

# Nazgûl

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The **Nazgûl** (from Black Speech *nazg*, "ring", and *gûl*, "wraith, spirit", possibly related to *gul*, "sorcery"), also called **Ringwraiths**, **Ring-wraiths**, **Black Riders**, **Dark Riders**, the **Nine Riders**, or simply **the Nine**, are characters in J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth legendarium. They were nine men who succumbed to Sauron's power and attained near-immortality as wraiths, servants bound to the power of the One Ring and completely under the dominion of Sauron. They are first mentioned in *The Lord of the Rings*, originally published in 1954–1955. The book calls the Nazgûl Sauron's "most terrible servants".

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## Nazgûl

*Tolkien's legendarium* character

<b>Aliases</b>	The Nine <div>Úlairi (in Quenya)</div> <div>Black Riders</div> <div>Fell Riders</div> <div>Ringwraiths</div>
<b>Book(s)</b>	<i>The Fellowship of the Ring</i> (1954), <div><i>The Two Towers</i> (1954),<div><i>The Return of the King</i> (1955),<div><i>The Silmarillion</i> (1977),<div><i>Unfinished Tales</i> (1980)</div></div></div></div>

## In Tolkien's writings

### Ringwraiths

According to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the Nazgûl arose as Sauron's most powerful servants in the Second Age of Middle-earth. They were once mortal men; three being "great lords" of Númenor. Sauron gave each of them one of nine Rings of Power. Ultimately, however, they were bound to the One Ring and completely enslaved by the will of Sauron.

Those who used the Nine Rings became mighty in their day, kings, sorcerers, and warriors of old. They obtained glory and great wealth, yet it turned to their undoing. They had, as it seemed, unending life, yet life became unendurable to them. They could walk, if they would, unseen by all eyes in this world beneath the sun, and they could see things in worlds invisible to mortal men; but too often they beheld only the phantoms and delusions of Sauron. And one by one, sooner or later, according to their native strength and to the good or evil of their wills in

the beginning, they fell under the thralldom of the ring that they bore and of the domination of the One which was Sauron's. And they became forever invisible save to him that wore the Ruling Ring, and they entered into the realm of shadows. The Nazgûl were they, the Ringwraiths, the Úlairi, the Enemy's most terrible servants; darkness went with them, and they cried with the voices of death. — *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age", 346

The corrupting effect of the rings extended the bearers' earthly lives far beyond their normal lifespans. Some passages in the novel suggest that the Nazgûl wore their rings, while others suggest that Sauron actually held them.

In a letter from *circa* 1963 Tolkien says explicitly that Sauron held the rings:

They would have obeyed . . . any minor command of his that did not interfere with their errand — laid upon them by Sauron, who still through their nine rings (which he held) had primary control of their wills . . . — *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Letter 246

They were by far the most powerful of his servants, and the most suitable for such a mission, since they were entirely enslaved to their Nine Rings, which he now himself held . . . — *Unfinished Tales*, p. 338

## Appearance and characteristics

The Nazgûl wore their rings long enough that their physical forms faded away until they had become entirely invisible to mortal eyes. Their black robes gave them visible form. During the assault on Minas Tirith, the leader of the Nine, the Witch-king of Angmar, cast back his hood to reveal a crown, but the head that wore it was invisible. While wearing the One Ring, Frodo perceived them as pale figures robed in white, with "haggard hands" and wearing crowns.

In *The Fellowship of the Ring* they were armed with steel swords, while the Witch-king wielded a Morgul blade that could turn its victim into a wraith. During the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, the Witch-king bore a "long pale sword", and later used a mace against Éowyn.

The Witch-king practiced black magic, and used it to break the gates of Minas Tirith. Tolkien said of the Nazgûl ". . . their chief weapon was terror. This was actually greater when they were unclad and invisible; and it was greater also when they were gathered together." <sup>[1]</sup> They exuded an aura of fear:

The Nazgûl came again . . . like vultures that expect their fill of doomed men's flesh. Out of sight and shot they flew, and yet were ever present, and their deadly voices rent the air. More unbearable they became, not less, at each new cry. At length even the stout-hearted would fling themselves to the ground as the hidden menace passed over them, or they would stand, letting their weapons fall from nerveless hands while into their minds a blackness came, and they thought no more of war, but only of hiding and of crawling, and of death. — *The Return of the King*, p. 97

Close or prolonged encounters with a Nazgûl caused unconsciousness, nightmares, and eventual death: an effect known as "the Black Breath". Aragorn used the herb *athelas* to treat victims of the Black Breath, including Frodo, Faramir, Éowyn, and Merry.

## History within the legendarium

The Appendices of *The Return of the King* explain that the Nazgûl first appeared around S.A. 2251, some 700 years after the rings were forged, and were soon established as Sauron's principal servants. They were dispersed after the first overthrow of Sauron in S.A. 3441 at the hands of the Last Alliance of Elves and Men, but their survival was assured since the One Ring survived.

They re-emerged around T.A. 1300, when the Witch-king led Sauron's forces against the successor kingdoms of Arnor: Rhudaur, Cardolan and Arthedain. He effectively destroyed all the successor kingdoms, but was defeated in 1975 and returned to Mordor. There he gathered the other Nazgûl in preparation for the return of Sauron to that realm.

In 2000, the Nazgûl besieged Minas Ithil and, after two years, captured it and acquired its *palantír* for Sauron. The city thereafter became Minas Morgul, the stronghold of the Nazgûl. Sauron returned to Mordor in 2942 and declared himself openly in 2951. Two or three of the Nazgûl were sent to garrison Dol Guldur, his fortress in Mirkwood.

By 3017, near the beginning of the story told in *The Lord of the Rings*, Sauron had learned from Gollum that Bilbo Baggins of The Shire had the One Ring in his possession. Sauron entrusted its recovery to the Nazgûl. They reappeared "west of the River", riding black horses that were bred or trained in Mordor to endure their terror. They learned that the Ring had passed to Bilbo's heir, Frodo, and followed him and his companions to Bree. Aragorn arrived ahead of them and hid the Hobbits from their pursuers, but eventually five of the Nazgûl cornered Frodo and his company at Weathertop, where the Witch-king stabbed Frodo in the shoulder with the Morgul blade, breaking off a piece of it in the Hobbit's flesh. When all Nine were swept away by the waters of the river Bruinen, their horses were drowned, and the Ringwraiths were forced to return to Mordor to regroup.

In 3018 the nine companions of the Fellowship of the Ring left Rivendell as the "Nine Walkers", in opposition to the Nazgûl, the "Nine *Riders*". The latter reappeared mounted on hideous flying beasts (reminiscent of — and in part suggested by — pterodactyls).<sup>[2][3]</sup> They were then called **Winged Nazgûl**.

During the Battle of the Pelennor Fields (portrayed in *Return of the King*), the Witch-king himself was slain by Éowyn and Merry: Merry's surreptitious stroke with an enchanted Barrow-blade drove the Witch-king to his knees, allowing Éowyn, the niece of Théoden, to drive her sword between his crown and mantle. Thus was the Witch-king destroyed by a woman and a Hobbit, fulfilling the prophecy that "not by the hand of man will he fall".<sup>[4]</sup> Both weapons that pierced him disintegrated, and both assailants were stricken with the Black Breath.

The remaining eight Ringwraiths attacked the Army of the West during the last battle at the Black Gate. When Frodo claimed the Ring for his own near the fires of Mount Doom, Sauron ordered the eight to fly to intercept him. They arrived too late, however: Gollum seized the Ring and fell into the Cracks of Doom, and the Nazgûl perished with its destruction.

# Adaptations

The Nazgûl are featured in all adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* on radio, film, and stage.

In Ralph Bakshi's 1978 animated film version of *The Lord of the Rings*, the Nazgûl hack and slash the Hobbits' beds at *The Prancing Pony* inn themselves. In the book, the assailants are not precisely identified, but Tolkien implies that the attack was carried out by agents of the Nazgûl, possibly including one Bill Ferny, rather than the Nazgûl themselves (though they were present in the town).<sup>[5]</sup> Another thing to note is that after the beds are destroyed, the Ringwraiths remove their hoods, revealing hideous black masks and the armour they wear beneath their cloaks. They remain unhooded, but masked, throughout the remainder of the film.

In the Rankin-Bass adaptation of *The Return of the King*, the Nazgûl are robed skeletons with white hair.

In the 1981 BBC Radio serial of *The Lord of the Rings*, the Nazgûl can be heard chanting the Ring-inscription.<sup>[6]</sup>

In *The Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy (2001–2003) by Peter Jackson, the Nazgûl appear as white ghostly corpses wearing black cloaks that conceal their true appearance from others. The Nazgûl attack the inn themselves. Their deafeningly loud shrieks and fell beasts are highlighted.

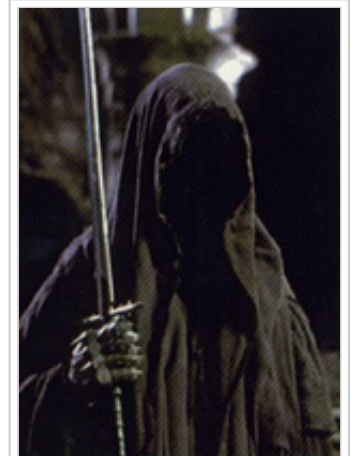
In *The Hunt for Gollum* (2009) Aragorn fights a Ringwraith on the borders of Mirkwood. *The Hunt for Gollum* puts more emphasis on the Nazgûl's physical strength: Aragorn is shown physically struggling as he pushes his sword against that of the Nazgûl.

In *The Hobbit* movie trilogy (2012–2014) by Peter Jackson, a prequel to the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the men who became the Nazgûl are said to have been buried and sealed within the High Fells of Rhudaur. In the first film, Radagast briefly encounters the Witch-king of Angmar while investigating Dol Guldur, and gives the Nazgûl's sword to Gandalf to present at the White Council. In the second film, at Galadriel's behest, Gandalf heads to the High Fells and finds that all the Nazgûl have left the tomb. This confirms the Necromancer's identity as Sauron, as the Nazgûl appear alongside their master in the third film in spectral forms wearing Morgul armour before being driven away by Galadriel.

## In other media

The Nazgûl are featured in many products based on Tolkien's writings, more recently the Jackson films.

Some examples include the real-time strategy computer games *The Lord of the Rings: War of the Ring*, not based on the Jackson films, and *The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth* and its sequels, *The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II* and its expansion pack *The Rise of the Witch-king*, which are based on the films. In *The Battle for Middle-earth* games, each of the Ringwraiths wields a Morgul blade.



One of the Nazgûl portrayed in *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy



The Nazgûl, as portrayed in the 1978 animated film version

In *The Lord of the Rings: War of the Ring* the Witch-king is a hero for the Evil faction, similar to the movie-based games (whose evil factions are realm-specific). In *The Rise of the Witch-king* there are three named Ringwraiths: the Witch-king, Khamûl, and "Morgomir", Lieutenant of Carn Dûm. While a player uses the Mordor faction, Morgomir is a cloaked Nazgûl, but if a player is to use the Angmar faction, while the Witch-king has no change to his appearance, Morgomir fits Frodo's vision of a Nazgûl: he has pale skin, white hair and a crown. Morgomir's name is invented for the game, developed by Electronic Arts.

In the massive multiplayer online role-playing game *The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar*, the Nazgûl, in particular the Witch-king, play a prominent part in the storyline; the premise is to fight the armies of the Witch-king in his realm of Angmar (although the Witch-king himself was driven from Angmar long ago). In the *The Lord of the Rings Online: Siege of Mirkwood* expansion, players can fight an actual Ringwraith (Khamul, the Lieutenant of Dol Guldur) in the tower of Dol Guldur.

In the Middle-earth Collectible Card Game produced by Iron Crown Enterprises, most of the Nazgûl have invented names, shared with Middle-earth Role Playing by the same company. Liz Danforth created the art for each of the Nazgûl in the game.

George R. R. Martin's novel *The Armageddon Rag* is about a rock band named the Nazgûl. The band's manager and promoter is referred to as Sauron, its lead singer is nicknamed Hobbit, and its logo is an Eye of Mordor. Many of its song and album titles make reference to Tolkien's Middle-earth.

The term Ringwraith is used in the song "The Battle of Evermore" by classic rock band Led Zeppelin, in the line "the ringwraiths ride in black". The Swedish black metal band Marduk has a song called "Those of the Unlight" which was written about the Nazgûl.

Epic symphonic Serbian band Númenor based their song *Once we were Kings* on the story about Nazgûl. Moreover, on the cover for their second full-length *Sword and Sorcery* appears a figure with much references to Witch-King.

The song *Shadows* by Swedish Power Metal band Sabaton is about the Ringwraiths quest to obtain the ring. The Nazgûl are given the epithet "Black Knights of Sauron"; the Witch-King himself is called "Black Shadow King".

## Names, titles and terms

The Nazgûl are called **Úlairi** (a plural) in Tolkien's invented language of Quenya.

They are also called the **Fell Riders** and the **Black Wings** (when they ride the fell beasts), as well as the **Shadows**, the **Servants of Sauron**, and the **Nine Servants of the Lord of the Rings**. The Orcs of the Tower of Cirith Ungol call them **Shriekers**.

In her duel with the Witch-king, Éowyn calls him a "dwimmerlaik". This is a word in Rohirric, the speech of Rohan (translated into Anglo-Saxon) that Tolkien glosses in the index as a "work of necromancy", a "spectre".

Only two of the Nazgûl are named or identified individually in Tolkien's works. Their leader was the Witch-king of Angmar; he is the only individual Nazgûl identified in *The Lord of the Rings*. Writings unpublished in Tolkien's lifetime identify his second-in-command as Khamûl, the "black Easterling" or the "shadow of

the East".<sup>[7]</sup> In the text of *The Lord of the Rings*, after the fall of the Lord of the Nazgûl, command of Mordor's army in the field falls to Gothmog, the "lieutenant of Morgul";<sup>[8]</sup> nothing else is said of Gothmog, but since Minas Morgul was closely associated with the Nazgûl, some have speculated that Gothmog was one of their number. (For example, the 1977 wargame *War of the Ring* depicts Gothmog as a Nazgûl.)

Tolkien stated that three of the Nazgûl were great Númenórean lords;<sup>[9]</sup> in his notes for translators, Tolkien speculates that the Witch-king was of Númenórean origin.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Names not created by Tolkien

The early Middle-earth Role Playing games (and material derived from them) name the eight other than Khamûl; *Er-Murazor* (the Witch-king, of Númenórean race), *Dwar of Waw*, *Ji Indûr Dawndeath*, *Akhôrahil* (Númenórean), *Hoarmûrath of Dír*, *Adûnaphel the Quiet* (female Númenórean), *Ren the Unclean* and *Ûvatha the Horseman*,<sup>[11]</sup> but none of these names come from Tolkien's writings. (Nor is there any indication that Tolkien ever imagined one of the Nazgûl as being female.)

In the *Lord of the Rings* Trading Card Game, chiefly based on the Jackson films, the Nazgûl are called *The Witch King*, *Úlairë Attëa* (The Easterling), *Úlairë Nelya*, *Úlairë Cantëa*, *Úlairë Lemenya*, *Úlairë Enquëa*, *Úlairë Otsëa*, *Úlairë Toldëa* and *Úlairë Nertëa*. These are not new names: *Úlairë* is a reconstructed Quenya singular "Ringwraith" (the singular of Q. pl. *Ulairi* is not directly attested), and the second word is simply an ordinal number from second to ninth.

For the expansion to its real-time strategy game *The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II*, *The Rise of the Witch-king* — chiefly based on the Jackson films and building much upon the original writings — Electronic Arts invented the name *Morgomir* for one of the Nazgûl. This appears to be a pastiche of the Sindarin words *Morgoth* ("Dark Enemy") and *mîr* ("jewel"); it is not attested in Tolkien's Elvish languages.

In *The Lord of the Rings* Strategy Battle Game, the Witch-king and Khamûl the Easterling retain the titles Tolkien gave them. The other seven are given honorific titles emphasising aspects of how they are used in the game: The Dark Marshal, The Shadow Lord, The Undying, The Tainted, The Betrayer, The Knight of Umbar and The Dwimmerlaik.

In *The Heart of the Wild* and *The Darkening of Mirkwood*, supplements for the tabletop role-playing game *The One Ring*, the three Nazgûl sent to Dol Guldur in T.A. 2951 are named in honorific form as "The Lieutenant of Dol Guldur", "The Ghost of the Forest", and "The Messenger of Mordor".<sup>[12][13]</sup>

## Steeds

After losing their horses at the Ford of Bruinen, the Nazgûl returned to Mordor and reappeared mounted on hideous flying beasts; Beregon called them "Hell Hawks". Tolkien describes them as "fell beasts", though Tolkien applies the adjective *fell* ("fierce, cruel") to a variety of other creatures throughout *The Lord of the Rings* — even at one point to Gandalf. In a letter, he calls the winged mounts "Nazgûl-birds".<sup>[14]</sup> In the absence of a proper name, derivative works sometimes press "fellbeast" or "fell-beast" into service.<sup>[15]</sup>

The flying steeds figure prominently in the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, where the Witch-king of Angmar, the Lord of the Nazgûl, rides one against King Théoden of Rohan. Tolkien describes the Witch-king's mount thus:

... it was a winged creature: if bird, then greater than all other birds, and it was naked, and neither quill nor feather did it bear, and its vast pinions were as webs of hide between horned fingers; and it stank. A creature of an older world maybe it was ...<sup>[16]</sup>

A few paragraphs later, it is said to attack with "beak and claw".<sup>[16]</sup>

Tolkien once wrote that he "did not intend the steed of the Witch-king to be what is now called a 'pterodactyl'", while acknowledging that it was "obviously ... *pterodactylic* and owes much" to the "new ... mythology of the 'Prehistoric'", and might even be "a last survivor of older geological eras."<sup>[17]</sup>

In Ralph Bakshi's 1978 animated version of *The Lord of the Rings*, one of the Nazgûl is shown riding these creatures. In the Rankin-Bass 1980 animated version of *The Return of the King*, the Nazgûl ride winged horses, although the Witch-king does ride a creature more in line with the book when he confronts Éowyn. In Peter Jackson's film trilogy based on *The Lord of the Rings*, all nine Nazgûl are shown onscreen riding them. Jackson's creatures explicitly differ from Tolkien's description in that they have teeth instead of beaks. The Nazgûl use them in battle more extensively than in the book. In the film the Witch-king's mount is largely responsible for the death of Théoden and his horse Snowmane, while in the book Snowmane is killed by a "black dart", crushing Théoden as he falls. As confirmed in the films' audio commentary, the design of the creatures was based largely on illustrations by artist John Howe.



The Witch-king's flying steed, as illustrated by John Howe



A Nazgûl on his flying steed in *The Lord of the Rings* (1978).

## References

1. Unfinished Tales, p. 343
2. *The Return of the King*, Chapter 5, Chapter 6, "The Battle of the Pelennor Fields", p. 822.
3. Humphrey Carpenter, editor, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Letter 211, p. 282.
4. *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix A, I iv, p. 412.
5. "In dark and loneliness they are strongest; they will not openly attack a house where there are lights and many people — not until they are desperate, not while all the long leagues of Eriador still lie before us. But their power is in terror, and already some in Bree are in their clutch. They will drive these wretches to some evil work: Ferny, and some of the strangers, and, maybe, the gatekeeper too." Tolkien, J. R. R. (1954), *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Lord of the Rings*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin (published 1987), "Strider", ISBN 0-395-08254-4
6. "Nazgul.wav" (WAV). October 25, 2009. Retrieved May 16, 2012.
7. *Unfinished Tales*, Index, entry for Khamûl, p. 448.

8. Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Return of the King* (mass market paperback ed.). Del Rey. p. 120. "There they had been mustered for the sack of the City and the rape of Gondor, waiting on the call of their Captain. He now was destroyed; but Gothmog the lieutenant of Morgul had flung them into the fray..."
9. "Yet Sauron was ever guileful, and it is said that among those whom he ensnared with the Nine Rings three were great lords of Númenórean race." *The Silmarillion*, "The Akallabêth", p. 267.
10. Tolkien writes: "the name and origin of the Witch-king is not recorded, but he was probably of Númenórean descent." Wayne G. Hammond & Christina Scull, *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion*, p. 20. The relevant passage was later removed by Tolkien from the notes for translators, and does not appear in the version published in Jared Lobdell's *A Tolkien Compass*.
11. The Encyclopedia of Arda. "What were the names of the nine Nazgûl?" (<http://www.glyphweb.com/arda/faq/nazgul.html>) Retrieved May 16, 2012.
12. Ryder-Hanrahan, Gareth; Nepitello, Francesco. *The Heart of the Wild*. Sophisticated Games Ltd and Cubicle 7 Ltd. pp. 87, 103, 106. ISBN 9780857441430.
13. Ryder-Hanrahan, Gareth; Nepitello, Francesco. *The Darkening of Mirkwood*. Sophisticated Games Ltd and Cubicle 7 Ltd. pp. 24, 128–9. ISBN 9780857441348.
14. Carpenter, Humphrey, ed. (1981), *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, #100, ISBN 0-395-31555-7
15. For example, Turbine, Inc. *The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar*. Level/area: Barad Guldur.
16. Tolkien, J. R. R. (1955), *The Return of the King, The Lord of the Rings*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin (published 1987), "The Battle of the Pelennor Fields", ISBN 0-395-08256-0
17. Carpenter, Humphrey, ed. (1981), *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, #211, ISBN 0-395-31555-7

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