

Chapter 1

In Mordor the shadows lay across a plain of broken hardpan. As tough as iron and less fertile, eternally tormented by cold winds, and cracked here and there with chasms that went down to unknown voids in the deep places, the valley between the Mountains of Ash and the Mountains of Shadow normally held nothing but orcs. Now it held orcs and men.

The men had come from a place known as Amber to treat with the dark lord. Nine they were, powerful and tall. King Random the First lead them with Vialle his wife. She refused titles, but every time he did the same she fussed at him. She was doing it now: fussing. His Royal Majesty was losing that battle again.

"And you need to wear your good crown. Not the bent one, which I have at the jeweler, but the nice one with the points."

"Didn't Corwin crown himself with- hey Corwin! Didn't you crown yourself with this once?"

"Yeah, probably," said Corwin the Grim. "Random, I'm going to be honest here. There was a while when Eric and I were home alone that I crowned myself with basically everything in the castle. Chairs, dishes, hell, I've crowned myself lord of Kitchenania at least half a dozen times."

"See?" said Vialle. "Your brother agrees with me. You need to wear your nice crown."

"No, he doesn't!" yelled Random. "He crowned himself with the salad bowls!"

"Only because it made Eric really mad," said Corwin.

The royal couple regarded him, Random with an annoyed expression because he couldn't figure out if his brother was agreeing with him or not, and Vialle with a gentle, friendly expression because she just assumed he was.

"Dad, why would you possibly do that?" asked Merlin of Corwin.

"Kid, I did not make a lot of sense when I was growing up."

"Ah, that's sweet," said Vialle. She turned. "Random, nice crown. We agreed on this."

"No, we didn't!"

Gerard stood with his siblings, Random and Corwin, and their families. Given their various sizes, Gerard standing with the crowd meant his siblings orbited him. Gerard was, to be blunt, a big dude. Six foot eight, three hundred and twenty pounds, the lineage of Oberon and the fire of the Pattern had smelted him into a creature more akin to mountain trolls than human flesh. He was currently trying to diplomatically leave the meeting and go get laid.

Also with them stood tall Julian in white mail and a green cloak. Julian scowled at everyone. His disquiet knew no bounds, but alas, other people did. They ignored his scowling with the assumption that his face just did that save for Merlin, who considered his uncle Julian terribly constipated and was trying to figure out a diplomatic way to offer him a laxative.

Merlin did not know whether they had laxatives in Amber. They might be like gunpowder, unknown to his father's family, and perhaps even wrapped in old lore and impolite to discuss. He had a few in a back pocket. He regarded Julian.

Julian looked him dead in the eyes and scowled.

Merlin thought of Fiber One.

On the other side, as far from Julian as possible, stood Fiona. She was small, red haired, rocking gorgeous, and talking with her slightly taller sister, blond bombshell Florimel about a portentous subject near and dear to her treacherous little heart: gardening.

"And I swear, it's the way Amberite holly grows. If you don't apply strict rules, it doesn't grow straight. It makes a wreath," said Fiona. She flicked her eyes at Julian.

"Fi, I don't care," said Flora. "At all."

Julian squinted at them.

"You should," said Fiona.

"I doubt it."

Standing apart, cold, mournful, and damp, stood Llewella. She was freezing her green hair off. Icicles had formed in her locks, right down her face, and no one offered her any help because most of them assumed it was a Rebman thing.

She sighed, forlornly, and lamented. She also wished she had a coat.

The grouping was suddenly stopped by the roar of trumpets and the beating of goblin drums. Mountain trolls let loose on horns stolen from dwarven cities of old. Mountain goblins started banging out rhythms incomprehensible.

"Ticks & Leeches," said Corwin to Merlin.

"I have a cream for that," said Merlin.

Corwin regarded him as dourly as Julian had, and Merlin offered his father a supplement for that too.

But the drums rolled through the valley, and the crevices in the hardpan caught the noise and brought it forth. Soon all of Mordor roared with lateral music, and spirals of arcane sounds echoed like the drumming of Mad Azathoth. Two lines of orc banner-carriers scuttled from the ominous doors of Barad Dur, and a great horde of the evil little creatures followed.

And behind them all, above them, and lording over them all, came Sauron the Deceiver, Mairon the Wise, in mail like mithril and carrying a mace in one hand.

The mad drumming achieved orgasmic intensity and went silent. The orcs threw themselves down. The Amberites stopped arguing for several seconds, and Sauron stepped forward to speak.

"Lo, creatures of the earth!" declared Sauron.

"What's a low creature of the earth?" hissed Vialle.

"An orc," said Random.

"I am Mairon the Wise! I have invited you all to my domicile to learn the true history of that which is greatest in Middle Earth: ME!"

The Amberites blinked a few times at that. Flora shot a look around to see if everyone else was getting this, and Merlin squinted one eye and opened his other wide.

But Sauron/Mairon was just getting started.

"Today is the greatest of all of your days, for it is on this day that you have met that which is most fair in Middle Earth. I am! You have met me!"

"See, he was kinda cute in a thirty foot tall embodiment of evil way until he opened his mouth," hissed Flora.

"Aw, sister. You've discovered men," replied Fiona.

Sauron continued. "I allow you to come before me in my glory, and selflessly allow you to look upon me! No greater gift could you receive! No greater honor could be given! In this moment your lives are made complete, and everything that you will do from this point on is a tragic dénouement from the infinite grandiosity of this moment!"

"Look upon my robes. Elves possess not this lore, and yet it was I who crafted them. This mace is the highest pinnacle of weapon technology, and it was I who crafted it!"

"Dad, can I shoot him?" hissed Merlin.

"No."

"I have created even a crown like that of the Lord Melkor, and upon it reside the spikes fitting for the Silmarils."

"See, he has a nice crown." Vialle nudged her husband.

He deigned not to reply.

"In the beginning, there was me. And I was so majestic, so wonderful, that the Valar themselves created a world for me as a frame to properly showcase my magnificence. All that you see is here to provide me with a podium to stand upon, that the world might regard me to its betterment."

Julian considered the utter lack of trees, plants, wildlife, or even running water, and arrived at harsh conclusions. They showed on his face like a sour taste.

"Have you tried prunes?" suggested Merlin.

"Boy, stop offering my brother purgatives!"

"Greatness came to me as effortlessly as the birds learn to fly. The heavens rejoiced that they might crest my head, and I allowed them their brief indignity that the skies themselves might form another, higher crown! Within them lie the Silmarils, and truly the arch of creation is but second crown to recognize my greatness!"

Vialle poked Random again, and he caught her fingers. She tried to pull her hand away and he wouldn't let her. They started discretely struggling, missing a bit of Sauron's disclosure.

"-elves of the ancient lands came to see me, for Middle Earth under my care was infinitely better than shabby old Valinor! Valinor is for losers. Inferior people. Mortals."

Flora moved around to stand beside Gerard. "Do you know how long he's going to go on with this?" she asked.

"Well, I was here about ten thousand years ago their time, and he's nowhere near that point yet," said Gerard.

"Oh, dear god!" muttered Flora.

Sauron caught that. "That's right! I am!"

The blonde stared at him for a moment. "Yeah," she said slowly.

"For it is me that the gods, the Valar, admire! It is me who gives form to the formless. It is ME!"

Gerard rolled his eyes so hard he wound up looking at Llewella and noticed she was freezing.

"Lee, do you want a coat?"

"Yes, please." She sniffled.

And Sauron explained to them the history of Middle Earth. After explaining the stars existed in the heavens to ornament his other crown, as noted above, he revealed that the Valar created two trees to act as spotlights and really put his magnificence on display. He explained that the Valar then got rid of those trees, because Sauron was too awesome for trees. And so they went through a period of darkness and made the Moon and Sun, and Sauron allowed them to shine on both him and others.

"Doing yet another great service to you and all of your kind," he said. "And yet in the era of the waking of men, a terrible offense was committed. A crime beyond all other crimes. The age of men, and the sun looked down on harlotry!"

"Harlotry?" repeated Corwin and Flora in unison, ears perking up.

"Dad!" snapped Merlin.

"Son, you don't even know," said Corwin.

But Sauron paid them all no heed and told the dark and terrible tale of humans, death, harlotry, and above all, himself.