenge you to single combat," said Elendil.

"I accept your challenge", Mairon started to say, but was overtaken by a fit of coughing. The wind had changed, bringing toxic fumes from Orodruin. He nodded his acceptance instead.

Elendil straightened up and faced him across the narrow distance between them. Mairon realized he'd underestimated Elendil's size and strength. Mairon was tall by Númenorian

Siege

standards, but Elendil was a giant.⁸

The duel began before Mairon had a chance to recover from the duel with Gil-galad. Elendil was fresh. Mairon could have asked for a delay, but he didn't want anyone to think he lacked courage. He planned to move slowly at first, circling and staying out of range until he could catch his breath.

Mairon struck the first blow, but fatigue made him clumsy and it landed wide. Elendil parried with a backhanded cut that left Mairon's right arm numb. Elendil's next blow found its mark as well. Mairon was breathing hard. His lungs gurgled as if he were breathing underwater. He coughed, and his mouth filled with blood.

Mairon raised the mace high above his head, but before he brought it down, Elendil swung the great two-handed sword and struck him in the side, breaking his ribs. The ground tipped beneath his feet. He stumbled but recovered. He tried to raise the mace again, but no longer could.

He was looking through a tunnel, and bright spots swam before his eyes. He knew he was about to collapse, and when that happened, he was finished. He had one move left. He would throw himself on the King of Gondor, and use his weight and the heat of his body as a weapon.

His vision was almost gone. It was time. He took a running step and collided with Elendil as hard as he could, knocking him off balance. He heard a muffled curse. As he fell, he clutched his enemy in a deadly embrace, but if they struck the ground together, he never felt it.

⁸ Elendil the Tall - 'Tolkien put his height at "more than man high by nearly half a *ranga*" or 8' tall. (JRRT, Unfinished Tales) Mairon was 'large, but not gigantic'. (JRRT, letter 246) My best guess is he was 7' tall, like Isildur.