

SINGLE COMBAT



Lugbúrz 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

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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?"

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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 swords. He approached the straw dummies. Er-Mûrazor called out all the normal components of a swordsman's repertoire,

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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.¹ 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 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

¹ Eönwë was the greatest swordsman in Ea.

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-Mûrazôr² 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.

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

² The Black Prince. 1300 years later, he would be awarded another title, The Witch King of Angmar.

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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 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.

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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 standards, but Elendil was a giant.³

³ 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.

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.