

Chapter 1 Tears of Mordor



Faramir sat in a darkened corner at the Shards of Narsil, nursing a tankard of ale. The Shards was one of the few drinking establishment still open in Osgiliath, as much of the once great city lay in ruins.

Faramir and the Rangers under his command had just returned from the wilds of Ithilien. They'd clashed with a party of Orcs caught on Gondor's side of the border. One of his rangers, a young man who hadn't yet completed his training, had taken a poisoned arrow in the thigh, forcing them to cut the patrol short and fall back to the city and find a healer.

The man was out of danger now, and all Faramir wanted was to sit here quietly with his tankard between his hands, with only his thoughts for company.

"Are you Captain Faramir? I was told I could find you here." The old man's brown robes for ragged, and there were leaves in his hair as though he'd just come in from the wilds. "May I join you?" He pulled up a chair and sat down.

Faramir was too tired to make polite conversation with a stranger, but the man was already sitting down, so he could hardly say no.

"I'm Radagast the Brown," the stranger said. Faramir hadn't met the Brown Wizard before, but he knew who he was. Radagast was a well-known figure in Ranger lore, a gentle soul who loved animals and birds. He'd made his home in Rhosgobel in Southern Mirkwood, dangerously close to Dol Guldur, the home of the Necromancer. The Rangers tried to warn him of the danger on his doorstep, but he hadn't taken

their concerns seriously. Radagast had stayed on at Rhosgobel, caring for the creatures of the forest, and didn't seem to notice when the woods around him were overrun by spiders and poisonous plants.

The Brown Wizard unfolded a piece of parchment from the folds of his cloak and unfolded it on the table. It was a map of Ithilien, showing where the mostly abandoned land bumped up against the ill-defined borders between Ithilien and Mordor.

"I've come here from Rhosgobel to look for a bird, the double-banded scrub weaver. It can only be found in Ithilien, in the foothills of the Ephel Dúath. Have you ever been there?"

Faramir had. His duties as a ranger took him all over Ithilien, even to the slopes of the Ephel Dúath, the mountains encircling Mordor.

"Did you happen to see a plant called the Tears of Mordor? It's a small thorn bush with grayish leaves and dark red berries."

Faramir nodded. He was familiar with the twisted little shrub with inch-long thorns. The berries had medicinal properties, and he'd gathered as many of them as he could find.

"My bird feeds on the berries, so before I set out, I wanted to be sure the Tears of Mordor grew there," said Radagast.

Faramir stiffened. "You can't be thinking of going there alone." Radagast was Gandalf's cousin, and out of respect for Gandalf, Faramir wasn't going to let the fool get himself killed. "You really shouldn't attempt the trip alone. A ranger could get in and out safely, but rangers are highly trained trackers and warriors."

"So you're saying, if you were my guide, we could get in and out safely? How can I say no? I'll meet you in front of the Shards first thing tomorrow morning."



Faramir strode through the streets of Osgiliath in the predawn, fuming. *I have no idea why I agreed to this.* Rangers defended the border between Gondor and the enemy's lands, they didn't take people on frivolous outings. He

would have to tell Radagast there'd been a misunderstanding.

But when he rounded the last corner, there was Radagast standing under the sign painted like a broken sword, carrying his knapsack and bedroll. When Radagast saw Faramir, his face lit up.

Now's the time to say something, but Faramir couldn't bring himself to say it.

They stepped around travertine blocks that had spilled into the road when a building collapsed. Behind a solitary wall, all that remained of a once-grand house, the sky showed orange through a row of arched windows on the upper story.

They reached the head of the Great Bridge, and began the mile-long bridge over the River Anduin. The first rosy colors of sunrise were reflected in the water below. There was more breeze over the water and there had been in the city, and Faramir wrapped his cloak around himself.

The road across the bridge was the main east-west route in Gondor. It connected Minas Tirith with Minas Morgul, originally built as the palace of Isildur.

Late in the afternoon, they reached the crossroad, the intersection with the Harad road. Minas Morgul lay ahead of them, to the east. They turned onto the Harad road and followed it south.

"So, you've come a long way for this. I take it it's some kind of magical bird?" asked Faramir.

"No, it's just one I've never seen, and I want to add it to my list."

Faramir tried to follow his reasoning, but failed.



The next day, they left the road and headed into Ithilien, the wild lands between Gondor and Mordor.

They hiked eastward for several days. From time to time, they saw the ruins of a stone foundation of a farmhouse, but

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the families who'd lived there were long gone, driven off by the Orc attacks that grew bolder every year.

Finally, they reached the foothills of the Ephel Dúath, the Mountains of Shadow which formed the outer fence around Mordor, and loosely defined its borders.

They climbed all day. By late afternoon, they reached the spot where Faramir had agreed to bring Radagast, the place where the Brown Wizard expected to find his bird. Faramir felt pleased. In a few hours, they'd turn around and head back. They were almost on top of the border between Ithilien and Mordor, and as long as they were close to the lands of the Enemy, Faramir wasn't able to relax.

A few thorny shrubs grew between the rocks, but none of them had red berries. Radagast looked around and announced this wasn't a good place to look for his bird.

Faramir drew a deep breath and counted to ten. "Maybe your bird is here, but it's hard to see."

But Radagast said he was looking for a thorn bush that produced berries called Tears of Mordor. His bird fed on them, and he didn't see the bush anywhere. Faramir knew all the different plants that grew in Ithilien, and he had to agree with Radagast, the Tears of Mordor wasn't here.

"I expect it grows higher up than this. If we go into the above the foothills, into the mountains themselves, I think we'll have a better chance of finding it, and with it, the double-banded scrub weaver." Radagast looked up at the Ephel Dúath, its crumbling or slopes orange-red in the late afternoon sun.

"It doesn't look like much grows up there, and besides, we'd have to hike several miles further east. We're already closer to the border than I like. Is it possible we'll see you bird here, even without its favorite bush?" asked Faramir.

"I want to see the scrub weaver, and I'd really like to collect some of the berries. They're used to treat infection, and they don't grow anywhere but here."

"It's not safe here. I think we should turn around now. We can be down from the foothills by nightfall and camp at

the same place as yesterday. What do you say?" Faramir asked.

"No. I want to camp here tonight, and climb higher into the mountains tomorrow morning. It's likely we'll find the Tears of Mordor higher up," said Radagast.

"We're already as far east as we should go. I've lost track of where the border is, but I know we're close, closer than I like," Faramir said. He didn't even like being east of the Harad road, several days' hike behind them.

"We've come this far. I want to see my bird," Radagast wouldn't budge.

He's not here to have fun. He's on a mission.

Faramir agreed to it in the end. His only other choice was to go home alone and leave Radagast here by himself.



Faramir stirred in his bedroll. The songs of birds were all around them, as they often were at dawn even in a place as desolate as this.

"Come on, the sun's almost up," Radagast said.

Faramir looked around and saw Radagast standing on a rock, looking towards the mountains.

Faramir looked, too. Behind the peaks, a blood red sky was streaked with purple and orange. Much of the sunrise was hidden by fumes from the volcano, a billowing pall that rose to towering heights. They were closer to the Burning Mountain than Faramir had ever been before.

They broke camp before the sun was up and headed east, up into the mountains called the Encircling Fence. After an hour of hiking, Faramir stopped worrying about the location of the border. He felt sure they had crossed it already and were now in Mordor. They continued east for several hours more.

"Here it is," Radagast cried out happily, kneeling by a little shrub almost crushed between two boulders. The tiny grey-green plant, stunted from lack of water, was covered with inch-long thorns and a few dark red berries, the Tears of Mordor.

Faramir looked around. He studied the rocks and found another stunted shrub, with a few of the same precious berries. Radagast picked handfuls of them, and put them in his pouch.

"Now to find my bird." Radagast settled down to wait. He pulled out a small sketchbook and began to draw one of the little shrubs.

Faramir was in a state of high alert, listening with all his senses. While he hadn't seen any signs of Orcs, or heard their drums in the distance, he suspected they might be near.

He looked over at Radagast. Radagast's whole body went rigid, his eyes fixed on something. Faramir drew his sword with practiced speed, his heart hammering in his throat. He followed Radagast's gaze, and saw a small grey bird perched on a thorn bush.

"It's a double-banded scrub weaver," Radagast said, his face radiant as though he were in the presence of something holy.

Faramir sagged and sheathed his weapon. *I'll kill him, I really will.*

Something that might have been voices carried from far away. A chill ran up Faramir's spine. "Radagast, I'd like to move us to a less visible location." Faramir said in a low voice. "There's a fissure in the rock nearby, big enough to hold both of us."

"I didn't hear anything," said Radagast. He turned the page of his notebook and began another sketch.

"I'm not sure what I heard, but the hair's standing up on the back of my neck. Let's go!"

They got up and slipped into the opening. Inside, there was enough room for both of them, but their hiding place wasn't more than ten or twelve feet deep.

Faramir opened his mouth to listen. Something sounded like the crunch of gravel under iron-soled boots.

He pulled out his sword and gripped a dagger in the other hand. Radagast had unsheathed his own small dagger and assumed a fighting stance. Faramir hadn't expected to get any help from the wizard. *Radagast has hidden depths.*

A moment later, an orc passed in front of the entrance, then another, then three or four more.

Tavern

Faramir held his breath. A few minutes went by. He was ready to believe the Orcs had gone, until a huge one stepped into the opening, filling it. There were at least half a dozen more Orcs behind him, all holding scimitars. The Orc captain waved a scimitar at them and barked an order.

“I think he wants us to come out,” said Radagast.

Chapter 2 Minas Morgul



Faramir dropped his weapons and raised his hands above his head. From the corner of his eye, he saw Radagast doing the same. The Orcs blocking the exit from the rock fissure had increased in number, even in this short time.

Once again, Faramir regretted agreeing to this trip in the first place. He regretted even more that Radagast had persuaded him to come this far east.

A few Orcs stepped forward. One kicked their weapons out of reach. Another bound his wrists and pulled a sack over his head. It sounded like they were doing the same to Radagast.

"Don't worry, it will be fine. I can talk our way out of this," said Radagast.

How can he be so calm? Oh yeah. Radagast the Simple, Radagast the Fool, Faramir thought.

"Are you sure you understand exactly what our situation is?" Faramir asked sarcastically.

"Uh huh," Radagast said. "I understand it perfectly well.

They began a long trek over rough terrain. From beneath the sack over his head, Faramir could see his feet and the path immediately in front of him, but nothing else. With his hands bound behind his back, he stumbled frequently, and he thought he was bleeding under the torn knees of his legging.

Radagast leaned close and said to Faramir, "You have great value as a hostage. The Dark Lord must not learn who you are. For as long as we are here, you are my servant. You mustn't speak to anyone, and you mustn't make eye contact."

Why is Radagast in charge all of a sudden?

They came to a narrow mountain road sloping downhill. Gravel crunched under the soles of his boots, and he walked on it without stumbling.

The path merged into a wider road that was paved in stone. The road started to climb again until Faramir's legs shook from exertion.

An hour later, they were marched across a wooden bridge, and Faramir heard a squeal of iron as the gates opened to admit them. The Orcs pushed them forward. Within a few minutes, a dimming of the light told him they were indoors. Their captors then turned them over to a group of guards and then left.

The sack was pulled from his head. Faramir looked around while someone untied his wrists. They were in a guardroom, probably just inside the main gate. The guard captain sat behind a desk, studying them. He did not look friendly.

"What were you doing here? The Dark Lord does not love spies," the guard captain said.

Faramir was about to speak, but Radagast interrupted him.

"Oh, no no, we're not spies. We got lost and strayed across the border by accident. I'm glad we had a chance to clear this up. If you could just point us toward Osgiliath, we'll be on our way."

The captain spoke to the guards. "Take them to the dungeons,"

Radagast shook his head. "Wait, don't do that! Your Master, the Dark Lord, would be really upset with you because ...umm...as I'm sure you know, all wizards are related to each other and...umm...I'm his cousin."

"Riiiiiiiiight."

"And he'd be angry if you mistreated us in any way."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. It can't be true."

"But you're not sure," said Radagast.

The captain thought for a while. "We can't keep them here." Faramir went limp with relief. "Take the prisoners to Barad-dûr. Let the Dark Lord decide what to do with them."

Chapter 3 Barad-dûr



They spent the night in a locked room, not exactly prisoners, but not exactly guests either.

Early the next morning, they were brought back to the guard room, overseen by the soldiers who brought them there. Presently someone came in to tell them the wagon was ready, and they should follow him.

It was cold in the mountains. The sun was not up yet, not that they could have seen it through the pall from Orodruin. The soldiers escorted them to the wagon and climbed in with them.

The dungeons of Minas Morgul, as bad as they were, were far preferable to the dungeons of Barad-dûr, which Faramir assumed was their new destination. If Radagast hadn't come up with such a preposterous excuse, they wouldn't be on the road to Barad-dûr.

Radagast patted his arm. "Don't worry, everything will be fine," Faramir sighed.

Their route took them up and up some more, to Cirith Ungol, the Pass of the Spider. Beyond it, the whole plane of Gorgoroth opened up before them, with the flames from Orodruin reflected on the low clouds above it.

The road to Barad-dûr wrapped around Orodruin. The volcano appeared to grow large as they drew nearer. After the sun set, the glow from the mountain provided their only light. At one point, the road actually touched the cinder cone. There was a small hostel at its base, little more than a shelter against the elements, where they spent the night.

Tavern

They continued on in the morning. As they rounded the cinder cone, Faramir saw a high promontory, far away. It was veiled in mists, but occasionally, the fog parted to reveal something huge. It had straight lines and corners, not a natural part of the rock.

They reached a causeway and followed it to the base of the promontory, where the road narrowed and ran up the side of the cliff in a series of hairpin turns.

"Everyone out. From here on, you'll have to walk," the driver said.

Faramir climbed from the wagon and dropped to the ground, stiff from sitting still for so long. Radagast climbed down beside him.

They started to climb. At the end of every turn was another, and another after that. The sun was low over the encircling mountains when Faramir rounded the final turn and found himself on a broad plateau, at the head of a bridge leading to the gates of Barad-dûr.

The Tower itself was hidden behind tendrils of mist which moved like the appendages of a living thing. Where the fog parted, they were pierced by spots of orange light, which turned out to be from the torches along each curb of the bridge.

The soldiers who'd escorted them for Minas Morgul marched them across the bridge, and the massive portcullis was raised to admit them. They walked over the bridge and through the gates. The portcullis lowered behind them, leaving them trapped inside Barad-dûr.

Faramir looked around. He guessed they were in a walled town at the foot of the Dark Tower, but not in the Tower itself. He tried to identify the walls, but since the buildings touched each other and were three or four stories tall, he could only make out his immediate surroundings.

They stopped in front of a respectable looking Inn. A tavern sign hung over the door, an Iron Crown with three white jewels.

An official of some sort was waiting for them. He looked like a typical palace courtier back at Minas Tirith. Even the style of

his clothing was the same, if a little old fashioned. He must be a Black Númenorian, Men of the West who'd renounced the Valar and chosen to follow Sauron instead.

The man held the door and motioned them to come in. "My name is Kalan, and I'll be looking after you. Let me show you to your room." He motioned them to follow him. Faramir didn't know his official function, but he was clearly their minder.

Kalan was a slender young man with fair hair, and peach fuzz that was not yet a beard. Faramir guessed that this was his first real assignment, and that he was determined to show his superiors what he could do. He was just like the apprentice rangers under Faramir's command, so serious, so eager to make a good impression. They reminded him of puppies.

What would happen to a junior official in Mordor if his charges escaped? Nothing good, Faramir was sure. Faramir cursed inwardly. Much as he'd he wanted to escape, he didn't want to be responsible for the young man's death.

On the way to the staircase, they passed the entrance to the Inn's common room. At the moment, the tavern was almost empty. A few servants were setting up for the evening meal. Faramir guessed it would be noisy and crowded later on, when work ended for the day.

"After you've had a chance to settle in, I'll collect you and take you down here for dinner."

Their minder led them upstairs to the highest floor of the Inn and stopped by a door with a bench beside it. He produced a key and opened the door for them, motioning them to go in first. They entered a large, comfortable room with several beds and a small fireplace, wood laid on the hearth ready to be lit.

Faramir walked to the window. It was already getting dark outside, even though he knew it was only late afternoon. The unnatural mist was getting thicker. Fingers of the grey fog crept past the window.

He looked down on rooftops of tile and slate. The cobbled street was far below. There weren't any rain gutters or vines within easy reach of the window.

Then he saw it, no more than a few streets away. It was a sheer black wall, the base of the Dark Tower. Orange light from the volcano reflected from its polished surface. His eyes moved up and up, but whenever he thought he'd found the top, there was another wall above it, and another one above that. His jaw dropped.

Behind him, Faramir heard their minder talking to Radagast. "You have an audience with the Dark Lord at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. I'll take you to him myself," Faramir froze.

"Someone will be just outside your door at all times during the night, so if you need anything, anything at all, just call," Kalan said.

We're under arrest, but they're being so polite about it, we can hardly take offense, he thought.

Kalan left them alone for a few minutes to wash up and rest. He left the room and pulled the door shut behind him. Faramir heard the scrape of the bench just outside their door.

Radagast pulled Faramir to the center of the room and said to him. "Remember what I told you. You are my servant. You are not to speak to anyone. You are not to make eye contact with anyone. Let me do all the talking."

"We're about to be brought before the Dark Throne. What can you possibly say that will get us out of here?" Faramir asked.

"Sauron has the authority to let us go. All I have to do is persuade him that we're here by accident, and that we're not a threat to him. Simple," said Radagast.

"Why would he believe you?" asked Faramir.

"Because it's the truth," said Radagast.

Faramir thought about tomorrow morning. He imagined doors flung open to reveal an audience chamber, rows of torches on the walls, vaulted ceilings so high they disappeared in the shadows, and an endless walk along a stone floor leading to the Dark Throne itself. Their audience was less than eighteen hours away. Faramir fought down a sense of panic.

I don't want to do this.

Chapter 4 The Iron Crown Inn



Radagast opened the door and stuck his head out. “It’s a little early, but could we go down to dinner now?”

They went downstairs with their minder and followed him into the Iron Crown Tavern. Faramir smelled peat smoke from a stone fireplace in one wall, tall enough to stand inside. A small fire burned in the grate, it threw off a cheerful light. The lower half of each wall was paneled in dark wood, and the room was dimly lit.

As his eyes adjusted, he noticed the room was dominated by a polished wooden bar. High-sided booths provided most of the seating, although there were tables in the center of the room as well. It was late afternoon, but already there were a few customers sitting at the tables and the booths.

Kalan led them to a booth in the back of the room and motioned them to sit. Faramir preferred to have his back to the wall, because it let him survey the whole room. Then Radagast slid in behind him, forcing him into the darkened corner from which he could only see the far end of the bar and the back door to the alley.

Kalan went to get a chair from the nearest table. While he was occupied, Radagast leaned close to Faramir and whispered, “Remember, don’t make eye contact with anyone, and don’t say a word. Try to be invisible.”

Kalan positioned his chair at the end of the booth, effectively blocking them in. Then he motioned to the barmaid, who came to their table with three tankards of ale.

Faramir took a sip. He expected anything from Mordor to be undrinkable, but the ale in his tankard was bitter in a good way

and ice cold. He took a larger swallow and wiped his mouth with satisfaction.

Kalan explained how the Inn got its name. "The Dark Lord Melkor took the Silmarils and set them in the Iron Crown he wore on his brow as the symbol of his power."

"There was a Dark Lord before Sauron?" asked Faramir, surprised.

"Oh yes. Do you see that portrait?" Radagast pointed to one of the murals decorating the plaster above the paneling. "That's Melkor, the rebellious Vala.¹ He was magnificent in the beginning, and many chose to follow him. Sauron was his second in command. Sauron adored Melkor, and was inconsolable when he fell. Eventually, Sauron took Melkor's place,"

The barmaid came back to their table with a second round of ale, and Kalan paid her with an Iron Crown coin.

He said to Radagast, "Do you collect coins? Here's a souvenir for your trip, something to show people back home." He took a coin from his purse and handed it to Radagast.

"Thanks!" said Radagast. "I'll look for an occasion to show it off. I don't know anyone who has one of these,"

Kalan must have noticed Faramir looking at it, because he gave Faramir a coin as well. It was quite beautiful, and very well made. It was iron, black with an oiled finish. Kalan explained that one side showed the Iron Crown with the three Silmarils, and the other, Ancalagon the Black, a famous dragon from the First Age.

Something to show people back home? Maybe they really will let us go home again.

¹ rebellious Vala = fallen angel

Chapter 5 Radagast's Cousin



fter a while, Faramir realized they were being watched. A man standing at the bar was observing them from across the room. Like most people in the tavern, he was dressed in workman's clothing, a blacksmith's leather apron over a coarse linen shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He was clean-shaven in the manner of a workman, and his reddish brown hair reached his shoulders.

Radagast was talking about the birds they'd seen that day and hadn't noticed him yet. The stranger approached their booth. He was a head taller than most men, and he was built like someone accustomed to physical labor. He laid an arm along the back of the partition and stood with the other hand behind his back, waiting for Radagast to notice him.

"Did you see those little wrens darting beside the trail up the promontory? Their plumage was speckled, compared to the wrens back home." Radagast looked up. "Mairon! I didn't expect to see you here. How are you?"²

Faramir looked at Radagast with surprise. *How does Radagast know anyone in Mordor?* He wondered what the connection could be.

The stranger didn't return the warmth of Radagast's greeting.

"What brings you to Mordor, may I ask?" he said.

"Oh, well, I can explain. I'm a spy in the service of Gondor, sent here to study the fortifications of Minas Morgul and make detailed sketches of them, particularly sally ports and other

² Mairon Artano, the High Smith

hidden entrances. Then I'm to report back to Minas Tirith and turn over my notes. See? Here's what I have so far."

Radagast took out his notepad and opened it to a sketch of a bird sitting on a thorn bush. The man's face bore no expression, and his eyes were cold.

I am going to die, and then I am going to kill you. Faramir looked daggers at Radagast.

"One more time. What brings you to Mordor? And this time, make it the truth," said the man.

So Radagast told the story of how they were captured. That he'd been looking for the double-banded scrub weaver and gone further east than intended, how they'd crossed into Mordor by accident, how they were captured by Orcs who took them to Minas Morgul.

The stranger relaxed visibly. He took off his leather apron and hung it on a hook outside the partition, then slid into the booth opposite Radagast. He smelled of wood smoke, and his hands were grimy with soot. He rested them on the table, one hand covering the other.

"It's good to see you too, if I forgot to say so earlier," he said.

"Why are you dressed like that? What were you doing before you came in here?" asked Radagast.

"I was shoeing a horse, actually."

Faramir believed him. He could smell horse as well as smoke on the man's clothes.

"Why were you doing that?" Radagast asked.

"It's the only way I can get a quiet moment to myself around here. And the horse needed shoeing."

The barmaid came back to their table with another round and placed full tankards in front of Radagast, Faramir, and Kalan.

"And what will you be having?" she asked Radagast's friend.

"Bring me the same," he said.

She looked at him. "Are you..."

"Yes," he said.

She nodded, and turned to go.

Radagast's Cousin

Faramir noticed that Radagast's friend kept one hand in his lap or covered it with his other hand. It made him wonder if the man was doing it on purpose.

But Radagast's friend also liked to talk with his hands. In the middle of an animated story, Faramir saw what he had been hiding. The index finger of one hand was missing, and the one beside it was so badly scarred, Faramir was surprised he hadn't lost it, too. It looked more like an industrial accident than a war wound, but then, the man looked like a craftsman, not a soldier. Radagast must have noticed Faramir staring, because he kicked him under the table, and Faramir looked away.

Radagast's friend asked them, "Do you want supper? It's early, but they must be about to start serving. Let me tell them to bring something over." He got up and went over to the bar.

When the minder's attention was elsewhere, Radagast leaned over and said, "I didn't have a chance to tell you earlier, but don't speak to him, don't make eye contact, and don't draw any attention to yourself. He's unimaginably dangerous."

"But I don't understand..."

"Just do what I said, and let me do the talking," said Radagast.

The barmaid brought platters of food to their table, bread and butter, cheese, and meat pies. She put the serving dishes in the center of the table, and set a small pewter plate before each of them. Kalan started to open his purse, but Radagast's friend asked the barmaid, "Can I sign chit?"

"Sure." She put a small piece of paper and a lead stick in front of him. He wrote the initials SG and passed it back to her. He held the pen strangely, in what looked like a child's grip.

"I could have gotten that," said their minder.

"I know, but I have trouble delegating," he said.

Radagast helped himself to bread and passed the platter to Faramir, then sliced some cheese for himself. He said to Faramir, "I'm glad they returned our daggers. Otherwise we'd be eating with our fingers."

Faramir took a piece of bread, but left it on his plate untouched. Ten o'clock tomorrow morning was less than sixteen hours away.

Tavern

There was a commotion at the front of the tavern. Faramir couldn't see around the partition enclosing the booth, but he could see several tables nearby. People had stopped talking and were craning their necks towards the door.

Then he saw a tall man threading his way through the crowd. Judging from the man's height and style of clothing, he must be a Black Númenorian. He wore a chain of office, the double curved links resting low on his shoulders, and his robes were heavy brocade, the tawny silk embroidered in gold. The man was clearly a member of the nobility, and from the way people were staring at him and moving out of his way, he must be a person of great importance.

From what Faramir could see from the back of the booth, everyone in the Tavern appeared to be a craftsman or a foot soldier. There were a few minor officials like Kalan, but Faramir hadn't seen a single member of the nobility, or even an officer treating his men to a round.

The nobleman made his way to their end of the room. He had black hair, and a long face that was anchored by a prominent lower jaw and unusually large front teeth, which would have looked better on a horse.

He stopped at their booth and spoke to Radagast's friend. They seemed to know each other. Then Kalan pulled over another chair, and the nobleman took it and sat down near Radagast's friend.

It's unusual for a member of the nobility to sit down with a blacksmith, Faramir thought. Faramir was the son of the Steward of Gondor, but even though he was friendly and approachable, he barely knew any working people other than the servants who looked after him and the soldiers under his command. Radagast's friend must be very well connected.

Radagast's friend introduced the newcomer. "This is Urzahil of Umbar³, the Lieutenant of Barad-dûr and Chief Ambassador for Mordor. He's an important person to know here."

³ Urzahil of Umbar is the name given to the Mouth of Sauron by Iron Crown Enterprises (ICE).

Radagast's Cousin

The Mouth of Sauron, the third highest ranking person in Mordor. Only the Dark Lord himself and the High Nazgûl held higher office than he did. Faramir stared at the man in awe.

“Urzahil, this is my cousin Aiwendil. We grew up together.”

So he and Radagast are cousins. That explains how Radagast knows someone in Mordor.

The Mouth of Sauron placed his hands on the table. His nails were long and pointed, like those of a sorcerer's. Around his neck was an amulet, black with three white jewels, symbol of the Cult of Melkor.

If he was one of its priests, as was rumored, then it was possible he performed human sacrifice. Faramir shrank away in revulsion.

On the other hand, of all the people they'd met, the Mouth was the one most likely to have enough influence to get them out of here. Faramir expected Radagast to speak to him, but the brown wizard just nodded politely and resumed talking with his cousin about people they both knew and insignificant events from their shared childhood.

“Do you remember the time I brought a snake into the house and it got loose? I asked you to help me look for it. We searched everywhere, but we never did find it. What did we tell the others?”

“I think we decided not to mention it,” said his cousin.⁴

Faramir was grinding his teeth with frustration. *Speak to the Mouth, you simpleton. Try to win him over.*

It wasn't going to happen. Radagast was better suited to chasing butterflies with a net than playing a high stakes game with a master of court intrigue.

Faramir was tempted to climb across the table and speak with the Ambassador himself, except that he'd promised Radagast he wouldn't talk to anyone while they were here, not even to answer a question. Faramir couldn't remember how Radagast had extracted the promise from him, but Faramir given his word, and he couldn't go back on it now.

⁴ Another reference to Aunt Jean and Uncle Ted, only the incident involved scorpions.

Tavern

After a time, Radagast's cousin excused himself and left the table. Radagast said to Faramir, "You're not eating."

"I keep thinking about our audience before the Dark Lord tomorrow morning. I'm too worried to eat."

"There won't be an audience tomorrow," said Radagast.

"What? Why not?" asked Faramir.

"Because we've already had it."

"But won't Sauron want to see us in person?" asked Faramir.

Radagast leaned back and looked at him. "Who do you think we were talking to all evening?"

Chapter 6 Remember When



fter a few minutes, Sauron came back to the table and slid into the booth, accidentally bumping Faramir's knee. "Sorry," he said.

Faramir didn't answer. He kept his eyes down and moved over a few inches, trying to be invisible. It didn't matter, because nobody notices servants. Faramir could still feel the place where he'd been bumped, and wondered if he'd been contaminated.

Sauron picked up an Apple and began slicing it. "Was I just saying? Oh right, we were talking about the Great Plague."

Radagast leaned forward and listened with interest.

Faramir was suddenly ravenous. All evening, he'd been sick with worry about their audience with the Dark Lord. He couldn't eat, and he was too preoccupied about the next day to pay attention to the conversations around him. He helped himself from the platters in the middle of the table, and concentrated on eating.

Faramir kept his head down, eavesdropping on the conversation and pretending to focus on his food.

"We were both in Southern Mirkwood when it hit, you were in Rhosgobel and I was in Dol Guldur. Did you fall ill from it?" Sauron asked.

"No, I was spared. Wizards are mostly immune to disease," said Radagast.

"That's what I thought. But I was wrong."

"You had the plague? But I thought..." Radagast stammered.

Faramir cringed. Radagast had been about to say, *But I*

thought you were the one who started it.

Sauron laughed. "You're right, I did claim to have started it. I take credit for a lot of things I didn't do." He thought for a minute. "Actually, I believe the plague came out of South Harad, then spread across moved North. It burned through Osgiliath with devastating effect, and arrived in southern Mirkwood a year later."

"So you didn't start it, you were one of its victims? What happened?" asked Radagast.

"It began with a rash, followed by a high fever. There were days when I couldn't lift my head from the pillow. But after five days, the fever broke hadn't thought and I was fine."

"Were you ever in any danger?" asked Radagast.

"I hadn't thought so, but when I left the plague ward and went back to my room, I found the clothes they were going to bury me in laid out on my bed," said Sauron. there. It devastated Osgiliath, and arrived in Southern Mirkwood about a year later."

"So you didn't start it, you were one of its victims? What happened?" asked Radagast.

"It began with a rash, followed by a high fever. There were days when I couldn't lift my head from the pillow. But the fever broke suddenly, and I was fine."

"Were you ever in any danger?" asked Radagast.

"I didn't think so, but when I left the plague ward and went back to my room, I found the clothes I would have been buried in laid out on my bed," said Sauron.

Later, Faramir saw something from the corner of his eye, the motion of black fabric. Something was standing behind him, its gloved hand resting on the partition above his head.

How long had it been there? Probably a while.

Then he saw two more of them nearby. Nazgûl. Faramir was rattled, but after a few minutes, he forgot about them and returned to his supper.

Sauron was still talking. "It was cold last night. When I woke up, a huge dog was sleeping on the foot of my bed. That's

nothing unusual, but it wasn't one of my dogs. I'd never seen it before."

"He got past the guards?" asked Radagast.

"What guards?" asked Sauron.

Radagast looked surprised. Sauron explained, "When I was a hostage in the palace at Armenelos, they locked me in my room at night and stationed a pair of guards outside. Ever since I got back, I sleep with the door ajar, and I have no use for guards."

"I've avoiding a certain subject all evening, and it makes me feel awkward around you. May I speak of it openly?" said Radagast.

"ah...all right," said Sauron.

"I can't understand why you joined the Rebellion. When Ossë joined, no one was surprised. He was wild and rebellious, whereas you were the responsible one, sensible and dependable. Ossë never had the bonds of affection with Ulmo that you had with Aulë. Yet he came back, and you didn't. Why?"

"I don't even know where to start," said Sauron.

"I heard you quarreled with Aulë and ran away and join the Rebellion," said Radagast.

"I didn't quarrel with Aulë," said Sauron.

"Really? It seemed to me he was hard on you. You argued with him a lot," said Radagast.

"I didn't run away. I left to follow Melkor."

"How do you feel now? If Melkor came back and asked you to follow him into the Void, what would you do? Go or stay?"

"I'd say, 'Angmar, you're in charge,' and I'd be out of here without a backward glance." The partition jostled, Faramir had forgotten the wraith standing behind him. Sauron looked up at the creature. "Sorry, but that's how it would be."

Chapter 7 An Old Joke



he barmaid came over with a tray and set a tankard or goblet in front of each of them. Faramir had lost count of the number of rounds they'd had, and he was definitely beginning to feel it.

Faramir was surprised people from Mordor were talking in front of him, but apparently they'd forgotten he was there. Radagast had been talking to Sauron all evening, and showed no sign of slowing down.

"A question for you. If it took six hundred years to build Barad-dûr the first time, how did you rebuild it in just sixty years?" asked Radagast.

Faramir stiffened. To Radagast, it might be a polite social inquiry, but to anyone else, a question about military defenses was an attempt at espionage, but it seemed that Sauron loved to talk about Barad-dûr. However, Sauron didn't seem to take offense.

"We built the new structure on the original foundations. When Barad-dûr was first built in the Second Age, the foundations took far longer to build than the tower. But once they were done, the tower went up in less than a year. Well, the outer shell did, anyway. It had no doors or staircases for a while.

"After the Siege, Mordor was empty for over a thousand years. When the Nazgûl occupied Minas Morgul, they found the Dark Tower had been reduced to a pile of rubble, but underneath the rubble, the original foundations were still there.

"The foundations were extremely strong, and unlike the tower, they hadn't been pulled down. All we had to do was

An Old Joke

clear away the rubble of what had once been the original tower.

"We didn't have to quarry much stone the second time around, either. When we dug through the rubble, we found that most of the original stone blocks were still useable.

"And the new tower is plain compared to the original. The first Barad-dûr had carved paneling, decorative ironwork, and inscriptions over doors. The new tower doesn't have any ornamentation. The tallest towers aren't even finished yet, and until they are, I can't begin to think about fireplaces or window glass. In fact, the only decorations in the place are the murals in the tavern."

Radagast studied the portrait of Melkor on the far wall, and drained the last to his tankard. His pronunciation was starting to slur from drink.

"I was thinking about your meteoric rise at Utumno. You joined Morgoth's household late, but rose through the ranks with astonishing speed. What'd you do, sleep with him?"

It was an old joke, Faramir had heard it before. Sauron lowered his eyes, his face perfectly still.

"I'm sorry," Radagast stammered. "I didn't know...."

Sauron's Chief Ambassador lifted his wine goblet, it slipped from his fingers and struck the flagstones with a ringing sound. A pool of dark red wine spread across the surface of the table and spilled into his lap. He jumped to his feet with a yelp, his amber and gold robes soaked from the thigh down. Embroidered silk, they probably couldn't be saved.

"Ahhh! Please excuse me, I'm so clumsy." He blotted at the purple stain with a handkerchief.

"It happens. Go and change." Sauron lifted a hand, dismissing him.

The barmaid hurried over to mop up the table, and conversation moved on to other topics.

The Nazgûl behind the booth came around the table and laid a hand on Sauron's shoulder.

"Mairon, a word," said the creature.

"Later," said Sauron.

"Now."

Sauron sighed and got to his feet. He crossed the room with the Nazgûl on his heels, and rounded the screen at the end of the bar. They entered the dim space, and stopped when they reached the door to the alley.

Sauron turned and faced the black robed creature. Faramir could hear only a few words above the clatter of dishes from the kitchen.

"I need you to tell me it isn't true."

Sauron met his eye and didn't answer. The Nazgûl punched the wall inches beside Sauron's head. He jumped, and his eyes were unnaturally wide.

The two of them stood motionless while wisps of plaster dust floated from the fist-sized crater. The Nazgûl turned on its heel and stormed out the exit. The door slammed. Faramir heard glass shattering on the flagstones.

Sauron watched the wraith leave. He stared at the closed door for a time, then returned to the table.

"What was that about?" asked Radagast.

"What was what about?" said Sauron.



It was getting late, and their group was among the last in the tavern. Servants were beginning to wipe down the tables.

"I promised I'd be at a baby naming ceremony in Osgiliath the day after tomorrow. Can I reasonably expect to make it? What would be the best route to take?" asked Radagast.

Faramir tensed. Sauron hadn't said they could go.

Sauron tapped a finger on the table. "The easiest route is through the gates of the Morannon, then go west around the mountains. The road is wide and level the whole way, but it won't get you there in time.

"You'll have to go the way you came in. You'll have to leave here before dawn and ride hard to reach Cirith Ungol before dark. If you set out at first light, you'll reach Minas Morgul by mid-morning and Osgiliath by late afternoon."

"What if we pressed on and traveled through the night?"

An Old Joke

"You don't want to go through the Nameless Pass after dark. It's not safe."

"Not safe? Because of the spider?" asked Radagast.

"No, because the horses can't see in the dark. The road is narrow, and there's a steep drop to one side. But if you leave Cirith Ungol at dawn, it should be possible to reach Minas Morgul by mid-morning, and Osgiliath by late afternoon. Faramir felt limp with relief.

"I'm afraid I can't make you a gift of horses. We don't have any to spare, but I can lend you some. An armed escort will take you within sight of East Osgiliath, but after that, you're on your own. Will that do?" Sauron asked.

"That will do fine," said Radagast.

Chapter 8 The Ride Home



aramir woke to a sharp knock on the door. "The sun will be up in an hour. It's time to get moving," a muffled voice of called through the door.

They dressed quickly and followed him downstairs. Their minder took them into the tavern, now dark, and showed them to a table where bread and tea had been set out for them.

They ate breakfast standing, then followed their minder out the Inn's front door and waited with him on the front steps. It was chilly in the pre-dawn. The Iron Crown sign was wet with dew.

A small group of men-at-arms rode down the street. They would escort Radagast and Faramir most of the way to Osgiliath. They had two extra horses with them, already saddled. The captain of the men-at-arms gave the best horse to Radagast and the lesser one to Faramir, befitting his status as a servant.

They were almost to the main gate when Faramir heard hoof beats. A man on horseback caught up with them. Faramir recognized him from the evening before, the Lieutenant of Barad-dûr, Sauron's horse-faced Ambassador. "I'll be riding with you," he said.

"There's no need for you to come along, Ambassador, I can manage," the captain told him.

"Even so, we should show our guest every courtesy. After all, he's our Master's cousin," said the Mouth of Sauron.

Guest, not guests, Faramir noticed. Radagast was right, servants are invisible. In the tavern last night, he was never introduced to anybody and never included in the conversation.

The Ride Home

They never even looked at him. Faramir had a new appreciation for their minder, who thought to include him when he gave them souvenir coins.

A minute later, their party was joined by another rider, robed in black and mounted on a black horse. He held both reins in his left hand. In the dimness, the black fabric of the sling supporting his right arm was almost invisible against his clothing.

"I can take over," said the Nazgûl.

"You can't ride that far, you're injured. Let me handle it," said the Lieutenant of Barad-dûr.

"No, that's all right. I was going to Minas Morgul anyway."

Neither would back down, so they both joined the escort.

"I half expected your Master to see us off this morning. Isn't he usually an early riser?" Radagast said to the Ambassador.

"We were up late into the night, talking," said the Nazgûl. "I don't think he's up yet."

They rode toward the main gate. The captain handed the guard an official looking document, which he took it into the gatehouse. A minute later, the portcullis rose and the gates swung outward.

They rode out through the main gates. The fires of Orodruin glowed orange and lit up the low clouds above it. After sunrise, it would just be an orange light in the distance under an overcast grey sky, but in the darkness, the burning mountain dominated the view to the west.

They traveled in silence for a few miles. It took concentration to navigate the steep terrain. After a while, the road flattened out, and the riding got easier. The sky was beginning to get light, and they could see a little more of the landscape. Faramir looked east, toward Barad-dûr. The mists that usually cloaked the tower had lifted, leaving the Dark Tower silhouetted against the pale sky.

Whoa, it's huge! And we're not even close to it anymore, thought Faramir.

The captain of the men-at-arms shook his reins, anxious to continue. He wanted make good time, and Cirith Ungol was a

long way away. They spurred their horses and rode on at a faster pace.

The Lieutenant of Barad-dûr took up a position beside Radagast. The Nazgûl moved over to his other side. Faramir rode behind them, unseen but close enough to overhear their conversation.

“So...you grew up with our Master?” the Lieutenant of Barad-dûr asked Radagast.

“Yes, although he was older than I was, so I didn’t know him well.”

“What was he like?” asked the Nazgûl.

“I remember him as a serious teenager who seldom smiled. Reliable, steady, very hard working.” Radagast thought for a minute. “He was a perfectionist. If a picture was hanging crooked on the wall, he had to fix it right away. We used to tilt them on purpose when we were mad at him.”

“We’re obviously talking about the same person,” said the Nazgûl.

Radagast went on. “He was the oldest, so he was given a lot of responsibility early. Maybe too much, too early. It made him anxious, and he handled it by being controlling. He wouldn’t delegate, so he ended up doing most of the work himself. Then he’d get overwhelmed and melt down.”

The two exchanged a look. “We’re definitely talking about the same person,” said the Lieutenant of Barad-dûr.

“Who were his friends?” asked the Nazgûl.

“Eönwë, Ilmarë, and Ossë. His girlfriend’s name was...”

“He had a girlfriend?” The wraith sounded surprised.

“Yes. They planned to marry, but were forbidden to, I believe because they were too young. Then he joined the Rebellion, and she married someone else,” said Radagast.

They reached Cirith Ungol just as it was getting dark. The footing on the mountain road was getting dangerous in the fading light. They spent the night at Cirith Ungol, in bunks in the guard room.

They left Cirith Ungol before sunrise and reached Minas Morgul by mid-morning. The Lieutenant of Barad-dûr and the

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Nazgûl only went as far as Minas Morgul, while Radagast, Faramir, and their escort continued westward. Their escort brought them within sight of East Osgiliath. Then they collected the horses and rode back toward Minas Morgul.

"There it is. Osgiliath," Radagast said with satisfaction. "I bet you didn't think I could get you here."

You're right, thought Faramir.

"Well, let's get going. It's a long walk," said Radagast.

Deleted Scenes



Mairon leaned against the back of the booth, both hands wrapped around his tankard. Judging from the slurred speech around the table, he wasn't the only one who'd had too much to drink. Radagast was teasing him about his meteoric rise at Utumno. "You joined Morgoth's household late, but rose through the ranks with lightning speed until you were his second-in-command. What did you do, sleep with him?"

It was an old joke, Mairon had heard it a hundred times. But Radagast must have read something in his face the others missed.

"I'm sorry ..." Radagast stammered. "I didn't know ..."

A tankard hit the flagstones with a crash and made everybody jump. Ale splashed their boots and clothes, and puddled on the floor.

"Ahhh! Please excuse me, I'm so clumsy," said Urzahil.

Urzahil's own clothes got the worst of it. His robe was soaked from the knee down. Made from embroidered silk, it probably couldn't be saved. Mairon knew that Urzahil, the Mouth of Mairon, was a career diplomat, but even so, he was impressed.

A barmaid hurried over to clean up, and the conversation moved on to other topics.

Angmar put a hand on Mairon's shoulder, firmly enough to hurt. "A word with you."

"Later," said Mairon.

"Now," said Angmar.

Mairon rolled his eyes and stood up. He tried to probe the mind of his most powerful servant, but Angmar blocked the

Deleted Scenes

attempt, keeping his thoughts as still as his face. It didn't matter. Mairon knew what this was about.

Angmar led the way to a private corner of the room, with Mairon following him. *I do not want to have this conversation. Please, Angmar, can't you just drop the subject?*

Mairon turned to face him. "What's this about?"

"I've heard that joke before, and I never thought anything of it," said Angmar. "But tonight, watching your face, for the briefest instant I saw you look ashamed."

"It was just a joke," said Mairon. "Don't read too much into it."

Angmar whirled around, his fists clenched. "I'm only going to ask you once. Did he fuck you?"

Mairon remembered a bruising grip around his wrists. Twisting to get loose. A slap, hard enough to make his eyes water. The sound of fabric ripping. *Please no please no...*

Mairon laughed off the question and tried to distract him. Angmar cut him off. "Please! I need to know that nothing happened." Angmar's face was anguished. "I just need to hear you say it."

Mairon would have lied to anyone else, but with Angmar, it was different. He stood there in silence, looking at the floor, unable to answer.

Angmar looked at him, his face unreadable. Then he slammed his fist into the wall inches from Mairon's head and stormed out of the room. Mairon watched him leave.

I'll give him time to calm down, then find him and try to patch things up, he thought.

Mairon understood why Angmar reacted that way. Angmar was born into the upper nobility of Númenor. Members of his class were held to a high standard. He valued chastity, both in himself and others. And because he grew up with it, purity was as natural to him as breathing.

Mairon also suspected that Angmar had an idealized view of him, believing his Master to be more intelligent, more courageous, and more capable than he really was. Angmar also believed his Master to be chaste. That was pretty much true, Maiar usually are. But when Angmar learned Mairon had

prostituted himself with his own master, hero worship must have turned to contempt.

The blow left a crater in the wall. Plaster dust floated in the air. Mairon drew a deep breath and waited for his pulse to return to normal before he returned to the table and sat down.

“What was that about?” said Radagast.

“What was what about?” said Mairon.



After they'd said their goodbye for the evening and everyone else had gone to bed, Mairon went back to his chambers and summoned Angmar to talk to him in private. Angmar ignored the summons, a thing he'd never done before.

Mairon waited, and summoned him again. This time Angmar did come. His arm was in a sling, supporting a bandaged hand. He said nothing in greeting, and his manner was distant and cold.

Mairon knew that Angmar had been born into the upper nobility of Númenor. He valued chastity, both in himself and others. Members of his class were expected to practice self-restraint, and because he grew up with it, it was as natural to him as breathing.

Mairon also suspected that Angmar had an idealized view of his Master, believing him more intelligent, more courageous, and more capable than he really was. Angmar also believed his Master to be chaste. That was pretty much true, Maiar usually are. But when Angmar learned that Mairon prostituted himself with his own master, in an instant, hero-worship became contempt.

Angmar stood before him in silence, furious and filled with disgust. But if Angmar was not speaking to him exactly, at least he was willing to listen.

Mairon told him everything. How the first time Melkor asked, he'd refused. It made no difference. It happened again. It happened a third time. Tired of the bruises and torn clothes,

Mairon decided, the next time it came up, to just submit and get it over with.

It continued. He told himself it was no big deal. He told himself to suck it up. He told himself it hadn't ever happened.

Until one time. Melkor pinned him down with the weight of his body and held his wrists against the bed in a vise-like grip. Mairon could move his toes, but nothing else. He looked at the wall and thought of something inconsequential, waiting for it to be over. He bit his lip against the pain. Then he realized something was about to happen. Something that took his breath away and made him cry out loud. He liked it. A lot. It still hurt, but he no longer cared.

When it was over, he leaned forward and brushed his lips against Melkor's. Melkor responded by covering his mouth with his own, and not so much kissed as devoured him. Mairon had always loved Melkor, but at that moment, he fell *in* love with him as well.

Mairon was never sure if there was a connection, but Melkor began to confide in him more, and to include him in his plans. Mairon was given command of Angband and promoted to Melkor's second-in-command, a role that Gothmog rightly should have held. He even noticed his own personal power as a Maia increasing, possibly a result of the repeated close physical contact with a being far more powerful than himself.

Soon, he was no longer motivated to end the physical relationship. He let it continue until Melkor met his end.

Angmar listened in silence. Mairon dismissed him. Angmar bowed and turned to go.

Within a few days, Angmar's manner toward him returned to normal. Mairon was relieved, because he had feared Angmar's disillusionment might be permanent. Angmar may have felt disgusted with him, but he apparently found a way to accept that his Master was flawed. In any case, their relationship returned to normal.

Much later, Mairon teased Angmar by calling him The Chastity Guardian. Angmar spun around to face him, annoyed. Hands on his hips, he snapped, "You really don't get it, do you?" Mairon had no idea what he was talking about.

This story is based on an incident in which my Aunt Jean and Uncle Ted climbed over the fence at Vandenberg Air Force Base in search of camel crickets and got caught.

