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Tolkien 2000 Contest
Serious Entry Winner - David Laughlin

Serious

Thank you for this opportunity, it has given me much pleasure. Parts of this entry use Tolkien's work heavily. Much of the beginning is only slightly altered until I spliced my work into the original. I had to put in the stuff leading in order to set up the ensuing changes. Since you probably have a lot to read I marked with asterisks large sections with no significant changes so you get through faster if you are pressed for time. Enjoy.

Chapter 10

The Black Gate Opens

*** Two days later the army of the West was all assembled on the Pelennor. The host of Orcs and Easterlings had turned back out of Anorien, but harried and scattered by the Rohirrim they had broken and fled with little fighting towards Cair Andros; and with that threat destroyed and new strength arriving out of the South of the City was as well manned as might be. Scouts reported that no enemies remained upon the roads east as far as the Cross Roads of the Fallen King. All now was ready for the last throw.

Legolas and Gimli were to ride again together in the company of Aragorn and Gandalf, who went in the van with the Dunedain and the sons of Elrond. But Merry to his shame was not to go with them.

‘You are not fit for such a journey,’ said Aragorn. ‘But do not be ashamed. If you do no more in this war, you have already earned great honour. Peregrin shall go and represent the Shirefolk; and do not grudge him his chance of peril, for though he has done as well as his fortune allowed him, he has yet to match your deed. But in truth all now are in like danger. Through it may be our part to find a bitter end before the Gate of Mordor, if we do so, then you will come also to a last stand, either here or wherever the black tide overtakes you. Farewell!’

And so despondently Merry now stood and watched the mustering of the army. Bergil was with him, and he also was downcast; for his father was to march leading a company of the Men of the City: he could not rejoin the Guard until his case was judged. In that same company Pippin was also to go, as a soldier of Gondor. Merry could see him not far off, a small but upright figure among the tall men of Minas Tirith.

At last the trumpets rang and the army began to move. Troop by troop, and company by company, the wheeled and went off eastward. And long after they had passed away out of sight down the great road to the Causeway, Merry stood there. The last glint of the morning sun on spear and helm twinkled and was lost, and still he remained with bowed head and heavy heart, feeling friendless and alone. Everyone that he cared for had gone away into that gloom that hung over the distant eastern sky; and little hope at all was left in his heart that he would ever see any of them again.

As if recalled by his mood of despair, the pain in his arm returned, and he felt weak and old, and the sunlight seemed thin. He was roused by the touch of Bergil’s hand.

‘Come, Master Peregrin!’ said the lad. ‘You are still in pain, I see. I will help you back to the Healers. But do not fear! They will come back. The men of Minas Tirith will never be overcome. And now they have the Lord Elfstone, and Beregon of the Guard too.’

So time and the hopeless journey wore away. Upon the fourth day from the Cross Roads the Aragorn’s company halted suddenly in the woods north of Osgiliath. The bodyguard tensed in anticipation. A growing rustle began in the woods to the East above the sound of wind in the trees. Several hooves

crashed like thunderbolts toward Aragorn.

Being the sharpest of ear, Legolas had strung his arrow before the men of Gondor could react. His bow sang as an elf rider rode with abandon into the arrows path. He was shot to the ground as three Easterlings emerged behind him, startled to find an army where their lone target had been.

The Dunedain pursued them as they fled to the wood. Legolas, with Aragorn with Gandalf behind him, was cradling his ill-fortuned kinsman, a cousin from the great northern forest. As he spent out the last of his life upon the path, the elf declared himself the an ambassador extraordinary from the north.

'Radagast is coming from the north as you pled for Gandalf,' he whispered, 'He brings a company of elves from the north. We can spare no more, the black tide is not confined to the realm of Gondor. They are pursued by Orcs from...Dol Guldur..Radagast leading through,' he gasped for a last breath, '...ills of Emyrn Muil and will meet you at Dagorlad.' And his body slumped as his soul took its westernmost flight.

The wood elf's death destroyed any solace the army would have achieved from the messenger. With heavy hearts the company turned again to the road.

Upon the fourth day from the Cross Roads and the sixth from Minas Tirith they came at last the end of the living lands, and began to pass into the desolation that lay before the gates of the Pass of Cirith Gorgor; and they could descry the marshes and the desert that stretched north and west to the Emyrn Muil. So desolate were those places and so deep the horror that lay on them that some of the host were unmanned, and they could neither walk nor ride further north.

Aragorn looked at them, and there was pity in his eyes rather than wrath; for these were young men from Rohan, from Westfold far away, or husbandmen from Lossarnach, and to them Mordor had been from childhood a name of evil, and yet unreal, a legend that had no part in their simple life; and now they walked like men in a hideous dream made true, and they understood not tis war nor why fate should lead them to such a pass.

'Go!' said Aragorn. 'But keep what honour you may, and do not run! And there is a task which you may attempt and so be not wholly shamed. Take your way south-west till you come to Cair Andros, and if that is still held by enemies, as I thin, then re-take it, if you can; and hold it to the last in defence of Gondor and Rohan!'

Then some being shamed by his mercy overcame their fear and went on, and the others took new hope, hearing of a manful deed within their measure that they could turn to, and they departed. And so, since many men had already been left at the Cross Roads, it was with less than six thousands that the Captains of the West came at last to challenge the Black Gate and the might of Mordor.

They advanced now slowly, expecting every hour some answer to their challenge, and they drew together, since it was but waste of men to send out scouts or small parties from the main host. At nightfall of the fifth day of the march from Morgul Vale they made their last camp, and set fires about it of such dead wood and heath as they could find. They passed the hours of night in wakefulness and they were aware of many things half-seen that walked and prowled all about them, and they heard the howling of wolves. The wind had died and all the air seemed still. They could see little, for though it was cloudless and the waxing moon was four nights old, there were smokes and fumes that rose out of the earth and the white crescent was shrouded in the mists of Mordor.

It grew cold. As morning came the wind began to stir again, but now it came from the North, and soon it freshened to a rising breeze. All the night-walkers were gone, and the land seemed empty. North amid their noisome pits lay the first of the great heaps and hills of slag and broken rock and blasted earth, the vomit of the maggot-folk of Mordor; but south and now near loomed the great rampart of Cirith Gorgor, and the Black Gate amid most, and the Towers of the teeth tall and dark upon either side. For in their last

march the Captains had turned away from the old road as it bent east, and avoided the peril of the lurking hills, and so now they were approaching the Morannon from the northwest, even as Frodo had done. Radagast had not yet arrived.

*** (if your following these asterisks go to page 11)

Three vast doors of the Black Gate under their frowning arches were fast closed. Upon the battlement nothing could be seen. All was silent but watchful. They were come to the last end of their folly, and stood forlorn and chill in the grey light of early day before towers and walls which their army could not assault with hope, not even if it had brought thither engines of great power, and the Enemy had no more force than would suffice for the manning of the gate and wall alone. Yet they knew that all the hills and rocks about the Morannon were filled with hidden foes, and the shadowy defile beyond was bored and tunnelled by teeming broods of evil things. And as they stood they saw all the Nazgul gathered together, hovering above the towers of the Teeth like vultures; and they knew that they were watched. But still the Enemy made no sign.

No choice was left them but to play their part to its end. Therefore Aragorn now set the host in such array as could best be contrived; and they were drawn up on the two great hills of blasted stone and earth that orcs had piled in years of labour. Before them towards Mordor lay like a moat a great mire of reeking mud and foul-smelling pools. When all was ordered, the Captains rode forth toward the Black Gate with a great guard of horsemen and the banner and heralds and trumpeters. There was Gandalf as chief herald, and Aragorn with the sons of Elrond, and Eomer of Rohan, and Imrahil; and Legolas and Gimli and Peregrin were bidden to go also, so that all the enemies of Mordor should have a witness.

They came within cry of the Morannon, and unfurled the banner, and blew upon their trumpets; and the heralds stood out and sent their voices up over the battlement of Mordor.

'Come forth!' they cried. 'Let the Lord of the Black Land come forth! Justice shall be done upon him. For wrongfully he has made war upon Gondor and wrested its lands. Therefore the King of Gondor demands that he should atone for his evils, and depart then forever. Come forth!'

There was a long silence, and from wall and gate no cry or sound was heard in answer. But Sauron had already laid his plans, and he had a mind first to play these mice cruelly before he struck to kill. So it was that, even as the Captains were about to turn away, the silence was broken suddenly. There came a long rolling of great drums like thunder in the mountains, and then a braying of horns that shook the very stones and stunned men's ears. And thereupon the middle door of the Black Gate was thrown open with a great clang, and out of it there came an embassy from the Dark Tower.

At its head there rode a tall and evil shape, mounted upon a black horse, if horse it was; for it was huge and hideous, and its face was a frightful mask, more like a skull than a living head, and in the sockets of its eyes and in its nostrils there burned a flame. The rider was robed all in black, and black was his lofty helm; yet this was no Ringwraith but a living man. The Lieutenant of the Tower of Bard-dur he was, and his name is remembered in no tale; for he himself had forgotten it, and he said: 'I am the Mouth of Sauron.' But it is told that he was a renegade, who came of the race of those that are named the Black Numenoreans; for they established their dwellings in Middle-earth during the years of Sauron's domination, and they worshipped him, being enamoured of evil knowledge. And he entered the service of the Dark Tower when it first rose again, and because of his cunning he grew ever higher in the Lord's favour; and he learned great sorcery, and knew much of the mind of Sauron; and he was more cruel than any orc.

He it was that now rode out, and with him came only a small company of black-harnessed soldiery, and a single banner, black but bearing on it in red the evil Eye. Now halting a few paces before the Captains of the West he looked them up and down and laughed.

'Is there any one in this rout with authority to treat with me?' he asked. 'Or indeed with wit to

understand me? Not thou at least!' he mocked, turning to Aragorn with scorn. 'It needs more to make a king than a piece of elvish glass, or a rabble such as this. Why? Any brigand of the hills can show as good a following!'

Aragorn said naught in answer, but he took the other's eye and held it, and for a moment they strove thus; but soon, though Aragorn did not stir nor move hand to weapon, the other quailed and gave back as if menaced with a blow. 'I am a herald and ambassador, and may not be assailed!' he cried.

'Where such laws hold,' said Gandalf, 'it is also the custom for ambassadors to use less insolence. But no one has threatened you. You have naught to fear from us, until your errand is done. But unless your master has come to new wisdom, then with all his servants you will be in great peril.'

'So!' said the Messenger. 'Then thou art the spokesman, old greybeard? Have we not heard of thee at whiles, and of thy wanderings, ever hatching plots and mischief at a safe distance? But this time thou hast stuck out thy nose too far, Master Gandalf; and thou shalt see what comes to him who sets his foolish webs before the feet of Sauron the Great. I have tokens that I was bidden to show to thee—to thee in especial, if thou shouldst dare to come.' He signed to one of his guards, and he came forward bearing a bundle swathed in black cloths.

The Messenger put these aside, and there to the wonder of dismay of all the Captains he held up first a short sword such as Sam had carried, and next a grey cloak with an elven-brooch, and last the coat of mithril-mail that Frodo had worn wrapped in his tattered garments. A blackness came before their eyes, and it seemed to them in a moment of silence that the world stood still, but their hearts were dead and their last hope gone. Pippin who stood behind Prince Imrahil sprang forward with a cry of grief.

'Silence!' said Gandalf sternly, thrusting him back; but the Messenger laughed aloud.

'So you have yet another of these imps with you!' he cried. 'What use you find in them I cannot guess; but to send them as spies into Mordor is beyond even you accustomed folly. Still, I thank him, for it is plain that this brat at least has seen these tokens before, and it would be vain for you to deny them now.'

'I do not wish to deny them,' said Gandalf. 'Indeed, I know them all and all their history, and despite your scorn, foul Mouth of Sauron, you cannot say as much. But why do you bring them here?'

'Dwarf-coat, elf-cloak, blade of the downfallen West, and spy from the little rat-land of the Shire_nay, do not start! We know it well_here are the marks of a conspiracy. Now, maybe he that bore these things was a creature that you would not grieve to lose, and maybe otherwise: one dear to you, perhaps? If so, take swift counsel with what little wit is left to you. For Sauron does not love spies, and what his fate shall be depends now on your choice.'

No one answered him; but he saw their faces grey with fear and the horror in their eyes, and he laughed again, for it seemed to him that his sport went well. 'Good, good!' he said. 'He was dear to you, I see. Or else his errand was one that you did not wish to fail? It has. And now he shall endure the slow torment of years, as long and slow as our arts in the Great Tower can contrive, and never be released, unless maybe when he is changed and broken, so that he may come to you, and you shall see what you have done. This shall surely be—unless you accept my Lord's terms.'

'Name the terms,' said Gandalf steadily, but those nearby saw the anguish in his face, and now he seemed an old and wizened man, crushed, defeated at the last. They did not doubt that he would accept.

'These are the terms,' said the Messenger, and smiled as he eyed them one by one. 'The rabble of Gondor and its deluded allies shall withdraw at once beyond the Anduin, first taking oaths never again to assail Sauron the Great in arms, open or secret. All lands east of the Anduin shall be Sauron's forever, solely. West of the Anduin as far as the Misty Mountains and the Gap of Rohan shall be tributary to Mordor, and men there shall bear no weapons, but shall help to rebuild Isengard which they have wantonly destroyed, and that shall be Sauron's, and there his lieutenant shall dwell: not Saruman, but one more

worthy of trust.'

Looking in the Messenger's eyes they read his thought. He was to be that lieutenant, and gather all that remained of the West under his sway; he would be their tyrant and they his slaves.

Bu Gandalf said: 'This is much to demand for the delivery of one servant: that your Master should receive in exchange what he must else fight many a war to gain! Or has the field of Gondor destroyed his hope in war, so that he falls to haggling? And if indeed we rated this prisoner so high, what surety have we that Sauron the Base Master of Treachery will keep his part? Where is this prisoner? Let him be brought forth and yielded to us, and then we will consider these demands.'

It seemed then to Gandalf, intent, watching him as a man engaged in fencing with a deadly foe, that for the taking of a breath the Messenger was at a loss; yet swiftly he laughed again.

'Do not bandy words in your insolence with the Mouth of Sauron!' he cried. 'Surety you crave! Sauron gives none. If you sue for his clemency you must first do his bidding. These are his terms. Take them or leave them!'

'These we will talk!' said Gandalf suddenly. He cast aside his cloak and a white light shone forth like a sword in that black place. Before his upraised hand the foul Messenger recoiled, and Gandalf coming seized and took from him the tokens: coat, cloak, and sword. 'These we will take in memory of our friend,' he cried. 'But as for you terms, we reject them utterly. Get you gone, for your embassy is over and death is near to you. We did not come here waste words in treating with Sauron, faithless and accursed; still less with one of his slaves. Begone!'

'Then the Messenger of Mordor laughed no more. His face was twisted with amazement and anger to the likeness of some wild beast that, as it crouches on its prey, is smitten on the muzzle with a stinging rod. Rage filled him and his mouth slavered, and shapeless sounds of fury came strangling from his throat. But he looked at the fell faces of the Captains and their deadly eyes, and fear overcame his wrath. He gave a great cry, and turned, leaped upon his steed, and with his company galloped madly back to Cirith Gorgor. But as they went his soldiers blew their horns in signal long arranged; and even they before they came to the hosts of Mordor appeared.

Drums rolled and fires leaped up. All the doors of the Morannon swung back wide. Out of them streamed a great host as swiftly as swirling waters when a sluice is lifted. The Captains mounted again and rode back, and from the host of Mordor there went up jeering yell. Dust rose smothering the air, as from nearby there marched up an army of Easterlings that had waited for the signal in the shadows of Ered Lithui beyond the further Tower. Down from the hills on either side of the Morannon poured Orcs innumerable. The men of the West were trapped, and soon, all about the grey mounds where they stood, forces ten times and more than ten times their match would ring them in a sea of enemies. Sauron had taken the proffered bait in jaws of steel.

Little time was left to Aragorn for the ordering of his battle. Upon the one hill he stood with Gandalf, and there fair and desperate was raised the banner of the Tree and Stars by stood the banner of the White Horse. Upon the other hill hard by stood the men of Dol Amroth. And about each hill a ring was made facing all ways, bristling with spear and sword. But in the front towards Mordor where the first bitter assault would come there stood the sons of Elrond on the left with Dunedain about them, and on the right the Prince Imrahil with the men of Dol Amroth tall and fair, and picked men of the Tower of Guard.

The wind blew, and the trumpets sang, and arrows whined; but the sun now climbing towards the South was veiled in the reeks of Mordor, and through a threatening haze it gleamed, remote, a sullen red, as if it were the ending of the day, or the end maybe of all the world of light. And out of the gathering mirk the Nazgul came with their cold voices crying words of death; and then hope was quenched.

Pippin had bowed crushed with horror when he heard Gandalf reject the terms and doom Frodo to the torment of the Tower; but he mastered himself, and stood beside Gandalf at the crown of the hill looking to the North for signs of Radagast.

He heard a man in the front rank cry 'The Eagles are coming! The Eagles are coming!'

For one moment more Pippin's thought of Bilbo. 'But no that came in his tale, long long ago.' Then to his surprise he saw a flying form approaching from the north which moved faster than a Nazgul, but the screams of the Ringwraiths brought back the coming doom; there was no army of Eagles from the forgotten West to save them, Gwaihir, Lord of the Eagles was alone.

Gwaihir settled next to Gandalf; the Orcs were struggling through the mires, and the Eagle spoke saying, 'Gandalf, the elven company has been lost.'

'And Radagast?'

'He was taken at the cliffs South of Emyr Muil. An army from the south fell upon them as several companies of Orcs cut off their escape.' The great lord let a the wind whistle for a moment, 'Radagast was taken with them, but it is worse still, I flew over a massive army as I came, marching south to strike you against the Morannon. This force in front of you is only the anvil Gandalf, the hammer will fall from the north.'

Gandalf stared as the orcs fell upon the hills; in a gathering sea of enemies he stood as a rock. For several a minute he pondered as battle raged. 'None of your brethren are coming.'

'The fate of this age is in the hands of men, not the beings of Valinor.' Gwaihir said, 'We can give them nothing.'

Gandalf looked to the other hill and saw that Aragorn's men were foundering in the black tide. He turned back to the great beast, he shook his head. 'You are wrong.' Gwaihir looked deep into the eyes of Gandalf and the true quest was revealed. 'We can give them time.'

Before he took leave, Gandalf again opened his mind to the Lord of the Eagles. He stood with a look of deep compassion and guilt, and Gwaihir sat for sometime beneath that asking gaze, in fear. Then he conceded to Gandalf's will.

Those looking upon slunk beneath his gathering glory. He grew immense and terrible. Then he shone with a brilliant light, bathing the dark valley in brilliance. The light exploded in radiance; all the companies saw the light of Illuvatar reflected in Gandalf, as he bleached the valley in white.

The eyes of all the dark hosts, save the Nazgul, were burned with his image. For their short remainder the orcs at Morannon saw nothing but the indomitable face of Gandalf; they felt only its continually intensifying pain, but for the men of Gondor the image was one of indescribable beauty. But it was a beauty forever lost from Middle-Earth, because they remained in the shadow of Mordor.

And the light was gone.

Aragorn fell to his knees as he saw that Gandalf's face. He was gone and Gwaihir with him, the Captains of the West had been abandoned during their hour of greatest need, and Aragorn was stirred to wrath. Barely was he able regain himself to realize the companies of Mordor were in confusion. All the foes in sight were wandering blinded by Gandalf's final act.

Straightway he saw the gift he had been given and yelled 'Peregrine Took!'

The Hobbit flew to his friends call thinking he was crying in distress crying, 'What is the matter?'

'Pippin you must deliver this message to the men of Dol Amroth. Upon the other hill. Do you see their standard?' Pippin saw as Aragorn lifted him up to peer over those around him. Pippin could see the

Silver Swan waving above the glinting steel.

‘Yes, Strider, I do.’ He said, noting the sea of orcs in between also.

‘Good man. The orcs are blinded, you will be safe if I know hobbits. Tell the prince that he is to leave one company in rearguard and his archers upon the hill. They are to hold and harry any reinforcements from the towers as the rest charge with my companies towards the Morannon.’

‘Strider you’re mad.’

‘That is yet to be seen, I will meet you in front of the Morannon my friend!’

Like an arrow Pippin leapt through the blinded mass of orcs. They were in a mad rage killing all that they laid their hands upon. Pippin thought he was rather like Bilbo at that moment as he weaved through the hosts.

Aragorn saw the banner of the Silver Swan dip in recognition. He yelled with all his might, ‘Rohan! Gondor, With Me!’ Then they swept around the mire south of the hills, clearing the orcs at the foot of the Towers of Teeth. The orc companies were utterly ruined; the Captains of the West wheeled to converge on the second arch of the Morannon.

Upon the entire field orcs died in scores until the host of Gondor pressed upon the black wall itself. Mordor’s reinforcements from the towers were cut down by the archers of the Silver Swan upon the slag hills.

A triumphant yell went up as the two wings of the Captains of Gondor vainly thinking they might win the day. Pippin and Aragorn did indeed meet, and the hobbit jumped up in adulation into his liege friends arms, but the King of Gondor knew better than the false joy of the simple hobbit. The Dark Lord had not yet played his hand in full. Then Sauron sprung his final trap.

Aragorn looked north as a blast of trumpets called his attention. The banner of the Silver Swans was waving wildly in distress. Before he could muster his army a great rumbling was heard. South the gates of the Morannon swing open again. In the valley of Udun columns of Southrons had been waiting. They sprung upon the exposed troops of Gondor like a scythe.

North the banner of the Silver Swans fell. A great company of hill-trolls out of Eryn Muil crested the slag hills bellowing as they came. Taller and broader than Men they were, and they were clad only in close-fitting mesh of horny scales, or maybe that was their hideous hide; but they bore round bucklers huge and black and wielded heavy hammers in their knotted hands. Like a storm they broke upon the rearguard of Gondor, and beat upon helm and head, and arm and shield, as smiths hewing the hot bending iron. Quickly they threw down their opposition and the archers stationed upon the hill.

Tousounds of Easterlings swept down on horseback from the hills behind the two towers. Aragorn rallied the men of Gondor on the southern edge of the mires waiting for the converging forces. The trollscame first. Reckless they sprang into the pools and waded across to the waiting ranks. The Easterlings would soon cut down the sides and the Southrons continued their rout.

At Pippin’s side Beregon was stunned and overborne, and he fell: and the great troll-chief that smote him down bent over him, reaching out a clutching claw; for these fell creatures would bite the throats of those that they threw down. Then Pippin stabbed upwards and the written blade of Westernesse pierces through the hide and went deep into the vitals of the troll, and his black blood came gushing out. He toppled letting his hammer crashed down like a falling boulder, smashing Pippin. Blackness and crushing pain came upon Pippin, and his mind began to fall away into a great darkness.

‘So it ends as I guessed it would,’ his thought said, even as it fluttered away; and it laughed a little within him ere it fled, almost gay it seemed to be casting off at last all doubt and care and fear. And then even as it winged away into forgetfulness it heard the voice of Aragorn pleading with him to tarry a while, it seemed to Pippin that the fighting had momentarily paused. Then he heard a mind shattering screech

more terrifying than any Nazgul, but more distant and powerful.

He sat up next to his kneeling liege and watched in amazement as the Nazgul wheeled south and dashed down the valley of Udun faster than the wind to answer their master's call. He expected see the hosts of Mordor fleeing with them, but Pippin saw through the ill-lit haze that the black army was not retreating. It stood in a menacing circle around the army of the west, but did not strike.

All eyes fixed on the South, waiting.

Chapter 3

Mount Doom

Like grey insects, they crept up the slope. They came to the path and found that it was broad, paved with broken rubble and beaten ash. Frodo clambered onto it, and then moved as if by some compulsion he turned slowly to face the North where the Mountains of Ash and Shadow met the horizon. Through the sulfurous midday heat he saw a great white light glow quickly form and fade. He was a lonely child lost in the broken reek of Mordor.

Sam knelt by him. Faint, almost inaudibly, he heard Frodo whispering: 'Help me, Sam! Help me, Sam! Hold my hand! I can't stop it.' Sam took his master's hands and laid them together, palm to palm, and kissed them; and then he held them gently between his own. The thought came suddenly to him: 'It's all up, or soon will be. Now, Sam Gamgee, this is the end of ends.'

Again he lifted Frodo and drew his hands down to his own breast, letting his master's legs dangle. Then he bowed his head and struggled off along the climbing road. It was not as easy a way to take as it had looked at first. By fortune the fires that had poured forth in the great turmoils when Sam stood upon Cirith Ungol had flowed down mainly on the southern and western slopes, and the road on this side was not blocked. Yet in many places it had crumbled away or was crossed by gaping rents. After climbing eastward for some time it bent back upon itself at a sharp angle and went westward for a space. There stone once long ago vomited from the Mountain's furnaces. Panting under his load Sam turned the bend; and even as he did so, just out of the corner of his eye, he missed something fall from the crag, like a small piece of black stone that had toppled off as he passed.

As Sauron prepared to spring his final trap in the north the path climbed on. Soon it bent again and with a last eastward course passed in a cutting along the face of the cone and came to the dark door in the Mountain, Sammath Naur. Far away, the sun, piercing the smokes and haze, burned ominous, a dull bleared disc of red; but all Mordor lay about the Mountain like a dead land, silent, shadow-folded, waiting for Sauron's dreadful stroke. Sam carried Frodo to the gaping mouth and set him down to rest before they walked the dark path; it was hot, and a deep rumbling shook the air. Frodo gingerly propped himself upon a nearby boulder and reached for Sam's hand.

A sudden weight smote Sam and he crashed forward, tearing the backs of his hands that still clasped his master's. Then he knew what had happened, for above him as he lay he heard a hated voice.

'Wicked masster!' it hissed. 'Wicked masster cheats us; cheats Smeagol, *gollum*. He musn't go that way. He musn't hurt Preciouss. Give it to Smeagol, yess, give it to uss! Give it to uss!'

With a violent heave Sam rose up. At once he drew his sword; but he could do nothing. Gollum and Frodo were locked together. Gollum was tearing at his master, trying to get at the chain and the ring. This was probably the only thing that could have roused the dying embers of Frodo's heart and will: an attack, and attempt to wrest his treasure from him by force. He fought back with a sudden fury that amazed Sam, and Gollum also. Even so things might have gone far otherwise, if Gollum himself had remained unchanged; but whatever dreadful paths, lonely and hungry and waterless, he had trodden, driven by a devouring desire and a terrible fear, they had left grievous marks on him. He was a lean, starved, haggard thing, all bones and tight-drawn sallow skin. A wild light flamed in his eyes, but his malice was no longer matched by his old griping strength. Frodo flung him off and rose up quivering.

'Down, down!' he gasped, clutching his hand to his breast, so that beneath the cover of his leather shirt he clasped the Ring. 'Down, you creeping thing, and out of my path! Your time is at an end. You cannot betray me or slay me now.'

Then suddenly, as before under the eaves of the Emyrn Muil, Sam saw these two rivals with other

vision. A crouching shape, scarcely more than the shadow of a living thing, a creature now wholly ruined and defeated, yet filled with a hideous lust and a rage; and before it stood stern, untouchable now by pity, a figure robed in white, but at its breast it held a wheel of fire. Out of the fire there spoke a commanding voice.

'Begone, and trouble me no more! If you touch me ever again, you shall be cast yourself into the Fire of Doom.'

The crouching shape backed away, terror in its blinking eyes and yet at the same time insatiable desire. Far off the shadows of Sauron hung; but torn by some gust of wind out of the world, or else moved by some great disquiet within, the mantling clouds swirled, and for a moment drew aside; and then they saw, rising black, blacker and darker than the vast shades amid which it stood, the cruel pinnacles and iron crown of the topmost tower of Barad-dur. It stared out, but as from some great window immeasurably high there stabbed northward a flame of red, the flicker of a piercing Eye; as the Power moved to strike its deadly blow; the three small figures wished for the terrible vision to cease, but it continued. The Eye relaxed its focus; the Captains of the West succumbed to the fate Sauron had so masterfully planned. Its piercing vision now began to grow and bend to all the land of Mordor. Finally the gaze turned to them, and the eye to see the wheel of fire silhouetted against the darkness of Sammath Naur.

The Dark Lord was suddenly aware of them, and his Eye piercing all shadows looked across the plain to the door that he had made; and the magnitude of his own folly was revealed to him in a blinding flash, and all the devices of his enemies were at last laid bare. the Power in Barad-dur was shaken, and the Tower trembled from its foundations to its proud and bitter crown. Then his wrath blazed in consuming flame, but his fear rose like a vast black smoke to choke him. For he knew his deadly peril and the thread upon which his doom now hung. From all his policies and webs of fear and treachery, from all his stratagems and wars his mind shook free; and throughout his realm a tremor ran, his slaves quailed, and his armies halted, and his captains suddenly steerless, bereft of will, wavered and despaired. For they were forgotten. The whole mind and purpose of the Power that wielded them was now bent with overwhelming force upon the Mountain. At his summons, wheeling with a rending cry, in a last desperate race there flew, the Nazgul, the Ringwraiths, and with a storm of wings they hurtled south wards to Mount Doom.

Sam saw with momentary clarity, nine black shapes rending the sky to the north. To the East a great shape of black began to move towards him; he shuddered at the shrieking call of distress from the dark tower; the foul worm upon which the Blackness rode flew swifter than the wind under his master's full will. Sam barely turned from the terror to see Gollum eyeing Frodo.

'Look out!' cried Sam. 'He'll spring!' He stepped forward, brandishing his sword. 'Quick, Master!' he gasped. 'Go on! Go on! No time to lose. I'll deal with him. Go on!'

Frodo looked at him as if at one now far away. 'Yes, I must go on,' he said. 'Farewell, Sam! This is his end at last. On Mount Doom doom shall fall. Farewell!' he turned and went on, walking slowly but erect into the darkness, his hand seeking the chain about his neck

'Now!' said Sam. 'At last I can deal with you!' among the howling turmoil he leaped forward with drawn blade ready for battle. But Gollum did not spring. He fell flat upon the ground and whimpered.

'Don't kill us,' he wept. 'Don't hurt us with nasty cruel steel! Let us live, yes, live just a little longer. Lost lost! We're lost. And when Precious goes we'll die, yes, die into the dust.' He clawed up the ashes of the path with his long fleshless fingers. 'Dusst!' he hissed.

Sam's hand wavered. His mind was hot with wrath and the evil swiftly approaching. It would be just to slay this treacherous, murderous creature, just and many times deserved; and also it seemed the only safe thing to do. But deep in his heart there was something that restrained him: he could not strike this thing lying in the dust, forlorn, ruinous, utterly wretched. He himself, though only for a little while, had borne

the Ring, and now dimly he guessed the agony of Gollum's shriveled mind and body, enslaved to that Ring, unable to find peace or relief ever in life again. But Sam had no words to express what he felt.

'Oh, curse you, you stinking thing!' he said. 'Go away! Be off! I don't trust you, not as far as I could kick you; but be off. Or I *shall* hurt you, yes, with nasty cruel steel.'

Gollum got up on all fours, and backed away for several paces, and then he turned, and as Sam aimed a kick at him he fled away down the path. Sam gave no more heed to him. He suddenly remembered his master. He looked into the door and could not see him. 'Frodo! Master!' he called. There was no answer. For a moment Sam stood, his heart beating with wild fears, and then he plunged in. If he had looked back, he might have seen not far behind Gollum turn again, and then with a wild light of madness glaring in his eyes come, swiftly but warily, creeping on behind, a slinking shadow in the darkness of Sammath Naur.

At first he could see nothing. In his great need he drew out once more the phial of Galadriel, but it was pale and cold in his trembling hand and threw no light into that stifling dark. He was come to the heart of the realm of Sauron and the forges of his ancient might, greatest in Middle-earth; all other powers were here subdued. Fearfully he took a few uncertain steps in the dark, and then all at once there came a flash of red that leaped upward and smote the high black roof. Then Sam saw that he was in a long cave or tunnel that bored into the Mountain's smoking cone. But only a short way ahead its floor and the walls on either side were cloven by a great fissure, out of which the red glare came, now leading up, now dying down into darkness; and all the while far below there was a rumour and a trouble as of great engines throbbing and labouring. Frodo was not in the Forge.

Another light glowed across the chamber. 'Master!' cried Sam as he ran, expecting at any time the Dark Lord to arrive. He ran to the other end, entered a high stone archway with a roughly hewn ground. He continued until it opened; in front of Sam stood Frodo facing him.

They were perched on a ledge of rock suspended a thousand fathoms over a lake of burning sulfur inside Orodruin. The outcropping was dwarfed; it barely stabbed into the massive cone chamber, at the top he would have seen the sky, if it wasn't choked out by omnipresent black fumes. Where he stood the archway the outcrop was wide indeed, but the ledge quickly converged to a point. Sam's eyes burned as he gazed at Frodo standing half the length of the ledge away.

Then Frodo stirred and spoke with a clear voice, indeed with a voice clearer and more powerful than Sam had ever heard him use, and it rose above the Throb and turmoil of Mount Doom, and the howl of the worm's landing outside.

'I have come,' he said. 'But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!' And removed the ring from the chain. Sam gasped, but he had no chance to cry out, for at that moment something happened.

It struck Sam violently in the back, his legs were knocked from under him and he was flung aside, striking his head against the stony floor, as a dark shape sprang over him. He lay still and for a moment all went black.

Sam got up. He was dazed, and blood streaming from his head dripped in his burning eyes. He groped forward, and then he saw Gollum strike his master's hand, the ring flew up and landed on the stone. Sam watched as it rolled inexorably to the edge, hoping it would not stay itself. To and fro Gollum and Frodo grappled furiously, now so near the brink that almost they tumbled in, now dragging back, falling to the ground, rising, and falling again. And all the while they hissed but spoke no words. Sam's heart skipped as he saw the ring stopped before falling into the abyss, seemingly of its own accord.

Sam heard a great disturbance, turned, and saw the Terror of Mordor enter. He stood as a shape of a Lord in full wrath entered; Sam shrank before the Presence of his Unblinking Eye, burying his head in the blackness; as His sable mantle passed over the cowering hobbit with a hideous swoosh

Frodo and Gollum looked up to see Him take a great stride towards the waiting ring. They tried to claim the One Ring before He could take it away forever. Frodo launched himself p; crashing his shoulder into the back of the Dark Lord's knee, wrenching it hard. Sauron let out a demons' howl as he fell towards the side. Gollum scurried between the Dark Lord's legs as the Menace fell. Frodo's shoulder had been pierced by barbs set in the mail of Sauron's knee; he was pulled with Sauron over the edge of the narrow outcropping.

Gollum dove for the ring; as the Dark Lord's grasped desperately for the ledge he was slammed down under the weight of His iron hand. Sauron swung out over the abyss, one iron fist clutching the solid edge, the other pressing upon Gollum. As Sauron grasped the ledge; Frodo's flesh was ripped away and he fell, barely managing to catch the foot of Sauron. He pulled himself up and began to desperately climb up His black mantle.

Through the terror of his thought Gollum squirmed away from the hand which slipped over the edge. Sauron started to pull himself up with his other hand. The mountain began to shake violently; the ring once again rolled, inching toward Sauron's other hand. Gollum desperately lunged for the ring. He trapped it under his hand, bare inches from the dark fist.

Gollum despaired as Sauron lifted his free hand above the ledge to grab the ring. Before Gollum could leap away and before Sauron could grab the ring. The ledge broke under their weight. Gollum screamed as the ring lurched downwards. He clutched the his precious had been as he tumbled downwards into the lake of fire. Sam felt his master's distress and turned to see Gollum lurch down. He then saw a flying beast settle on the remaining rock in front of him, silhouetted in the fires of Orodruin. It turned away from Sam; the hobbit lept forwards to clutch its neck as it plunged like a phoenix towards the burning lake below.

Sauron and Frodo and Gollum and the Ring fell; high above they heard the screeching Nazgul coming to save the one who would wield the ring; it was a strange and terrible site, the three wrestling in the air as the walls of the chamber spread further apart

Gollum continued to grasp the ledge trying to reach the ring falling through the air above him. It glowed in the presence of its Orodruin fire. The Lord of Mordor fell headlong towards the pit of fire, reaching for the ring, above his dark cape fluttered in the hot wind. Frodo was still clutching Sauron's mantle; he scrambled down desperately and grasped the iron crown of Sauron, still cold amidst the havoc.

Frodo heard the beat of approaching wings closing quickly. He pushed off the iron crown, grasped the glowing ring; it burnt his hand, but Frodo would never let the ring out of his hand again. Then cold wrapped itself around his legs and pulled him upwards. Gollum lept off the falling rock before Frodo was pulled further back by Sauron. He lurched and viciously bit down on the hobbits wrist. Ha savagely gripped the glowing hand and tore off the remaining the sinews by which it was connected, clutching the still closed fist.

'Precious, precious, precious!' Gollum cried. 'My Precious! O my Precious!' And with that even as his eyes gloated upon his prize it was wrenched by his hands; sending the wretch screaming and hissing.

'No!' Frodo cried through the searing pain, as Sam hurtled by him; Frodo felt hard talons grab. And he continued to gaze down at his fellow hobbit as he was wrenched away and climbed higher and higher in a powerful grip.

Sam clutched his master's injured hand as he fell. Looking up he saw the Dark Lord demanding Sam to give his master's hand to Him. Sam yearned to give up his burden. And for one tenuous moment his will floundered the terror of Sauron's stabbing eyes. Then Sam closed his eyes to the dark vision and it was no more. He felt only the warmth of his fireplace the Shire.

Frodo's tears followed Sam down into Mount Doom. The Nazgul screeched by him as he was carried

higher and higher, out of the reek of Orodruin and into the sky above the plains of Mordor. As Frodo slipped into darkness he moaned in profound guilt for his ill-fated servant; he did not want Sam to come to Mordor and now his faithful servant would never return, from the fire of Orodruin. But Frodo could do nothing for Sam.

Orodruin burst in violence far below him as it spewed forth for the last time, sending itself scattering over the plain. In ages to come the land of Mordor became a plain of grass, utterly flat save a small rise where Orodruin had stood. There a small hill rose crowned by a solitary *mallorn* tree the likes of which could only have been found in the days before the waning of Lothlorien.

North upon the fields of Cormallen the enemies of the West scattered in the wind. Upon the high walls of Minas Tirith, Eowyn, Faramir, and Merry watched the tumult. They were the first to see Gwaihir approaching from the East bearing the injured Frodo.

Thank you for reading.

Straightway yelled 'Peregrine Took!'

The Hobbit flew to his friends call thinking he was crying in distress crying, 'What is the matter sir?'

'Pippin you must deliver this message to the men of Dol Amroth. Upon the other hill do you see their standard?' Pippin saw as Aragorn lifted him up to peer over those around him. Pippin could see the Silver Swan waving above the glinting steel.

'Yes, Strider I do.'

'Good man. The orcs are blinded, you will be safe if I know hobbits. Tell the prince that he is to leave one company in rearguard and his archers upon the hill. They are to hold and harry any reinforcements from the towers as the rest charge with my companies towards the Morrannon.'

'Strider you're mad you don't believe you could succeed in assault.'

'That is yet to be seen go.'

'Have no fear Strider I will deliver the message.' He ran down the hill as scared as he had ever been. The Orcs had turned on each other thinking each to be a foe. Pippin weaved through blind mess thinking of Bilbo again.

Aragorn saw the banner of the Silver Swan dip in recognition