

# SOFA CITY

*Isengard, March 9th TA 3019*



Wooden crates and bits of rag bobbed in the stinking floodwater. And what was that? A body, face down in the water, and already beginning to bloat.

A crow landed between the corpse's shoulder blades and tugged at a lock of its hair. Saruman picked up a rock and chucked it at the carrion bird. It struck with a thunk. The crow let out an angry squawk, then spread its blue-black wings and lifted away.

"Sir? What are your orders?" Grima Wormtongue looked anxiously at his master.

Saruman ignored him. He had no idea what to do next.

"Do you have any kin? You know what they say about family. 'When you have to go there, they have to take you in.'"

Saruman looked to the east. The sky over the horizon was dark with smoke. He bit his lip.

"I have a brother, but he doesn't like me much." Saruman drew his brows together.

"But he'll take you in?"

"I suppose so."

The crow returned to his perch on the floating corpse and pecked away at its head.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Saruman.



Saruman trudged eastwards into Rohan, with Wormtongue struggling to keep up. They’d only been walking for an hour, and already he had blisters on his heels. There were still days and days of walking in front of them. And when he got there, well, it was going to be interesting.

He and Mairon had never gotten along. Saruman remembered an occasion when they were both apprentices under Aulë. Mairon had been working on the same piece for a while. He’d scrapped it and started over several times, and it still wasn’t done.

Aulë sent him outside to get more wood for the forge. Saruman waited until he heard the sound of axe on wood, then went to look at the piece Mairon had left on the workbench.

It was going to be an S-shaped bracket, utilitarian but pretty. The piece was well made. Mairon did skilled, careful work. But the flange was thicker than necessary, and the proportions were a little off. Mairon didn’t hear the music within the iron the way Saruman did, didn’t bring it to life.

Looking around and seeing he was unobserved, Saruman picked up the tongs and held the piece in the fire, then struck a few blows with the hammer, changing the proportions slightly, making the curves lighter, more subtle.

He quenched the glowing metal in the slake barrel. The water hissed as a plume of steam rose from its surface. When the metal cooled, he pulled it from the barrel and put it back on the workbench where he’d found it.

Mairon came back in with an armload of wood and dumped it by the hearth. He dusted the sawdust from his clothes and went back to the workbench. He looked at the piece, then at Saruman.

"Your proportions were off, so I fixed them," Saruman said.

Mairon's hands curled into fists and he stood there, breathing hard. Saruman laughed.

An instant later, Saruman found himself flat on his back with Mairon straddling him. Mairon was heavy. It was hard to breathe, and his arms were pinned to the dirt floor under Mairon's knees. Saruman could do little more than wiggle his fingers and scream. Mairon pommeled him until Aulë yanked them apart and knocked their heads together.

"Mairon, Curumo, stop it!" Aulë's grip was like iron.

"He hit me! Aren't you going to beat him for it?" Saruman wailed.

"And what did you do to him?"

Long after Mairon left the Forge for the last time, Saruman overhead Aulë saying to Mahtan, the first of a series of Noldor Elves who came to study under him,

"That's excellent work. It's almost as good as something Mairon would have done."

You'd never know he was talking about someone who'd been charged with war crimes. It wasn't fair. Mairon was still the favorite, Mairon could do no wrong.



A few miles out of Isengard, they came upon an isolated farmstead. They had no money and nothing to trade, but Saruman used the power of his voice to persuade the farm wife to 'lend' him a pair of horses.

"And can you give me a loaf of bread, too?" Saruman asked. The farm wife nodded, her eyes distant and trancelike.

She went inside the cottage, and Wormtongue asked, "Should you send word to your brother, to let him know we're coming?"

"No, he might tell me to go away. I'll just appear on his doorstep and hope for the best."

They rode bareback through the endless steppes of Rohan, with robe bridles for reins. They traveled for several days in this manner, stopping at farmhouses to ask for food. Eventually the grassy plain gave way to the foothills of Ithilien at the base of the Ephel Dúath, the mountains that encircled Mordor.

“Do you have a plan?” asked Wormtongue

“Beyond showing up and hoping for the best? No, not really.”

“We’re really going into Mordor, then. Is it safe?”

“It’s not like I don’t know him,” said Saruman.

Wormtongue looked unconvinced.

“You saw me talking to him in the Palantir every day until somebody, we won’t name names, threw it over the rail and lost it in the floodwaters.”

Saruman twisted around as far as he dared without stirrups. “Look, the whole time we were growing up, I slept in a bed next to his, and nobody ended up with a knife between their shoulder blades.” In large part because Mairon was a lark and Saruman was an owl.

At night, when Saruman climbed the stairs to the attic dormitory, shielding the lamp so as not to wake the others, Mairon would already be asleep, an arm flung over his eyes, his breathing deep and even. He was so much easier to get along with when he was unconscious.

Saruman would get ready for bed as quietly as he could, taking great care not to bump the bedframe almost touching his own, but it wasn’t necessary, Mairon never stirred during the night. And in the morning, when Saruman woke up, Mairon would already be gone.



They crossed the bridge to the gates of Minas Morgul, the fortress which straddled the road into Mordor. Saruman wasn’t sure he’d be able to charm his way in, but the guards

at the gate were as easily won over as the farm wives of Rohan.

Inside, there were as many soldiers packed in as would fit. It was hard to thread a path through them. Pushing through the sea of Orcs and leading the horse by its halter rope, he took more than one elbow to the ribs.

It took another day of hard riding to cross the plain of Gorgoroth. The plateau was covered by the Armies of Mordor. During the night, campfires were visible in all directions.

The grey dawn revealed tents and standards and rank upon rank of armored soldiers. It was astonishing how organized they were, forming up into square formations and moving as if choreographed. Mordor Orcs were unlike any others. They were disciplined, and that made them frightening.

The road wrapped around the southern slope of Orodruin. The volcano was erupting hard. Saruman paused for a moment to stare, filled with awe. That was where the Ring was forged.

The wind changed, and he choked on sulfurous fumes. Patches of yellow were crusted around the rim of the cinder cone. What was that? The earth beneath his feet trembled. Far away, a boulder bounced down the slopes of Orodruin, followed by a spray of rocks. It struck an outcropping, the sound reached him seconds after the impact.

Saruman looked toward the promontory which was home to Barad-dûr, but the Tower was concealed in swirling mist. No matter, they'd be there soon enough.

They continued eastward. They reached the causeway, then climbed the hairpin path along the face of the promontory. Toward the end, Saruman slid off the horse's back and led the animal by the reins.

They crossed a bridge over an abyss to reach the gates of Barad-dûr. Saruman could see more of the structure now. It

was large, but not that much taller than Orthanc. He felt like they were almost evenly matched.

The wind picked up. It whipped his hair in his face, and his cloak flapped around him.

Wormtongue gasped. His head tilted back as he looked up, and up. Saruman followed his gaze.

Gust of wind had torn a hole in the mists. What he'd seen before wasn't Barad-dûr, it was a gatehouse tower in the curtain wall encircling Barad-dûr. The Dark Tower itself was huge, more massive than he'd ever imagined.

"It's big. Really big. I just can't believe how vastly, hugely, mind-bogglingly big it is," he said. "I mean, ..." <sup>1</sup>

Saruman smacked him.

They approached the Main Gate. It was closed, but there was a sally port just large enough for one man at a time, if he turned sideways.

Saruman used his most persuasive voice on the sentries, but they just laughed at him. People here must be used to enchantments. He tried another tack.

"Please tell Sauron his brother is here to see him."

More laughter. He found a scrap of paper and scratched a note,

*Curumo to Mairon, greetings. I'm destitute. Can you give me a roof and a bed?*

He folded the paper and handed it to a sentry, who took it from him and disappeared inside. Ten minutes later, an official-looking person appeared in the sally port. He wore black, and wore a badge of the Lidless Eye at his shoulder. He was tall, with dark hair and a bony face that would have looked good on a horse.

"My name is Urzahil of Umbar. Sauron says you may stay. Follow me," he said.

He led them down a cobblestone street between closely-spaced buildings. There was a whole city within the curtain

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<sup>1</sup> with apologies to Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

wall. Their guide stopped under a tavern sign, an iron crown with three white stones. He pushed open the door, revealing a comfortable pub.

“Sauron can’t see you right now. He’s busy with the preparations for war, but he’ll see you later,” the official said, and left.

There was a fire smoldering on the hearth, and the room smelled of peat and new wood. Everything looked new. The oak panels surrounding the booths were golden, not dark as they were in most pubs, and the beams hadn’t yet been blackened by smoke.

Saruman looked around the room. The walls were decorated with murals. He recognized the drawings as Mairon’s. One of the murals showed Melkor as he’d been before his downfall – beautiful, awe-inspiring. Mairon must still be infatuated with Melkor. They’d all been, at first.

When Melkor made war against the Valar, no one was surprised when wild, rebellious Ossë followed him. The surprise came when Mairon, the responsible one, the rule-follower, joined them. And then Ossë came back, subdued and repentant, while it was Mairon who stayed on in Utumno as one of Melkor’s chief lieutenants. Mairon became a powerful warlord in his own right, taking the name Sauron Gorthaur, or Sauron the Dreaded.

They waited. An hour later, the horse-faced official returned.

“Sauron is meeting with the ambassador from Núrn right now, but he’ll try to make time for you later in the day. At worst, he’ll see you at dinner.”

An hour went by, and another, and no one came for them. Saruman sat at the table with Wormtongue, nursing a tankard and growing increasingly bad-tempered.

Saruman fumed. Mairon could’ve spared a few minutes for him. That was just common courtesy.

Finally a servant came to their table and asked them to follow him. "Let me take you to your room and let you get settled."

He led them down narrow streets to the base of the Dark Tower itself. A huge iron gate stood open, its thickness the width of a man's shoulders.

The inside of the Tower was chaos. The stairways were made from scrap lumber crudely nailed together, the railings of splintery boards, when there were railings at all. Construction debris, ends of timber and broken bits of stone, were piled up in corners or swept under the stairs.

They passed several doorways with hinges but no doors. It was a far cry from Orthanc, with its polished marble staircases and decorative stonework. In Orthanc, every hinge and latch was the work of a skilled craftsman.

Their guide stopped in front of a door and pushed it open. A hole had been drilled through the door for the latch, but the hardware hadn't been installed yet.

Saruman stepped inside and looked around. The walls hadn't been painted. In some places, the plasterwork hadn't been finished at all. A bucket, along with plastering tools and rags, lay abandoned in a corner. The room below was visible between the rough planks that passed for floorboards.

A table and two crude benches sat in the middle of the room, the makeshift furniture of an army camp. It wasn't even peasant-cottage quality. A pair of straw pallets on the floor were covered with scratchy blankets. He looked out the window. There was no glass, there weren't even shutters to keep out the weather.

The Tower was like everything else he'd seen Mairon do in Aulë's forge, bigger and heavier than necessary, made with strength rather than skill. Was it possible he'd made the Ring the same way, overbuilt, crudely executed, and achieved only through overwhelming strength. That was so like Mairon.



Saruman entered the dining chamber. Everyone in the room was dressed in black. Mairon was sitting at the head of the table, leaning over a map of Gondor, deep in conversation with the two highest-ranking Nazgûl and the horse-faced official who'd let him in earlier. Saruman greeted Mairon warmly, but Mairon barely acknowledged him with a nod before returning to the discussion. Saruman's fingernails dug into the palms of his hands.

Saruman hadn't seen Mairon in more than an Age, but he had no sense of strangeness with him. They'd been in almost daily contact through the Palantir until a few days ago.

Mairon's hand was resting on the table next to his wine goblet. Saruman hadn't seen his injured hand before. One finger was gone, ropey scars covered the stump. There were white lines on the inside of the finger next to it, the scars from deep scratches or cuts.

"Did that hurt when it happened?"

"I don't know. I have no memory of it."

"Mairon? Do you have a minute? I came here because Isengard was attacked. My home was destroyed and ..."

"Can't it wait? I'm giving the signal to start the invasion tonight, and I need to focus on that." He turned away and moved a lead token on the map. Saruman fumed.

To pass the time, he studied the other people in the room. The High Nazgûl, the Witch King of Angmar was easily recognizable by his steel crown. Saruman had clashed with him the previous year, and sitting across the table from him was distinctly uncomfortable.

In his mind, Saruman could see beneath the black wrappings that made them visible to the living. They were identical in the black robes, but beneath them, each was an individual.

The Witch King wore the robes of a Númenorian prince, costly fabrics of silver and pale blue, the colors of the sea. His grey hair fell to his shoulders, and his beard was neatly

trimmed. Khamûl the Easterling, the second Nazgûl, wore the jewel-colored silks of the East, his blue-black hair fell to his elbows, and his eyes were ringed in kohl.

There were others whose names he didn't know, a barbarian from the North clad in furs and primitive jewelry, and a country squire, portly in rustic leathers and wools. A dog lay at his feet, thumping its tail on the floorboards.

If Saruman could choose a Nazgûl of his own, it would be Khamûl. Good-natured, accommodating, not at all like Mairon's favorite, the Witch King, who had a fiery temper and a mind of his own.

Mairon must have noticed him staring. "Angmar is my second-in-command, and my most trusted lieutenant. He's like a brother to me."

"You mean you mock him on occasion, and ignore him the rest of the time?" said Saruman.

Before he could answer, a servant came in with a plate in each hand. He set the first one in front of Mairon, who picked up a knife and began to eat. He served the Witch King next. Saruman and Wormtongue were served last. Saruman was a Maia, one of the Holy Ones. He thought he should have been served immediately after Mairon. Saruman clenched his teeth.

During the meal, the war was all they talked about. Saruman had fielded an army. He knew about logistics and supply lines, but the scale of Sauron's campaign was so huge, Saruman couldn't grasp it. His attention wandered.

There was a break in the war discussions, and Mairon seemed to remember Saruman's existence.

"So, what you think of my Tower?" Mairon tipped back his chair like someone waiting to receive praise.

This was the first time Mairon had initiated a conversation with him since he's arrived, and it involved Mairon fishing for compliments. Typical. Saruman didn't want to talk about the magnificence of the Dark Tower, he wanted to talk about how unhappy he was about losing Isengard.

“Well, it’s really big, but it looks like it was slapped together as quickly as possible.”

The front legs of the chair hit the floorboards. “Excuse me?”

“It’s not even finished. There’s no paneling or ornamental ironwork, the plaster hasn’t been finished, and the staircases appear to be made from scrap lumber.”

Mairon’s mouth hardened into a thin line. He sniffed and turned away.

“Well, you asked,” said Saruman.

The evening wore on. Mairon was still finalizing the preparations for war with his lieutenants. He moved tokens around on the map, going on and on about battalions and tactics. He worried about the expense of the war, which was staggering.

Saruman wished they would talk about something else. He motioned for a servant to fill his wine cup. It had already been refilled several times, and he was beginning to feel it.

“I rode by Orodruin on the way in. Did you make the volcano erupt?” he asked.

Mairon nodded, and held himself a little straighter. “I’m the one who brings it to life, and it goes dormant when I’m not around.”

“And that’s where the Ring was forged?” Saruman said.

“I’d originally planned to use dragon’s fire, but any dragons that survived the First Age were scattered and in hiding. Luckily, the temperatures inside the volcano are just as hot.”

“You do realize basalt melts at a lower temperature<sup>2</sup> than iron?”

“Meaning what?”

“The cast iron an ordinary blacksmith pours into a mold is hotter than lava. Any village smithy could have produced fires hot enough for your purposes.”

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<sup>2</sup> Basalt melts at 1000 to 1260 C, Iron melts at 1538 C

Mairon's eyes widened.

"You're an Earth spirit. You should've known that."

Apparently he hadn't. Moron.

"I've been studying Ringlore for some time. This is my first essay in the craft." He held up his hand to show it off, proud of his work.

Mairon snorted.

"Do you want to know what I've learned?" asked Saruman.

"No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me anyway."

"Well, it's easy enough to assemble a Great Ring from parts, but ideally, you want to merge those parts into a single, unified whole. It took me forever to figure out how to do it. Even now, although I understand it in theory, I'm still working out the details."

The color drained from Mairon's face.

"What? ... but it's not..." He recovered quickly. "That's a difficult problem. Just for my own satisfaction, tell me what you believe the answer is."

A grin spread across Saruman's face. Mairon didn't know how to merge the separate parts. It explained why he'd had to put so much of his own power into the Ring.

"You never did figure it out, did you?" Saruman leaned back in his chair, gloating.

Mairon leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed. His mouth was a tight line.

"You talk about making rings, but I actually did it."

"I never understood why. I mean, you put the greater part of your own power into an object outside yourself, which you then lost. Nice one, genius."

There was a crash as something hit the table. The Witch King sat frozen with his arm raised, his fingers wrapped around the stem of a goblet that was no longer there. A puddle of wine spread across the surface of the table and drained into his lap, unnoticed.

Mairon sat rigid in his chair, staring straight ahead. He was breathing hard, his breath whistling through his nose. "Get out," he said.



Saruman was shoved through the sally port with such force that he fell and scraped his knees. Wormtongue was ejected behind him, followed by most of their belongings, although Mairon kept the horses.

Saruman got to his feet. "We've got a long walk in front of us, Worm, especially since I don't know where we're going."