

## Synopsis – First Half of the Book

Second Age 1870 - *Numenor is rising in power but beginning to lose contact with the Elves, with whom they were recently allied in the Battle of Tharbad (SA 1700), in which they jointly defeated the sorcerer-warlord Tar-Mairon.*<sup>1</sup>

Er-Murazor<sup>2</sup> is bold, independent, and resourceful. He takes orders as suggestions.

Although a younger son, he is his father's favorite. (His father, Ciryatan the Shipbuilder, is the 12<sup>th</sup> king of Numenor. His brother Atanamir will be the 13<sup>th</sup> king.)

He sailed further west, and stretched the Ban harder, than any man had ever done before. His father (one of the first Black Numenorian, those who chafe against the Ban) was delighted, and presented him with a great two-handled sword, a family heirloom that normally would have gone to his older brother Atanamir.

The personality traits which won him favor early on (not being afraid of authority, pushing the limits, having his own way of doing things) get him into more and more trouble, and he falls from favor within his own family.

To please his family, Er-Murazor agrees to an arranged marriage, which will cement an alliance with a nation on the coast. The bride is older than himself, and not Numenorian (lower status than himself). He has too much to drink at the wedding banquet and fails to consummate the marriage. He is sent home in disgrace, where his family calls him selfish and too picky.

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<sup>1</sup> Sauron

<sup>2</sup> The Witch King of Angmar

## Wraith

Desperate to redeem himself, Er-Murazor agrees to establish a colonial outpost at Haven of Umbar, the most strategically important deep water harbor on the coast of Arda. This will be the toehold from which Numenor will expand into the mainland. He does it his own way: taking the harbor from the local people by deceit, building on top of the rock instead of at its base, spending more than was allocated. He has constant friction with home about it, however, the end result is fabulous - a walled city that commands the harbor, surrounded by a farming community where there had been only desert.

When the walled city is finished, his father orders him to gift the Haven to his brother. Er-Murazor refuses.

There is a period of calm, filled with tension. After several months, Er-Murazor starts to relax, and feels pleased about having stood up for himself and won.

## Chapter 1 The First Use of Magic



great bank of clouds towered in the West, their edges yellow-gold in the late afternoon sun.

From the height of the aft deck, Er-Mûrazôr scanned the endless line where the sea met the sky. A swell rolled beneath the ship and lifted it high in the air. There it was, a roughness on the horizon, barely noticeable but definitely there. He stepped up on the stern rail for a better look, holding the backstay for balance. Tolan, the old helmsman shot him a warning look. *Have a care, young princeling.*

Above the irregular spot, the undersides of the clouds were tinged with green. Every sailor knows that clouds over land are green, they reflect the color of the fields and forests beneath them.

The swell rolled on, and the ship dropped into the trough between waves. The prow dipped below the water, dunking the lavender and rosemary tied to the bowsprit, an offering to Ossë.

When the ship rose on the next swell, he saw it again. It could be a triangle of sail, but more likely it was Tol Eressëa, the westernmost outpost of the undying lands. He would hold this course just long enough to get a better look.

He glanced over his shoulder in the direction of home. A small bump, the peak of the highest mountain on Númenor,

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interrupted the otherwise unbroken horizon. The cities hugging the coast had long since disappeared beneath the sea, visually speaking, but as long as he could see any part of Númenor, at least intermittently, he considered himself not in violation of the Ban.

They continued sailing west. When they slipped into the troughs, he lost sight of the tip of the mountain. He sent Wynn, the lookout, into the rigging to keep an eye on it.

“I can’t ... oh wait, I can still see it,” the slender boy called from his perch just below the tip of the mainmast. Their pennant, a tree with seven stars, snapped in the breeze above his head.

His interpretation of the Ban was more flexible than most, and every time he sailed west, he pushed the limits a little harder.

Someday, he would see the undying lands with his own eyes. If the sages were right, it would add years to his natural life. Not by as many as if he lived there, but every added year was precious.

A wall of squalls was moving in from the north. The ugly clouds danced with lightning, and a low rumble reached him from across the waves. If the squalls continued on their current course and speed, his view of the peak would be cut off behind diagonal curtains of rain.

Er-Mûrazôr took a last look to the West, at the billowing white clouds reflecting green underneath, which might be the only look he would ever have of the undying lands. Reluctantly, he gave the order to turn around.

“Jibe ho.” The stern swung around, and the sails filled with wind.

The course back to Númenor led them directly into the path of the squall. If they were lucky, they’d outrun it, but if it caught

them, they'd be in no real danger. They'd shorten sail, drop the sea anchor, and wait out the storm below decks. There was nothing to run into out here. They were sailing through blue water, unimaginably deep, with no rocks or shoals.

The great mass of cloud lit up from within, revealing the enormous height of the waves. The water was pockmarked from rain, and wisps of spume raced across its surface.

The wind freshened. The deck tipped until it dipped into the water, and the sea hissed along the gunwales. The sky turned black. When the rain hit, it was stinging hard and cold as ice, startling compared to the warm water sloshing over his feet.

A gust blew out one of the sails, leaving ribbons of canvas flapping in the gale. The bow drifted off the line of swells, and a wave broke over the bow.

"Helmsman, I relieve you." The exhausted man shot him a look of gratitude, and Er-Mûrazôr took over the tiller.

"Shorten sail." His words were torn away by the shriek of the wind, even he couldn't hear them. He put his fingers in his mouth and blew ear-splitting blasts, two short and one long. A sailor at the bow nodded, and took down the larger of the two remaining jibs. There was almost no canvas left to take in. They were flying a jib the size of a snot rag, and nothing else.

Hours past dark, and the squall showed no signs of letting up. The stars were hidden behind the clouds. Without them, Er-Mûrazôr lost his bearings. It didn't matter, in a storm like this, he had to abandon his course and steer directly into the waves.

The bow of the ship lifted on the next crest, and the hull slid down the side of a mountain of a wave. They landed wrong, and the keel shivered as if it would snap. Er-Mûrazôr gripped the rail and struggled to keep his footing on the slippery deck.

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He stood upright, his face still. It wouldn't do for the men see him afraid.

A bolt of lightning struck, too close, and the crack of thunder came at almost the same moment. The lookout on the prow turned around, gesturing wildly and pointing to something off the port quarter. Er-Mûrazôr saw his lips move but couldn't hear anything above the shriek of the storm and the ringing in his ears.

He looked where the man was pointing. The light from the next strike revealed a line of breakers, the boiling foam pale against the black water. Rocks, where there should be only blue water, of unplumbed depths.

He threw his whole weight against the tiller. "Ready about!" The jib swung from one side to the other, and the ship began to turn. The waves hit them abeam, driving the ship closer to the rocks. He cringed at the drawn-out scraping of wood against stone.

"Ossë, spare us and I will raise a temple to you."

Assuming Ossë wanted another temple. Númenor was a seafaring nation. It was lousy with roadside shrines and temples to Ossë, probably one for every person on the island.

He ordered the mainsail raised, and the canvas filled with a snap. The deadly breakers passed alongside them, and soon, they left the fangs of rocks in their wake. Er-Mûrazôr put a hand to his chest and held it there until his pulse dropped to normal.

Sometime past midnight, when the storm had died down to a heavy rain, he told Sevrann, his first officer, "Set a double watch. We'll update the charts as soon as it's light."

He went below into the low-ceilinged cabin, barely large enough for the six bunks shared by a twelve-man crew, and flung himself onto the nearest one fully clothed, too tired to care that he was dripping onto the sheets. When he closed his eyes, he felt like he was falling. He clutched the edges of the pallet for support.

There was shouting on deck, and the sound of running feet. Someone screamed. He struggled from deepest sleep, as if swimming toward the surface from a great depth.

“Hard a lee,” ordered the first officer. The ship wallowed through its turn, and canvas flapped.

A blow struck the vessel. It flung him from his bunk and resonated through the hull like a drumbeat. He was on his feet in an instant, but the next blow knocked him to the floor. Pain shot from his wrist to his elbow.

The ship was lifted and dropped, lifted and dropped, and each time, the vessel rolled further onto its side. There was the scrape of wood against rock, and the sound of timbers splintering. The blows sounded flat and dull, as if they came from a drum with a split skin. At that moment, he knew the hull had been breached.

He crawled through seawater a foot deep and reached the hatch. The deck was canted at an unnatural angle, but he could keep his footing by hanging onto the roof of the cabin.

“Captain, there was another rock.” His first officer looked terrified, either of being shipwrecked or of his own Captain. Er-Múrazôr couldn’t tell.

The ship rolled in the surf and seemed to twist, and the timbers groaned like whales. The ship started to break apart.

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“Abandon ship,” he said. The order no captain ever wants to give.

The hull had been driven so high up on the rocks, they could step from the deck and wade through the foaming surf.

Judging from the height above which no mussels or barnacles clung, the rock would keep them above water at high tide. However, no plants grew here, and as far as he could tell, there was no water.

He stood among the rocks, breathing hard and staring out to sea.

*No one knows where we are.*

It was his own fault. Er-Mûrazôr hadn't told anyone he was planning to sail so close to the undying lands.

If his brother Atanamir failed to return on time, they'd search for him right away. Unlike Er-Mûrazôr, Atanamir did what he was told. But if Er-Mûrazôr were late, his father would assume he'd gone off exploring, and wouldn't worry.

Some captains always kept a silver mirror used for signaling on their person at all times against this very possibility. He felt for the cord around his neck, at the same moment he remembered when he'd taken it off and where he'd put it. Ossë's stiff cock! They might be here for a long time.

But there was no time to brood. The more food and water they could recover from the disintegrating ship, the longer they could hold out. The men made trip after trip over the razor-sharp rocks, moving the wounded, carrying water kegs, and bringing out whatever tools and equipment they could carry, taking care not to fall in the darkness and the swirling water.



Some of the men refused to go below decks, now in pitch darkness and tilted at an unfamiliar angle. Er-Mûrazôr could have ordered them below, they needed to retrieve the kegs of water in the hold, but there was only so much he could ask of the terrified men, so he did it himself.

After that, Er-Mûrazôr carried armloads of wet canvas from the wreck until his limbs trembled from exertion. His left arm was almost unusable. He could grip with his hand, but it hurt to lift any weight.

The hull rocked in the waves. It could crush a hand or foot if a sailor was unlucky. Timbers cracked. Something snapped, and the mainmast came down. Hempten ropes trailed in its wake. However badly they needed supplies, it was no longer safe to collect them.

“All ashore. We’ve done enough for tonight.”

He went to the makeshift tent where they were treating the wounded, jury-rigged from a sail draped over a spar across two boulders. He lifted the edge of the canvas and crawled beneath it. There was enough sand between the rocks to lay a man on, but it was soaking wet.

Tolan, the old helmsman knelt over a still form. “It’s Sevrann, Captain. He’s bad hurt.”

The fabric of his legging had been cut away to above the knee, and pieces of wood were bound the length of his shin with strips of cloth. Er-Mûrazôr hoped the bone splinters hadn’t pierced the skin. If they had, it would be a death sentence.

Er-Mûrazôr knelt beside the wounded man and asked, “How’s the leg?” His first officer bit his lip and grimaced. He turned to the helmsman. “Was there any wine among the water barrels we managed to save? Give it to him.” He couldn’t do anything more for the man.

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Outside, he stood in the rain, the cold water running in rivulets down the side of his face, down his neck. This was his fault. He looked around to be sure he was unobserved, then fell to his knees and punched the sand over and over. Remorse hit him like a punch in the gut, and he couldn't seem to catch his breath.

Recovering his composure, he joined the others and counted those who remained. Two were in the tent and the rest were salvaging things from the ship. That made ten. No, eleven, he'd forgotten to count himself. They had been a crew of twelve. Wynn, the lookout, was missing. Er-Mûrazôr punched the sand again.

The rain was still coming down, icy cold. It didn't rain often in this part of the world. He tasked two sailors with catching rainwater in a square of canvas, and told another to find a cask or pot, anything that would hold water.

Sometime in the small hours, the moon began to show through broken clouds. The rain had stopped, but mist continued to soak his hair and clothing. Er-Mûrazôr sat in the sand with his knees pulled up to his chin, his thoughts swirling.

The helmsman came over and sat beside him. "Sevrann's sleeping now." Er-Mûrazôr nodded. "And now for you. That's blood on your leg. Do you want me to patch you up?"

Er-Mûrazôr looked down. A dark stain spread across the outside of his thigh. He touched it, and his hand came away sticky. Something protruded from the fabric. He tugged, and eased out a splinter the size of a writing pen. It must have been four or five inches deep, just under the skin. Ugly, but not serious.

The helmsman tore a strip of linen from the tail of his shirt and passed it over. Er-Mûrazôr knotted the ends, then dropped it

over his head. With the weight of his arm supported by the loop of fabric, the sudden stabbing gave way to a dull ache. Much better.

“Thanks,” he said, and he meant it.

Nearby, two men bent over the collection of driftwood and broken timber, striking a stone against the blade of a knife over and over. Every once in a while, a spark landed in the shavings cupped in the second man’s hands. Once, it glowed for a moment under his breath, but it didn’t catch.

It would be better to have a signal fire at night, it could be seen for much further away. He wouldn’t want to lure a ship up onto the rocks, but experienced mariners would know not to approach until daylight.

Er-Mûrazôr looked from one face to another. “Did anyone rescue the tinderbox?” The men looked at each other. In the dark, with the waves threatening to drag them over rocks as sharp as knives, while thinking of more important things, like rescuing the drinking water. “It must have been lost with the ship.”

*Once, Er-Mûrazôr had seen one of the court astrologers light a candle with his will alone. It took a long time, and seemed to take a lot of effort, but finally there was a curl of smoke, and a yellow flame leapt up from the wick.*

*Er-Mûrazôr had assumed it was a street conjurer’s trick, something with flammable oils and a rough surface to his fingertips, but the man didn’t seem the type. He was a serious scholar, and not one to draw attention to himself.*

*“How did you do that?” the young prince had asked him.*

*“Keep your mind still, and focus the whole of your attention upon the wick. Be patient, and expect to have to work at it.”*

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*Er-Mûrazôr had tried a couple of times. He'd stared for what seemed like long minutes, and had punched the wall when nothing happened. But once, just once, he managed to produce the smallest wisp of smoke. When he touched the wick, it was warm.*

Er-Mûrazôr knelt beside the makeshift fire circle. "Let me try."

The sailors had arranged a bundle of driftwood twigs into a miniature tent, and put shaved curls of wood under it.

Er-Mûrazôr knelt in the wet sand by the edge of the fire ring and sat back on his heels. He rested his hands on his thighs, to the extent the sling would allow it. His left wrist was twice the size it should be, the wrist bone and tendons had disappeared under puffy flesh.

"Give me some room." The sailors withdrew by two or three paces, but he still felt crowded. Maybe the secret to magic is getting past the fear of looking stupid.

Er-Mûrazôr focused on the shavings. He drew a breath, held it, let it go. The stones on the shingle beach clattered as the waves lifted them and then drained back. His wrist hurt. He ignored it. The ankle he was sitting on started to go numb, and he shifted his weight. Focus. He closed his eyes. Breath in, breath out.

The swell of the ocean all around him was like a living thing. The power of it seemed to fill him. Breath in, breathe out. Send with it all the power from the surf, from the ocean, the storm.

It took what seemed like hours, but finally, a curl of smoke rose from the shaving. A spark glowed orange, and the tangle of shavings burst into flame, which ignited the tip of a driftwood twig. Soon the whole structure was burning, the wet wood popping in the heat. Er-Mûrazôr hung his head, exhausted.

"How did you do that?" The sailor's voice was awe-stricken.

"He's a sorcerer, that's how. Don't ask stupid questions," said his shipmate.

Er-Mûrazôr was as amazed as the sailors. Was he a sorcerer? Or, as the court astrologer had said, did you just need to be patient and work extremely hard?

The men fed timbers from the ship into the blaze. Someone slapped him on the back. The flame shot up four or five feet high, burning hotter than a natural fire, the soaked wood popping and hissing with steam.

Er-Mûrazôr unfolded himself from the sand and brushed off his knees. "Get some rope and an oar."

They wrapped the rope around the blade of the oar and wedged it between two rocks, a fiery beacon high in the air. It was impossible to tell if anyone was out there, all they could do was wait.

All night they fed the fire, keeping it alive in the drizzle and damp. Even standing on his feet, Er-Mûrazôr's head kept falling forward and snapping him awake.

The day dawned under a cloudless sky with glassy calm seas. What was left of the ship were strewn up and down the shore. Debris floated on the water.

"Captain! There's a ship on the horizon. We need to fashion a smoke signal, right quick."

There were no plants on the rock, and everything from the ship: timber, fabric, or rope, was soaking wet.

"Bring some more tarred rope," Er-Mûrazôr told the nearest sailor.

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A sailor came back with a coil of rope over one shoulder and dumped it into the fire. Resinous smoke billowed from the twisted hemp, forcing Er-Mûrazôr back, his eyes burning.

An oily black column rose hundreds of feet in the air, as thick as the trunk of a tree. On the horizon, the ship tacked, and tacked again, the white triangle of sail growing larger as it drew near.

A pennant floated from the top of the mainmast, unreadable against the sun. The rock on which they were marooned was to the west of Númenor, far from the normal trading routes. Reputable vessels didn't come this way.

"Captain, what if they're pirates?" The young sailor's face turned pale.

Er-Mûrazôr kept his face still. *Worse than that, what if they're slavers?*

He lifted the sling over his head and let it drop to the ground. The newcomers needn't know he was injured. He stepped to the edge of the surf, motioning his men to stay back. His good hand tightened around the hilt of his dagger.

The vessel completed another tack, bringing it closer. Its lines were slender and graceful, like an elvish ship. Men had no trading routes west of Númenor, but the Teleri, famous mariners who sailed between the mainland and Tol Eressëa, passed this way all the time. Er-Mûrazôr chewed his lip, waiting.

The breeze freshened and lifted the pennant, revealing a blue background arrayed with a host of stars. Er-Mûrazôr's knees almost buckled with relief.

"Captain, it's an Elvish ship," said Tolan.

## Wraith

### Author's note:

The purpose of this chapter is to show that Er-Murazor has an inborn talent for magic, and can do it without memorized spells, a talent few people have. Later, he works necromancy, the most difficult of all magic, also without the benefit of instruction or spells.

The story is autobiographical, and the shipwreck is a real incident. It occurred in the Bahamas when I'd just completed freshman year in college. I was thrown from my bunk a little past 1:15 in the morning when we struck the reef. I still remember how angry I was at being awakened, I'd come off watch at midnight and was entitled to sleep until 4:00 am. The story is almost literal, except that no one was injured, the wooden hull was fiberglass, and the Teleri were actually Bahamian fishermen.

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Bond's Cay, in the Berry Islands north of Nassau



site of the  
wreck

The storm blew the boat against a lee shore (to the lee of the vessel, e.g. downwind), greatly feared by mariners. Note the extensive bands of reef the vessel was driven over before it hit. The rise and fall of waves created the lift-drop, lift-drop effect.



(photo credits – Shakira's Facebook page. Apparently she owns the island.)

Note the razor-sharp rocks along the coast.



## Chapter 13 A Spy Revealed



Er-Mûrazôr stood in front of the makeshift table that served as a desk. Every part of its surface was buried under ledger books, reports from the frontier, and scraps of paper on which he'd added long columns of numbers.

Ships sailed on the tide, and the Royal barge was due to leave this afternoon. Finished or not, his report to the palace would be on it. Er-Mûrazôr skimmed the dozen pages. It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do.

"How long until the tide turns?" his private secretary was beginning to look anxious.

"Within the hour. But I only have to sign it and attach the seal."

He bent and signed his name and titles, then folded the sheets into quarters and tied the bundle with red tape. Halwn melted the wax. Halwn tipped the ladle over the knot, and Er-Mûrazôr imprinted the crest of the Royal House of Númenor into the cooling wax.

He had fifteen minutes to spare and one more thing to do

"I'll take it down the Royal barge myself. We're done for the day, you can go home."

The little secretary beamed, then gathered up his pens and scurried across the square. When he'd gone, Er-Mûrazôr sat

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down at the table and dipped a quill into ink and began a second letter to the King.

*Dearest Father,*

*I wish you were here to see how the walls of the city have risen from the bare rock, as white as sand and at least two stories tall.*

*From Umbar, the whole of the mainland is open before us, unimaginably vast. It's so different here than it is at home. During the day, the breeze is fresh and cold, but at night it comes from the desert and carries the scent of roses and mint.*

He wrote more, nothing important, just small news about the farmers' market that morning, and that the blacksmith had started making things for the fishermen. Nothing exciting, just details of day to day life. When he finished, he folded it into a square and sealed it with his signet ring.

He stacked the letter on top of the official dispatch and headed down to the harbor. It was a fairly substantial hike, but faster going down than coming up. Even so, when the path ended at the quay, his calves were burning.

The harbor smelled of salt and sea air. He could tell high tide just by the aroma, the mud flats were underwater right now, and so were the dead fish.

A slim, fast boat of the sort used for smuggling, or possibly to outrun pirates, was moored almost directly in front of him. The deck was higher above the quay than a man is tall. Only the heads and shoulders of the men showed above the rail, but they appeared to be stowing gear as if when the ship were preparing to sail.

The Royal barge was tied up a little further along the quay. Crewmen waited by the pilings where mooring ropes as thick as a man's wrist held the great vessel in place. A wide

gangplank led up to the barge, dragging back and forth as the barge lifted and dropped.

Waves slapped against the side of the quay. Er-Mûrazôr mounted the steeply-inclined ramp, then stepped onto the deck and summoned the ship's captain.

"I have an official dispatch for the King." He gave the dispatch to the Captain.

"Is that everything?" the captain asked.

Er-Mûrazôr almost gave him the letter, but hesitated. The Royal barge would reach Armenelos in three days. If he sent it by the smuggling ship instead, it could be at the Palace by late tomorrow afternoon.

"No, that's it." He put the letter away.

He left the Royal barge and went to the smugglers' ship. Men moved around the deck, preparing to sail.

He cupped his hands to his mouth. "You there. I would speak to you captain." One of them looked at him with mild interest, then returned to what he was doing. "I am Er-Mûrazôr, Captain of the Haven. I would speak to your captain."

Every one of them froze. "My noble lord, our captain will attend you right away." Er-Mûrazôr had spent more time at sea than on land. He didn't need help climbing the rope netting that hung over the side, but he accepted the hand that was offered.

A crewman pointed down the companionway. "Our captain is below." Between decks, the space was cramped and low-ceilinged, dark and suffocatingly hot. His eyes adjusted. At a crude table sat a wiry man of middle years with a thatch of iron grey hair.

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"I'd like you to deliver a letter to the Palace at Armenelos." The captain waited. "There's a silver penny in it for you, and another on delivery."

Footsteps clattered down the rungs of the companionway. The captain looked up. Er-Mûrazôr turned around, and there was Halwn, balanced on the lowest step with something in his hand.

"Oh hullo, Halwn. The usual arrangement?" asked the captain.

Halwn's face froze. He turned away, so that Er-Mûrazôr couldn't see what he was holding.

Er-Mûrazôr grinned. "What's that, a letter for your sweetheart?" He really shouldn't tease the little clerk, Halwn was a family man with a new baby at home, and that his only sweetheart was his wife.

"Well, let's have it, then." The captain held out his hand.

Halwn went white. His eyes darted back and forth from the captain to Er-Mûrazôr. Very slowly, he handed over a packet of papers sealed with red wax, indistinguishable from official dispatches sent to the palace.

"What is that? Give it to me." Er-Mûrazôr ordered the captain.

Halwn's eyes were fixed on the captain. He moved his head almost imperceptibly, the tiniest shake "no". Er-Mûrazôr stepped forwards and snatched the package from the captain's hand.

The red wax held the royal seal, but there is no address anywhere on the outer wrappings. Er-Mûrazôr broke the seal. Inside was page after page of Halwn's careful script.

*The Palace authorized two silver pennies to be spent on soldiers' pay, but he spent three pennies two farthings.*

He flipped to another page.

*The agreement requires any modification to the charter to be considered by the full Council of Captains, but he altered a regulation regarding duty shifts for sentries without first consulting the Council.*

"What is this?" The cramped space between decks seem to spin. He sank onto a bench, his head between his hands.

There was the sound of feet pounding up the stairs and across the deck. Er-Mûrazôr dove for the stairs, crossed the deck in a few long strides, then leaped over the side onto the quay.

Halwn was nowhere in sight. Where would he have gone? The Royal barge. If he was in the pay of Er-Mûrazôr's brother, that was his best chance of safety.

A quick search proved the spy wasn't on the Royal barge, and now he had a significance head start.

Er-Mûrazôr looked up the hairpin road towards the walled city, and there he was, rounding the fourth of eighteen hairpin turns. Er-Mûrazôr took after him, his long legs burning up the distance.

He caught up with the little sneak at the twelfth turn. The man was standing with his hands on his knees, panting, unable to run any further.

Er-Mûrazôr couldn't believe the man would betray him. Halwn was his father's private secretary, he and Er-Mûrazôr had always been on good terms.

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“Start talking, you worm.” Er-Mûrazôr took a step toward him.

He took a shaky step backwards. “Please don’t hurt me.”

Er-Mûrazôr seized him by the arms. “Who sent you?”

The clerk shook with fear. Er-Mûrazôr struck him.

“Why are you spying on me?”

He dangled the little man backwards over the drop. The man’s toes still gripped the white granite, but he was overbalanced. Er-Mûrazôr released the grip on his arms, or if he managed to struggle free, he’d fall to his death.

The man started to cry. “Please, I have a wife and baby.”

“It’s my brother, isn’t it? Why is he spying on me?”

“It’s not your brother who sent me, it was your father.”

Er-Mûrazôr yanked him back onto the path and shoved him. The man fell to his knees, retching.

“Go down to the harbor. Get on the first boat that will have you. Don’t go home to pack, don’t tell anyone where you’re going. Just leave, or I will kill you.”

Halwn scrambled to his feet. The knees of his leggings were shredded, and one knee was streaked with blood. He tore down the path, running and falling and getting up again. Er-Mûrazôr watched until he vanished from sight.

He wouldn’t really have killed him, the little secretary hadn’t done anything wrong, he’d only acted on orders. But Er-Mûrazôr was so angry, he feared that unless the man was well away from here, Er-Mûrazôr might hurt him.

The corner of the folded document poked his skin. He pulled the packet from his tunic and looked at it again and saw what he'd missed the first time. The greeting addressed the king, not his brother the prince.

Hundreds of feet below, the surface of the harbor had the glassy look it did just as the tide turned. Soon, it would start to boil with the current as it flowed out to sea.

Men alongside the smugglers' vessel flung the last of the mooring lines onboard as they prepared to sail.

Just then, Halwn appeared on the quay, sprinting as if sea demons were after him.

Er-Mûrazôr expected to see him make for the Royal Barge, but instead, he flung himself at the side of the smugglers' vessel, which had just finished casting off, creating a widening gap of open water between it and the quay. There was an enormous splash, then a hand on the rope netting, and then the little clerk climbed up the side of the ship and disappeared from sight.

Halwn was traveling aboard the same vessel as Er-Mûrazôr's letter. Both would arrive at the Palace at the same time, Er-Mûrazôr's cheerful note about the future of the kingdom, and Halwn's damning report about Er-Mûrazôr's failings.

## Chapter 15 The Second Offer



r-Mûrazôr returned to his own house, which was empty. Even his clerk was gone. He scowled. He'd meant to have the clerk count the money and enter it in the ledger. He hunted on his desk for the ledger book.

A few minutes later, his clerk came in the door. "You missed the council meeting."

"What council meeting?"

"Your brother summoned everyone in the Haven who holds rank to meet with him in the Guild Hall."

Mixed in with the invoices and pay slips on his desk was a square of paper addressed to him. Er-Mûrazôr unfolded it and read the short note in his brother's handwriting, requesting his presence in the Guild Hall at midday.

"This arrived after I went out." Er-Mûrazôr tapped it against his hand in annoyance.

"Yes, the whole thing came up suddenly."

"What did they talk about?"

"The scribe bent down to put away his pens and inks. "I think you should talk to him yourself."



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The blood roared in his ears. He had to see Atanamir, now.

He pulled on a long formal tunic, gray-green silk with gold embroidery, and strapped on his two-handed sword, a badge of rank. On his way out, he snagged a cloak from the peg by the door and draped it over his shoulders.

“You do realize you never took off your hunting clothes?” said the clerk.

“I’m in a hurry.”

The house had one room and no privacy. Er-Mûrazôr didn’t want the clerk to know this hardened soldier was as modest as any girl.

Er-Mûrazôr entered the Guild Hall of the Council of Captains. The late afternoon sun cast long rectangles of yellow light onto the flagstones, and the smell of new lumber overpowered the scent of beeswax candles.

At the far end of the Hall, several smaller tables had been pushed together to create a single long table. A dozen or more chairs surrounded it, most of them empty and pushed back at an angle.

His brother Atanamir sat at its center in the Er-Mûrazôr’s own tall chair, flanked by two other men. One was the young emissary who’d asked him to step down the first time, who’d been on the tours and the banquet.

He couldn’t place the other, a hawk-faced man with a narrow beard and iron-colored hair that seem to have a mind of its own. Wait, he was that palace-intrigue friend of Atanamir’s, one of their father’s advisers. The one Father used to do things he’d rather not do himself, like deliver a reprimand or tell someone he’d been demoted.

“Tindomul, please have a seat.” Atanamir looked up. Er-Mûrazôr pulled up one of the discarded chairs and chose a place across from his brother. The tip of his scabbard scraped on the paving stones as he sat down.

“I expect you’re wondering what this is about,” said his brother.

Er-Mûrazôr’s hands were shaking. He held them in his lap and willed himself to calm down.

“Father wants you to gift the Haven to me.”

“We’ve been over this before. It belongs to me.”

“Father has recalled you to Númenor and ordered me to take your place. Come down to the Royal Barge with us. You’ll be comfortable there. You can send for your things.”

If he set foot on the barge, he’d have a very hard time leaving, even if he weren’t officially a prisoner.

“Tindomul, this is serious. Will you step down of your own free will?” Atanamir’s eyes were pleading.

“I will not.”

“In that case, the gloves come off.” The hawk-faced man spoke, his voice like gravel. He’d been so quiet, Er-Mûrazôr had forgotten he was there.

The hawk-faced man unlocked a wooden coffer. “I have a letter from your father.” He produced an official-looking document, sealed with red wax, and slid it across the table.

A bead of sweat ran between his shoulder blades, and the fabric beneath his arms had soaked through. He regretted his decision to pull on a clean shirt over the one he was wearing.

## The Second Offer

Er-Mûrazôr broke the seal and unfolded the parchment. The first page was covered in his father's rounded handwriting, familiar and reassuring.

You will have no further role in governing the Haven of Umbar.

Er-Mûrazôr's breath hissed between his teeth.

He leafed through the pages, but in his rattled state, he wasn't able to pull meaning from the dense legal jargon.

Hawk Face leaned back, his eyes hooded as if he were enjoying this. "It's all there. How you were told to capture the Haven by conventional means, but instead, it took it by deceit. How you were ordered to give up Haven but refused. How you tried to strangle your father's personal secretary and throw him over a cliff."

Er-Mûrazôr went back to the first page and started over, reading more slowly.

The text was full of strike-outs and repeated phrases as if there hadn't been time to write out a fair copy, or perhaps they hadn't bothered. It was disrespectful, like being handed a death warrant full of spelling and grammatical errors.

Er-Mûrazôr crushed the pages in his fist, and bits of wax clattered to the paving stones.

"I don't understand why Father wants me removed. I captured the Haven, I built the walled city, I did everything he asked. Even if you're named Captain of the Haven, you won't be here to run it, you'll be inland with the army."

The emissary and Atanamir exchanged a look. "The Haven of Umbar has been so successful, your father fears it may seek

independence. It would split the kingdom," said the emissary.

"I would never do that," said Er-Mûrazôr.

Atanamir shifted in his chair. "Father no longer trusts you. You don't follow orders. You do whatever you want. When you first came here, and you couldn't capture the Haven by force, you resorted to treachery."

The room lurched.

"He stopped trusting me when I captured the Haven for him?"

"No, much earlier. It was when you refused to marry."

Hawk-face pulled a letter from his tunic. "I'd rather not have to use this. It's a warrant for your arrest. Twenty-five warships rest at anchor in the harbor, each of them under your brother's command, and each is full of soldiers. I believe we have three men for every one in your garrison."

Er-Mûrazôr rose to his feet, his hand on the hilt of his sword. "I'll see you in hell." His footsteps rang against the flagstones and echoed from the vaulted ceiling. The double doors were twenty paces away.

"Tindomul!" His brother's chair scraped against the flagstones.

The doors lay just ahead.

"Tindomul, wait!"

"Let him go," the emissary urged. "Give him time to calm down."

The rough wood left splinters in his palms as he shoved them apart, and he walked into the blinding sunlight, blinking hard.

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Er-Mûrazôr's temper was a force of nature, a terrible thing. He shouldn't be around people right now.

He felt the need to stride along one street and then another until he had lost himself, but a city of less than a hundred houses doesn't offer much more than a main square and a couple of unpaved streets. Even if he circumnavigated the whole city outside the wall, he would only have burned off ten minutes, not enough time to calm down.

Instead, he found one of the sets of stairs leading to the top of the city wall. No wildflowers or lichen grew on them, and they still smelled of stone dust. At home, the stones would it been as smooth and as perfectly fitted together as a carpenter's dovetailed joints, but here, every stone block showed the mark of the chisel, colonial and provincial-looking.

He walked on the wide top of the wall, above roofs and gardens and pens for the animals, until the vast expanse of the sea opened up before him. The wind stirred, carrying the smell of salt, ancient and calming. It chilled him where his clothes stuck to his skin, and cooled his temper as well.

The island of Númenor lay three days' sail to the west, faster if the wind was over the stern as it was on the outbound trip. Miles of sand and shrub separated Umbar from the coast, but a finger of water extended inland, the Haven of Umbar. At its tip lay the only deep-water harbor anywhere along the coast. The harbor was a forest of masts. The tide was out, exposing vast expanses of mud. Seabirds wheeled overhead, their cries sounded lonelier than usual and more bitter.

The Fleet, the might of Númenor, filled the inlet from one cliff to the opposite. The walled city held the high ground, but Hawk Face was right, they outnumbered him three to one.

The flagship of Umbar's fleet, the ship he usually captained, rocked the surge in the center of the harbor. He'd ordered it moved to let the Royal Barge have a place of honor the pier.

He could reach the flagship with any small boat. He would gather a small party of sailors, board it, and on the turn of tide, they'd raise anchor and let the tide carry them out to sea. The currents were strong, they'd depart the inlet by midnight. But the warships of the fleet stood between him and the open ocean. Intentionally or not, they were arranged in such a way that it would be impossible to slip past them.

At the pier, the royal barge sat beside tall pilings encrusted with barnacles, its gangway angled sharply down. He might walk that ramp, but not just yet. No ships were going anywhere into the tide turned, six or seven hours from now. Time, time was everything.

He couldn't fight, he couldn't escape, but he might be able to negotiate.

The sun hung above the horizon. It would be dark soon. No lights burned in the Royal Barge, its occupants must still be in the Guild Hall where he'd seen the last.

He would negotiate a delay. Anything could happen in a day, a week. He was an able general, he might get a command. He might get a post building another city over another harbor. Anything could happen.

He retraced his steps along the top of the wall to the street. He would find his brother and his brother's retainers, as soon as he washed his face and changed clothes.

He reached the center of the city. His house stood directly across the square. Two soldiers flanked his door, several more seemed to be taking instructions from Hawk Face, who had

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something white in his hand and was waving it for emphasis. More soldiers appeared from around the back.

Er-Mûrazôr drew back into the alley and flattened himself against the wall. None of them had been looking in his direction. No one shouted, and no one ran after him.

His fingers brushed against the purse of gold coins hanging from his belt. He hadn't thought of it since he'd sold the land at midday.

Leave. Just walk away.

He had money. He was armed, the great two-handed sword hung at his hip. He had a horse, and in the saddlebag, food and a map.

None of the men seem to be looking in his direction. Er-Mûrazôr took a step further back into the alley, and another step, taking care that his feet didn't crunch in the gravel. He would walk along the main street, and through the eastern gate, and out. He would stop just long enough to collect Twilight, and saddle him.

He would have to hurry. When the upper rim of the sun disappeared into the sea, the gates would be sealed. Already the city lay in the shadows of its own walls. He moved as quickly as he could without breaking into a run.

The Gate stood wide open. Beyond, the desert stretched endless and unexplored.

Soldiers flanked the stone archway. Er-Mûrazôr's hand dropped to the hilt of his sword, but the gate was always guarded, and these were his own men, Hagrith and Luthain. With any luck, they didn't know their commander had just been removed as Captain of the Haven.

The stables stood beside the Gate. They were little more than a thatched roof on poles leaning against the city wall, with a stone trough in front. Straw lay on the ground in front of the door, and the smell of horses was overpowering.

“We’re getting ready to close the gates, Captain” said Luthain.

“Can you give me a few minutes? I’m running late.”

“You know the law as well as I do, sir.”

Er-Mûrazôr checked the street for pursuers, then slipped inside. The stable was deserted, the grooms must be away at their dinner. Four or five horses looked up at him. Twilight was in the second stall from the door, and his saddle, blanket, and tack were draped over the rail of the stall.

Twilight accepted the bridle easily for once, but in his haste, Er-Mûrazôr’s fingers fumbled with the buckles. He lifted the saddle onto the horse’s back and tossed the girth across it, then retrieved the saddlebag and carried it over his arm.

He led Twilight outside by the reins. The water trough was right by the door. Bits of straw floated on the surface. Twilight dunked his nose in the cloudy water and drank. The water skin was half-full. No, there wasn’t time. And he was outdoors, the longer he stood out here, the more he risked being seen.

In the distance, the watchtower bell pealed the change of watch, and the last of the sun. Each of the soldiers grabbed one of the massive doors and pulled on it until it began to move.

Er-Mûrazôr yanked on Twilight’s reins, but the stallion hadn’t finished drinking. He tossed his head and yanked right back. He had to half-drag the stubborn animal under the stone archway and through the narrowing gap.



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Author's note:

*Wraith* is my most autobiographical story to date.<sup>3</sup> It's the story of how I lost a job I really liked at a firm where I'd worked for many years, and from which I'd expected to retire.

For one shining moment, I was Neville Longbottom with the sword of Gryffindor in his hand, saying, "I'm willing to die on this hill." And in a surprise to no one but myself, I did die. (employment-wise). Next thing I knew, I was doing the walk of shame with a cardboard box in my arms and wondering what to do next.

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<sup>3</sup> Other than "using magic" and "accepting a ring from Sauron".

## Chapter 16 Through The Desert



and and thorn bushes and loose rocks stretched away in all directions until they disappeared in the fading light. The Haven of Umbar was a new city, no roads yet led away from her gates.

Behind him, the city gates slammed shut. Prince Tindomul spun around.

*This can't be happening.*

A thud shook the massive timbers, and a scraping sound revealed the heavy bar had just been dropped into its bracket. By custom, the gates would remain sealed till morning, and no man's order, not even his own, could open them.

The sun had disappeared beneath the sea, but towering clouds to the west glowed golden in the last light of day. Below them, the city walls stood black against the sky.

*It didn't have to end like this.*

Tomorrow at first light, the gates would open, and he could go back and apologize. He would ask them to change their minds and this whole misunderstanding would blow over.

Not likely. "You are removed as Captain of the Haven" left little room for interpretation.

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Magic tossed his head and yanked on the bridle. The saddle perched on his back threatened to slide off. Tindomul steadied it with his hand.

This was no longer his home. He should leave.

No outlines of helms or spears interrupted the smooth line on top of the wall. As far as he could tell, he was unobserved. With clumsy hands, he stripped off the silver-green robe, then shoved it in the saddlebag on top of the food he'd packed for the hunting trip that morning, dried fruit and waybread. It should last for two or three days, more if he was careful.

The shirt he'd worn hunting flapped against his legs. He belted it around the waist, the purse of gold coins heavy at his side, his dagger where he could reach it easily. Then he strapped his sword belt around his hips and tightened Magic's girth.

A courtier had gifted him the dark-colored stallion the first time he'd used magic to kindle a fire. The name "Magic" embarrassed him, but he wouldn't have changed a horse's name any more than he'd have changed the name of a ship.

It pained him to be reminded of his first, clumsy attempt at fire starting, but there was no polite way to refuse the gift, and Magic was one of those rare horses large enough for a man of his height.

It was time to go. He gathered the reins and swung into the saddle. To the east, streaks of cloud glowed orange and red against the deepening twilight, darker but richer than the golden sunset behind him. He kicked Magic to a trot.

Anger drove him to push the stallion harder than was wise, and more than once, the horse stumbled over rocks or gullies invisible in the fading light. Tindomul's pulse hammered.

*Nobody speaks to me like that.*

His own father had called his actions dishonorable and sent an underling to spy on him. The minion reported that Tindomul didn't follow directions, and that he was willful and insubordinate. This came as a surprise to anyone?

And then they'd taken the Haven away from him. The harbor, and the walled city protecting it, which he'd built from nothing,

*They robbed me.* Oddly, the insults stung more keenly than the loss of his land and titles.

He spurred the horse on, each stride putting distance between himself and the walled city that had once been his. He had no idea where he was going. Away. Away from scrutiny and false accusations and the soldiers who'd encircled his house.

The desert floor rose and fell like waves of the ocean, getting larger the further he traveled from the coast. He hardly noticed his surrounding, his thoughts were fixed on the official letter that, like the swing of an axe, had brought his tenure to an end.

He climbed a small hill, and then another. At the crest of the ridge, he twitched the reins, and Magic halted. It wasn't quite dark. He would take one last look, and then move on. But behind him, there was only desert. The walled city, and the ocean beyond, it were hidden behind the hill.

He would go back, just far enough to get that last look. He heeled Magic's flanks and the big stallion took a step back the way they'd come. In a moment, the ocean would come into view, and beyond the next ridge, the city.

*What have I done?*

Everything he owned, and every person he cared about, was back there. He heeled Magic's flanks, and the big stallion took a

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step. He felt as if he were watching himself from a great distance.

It wouldn't be the first time he'd lost his temper and stormed out. Every other time, he'd always come back after he'd had a chance to calm down. The gates would open at first light, and his brother would be glad to see him. If he could have an hour alone with Atanamir, just the two of them with no clerks or scribes or emissaries, they could sort this out together. He could negotiate for more time. He could offer to stay on as his brother's assistant. He could return to Númenor and plead his case in person.

He jerked on the reins, forcing the animal to a halt.

It didn't matter. All paths led to the same end. Whatever he did, he would lose the Haven. Everything had been decided long ago, before he knew what was going on. The accusations against him, that his construction plans were too ambitious, that he'd spent too much on materials, that he'd taken too long to finish the walls, were trivia. They weren't why he'd been removed from his post, they were how.

He wheeled Magic around and kicked him forward, towards the blue-purple sky in the east.

When it got too dark to ride any further, he tied Magic's halter to a stunted shrub and lay down wrapped in his cloak and a soft hollow of sand above a dry wash. Normally he wouldn't camp in a wash because of the danger from flash flooding, but there wouldn't be a hard rain for at least half a year.

The coastal fogs of the Haven were far behind, as were the tightly-clustered houses that glowed with yellow lamplight. From the Haven, the familiar constellations stood out in sharp relief against a black sky. But in the desert, like at sea, even the Sickles was hard to make out at first, the seven bright stars that defined it lost among countless points of light.

A rock poked him in the shoulder, and he moved to avoid it. The sand was full of stinging insects which found their way into the neck of his clothing. He lay away and studied the sky. The Sickie swung around the lodestar, and the other stars wheeled with it. He tried to think of anything he'd done as Captain of the Haven that might have led to his removal: every act of independence, every sarcastic remark, every time he'd stood up for himself.

A falling star streaked across the sky and then winked out. An omen, but he couldn't guess what it meant.

Before first light, he gave up trying to sleep. It was impossible to travel when the sun was at its highest. He would cover as much distance as he could before the brutal heat of the day made the sand so hot it felt cold.

By midmorning, his water skin was flat. It felt moist inside, but when he turned it upside down, it only gave up a few drops.

The wind picked up, and it carried the scent of water. Gusts of fine sand swirled around Magic's legs. On the horizon, a dune so tall it blocked the sky bore down on the road like a rogue wave. Here and there, short sections had already disappeared under fingers of sand.

He rounded the base of the dune, and the smell of water grew stronger. Between ridges of sand a hundred feet high lay a deep lake, a fissure in the earth, its depths unplumbed. Even its edges were dark blue-green.

It was approaching noon. His shadow was foreshortened, almost nonexistent. A dozen or so houses were clustered around the lake. Most people would be inside taking shelter from the midday heat, but the animals should still be outdoors. Yet no mules brayed, no chickens cackled or scratched in the dirt.

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Palms encircling the lake, and the air in the shade beneath them was cool and damp. Tindomul let Magic step into the shallows, then dropped to his knees and drank the cold, pure spring water from cupped hands.

The wind stirred, carrying wisps of sand from the crest of the dune. Tiny grains shimmered down its side as the wall of sand moved imperceptibly closer. Already, the dune had begun to swallow some of the trees. Here and there, the upper half of a palm poked above the sand, and in places, only the fronds showed, unexpectedly healthy and green.

Further back in the dune, the corners of roofs poked above the sand, their red clay tiles mostly intact. This had been a village once. A dozen families had lived here, and now they were gone.

He left Magic tethered in the shade and went to investigate. The base of the dune had wrapped itself around the nearest mudbrick house. In back, the rear wall had been completely buried, and the dune had started to cover the roof. He grabbed a fistful and let it run between his fingers, softer than beach sand, and finer grained.

The door of the house stood open, trapped in a drift that reached halfway to the windows. The face of an animal had been carved below the roof peak, and the faded remains of paint showed where a design of leaves and flowers had been.

Inside, the sand was almost as deep. He crouched to avoid the low beams and moved carefully through the shallow space. A child's tin cup sat forgotten on a shelf, and the far corner of the room smelled of piss.

He leaned against the wall, utterly weary, sliding down until he was sitting in the sand. He'd left so suddenly, there hadn't been

time to write any letters, he hadn't had a chance to say goodbye.

Long purple shadows stretched from the oasis to the half-buried house. He came to himself with a start. He stood up, brushed off the sand, and went to check on Magic. He watches as the horse drank his fill, then drank as much as he could and filled the water skin.

The sun was low, it was time to move on. He tightened the girth and climbed into the saddle, and returned to the road. The wind picked up, blowing stinging sand in his face. He blinked hard.



The desert pavement, the rocks and pebbles left where the sand blown away, stretched out before him, leaving a surface that was easy for horses to walk on. To the east, the moon hung in the daytime sky, not yet full. The shadows on its face were the color of the sky behind it, a pale silver blue. It looked thinsliced to the point of being transparent.

The road shimmered as if submerged in puddles of water. The image broke into parts and reformed, and when he got closer, he could make out a number of men on horseback. He stepped off the road and watched. There were six of them, including a slender youth. They were leading at least a dozen mules, baggage piled high on their backs. They looked more like merchants than bandits or tribal warriors.

Normally Tindomul preferred his own company to that of others, but suddenly, the desire to be around others was as intense as thirst.

"Hullo!" Tindomul called out.



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They spun around and drew daggers. The boy cried out in fear. Tindomul made an effort not to touch the hilt of his own sword, although he turned to make sure they could see it.

“You’re traveling richly burdened but lightly protected. If you desire it, I will ride with you,” Tindomul said.

“We haven’t had any trouble on the road so far,” said the oldest among them, apparently their leader.

Tindomul hadn’t, either. “Just because you haven’t seen any troublemakers doesn’t mean they aren’t there.”

“How do we know we can trust him?” whispered his companion.

“We don’t, but he has an educated voice,” said the older man.

After some haggling, they agreed to share their food and water. In exchange, Tindomul would escort them to the capital of Haradwaith, two days distant.

All afternoon, Tindomul rode in front of the caravan, his hand on the hilt of his sword, scanning the road for trouble. As far as he could tell, the only real danger was of overheating and tipping out of the saddle, unconscious.

“Well, no wonder you’re suffering, with that blue-black hair of yours, and mounted on a dark bay, no less. Here, put this on.” Rafiq, the older man, tossed him a pale cloth, fringed and knotted at the corners. Tindomul draped the coarse cotton fabric over his head and let it hang around him. The fringes got in his eyes, but the shade made up for it.

The sun went down, but the memory of the heat of the day stayed on in boulders and darker stretches of ground. Before full darkness fell, silhouettes of palm fronds appeared in the

east against the indigo sky. The air stirred, and carried the scent of water.

“That’s the oasis on this trip, lads. Tomorrow, we’ll have lodgings in the Capital,” said Rafiq.

A dense growth of palm trees clustered around a low circular wall. A long wooden boom pivoted on a triangular frame, a bucket on one end, a counterweighting stone on the other.

Tindomul was beyond thirsty. His lips were swollen and cracked from breathing through his mouth. He dropped to the ground, his legs shaky.

Leading Magic by the reins, he walked to the edge of the well and leaned over the stone rim. His reflection seemed very far away. Oily scum covered much of the water’s surface, and thick mats of algae clung to the stone walls. Now and again, a bubble broke the oily surface.

Dhaki dipped the boom in the bucket splashed into the well. The smell rose like a cloud, a combination of rotten eggs and mildew. Bilge water. Tindomul never thought he’d actually want to drink it.

Dhaki drew up pail after pail of fetid water and spilled it into the stone trough for the animals. Tindomul accepted the loan of a drinking horn and scooped stagnant water from the trough. He raised it to his mouth and held his breath against the smell. The water was as warm as his own body, and stale, but he drank and couldn’t stop.

Once the animals were watered and unharnessed, Tindomul helped the merchants gather firewood, the resinous branches from the thorny shrubs that seemed to grow everywhere.

He arranged bits of kindling in a small tent and stuffed dry palm fronds beneath them. Looking up to see that he was

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unobserved, he chanted the words of the fire starting spell. Wisps of smoke rose from the dried leaves, and one of the little sticks caught. One of the merchants came back with more twigs to add to the fire. Soon, the blaze was large enough to cook on, and to sit around after dark.

After they finished eating, Tindomul drew a little bit away, looking back at the campfire. Until recently, he'd always belonged somewhere, he'd always known what he was supposed to be doing. But with his anchor rope cut, he couldn't seem to get his bearings.

Occasionally the fire was eclipsed by the form of someone walking in front of it. Just beyond the circle of light from the campfire, a score of horses and mules were hobbled or tethered to the palm trees with baggage lay piled up beside them. Something popped in the fire, and an ember floated high in the air. The sound of voices reached him, and occasionally, laughter.

They left the oasis before first light, riding toward the capital of Haradwaith. Mostly they spoke of the price they would get for their honey and the luxuries and entertainments city had to offer.

Not all the men belonged to the merchant's party. One, the youth, was a scholar looking forward to meeting, or at least seeing, the famed Palace astrologer who served the king.

"He's giving a lecture, and I'm going to the capital to hear it."

Tindomul rode ahead of them, scanning the road for trouble, but absorbed every word.

"He reads the stars for signs of war or crop failure. He can even learn a man's character from the movement of planets through the constellations."

Tindomul used the stars to find his way at sea. He was never lost as long as he could see the night sky, but sometime it was hidden behind clouds or rain. He'd pay gold for an enchantment that let him sense direction when he was fogged in.

The young scholar added, "Astrologers do more than read the stars. They're learned in the ways of magic, even if they don't often speak of it. Any astrologer can predict the weather, interpret dreams, or find things that are lost."

As a general, what would he do with magic on the battlefield. Foretell the outcome of a battle before it began? Heal wounds? Draw lightning from the clouds and strike the enemy? Tindomul felt a flash of resentment. He should be the one studying sorcery.

"Can your magician summon storms?" asked Tindomul.

"I imagine so, that's pretty basic," said the youth.

And could a magician use a spell to extend his own life? If Tindomul could bring that knowledge back to Númenor, every one of his people would profit by it. Sadness gripped him, Númenor was no longer his home.

"How does one get to meet him?" asked Tindomul.

"Anyone with the price of admission can hear him speak."

Over the crest of the dune, the spires the desert capital rose as if from out of the sand. Miniature gold domes perched on top of long fingers of stone.

"Let's keep going lads, we can reach the city by nightfall."

The path was becoming an actual road, a fixed width and a little lower than the rocky ground on either side, and mercifully

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free of thorn bushes. In the distance, the air shivered like water, black and wavering, but the air smelled dry and dusty.

The horses' hooves clicked against stones on the road. Tindomul pushed back the nodded headscarf he'd taken to wearing in imitation of the merchants and took a pull from his water skin, which was close to empty. Magic's flanks were crusted white with salt from dried sweat, but there was no watering hole between the oasis they'd left before first light, hours ago, and the desert capital before them.

Dusk came early. The sun blocked by the tall dunes behind them, and finally they could see the walls of the city. Mud brick, crenelated, each tooth a zigzag pattern, so unlike the smooth surface of the walled city at home. The temperature dropped, mercifully, and the breeze picked up a little. His clothes were soaked with sweat, and the breeze felt surprisingly cold. It wasn't yet dark, the gates of the city still stood open.

"Hello Nabeeh, well met!" said the merchant to one of the sentries. He produced a coin and pressed it into the sentry's hand, which the man pocketed discretely.

"Haven't seen you in a couple of weeks. But I guess that's what you'd expect of a merchant who travels the far corners."

Tindomul stayed with the caravan as they made their way to the Inn where they always stayed, although he opted to sleep in the stable to preserve his money. He did accept a meal with them in the common room, and an invitation to breakfast as well.

After breakfast, the merchants talked about who they hoped to see at the Guildhall, and the thousand and one preparations for Market Day. Tindomul feigned listening, although his thoughts were filled with the squares of sunlight on the floor, the voice

of the emissary, the fatal document shoved in front of him which he'd crumpled and torn to shreds.

The young scholar got up to go.

"I hate to leave you early, but I need to get in line to go hear Gulon, the Court Astrologer. He gives his lectures in a huge audience hall, but last time I almost didn't get in."

He got up from the table. Tindomul got up, too.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to come with you."

## Chapter 17 The Street Conjurer



indomul fell in step behind the student magician. The young man led him to one of the outbuildings of the palace compound.

“Can I still get in? You haven’t sold out, have you?” The young man leaned forward anxiously.

“Today’s lecture is sold out, unless you buy admission to the next ten lectures, paid in advance. There are a few of those left. We prefer payment in gold, if you have it.” The young man paid with a gold coin, and the clerk allowed him to add his name to the register.

Education was expensive, but this lecture fee was particularly steep, perhaps due to of the fame the speaker.

He considered how badly he wanted this. He had gold, but no way of getting more when it ran out. On the other hand, there were so many magical things he wanted to be able to do: stay oriented in the darkened fog, read minds, add years to his life. The court astrologer at Armenelos hadn’t known those things. If this one could, it would be worth the expense.

He gave the clerk a gold coin to secure his own admission.

A crush of people crowded into a hall at least a hundred feet long. High overhead, the vaulted stonework reflected the muffled roar of their conversation.

Tindomul took a place in the back, leaning forward slightly to hear better.

A wooden stage had been raised at the front of the room, loose planks laid over a makeshift structure. Behind it hung a painted canvas, dark blue, showing a map of the stars. The constellations were sketched around them, stylized drawings of heroes, beasts, and monsters.

Tindomul navigated by the stars and knew them as well as he knew the corridors and staircases of the palace where he grew up. He was never lost if he could see the stars, but he knew nothing of their ability to reveal the future.

He leaned against the wall, the stones were cold against his back. From there, he was able to look over the room and observe the people who'd paid to be here. Mostly they were young, students and apprentices just starting their careers, but here and there were men of middle years, and even a few with white hair.

There was a hush, and a man of middle years took the stage. Although it had probably been a long time since he'd been able to see his own feet, he still had upright posture, and a full head of silver hair.

"I am Gulon, master practitioner of the craft of magic and Court Astrologer for Haradwaith." The Hall rang with applause. "I read the future in the stars and warn the Sultan of all things that affect his kingdom, like crop failure or the advent of war."

As a general, he would give almost anything to be able to foretell the outcome of a battle before it happened. He leaned forward, straining to hear every word.

The court astrologer spoke of the celestial sphere, the great dome of the heavens, of the wanderers that moved cross it and



## The Street Conjuror

what it meant when they resided in certain houses of the constellations.

“Astrology is High Magic. It takes years of study, the stars yield up their secrets only to the most learned. And unfortunately, most of the ancient texts are in languages no longer spoken.

“But you don’t need any of that to be a magician, because there’s something called practical magic, or kitchen magic. It’s used to kindle a fire, open a lock, or conceal something you wish to hide. These are spells you can learn in an afternoon, and use the very same day.”

A murmur ran through the crowd, and he found himself getting caught up in the excitement. He already knew a little kitchen magic, the fire-starting spell he learned from the court astrologer Númenor. And it was so much easier to use a spell than to work magic without one.

“This is what we call household magic, or kitchen magic. These are spells anyone in this room can do successfully, if you’re willing to memorize the spell, and if you say it exactly right.”

The old magician scanned the crowd. “Now, who wants to be a magician?”

Tindomul’s arm shot up. Fists pumped the air and men cried out, “Huzzah, huzzah,” their raised arms as thick as spears of foot soldiers on the march.

“And who already practices magic?” Tindomul’s hand shot up again. He’d kindled fire, and had spoken with the dead.

“It appears we already have a few practitioners among us,” said Master Gulon. Just a few. Only two other students had raised their arms. People in the crowd turned to stare at him. Tindomul yanked his arm down. His face burned.

Master Gulon gestured for silence. "Now, the material we'll cover in this series of lectures is easy to master, but very useful. After you've been studying with me for a while, you'll be able to predict the weather, interpret dreams, and start a fire without flint and steel. Later today, I'll teach you a simple charm for good luck."

"Now, this is absolutely key. Anyone in this room can do magic, but you must use an authentic spell, and you must say the words exactly right."

Like the fire-starting spell one of the court astrologer's in Númenor had taught him. It was memorized, and it had to be performed just so, or it wouldn't work.

Someone in the middle of the crowd asked, "Why do we have to memorize and recite? Can't we learn the basic principles, then try things out and see how they work?"

Master Gulon froze in mid-gesture. "Everything there is to know about magic is already known, assuming you have the wit to understand it. If you think you're clever enough to tinker with the ancient learning, then you're not wise enough to use magic. Now, let's have no more of this foolishness."

The questioner hung his head, then elbowed through the crowd. Sunlight blazed from the back of the room, then dimmed when the door slammed.

Master Gulon reverted to his former, cheery self.

"Let's talk about kitchen magic. It's for the ordinary, everyday things you'd might want to do, but magic makes them easier.

"For example, think about lighting the kitchen fire in the hearth in the morning. If you've been unlucky enough to let the fire go out during the night, the ashes are cold, you have to strike a

## The Street Conjurer

spark with flint and steel into a handful of wood shavings, then feed in twigs, and then try to get a split piece of log to catch. It takes time. There you are, kneeling on a cold hearth, and blowing on a wisp of smoke until you're fainting.

"Think of how much easier it would be to speak a few words and watch the flames leap up from the twigs and catch the log. You don't even have to kneel, which, when you get to be my age, that starts to matter." One of the white-haired students nodded.

Or what if he could ride through a conquered village, setting thatched roofs ablaze using magic. Tindomul grinned. He'd love to be able to do that. He'd just need to do his fire-starting spell with a faster set-up, and aim it more precisely.

"Or suppose it hasn't rained in a week. You walk into your wheat field, and the leaves hanging limp and yellow around the edges. There are a few clouds in the sky, but the sun these unrelentingly bright and cheerful. What if you could sing a chant to make the puffy white clouds purple-dark, and rumble, and release a torrent of rain onto your fields?"

Would the same spell let him thunderclouds and release a bolt of lightning into the midst of the opposing ranks. It would terrify the enemy, and at the same time, his own captains would be awe-struck. However much it cost, he wanted this.

After the midday break, Tindomul returned to the Hall and took up the place near the wall where he was standing in the morning. On stage, the magician's servants were setting up and equipment in preparation for the promised demonstrations of the magical arts.

Master Gulon returned to the stage. The hall was packed, the audience applauded.

"Who wants to see some magic?" Master Gulon looked over the upturned faces and smiled.

"Lighting a fire is the first feat of magic virtually all magicians begin with."

He stood before and unlit candle, spoke an incantation, and the candle wick burst into flame. Er-Mûrazôr felt proud that that was something he could already do.

He then held a dagger in the air. He spoke a phrase, and it seemed to vanish.

"It's not gone, it's just hidden." He tapped the place where the blade should be and clink of metal reached the back of the room. Concealment spells were not very difficult, but they were very useful, and he didn't know how to do them yet. He leaned forward, watching with interest.

"This one is more difficult."

Master Gulon levitated a small stone. It hung in the air, then he released it and fell to the table and rolled off the edge.

Tindomul's shoulders sagged. That was a street conjurer's trick. Maybe it had been real magic, but it looked so much like sleight-of-hand at a country fair.

"Now, who'd like to learn some magic themselves?" There was thunderous applause. "First thing were going to learn is a spell for good luck, sometimes called a protection charm. It prevent accidents or misfortune."

Master Gulon spoke the words, and then the students recited them over and over until they knew them by heart.

"Try it when you go home tonight."

## The Street Conjuror

Tindomul frowned. The spell had more to do with superstition than actual magic. As far as he could tell, he had landed in a very expensive beginner-beginner class.

The great man left the stage to thunderous applause.

He was learning things in the ordinary lectures, but too little, too slowly.

Over several weeks, it became clear that, in the general lectures, you didn't learn magic, you learned *about* magic.

After he was gone, the clerk who'd sold admissions took the stage. "Master Gulon will be offering private lessons for advanced students during the noontime recess on a first-come, first-served basis. Register at the table where you paid admission." His message delivered, he disappeared from the stage.

The hall started to empty out, and Tindomul elbowed his way through the crowd. He had been standing near the back of the room, he had a good chance of getting there first.

Tindomul was the first to arrive. The clerk looked up and opened his ledger book. "It will be a two-hour lesson, covering more advanced topics than he teaches in the larger lectures. You can handle that?"

"I am a practitioner," Tindomul said. There hadn't been many in the audience, only a few other hands had gone up.

The fee for the private lesson was enormous. Tindomul debated whether he wanted to pay so much for an hour of instruction, but in the end, he surrendered two gold coins, and his name was entered on the list.

A few minutes later, he was admitted to a small chamber. There were eight stools around the table, and a throne-like chair at the end.

Several places were already occupied. The scholar from a caravan was there, and so were the two other students who'd raised their hands when asked if they practiced magic. Tindomul took the next empty place, only two seats away from the learned astrologer.

The door opened, and three more scholars joined them. Tindomul scowled. This was advertised as a private lesson, and for two gold coins, it should have been.

Master Gulon swept into the room. "Good afternoon, gentlemen. It's just us, so let's tackle some advanced topics."

Master Gulon draped a cloth with a complicated pattern over his end of the table.

He brought over a small coffer or jewelry box, plain wood in a dark color, with dark hinges and clasp, and set it down in front of him. It stood out sharply against the patterned cloth.

"Now, what I'm going to do is a concealment charm. I don't exactly make the object invisible, but I make it much less noticeable. If you wanted to bury a cache and make the disturbed earth less noticeable, this is the spell you use.

He spoke the words of a charm in the low measured voice holding his arms out. The box was still there. He stepped away from the table and put his hands behind his back.

"Now, I'd like everyone to look down or away, and then look back at the table.

Tindomul kept looking at the casket. It didn't change color, it was still there.

## The Street Conjuror

Other people looked back and gasped.

He looked away and looked back. There was nothing there. He looked where it was, he scanned the whole top of the table, he looked on the floor. It was not there.

"It still there. It's not invisible, but it's much less noticeable. I'd like to have someone come up, close enough to touch it."

One of the students touched the spot where it had been.

"It's not there it's, oh wait! It's right where it was. now I see it. His hand rested on its lid. Tindomul could see it too, although it seemed to have the pattern of the cloth projected onto its surface. And now that he knew where to look, he wondered how he'd missed it.

Tindomul's brow furrowed. It could be a street conjurer's trick, but it could just as easily be real.

"Let's see if one of you can do it. Who wants to try?"

Tindomul jumped to his feet and approached the end of the table. Master Gulon rehearsed him in the words to speak, and what intonation to use, and how to hold his hands. Tindomul spoke the words, and the chest vanished.

"Can I tried it with a different object?" He unsheathed his dagger and placed it on the cloth. The spell works just as well with the dagger.

"Can I make a person invisible?" He imagined a spy creeping into the enemy's command tent, or sending an assassin into their leader's bedchamber.

"Not invisible exactly, but far less noticeable. On living creatures, it's a very hard spell to cast. But yes, it's possible."

Tindomul wanted to study under this man.

However, the cost was becoming prohibitive. His purse of gold coins would only last so long, and he wouldn't be much further into his training when they ran out. He'd have to present himself to the Númenorian Embassy to ask for money. Tindomul ground his teeth. He'd rather not accept farthing from them, if he could avoid it.

When the lesson was over, Tindomul hung back a bit as the others filed out.

"Sir, will you take me on as a student?" If Master Gulon would take him on as an apprentice, he'd receive one-on-one training, and there wouldn't be any fees.

"Of course I will. The lectures are open to everyone who could pay the fee, the same with the private lessons."

Master Gulon didn't take apprentices  
[more]



## Chapter 18 The Poisoner



Tindomul dunked his shirt in the washbasin and lifted the dripping fabric, then dunked it again. Even by the light of a single candle, it was obvious that the water was too grey to be doing any good. He twisted the fabric until the trickle turned to drips, then shook it out and draped it over the rafter that cut through the slant-ceilinged room.

He owned exactly one shirt, which he wore every day. Threads were beginning to come loose at the edges of the sleeves. On the nights he washed it, he had to sleep in his skin. It was immodest, and his shoulders got cold.

He tipped the basin of grey water out the tiny window, then refilled it from the pitcher and bent over to wash his hair. Tomorrow was an important day. He would visit Atelic, the court physician. All he had to do was fake an interesting-enough ailment that the old sorcerer would agree to see him.

He wrung out his hair and lay down. For him, sleep had always been unreliable, but tonight was shaping up to be particularly restless.

The court physician was dangerous. It would be wise not to offend him.

Tindomul had a quick temper and smart mouth, not a good combination. Usually his other traits, loyalty or intelligence or courage, made up for it, but he often got off to a bad start with

people who didn't know him. If he wanted to make a good impression, it would be best if he spoke as little as possible, and thought first, before he opened his mouth.

-o-o-o-o-o-

Tindomul gave up trying to sleep before it was fully light. He got up and smoothed out the rafter-shaped creases in his shirt, and finger-combed his hair.

He left for the Palace as soon as he thought polite. On the way there, his elbow felt cold, and he realized the fabric had given way entirely. He pressed his arm against his body to hide it, and cringed with embarrassment.

He made a detour to the marketplace. Many of the booths displayed the cotton clothing the local people wore, usually in vivid colors and heavily embroidered.

He sifted through the folded stacks and found something plain white and similar in cut to what he'd wore at home. Silk would have been better, it was what he was used to, but it wouldn't last as well. As he was paying the merchant, he dug through his purse for his last silver coin, then realized he'd already spent it. He paid for the purchase with a handful of copper coins instead.

In a private corner at the back of a coffee shop, he spilled his remaining coins into his hand. His room was paid through the end of the week, but he barely had enough for food.

Luckily, Atelic, the court physician, was advertising for an apprentice. By tradition, apprentices didn't pay for their training, and while they weren't paid, they were given room and board. He was one of the only students in Gulon's classes who practiced magic, and he thought the others pursued it as a hobby. If he and the old sorcerer got along, then like as not, Tindomul would be his next apprentice

[more]

## Chapter 19 The Embassy



Dragging his feet as if he were mounting the scaffold, Tindomul found his way to the part of the Sultan's palace where the embassies of foreign nations were granted space.

The rooms Númenor occupied were particularly large and ornate, reflecting the status and importance of the island nation, however distant it was.

Tindomul entered the lobby. Dark red carpets muffled his footsteps, and the walls and ceiling were paneled in white marble, and each of the windows was screened behind translucent alabaster filigree. The darkened space offered no respite from the noonday heat.

A junior official, apparently tasked with greeting visitors, got to his feet.

"I am Prince Tindomul." He waited for it to sink in. Here before you stands a member of the Royal House of Númenor. "Please tell the Ambassador I wish to speak to him on a personal matter."

"I'm afraid the Ambassador is unavailable, but I could take a message to him. You're welcome to wait." The clerk went back to sorting papers.

Tindomul drew himself up to his full height and spoke in the voice he used to command the troops. "Ask again. I believe the Ambassador would like to know I'm here, even if it takes him away from something else."

The youth scurried off, and Tindomul settled in to wait. A small bird landed on the windowsill beyond the alabaster screen and flew away again. A patch of sunlight lay on a stylized animal. An hour later, it had moved onto a pattern of flowers and vines.

An interior door swung open. Tindomul jumped. A middle-aged man in the robes of a high-cast official entered the room.

"I'm Ciaran, the Ambassador's second-in-command. What can I do for you?"

Tindomul was taken aback. He'd expected the Ambassador.

"I am Tindomul, son of Ciryatan the Shipbuilder."

The official's expression remained blandly pleasant. "Yes, I know who you are. You arrived three weeks ago, and you've been attending classes of some sort."

Tindomul's breath hissed between his teeth. He thought no one knew where he was, but then, the main function of an embassy, after diplomacy, is espionage.

"I'm here on a personal matter."

Tindomul expected to be shown to a private chamber and offered tea before opening the conversation on a fairly embarrassing subject, but the emissary seemed to be waiting for him to speak, right there in the lobby. He sighed.

"I'll be staying in Haradwaith for the next several months, and I need to arrange a living allowance. The sum I received when I

## The Embassy

lived at the Palace will be sufficient.” The money that used to cover dice games and tips for servants would be enough for him to live on.

“You’re staying at the Boar’s Head Inn? That’s expensive, but I guess it’s all right. Have them send the bill to the Embassy. But that’s just for room and board, mind you. No dicing or women. No buying the house a round.”

Tindomul’s jaw dropped. He was a captain and general, not a reprobate kinsman being paid to stay away.

“Gold would be better.” It was all he could do to keep a civil tongue.

The man raised an eyebrow. Tindomul tried again. “I’m pursuing a course of study and I have to pay lecture fees.” He cringed as soon as he said it. The man didn’t need to know his private business.

“I heard you’re studying magic under Master Gulon, that old charlatan. I don’t care what people say, I applaud you for finding something to keep yourself busy after what happened. And think, you’ll be able to do tricks at the Yule banquet. What fun!”

Tindomul thought his head would explode.

“The money?”

“It will have to be approved. It should take about a week, but I’m sure it won’t be any problem.”

## Chapter 20 A Defeated Warlord



he journey from the capital of Haradwaith to Mordor took the better part of a week. Er-Mûrazôr kept the mountains, the Encircling Fence, to his right and kept riding until he came upon the natural opening in the ragged peaks known as Cirith Gorgor, the Pass of Horror. *This is an incredibly bad idea, a Númenorian going into Mordor, alone and friendless.*

It took several more days to travel through Mordor itself to the gates of Barad-dûr. In all that time, he didn't see another living creature. The wars appeared to have left the Black Land entirely depleted of Orcs. He began to worry less about his own safety and more about reaching the Tower and finding it abandoned.

In spite of the dryness, there was water here, but it was so black and vile, he feared it was poisonous. Magic drank it and didn't suffer ill effects, so when his water skin ran dry, he drank from the bitter rivulets dripping off the rocks himself, and held his breath against the smell of sulfur.

The Dark Tower stood on a high promontory, veiled behind mist and invisible. Occasionally the clouds that hung about it would part, but he never saw more than a tower here, a battlement there. He could tell nothing of its structure, other than it appeared to be of very great size.

Er-Mûrazôr reached the base of the promontory and began to climb up a series of switchback turns. After the first few turns, he dropped from the saddle and led Magic by the reins. He

## The Defeated Warlord

locked his knee on each step, to slow himself down and preserve his strength.

He reached the top of the promontory, and there it was, Barad-dûr. The foundation walls covered more ground than most walled cities, the upper portions were cloaked behind an unnatural-looking haze.

He pulled the silver grey robe from the saddle bag and shook it out. Deep wrinkles made a washboard of the heavy silk, but at least it was clean. Hoping he was unobserved, he put Magic between himself and the fortress, stripped off the shirt he bought in Haradwaith, and dropped the robe over his head. He was a Númenorian prince in enemy territory, it was fitting he look the part.

He finger-combed his hair, and checked to see that nothing unpleasant was clinging to his boots. He hadn't bathed other than mopping under his arms with the noxious black creek water, but it couldn't be helped.

He approached the Gate, more than three stories tall, shiny black and so smooth it looked wet. It felt like glass beneath his fingers.

*The rock was warm in the afternoon sun. His toes hugged it as if clinging for dear life. Forty feet below, a wave broke and surged into the natural cauldron, filling it with swirling seawater, the boiling foam spilling over its rim. Then the tide pulled away, leaving the basin knee-deep and lined with boulders.*

*"Come on, Tindomul. We've all done it, now it's your turn."*

*Artanamir's hair was plastered to his forehead. His brother's friends were also soaking wet, and unharmed.*

*"Shall I push him?" asked one of his brother's friends.*

*"It wouldn't be an act of courage then, would it? You have to do it yourself." said Artanamir.*

*Tindomul was ten years old. He didn't want to die. The next wave came rushing into the cauldron, surf shooting high up on the far side. In a moment, the water would be at its highest. Aim for the spot in the center. Do it.*

He knocked.

For a long time, nothing happened. He was about to turn away when the cover over the spyhole slid back.

"What do you want?" said whomever was behind the black eyes peering through the slit.

"I've come to see Tar-Mairon. I want to study sorcery under him," Er-Mûrazôr said.

The cover slid back into place, and after some rattling, the sally door swung outward. The door was smaller than the lid of the sea chest, and the lower edge was at least a foot above the ground. Er-Mûrazôr had to double over to squeeze through.

Er-Mûrazôr unfolded himself on the inside, and stared at the watchman, who appeared to have escaped the wars through age or infirmity, or both. His few wisps of hair were snow white, and he was missing important parts, like an arm.

In the wide expanse of courtyard between the curtain wall and the foundations of a massive tower, a space like this would normally be filled with hastily-built wooden structures: stables, woodsheds, smithies, and barracks. This fortress looked as if it had just been finished, and no one had moved in yet.

He followed the watchman into a tunnel through the base of the tower. Inside, floor tiles had been partially laid, murals



## The Defeated Warlord

were half painted, and wooden paneling leaned against the wall, waiting to be installed, their upper edges furry with dust.

In all the corridors they walked down, Er-Mûrazôr didn't see another soul. They stopped in front of a door. The watchman knocked, then pushed it open and motioned him inside.

The door opened onto a barrel-vaulted chamber with whitewashed walls, longer than it was wide. A slice of a window at the far end of the room admitted the afternoon sun. The center of the room held a long line of work benches covered with apparatus he didn't recognize. The air smelled metallic, and slightly of chalk.

Three young men looked up at him. The eldest, or at least the largest and most confident-looking, regarded him through lidded eyes. He was dressed in the bright cottons of Haradwaith and had copper-colored skin.

"Tar-Mairon?" Er-Mûrazôr asked.

"I am Ferran, Tar-Mairon's senior apprentice. This is Raedwald," he waved a hand in the direction of the slender youth against the wall, who wore the leathers and furs of the far North, "and this is Eamur," he said, jerking his head in the direction of a solid looking farm boy with wheat blond hair, who nodded and smiled a greeting.

"Tar-Mairon has three apprentices?" asked Er-Mûrazôr.

"Tar-Mairon has ten apprentices. Fifteen, if you count those who came here to learned smithing. They're mostly Dwarves, although one is a Noldor Elf. To answer your question, Tar-Mairon doesn't limit the number of students, but he only takes those who are already expert," said Ferran.

Exactly what Atelic had told him. Er-Mûrazôr wanted to be an expert, but he wasn't one yet.

“We’ll put you through a few tests, nothing unpleasant, just enough to evaluate your skills and knowledge. If we feel you’re qualified, we’ll report to Tar-Mairon, and he’ll decide if he wants to grant you an audience.”

Er-Mûrazôr’s heart sank. He had a little training at the beginner level. And it wasn’t years of study, he’d only been attending Gulon’s lectures for three weeks.

-o-o-o-o-o-

“This is the first test, a concealment charm,” said the chief apprentice. He placed a small stone on the workbench.

Er-Mûrazôr spoke the words of the charm, and watched the stone take on the texture of the wood behind it. While not invisible, it had become almost unnoticeable. He allowed himself a moment of satisfaction.

Next, Ferran placed a wooden box in front of him. “Tell me what’s inside. You don’t have to name the object, just describe its general size and weight.” Er-Mûrazôr sensed something slender with sharp edges.

“A dagger?” he asked.

Ferran opened the box. It held a writing pen.

“For the next test, form a thought and transmitted to me. Make it something simple, like a number or the name of an animal.” Er-Mûrazôr thought of a horse, and looked directly at Ferran while holding the image in his thoughts.

“I’m not getting anything. Unless, was it the number twelve?” Ferran’s brow wrinkled in concentration. They tried several more times, but Er-Mûrazôr was never able to transmit a word or an image to the senior apprentice.

## The Defeated Warlord

The tests increased in difficulty. Er-Mûrazôr was unable to move a small object, read the thoughts of another, or summon the wind.

Ferran leaned back against the workbench. "All right, I think we're done. You do know a little magic, but unfortunately, Tar-Mairon only takes apprentices who are already expert sorcerers, and you can barely even be called a beginner. Watchman, please show our guest to the gates."

The watchman escorted him out and closed the sally port behind him. The spyhole remained shut.

Er-Mûrazôr stood before the gates of Barad-dûr, frustrated and angry. He'd traveled a long way to be here. Ever since he'd left Umbar, his heart had been set on becoming a sorcerer.

-o-o-o-o-o-

Er-Mûrazôr pounded on the sally port. "I've come this far. I just want to meet Tar-Mairon. I ask for ten minutes of his time, and then I'll go."

"Why should he see you?" said the watchmen.

Flattery usually works on anyone, and Tar-Mairon was said to be particularly vain. "They say Tar-Mairon is the greatest sorcerer living. I want to meet him."

"You and a lot of others. Tell you what. Write a note explaining why you want to see him, and I'll carry it up."

He came back with writing materials. Er-Mûrazôr thought about what he wanted to say.

*My life is shattered. I'm starting over and I want to be a sorcerer.*

No, that sounded stupid. He crumpled it up and tried again, but what came out was just another version of the same. None of those were going to work.

He dipped the pen and started over.

*Since your defeat at Tharbad, you've been holed up behind your own walls, with nothing to do. Give me an audience, if for no other reason than that meeting me would break up an otherwise dull afternoon.*

He folded the paper and handed it to the watchman, who disappeared inside with it. The sally port door closed, and a cold chill washed over him.

"Wait! Don't deliver that!" There was no answer.

But a few minutes later, the sally port opened again. "Tar-Mairon will meet with you now."

-O-O-O-O-O-

Er-Mûrazôr was ushered back into the chamber where he'd met Tar-Mairon's apprentices an hour earlier. Ferran was sitting on the corner of a workbench, one foot on the floor and the other swinging back and forth. Raedwald was slouching against a wall, looking amused. Eamur smiled a greeting.

The door opened, and all three apprentices leapt to their feet.

A man at least as tall as Er-Mûrazôr swept into the room. His robes brushed the floor, and he carried a goblet in one hand. His features were severe and unsmiling.

The man could have passed for either Númenorian or Elvish. He had the height of a Númenorian, and he was broad-shouldered and muscular in build. Reddish-brown hair fell to

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his shoulders in the Númenorian style, but his features were symmetrical and delicate.

The apprentices bowed their heads. Tar-Mairon acknowledged them with a nod, then turned to Er-Mûrazôr. "You must be the persistent one."

Er-Mûrazôr sensed that he was expected to bow, but a Prince of Númenor outranks a defeated warlord. He drew himself up to his full height and held the sorcerer's eye.

Tar-Mairon drew uncomfortably close and sniffed the air. "You smell like compost."

So much for making a good first impression.

The cut of Tar-Mairon's garments was almost identical to Er-Mûrazôr's silver-green robes, but instead of silk, they'd been made from homespun linen, and the colors were the muted pastels of homemade vegetable dyes. He looked like someone in a village play about Númenor, who'd made his costume himself.

"Why are you here?" the sorcerer asked, although he must already know.

"I want to study sorcery. I think I have a vocation for it."

Something brushed against the surface of his mind, probing, seeking a way in. Annoyed, Er-Mûrazôr summoned an image from a sweltering day on the docks when he almost tumbled into a pile of fish guts. Beneath a cloud of buzzing flies, white maggots squirmed in the putrefying flesh, hundreds of them, wriggling blindly and making a humming sound. The smell was indescribable.

The probing touch yanked away. Er-Mûrazôr glared at his host. *Serves you right.*

Ferran swept an arm over the apparatus. “We put him through the tests. He has no real training.”

“Show me what you can do,” said Tar-Mairon.

Er-Mûrazôr walked over to the hearth, cold in the middle of summer. The remains of a fire lay in the grate, charcoal and the ends of burned logs. He rehearsed the spell in his mind first, then spoke the words exactly right. Yellow flames sprang from the charred end of the log.

The apprentices look bored. “It’s real magic, but anyone could do it with a little instruction,” said Eamur, the plump farmboy.

Tar-Mairon turned to leave.

“Wait, I can do one other thing.” Er-Mûrazôr’s voice sounded high, and he realized he was pleading.

It was a huge risk. It was the most difficult magic he knew how to do, and because it was illegal, he’d only tried it once before.

He closed his eyes and leaned against the workbench, bracing his palms against the edge. He closed his eyes and breathed in slowly, letting himself sink into a trance.

The sounds and smells of the barrel-vaulted classroom faded, and for the second time in his life, he found himself in the halls of Mandos. The grey-green shades of souls pressed all around him, calling to him with thin voices, grasping at him with their pale arms.

He was looking for his uncle. Last time, it had been easy. His uncle had been waiting for him, had been willing to speak to him. One corridor of the underworld looked like any other. He was lost, and he didn’t see anyone he knew.

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He started to panic. He grabbed the next person he saw, a drowned woman with wet hair clutching a baby in her arms. He spoke to her, and she answered, but it didn't mean anything to him, he didn't know her. He'd been looking for his uncle and hadn't been able to find him.

Reluctantly, he allowed himself to come out of the trance. He'd been given one chance to prove himself, and he'd failed.

The apprentices regarded him sarcastically.

"Now, that was a carnival trick if I ever saw one. The pretend trance, the affected voices? I mean, really," said Ferran. The other apprentices nodded. Er-Mûrazôr cringed, and disappointment washed over him.

Tar-Mairon stood there, slack-jawed. The goblet slipped from his fingers and struck the floor, then rolled away unnoticed.

"No, that was real."

# Epilogue



r-Múrazôr stood in the barrel-vaulted room where he'd taken the entrance exams the day before. About a dozen apprentices crammed into the back of the room, sitting on the edge of workbenches or leaning against the wall.

The three senior apprentices, Ferran, Raedwald, and Eamur, were familiar from the entrance exams the day before. His roommate, Sevv. Six more he didn't know. All were from the race of Men, but they seem to come from every nation in Arda, based on the wide variety in the style of their clothing.

This would be his first real lesson in sorcery, hands-on and advanced.

The door opened, and Tar-Mairon swept in. He was wearing the same clothing as the day before, and he carried a sheath of notes.

"Today we're going to learn how to communicate using just our minds."

"Sevv here communicates *without* his mind being actively involved," said Eamur.

"That I can't fix. I only teach telepathy," said Tar-Mairon.



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He walked to the chalk board and wrote something in the symbols used by all magicians. Er-Mûrazôr didn't have them memorized yet. His eye moved back and forth between the chalkboard and a cram sheet in his hand.

His uncle used to tell stories about getting a glimpse of Tar-Mairon across the battlefield, huge and terrible, a mace in his hand, his face concealed under his helmet. The Elves called him a demon. Not "demon" as in a ferocious warlord, but a literal demon like a Balrog.

Watching the dreaded warlord writing on the chalkboard and assigning practice exercises made Er-Mûrazôr snort with laughter, which he hid under a cough.

"Tomorrow we'll learn how to throw curses," said Tar-Mairon.

"I would, but I don't want my mouth washed out with soap," said Sevv. Someone else sniggered.

Tar-Mairon shot him a look. "We'll begin with theory. It isn't something to attempt when you don't know what you're doing."

"Instead of curses, could we do shape-shifting?" asked Raedwald.

"Shape-shifting can't be taught. It's an inborn talent," said Tar-Mairon.

"You can do it, right? They say you can turn into a wolf. Can you show us?"

"Not now, it takes preparation."

Er-Mûrazôr felt the slightest bit disillusioned. Atelic had warned him that Tar-Mairon was something of a charlatan, even if his magic was real.

Tar-Mairon tapped a pen against a book and looked at the ceiling. "Tell you what. Tomorrow morning, instead of meeting here, let's assemble in the great hall by the platform where High Table used to be. I can't teach shape shifting, but I can demonstrate it."

The next morning, Er-Mûrazôr arrived in the great hall early. The long, vaulted-ceilinged room was rarely used, as so few people lived in the fortress. Ever since he arrived, he'd been taking his meals with the other apprentices in the kitchens.

The great hall was laid out like the great hall in any fortress, except it was considerably larger. A vast expanse of flagstones, which would normally hold row after row of trestle tables, reached out to an empty platform at the far end of the room. Presumably, it had once held the high table. Now, it made an excellent stage. Most of his classmates were already there.

"It looks like word got out. The blacksmithing apprentices are here too," said Sevv. Several dwarves, an elf, and a young man he didn't recognize gathered around the edges of the group.

A door in the wall opened, and Tar-Mairon stepped onto the stage. He was wrapped in a blanket which he held closed with one hand. His legs were bare beneath the brown wool.

He crossed the stage on bare feet. The blanket flapped around him as he walked, and for a moment, the gap revealed bare skin from knee to rib. Er-Mûrazôr looked away, embarrassed. *However long I live, that image will be burned into my eyes.*

Tar-Mairon shrugged the blanket off his shoulders and held it in front of himself casually, as if he didn't realize he was naked.

He was as scarred as any warrior. A long, white line crossed his shoulder, and there was another on his upper arm and a stab

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wound on his belly, but the worst was a raised scar that showed where his throat had been slit.

Er-Mûrazôr looked at the floor, his face burning. He didn't know where to look. In the end, he fixed his eyes on his teacher's face.

Tar-Mairon addressed his apprentices. "The first thing to know about shape shifting is that you have to do it naked. If you shift to something large, your clothes will shred. I personally don't have the money to replace my wardrobe every time I do this. But you already knew that, since I pay you in seashells and small rocks."

"You get paid? Bastard!" A student punched his neighbor in the arm.

The master sorcerer lowered his head like an actor getting into character, and rolled forward until his knuckles almost touched the stage. His shoulders broadened, his arms thickened, and his body was covered in dark brown fur, grizzled silver. He growled, a low rumbling threat Er-Mûrazôr felt in his gut.

The wolf became a serpent, impossibly long, its middle as thick as a man's waist. The serpent took the form of a fanged creature with leathery wings. The wings became tentacles, purple and covered with jagged-toothed suckers, which spilled over the edge of the stage and reached for the cluster of apprentices. Someone screamed.

The Kraken retracted its tentacles onto the stage, then seemed to pull itself larger and taller, almost to the ceiling above the stage. Flames ran up its body, and it assumed the form of a demon, an actual Balrog. It roared, not like an animal but like something speaking ancient and evil words. Er-Mûrazôr tripped over his own feet and fell backwards against another student.

The monster turned into a wolf again, which became a man on all fours, in only his skin. Tar-Mairon sat back on his heels and pushed his hair out of his face. He left the other arm draped across his lap.

“Toss me that, will you?” he said, pointing to the blanket. He caught it with one hand and held it in front of himself when he stood up.

“That’s the problem with shape shifting. Everyone thinks clothes turn into fur. They don’t.”

-o-o-o-o-o-

A week later, Er-Mûrazôr sat around the table with a group of Tar-Mairon’s apprentices after they’d finished work for the day. The remains of the evening meal had been pushed aside to make room for a game of dice.

Ferran, Raedwald, Eamur were all there. So were at least four of the junior apprentices, one or two of the smiths, and a few foot soldiers.

Ferran scooped up the dice and set them aside. “Let’s make this more interesting. We’ll play a drinking game. Never have I ever ...”

“Paid back the money you owe me,” said Raedwald. Everyone laughed.

“Never have I ever... seen an Orc,” said Raedwald. Everyone except Tar-Mairon lifted his glass.

“That will change,” said Tar-Mairon.

“Never have I ever ... lain with a girl,” said a young apprentice, barely old enough to shave. Color spread upward from his jaw. Er-Mûrazôr felt his own face burning. He knocked a coin to the

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floor on purpose and made a fuss about picking it up, leaving his goblet untouched.

“Never have I ever ... told my mother I loved her,” said one of the foot soldiers. Two others lifted their goblets and drank.

“Never have I ever... had a stupid argument with my father and had to leave home because I wouldn’t apologize.” Eamur looked right at Er-Mûrazôr, his eyes teasing. Per the rules of the game, Er-Mûrazôr picked up his glass and drank. He wasn’t the only one.

Many rounds later, when Er-Mûrazôr reached for his goblet, or to be exact, for the space between two goblets, his knuckles grazed something metallic and he heard a clunk.

When it was his turn, Er-Mûrazôr said, “Never have I ever ... seen the coast of Valinor.”

Tar-Mairon lifted his glass.

*Liar.* It was almost certain Tar-Mairon had never been to Valinor. He claimed to have studied under Aulë the Smith, but when it was discovered that no one there knew him, the Jewel Smiths kicked him out of the guild.

Er-Mûrazôr met his teacher’s eye and held it. “You know what? You’re full of shit.”

“*What did you say?*” The goblet froze halfway to his lips.

I don’t care who you studied under or where you used to live. I just don’t like being lied to.”

Tar-Mairon slammed his goblet down on the table. Wine slopped over the rim and puddled on the table.

“Calm down, I’m on your side.” Er-Mûrazôr laid a hand on his teacher’s arm. The muscles beneath the linen sleeve were rigid.

Er-Mûrazôr leaned closer and lowered his voice. “For someone who walks around in his skin with no more concern than a beast in the field, you’re the most inhibited person I know. It’s like you’re an actor playing a role. Everything that comes out of your mouth sounds rehearsed. I’d rather deal with you, the the real you, than with some script.” Er-Mûrazôr realized he was slurring his words.

Mairon looked at him. For the first time since they’d met, the expression on his face reached his eyes. It was like watching actors rehearse a play, when they take a break, and you catch a glimpse of the person behind the role.

Mairon studied his hands. “I tried that once. It ended badly. When I lived among the Jewel Smiths, I confided something I swore I’d never reveal to anyone.<sup>4</sup>

“What something?” Er-Mûrazôr asked.

“Let’s just say I had to choose between going to prison, or changing my name and devoting my life to anonymous good works.”

A guardsman burst into the room. “I heard shouting. Is anything wrong?”

Mairon waved him off. “Eönwë and I were just talking. I mean Er-Mûrazôr. Melkor’s chains, I’m drunk.”

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<sup>4</sup> That he used to be known as Sauron Gorthaur, Melkor’s second-in-command



writing "Wraith"

I work out the plot with pen and paper (and concept maps, and index cards.) I do most of the text with Dragon dictation, which explains some of my peculiar word usage, like spelling "Lugbúrz" as "love birds".

The map and booklet were made by Iron Crown Enterprises (ICE), which produces "fanon", like canon only generated by fans. The souvenir tee shirt was purchased at the Iron Crown Inn, located just inside the main gates of Barad-dur.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> which upon closer scrutiny is actually from CustomInk.