

The Morgai

The Return of The King – The Land of Shadow

The eastern faces of the Ephel Dúath were sheer, falling in cliff and precipice to the black trough that lay between them and the inner ridge. A short way beyond the way-meeting after another steep incline, a flying bridge of stone leapt over the chasm and bore the road across into the tumbled slopes and glens of the Morgai. ... Behind them, now high above on the mountain-side, loomed the Tower of Cirith Ungol, its stones glowing dully. ... They scrambled on to the low parapet of the bridge. Fortunately there was no longer any dreadful drop into the gulf, for the slopes of the Morgai had already risen almost to the level of the road; but it was too dark for them to guess the depth of the fall. ... the hobbits landed ... with a thud and a crunch into the last thing that he had expected: a tangle of thorny bushes. ... they broke free at last. 'Now we go, Sam' Frodo whispered. 'Down into the valley quick and then turn northward ...'

Slowly and painful they clambered down, groping, stumbling, scrambling among rock and briar and dead wood in the blind shadows, down ...

Frodo now led the way, northward as near as he could guess, among the stones and boulders lying thick at the bottom of the great ravine.

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The light, though no more than a grey dusk, was now enough for them to see that they were deep in the valley between the mountains. It sloped up gently northward, and at its bottom when the bed of a now dry and withered stream. Beyond its stony course they saw a beaten path that wound its way under the feet of the westward cliffs. Had they known, they could have reached it quicker, for it was a track that left the main Morgul-road at the western bridge-end and went down by a long stair cut in the rock to the valley's bottom. It was used by patrols or by messengers going swiftly to lesser posts and strong-holds north-away, between Cirith Ungol and the narrows of Isen-mouth, the iron jaws of Carach Angren. ... So now they crossed the stony bed and took to the orc-path, and for some time they marched along it. The cliffs at their left were overhung, and they could not be seen from above; but the path made many bends, ... Water trickling. Out of a gully on the left, so sharp and narrow that it looked as if the black cliff had been cloven by some huge axe, water came dripping down; ... Here it came out of the rock in a little falling streamlet, and flowed across the path, and turning south ran away swiftly to be lost among the dead stones.

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After that Frodo felt easier, and they went on for several miles, until the broadening of the road and the beginnings of a rough wall along its edge warned them that they were drawing near to another orc-hold.

'This is where we turn aside, Sam' said Frodo. 'And we must turn east.' He sighed as he looked at the gloomy ridges across the valley. ...

The river-bed was now some way below the path. They scrambled down to it, and began to cross it. To their surprise they came upon dark pools fed by threads of water trickling down from some source higher up the valley. Upon its outer margins under the westward mountains Mordor was a dying land, but it was not yet dead. And here things still grew, harsh, twisted, bitter, struggling for life. In the glens of the Morgai, on the other side of the valley low scrubby trees lurked and clung, coarse grey grass-tussocks fought with the stones and withered mosses crawled on them; and everywhere great writhing, tangled brambles sprawled. Some had long stabbing thorns, some hooked barbs that rent like knives. The sullen shrivelled leaves of a past year hung on them, grating and rattling in the sad airs, but their maggot-ridden buds were only just opening. ... They had climbed up a narrow shelving ravine, ...

They went on up the ravine, until it ended in a sharp slope of screes and sliding stones. The last living things gave up their struggle; the tops of the Morgai were grassless, bare, jagged, barren as a slate.

After much wandering and search they found a way that they could climb, and with a last hundred feet of clawing scramble they were up. They came to a cleft between two dark crags, and passing through found themselves on the very edge of the last fence of Mordor. Below them, at the bottom of a fall of some fifteen hundred feet, lay the inner plain stretching away ...

Sam went on. '... There is no way down that I can see...'

...

They soon found it impossible to make their way along the crest of the Morgai, or anywhere along its higher levels, pathless as they were and scored with deep ghylls. In the end they were forced to go back down the ravine that they had climbed and seek for a way along the valley. It was rough doing, for they dared not cross over to the path on the westward side. After a mile or more they saw, huddled in a hollow at the cliff's foot, the orc-hold that they had guessed was near at hand: a wall and a cluster of stone huts set about the dark mouth of a cave. There was no movement to be seen, but the hobbits crept by cautiously, keeping as much as they could to the thorn-brakes that grew thickly at this point along both sides of the old water-course.

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The trough between the mountains and the Morgai had steadily dwindled as it climbed upwards, and the inner ridge was now no more than a shelf in the steep faces of the Ephel Dúath; but to the east it fell as sheerly as ever down into Gorgoroth. Ahead the water-course came to an end in broken steps of rock; for out from the main range there sprang a high barren spur, thrusting eastward like a wall.