



The Lord of the Rings: Book Four

TEA WITH TOLKIEN BOOK CLUB CHAPTER SUMMARY

The Lord of the Rings: Book IV Summary

Book IV of The Lord of the Rings follows Frodo and Sam as they slowly journey towards the Land of Mordor. After leaving the Fellowship behind, they become lost as they wander through the wilderness. Gollum has been pursuing them at length, and finally comes to them as they wander. Rather than hiding from him or attacking, they take him as their guide.

Gollum guides them eagerly through the Dead Marshes and to the Black Gate, however they soon realize they will need to enter Mordor through a different path. Gollum tells them of a different, secret path which will lead them through a tunnel.

As they continue to follow Gollum, they are found in Ithilien by Faramir, Captain of Gondor and brother of Boromir, and are taken in by his men. While he is initially skeptical of their story, they develop a great trust and gain much insight from each other. Faramir allows Frodo and Sam, guided by Gollum, to leave him freely and they journey to the Cross-Roads.

From then, they make the dangerous climb up the Stairs of Cirith Ungol.

At the top of the stair, they enter a putrid and dark tunnel—Shelob's Lair. Gollum abandons the hobbits and they realize they've been led into a trap. Frodo and Sam navigate the tunnel together, protecting themselves from Shelob with the bright Elven lights—The Phial of Galadriel and Sting. They manage to escape the tunnel and Frodo runs desperately away.

Shelob stings Frodo as Sam is attacked by Gollum, who flees after a short fight. Sam believes Frodo to be dead and weeps bitterly, nearly falling into despair. However, he comes to the decision that he must carry the Ring and finish the quest without Frodo.

He regretfully leaves Frodo where he lies, but his body is taken by a company of Orcs and brought through the tunnels. Sam follows them and the book ends as he comes to the horrifying realization: "Frodo was alive, but taken by the enemy."

Ch. I: The Taming of Sméagol

Frodo and Sam scramble across desolate, rocky terrain as they struggle in the general direction of Mordor. Feeling lost and altogether discouraged, they often find themselves going in circles. They have long sensed Gollum following them, and they finally see him crawling towards them. Instead of attacking or hiding, they approach him and ultimately take him as their guide.

It is in this chapter that we finally encounter Gollum face-to-face in all of his misery and brokenness. Gollum's thoughts are constantly fixed on what he calls 'the Precious', which he both loves and hates. He regards the hobbits as thieves and spies. Gollum is described as miserable, lonely, a poor wretch, full of wickedness and mischief. Things which are meant to be good, such as the Elven rope, cause him harm. Perhaps he deserves death, Frodo reflects, and yet he is pitiable.

Frodo understands him in a way that Sam cannot, because they are bound together by the Ring. Frodo has great pity for Gollum because it was the Ring that has driven Sméagol to become the creature known as Gollum. Not by any power of his own has he become so wretched, but by the power of the Ring—the manifestation of all evil, a burden which Frodo is now struggling to bear.

Sméagol's slow fade into becoming the creature Gollum was brought about by the will of the Ring. Sméagol was young and naïve when he first laid eyes on the Ring, and for nearly 500 years it slowly poisoned his heart and mind. In him, we encounter a picture of a soul decayed by sin. It works slowly, like water eroding rock, until great canyons are formed.



Ch. 2: The Passage of the Marshes

The heart of Sméagol shines through this chapter as he earnestly guides Frodo and Sam through the Dead Marshes. He appears to be genuinely concerned about their well-being, especially when Frodo lags behind and is enchanted by the lights of the marshes. Even as he struggles internally against his desire for the Ring, plotting and arguing with himself aloud, there is a part of his heart that still desires to be good.

They seem to be developing an unlikely sort of companionship, however strained. They care for and depend on one another in their own ways — the hobbits by offering to share their food with Sméagol, and Sméagol by vigilantly guiding them through the dangerous marshes. It's further illustrated as all three of the companions rest peacefully at the same time in this chapter.

As these characters spend more time together, a sort of uneasy trust is formed between the hobbits and Gollum. While the threat of danger looms over them, they are coming to realize that Gollum doesn't pose much of a threat for the time being. After this realization, the chapter becomes a bit more relaxed in tone if that's a good way of describing it.

They accidentally sleep for most of the day, which brings them an unexpected strength. While Sam is upset with himself for dozing off while the very hungry Gollum was nearby, he realizes upon waking, "there had for the present been nothing to guard against."

While their quest is weighing all the more heavily on Frodo's heart, he is comforted, at least in a small way, by the guidance of Sméagol and the dutiful care of his "friend of friends" Samwise.



Ch. 3: The Black Gate is Closed

Gollum leads Frodo and Sam to the Black Gate, where they find it closed and impassable. There, Gollum offers a new plan which is "darker, more difficult to find, more secret."

Frodo agonizes over this decision, wishing desperately for the counsel of Gandalf, until he at last decides to follow Gollum once more on this new path. As they change course, Frodo warns Gollum of the gravity of his oath to 'the Precious'. Despite all weariness and fear, Frodo has committed himself wholeheartedly to his task. He has accepted that it will almost certainly claim his life, yet he does not turn back.

Ch. 4: Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit

The hobbits follow Sméagol through Ithilien as their road begins to grow more pleasant. Their hearts rise with the familiar landscape of trees and grass, although scars and wounds of war can still be seen. Growing hungry and feeling a bit more safe for the present, they take a break to stew a few rabbits Sméagol has caught for them.

As Sméagol leaves in search of food for his own, the hobbits' cooking fire is discovered by Captain Faramir and his scouts. They are surrounded and questioned, and their answers are surprising to Faramir. After witnessing a short battle, the hobbits are taken into Faramir's company.



Ch. 5: The Window on the West

Frodo and Sam are questioned, once more, by Faramir who remains skeptical of their answers. Faramir reveals that Boromir is dead, much to Frodo's dismay, and that he was his brother. However, as they continue to speak with him, they grow in trust of one another.

Frodo is careful not to reveal too much of his quest, keeping in mind Boromir's attempt to take the Ring from him. Unfortunately, Sam accidentally reveals that Isildur's Bane is the One Ring and Faramir puts the pieces together.

However, Faramir tells Frodo he would not take the Ring, even "if it lay by the highway. Not were Minas Tirith falling in ruin and I alone could save her, so, using the weapon of the Dark Lord for her good and my glory. No, I do not wish for such triumphs, Frodo son of Drogo."

Faramir's character is arguably the most saintly of all men in Middle-Earth. He stands in stark contrast to Boromir, who was proud and eager. Faramir does not seek glory, rather he carefully pursues virtue and wisdom. In him, the hobbits find nothing to fear—and instead, they are surprised to find great aid and counsel.



Ch. 6: The Forbidden Pool

Frodo is awoken in the night and brought to the Forbidden Pool, where Faramir's men have found Gollum searching for fish. Faramir explains the law requires his death for trespassing, but Frodo asks them to spare him. Although he wishes he could be rid of Gollum, he recognizes that he is bound to him.

They grant him permission to go down to the pool, where he struggles to convince Gollum to come to him. Frodo resorts to threatening Gollum by the Precious, to which he responds at last. However, he soon realizes Frodo has tricked him and is captured by Faramir's men.

Faramir places Gollum under the protection of Frodo, threatening him with death if he is ever seen in these lands without Frodo. He questions them regarding their plan, becoming distraught to hear that they plan to use the path of Cirith Ungol. Frodo protests that it is the only way, though he is grateful for Faramir's counsel. Although he is suspicious of Gollum, Faramir allows him to continue as the hobbits' guide and they prepare to part ways.

Despite wishing he could be rid of Gollum, Frodo knows that he is bound to him and he cannot in good conscience allow him to be killed. He understands how lost he and Sam would have been in the Marshes without his guidance, and so feels indebted to him. Frodo chooses to honor his agreement to Gollum, attempting to regain his trust after he is taken by Faramir's men.



Ch. 7: Journey to the Cross-Roads

Frodo and Sam awake, eat breakfast, and prepare to part ways with the company of Faramir. Their packs are filled with food, and they are each gifted a walking stick for their journey. Faramir's scouts bring news that the surrounding lands are strangely empty, and Faramir urges the hobbits to make haste.

Filled with gratitude and much good counsel, Frodo remarks to Faramir, "It was said to me by Elrond Halfelven that I should find friendship upon the way, secret and unlooked for. Certainly I looked for no such friendship as you have shown. To have found it turns evil to great good." At their departure, Faramir bids them, "Go with the good will of all men!"

They journey for days through a deepening silence and sickening darkness. Gollum grows ever more restless, urging them forward, "We're not in decent places. Time's running short, yes, running fast. No time to lose. We must go."

At last, they draw near to the Cross-Roads where Frodo is filled with dread. However, despite all fear, the hobbits experience a few glimmers of hope amidst the darkness. The setting of the sun reveals to them a head of carven stone, toppled from a statue of a king. Upon its head, "a trailing plant with flowers like small white stars had bound itself across the brows as if in reverence for the fallen king."



Ch. 8: The Stairs of Cirith Ungol

Gollum leads them with haste toward the stairs of Cirith Ungol. By this point the hobbits are greatly worn down by their quest, "no longer able to care greatly about their peril." They near the base of the stair where they are horrified to see Minas Morgul, the city of the Ringwraiths. A terrible, great army marches from the gates and while Frodo has no desire to put on the Ring, he finds his hand moving against his will towards the chain on his neck.

After forcing his hand away and instead, gripping desperately to the Phial of Galadriel, he is momentarily relieved of all thought of the Ring. Frodo is deadly tired but Gollum urges them to hurry, so they begin to climb the narrow stairs.

At length, they come to a place of rest, where "the hobbits took what they expected would be their last meal before they went down into the Nameless Land, maybe the last meal they would ever eat together." Frodo and Sam begin to reflect on their journey, thinking of the great stories of Beren and Lúthien, wondering if they will ever be put into such tales.

Ch. 9: Shelob's Lair

Gollum leads the hobbits towards a massive tunnel—Shelob's Lair. Once inside, they are overwhelmed by utter darkness and the stench of filth. As they walk blindly through the tunnel, they soon realize Gollum has left them again but something about it feels different.

Soon, they hear a "gurgling, bubbling noise and a long venomous hiss," and realize Gollum has led them into a trap. Surrounded by overwhelming darkness, Frodo and Sam are saved only by the light, realizing "now indeed light alone can help us."

At this, Sam reminds Frodo of the star-glass, the Phial of Lady Galadriel. "A light when all other lights go out!" Frodo cries: *Aiya Earendil Elenion Ancalima!* Which means "Hail Eärendil, brightest of Stars" in Quenya. Realizing they cannot run from Shelob, Frodo holds fast to the star-glass, drawing his sword and advancing toward Shelob.

At last, they are free of the tunnel, and Frodo runs desperately — and heedlessly. Having left Sam with the Phial, Shelob swiftly pursues Frodo as he runs. Before Sam can warn him, he is attacked by Gollum and the two fight until Gollum flees back into the tunnel. Yet despite his efforts, Shelob overtakes Frodo.



Ch. 10: The Choices of Master Samwise

Sam is horrified to find Shelob bent over Frodo and charges towards her desperately.

He fights with a fury "greater than any she had known in countless years," until she impales herself upon Sam as he holds Sting. She springs away from him, quivering in pain, and Sam draws the Phial of Galadriel.

At his invocation of Elbereth, the Phial blazes 'like a white torch', burning Shelob's eyes and sending her back into her tunnel in defeat. Sam turns to Frodo, who is laying pale and unmoving on the ground. Because Shelob had stung him, Sam believes he is dead. Sam falls into utter despair, unsure of how to carry on or what to do. He struggles to discern how to go on, but at last he resolves to carry Frodo's burden for him. He will finish the quest.

A company of Orcs sees Frodo, and brings him with them into the tunnels towards the tower. Sam pursues them, listening anxiously to their plans and news of the Enemy. As they pass away from Sam, they mention that Frodo isn't dead, only poisoned. As the book comes to a close, the Orcs pass through a great door, leaving Sam behind and hopeless.

"Frodo was alive but taken by the enemy."



Book Club Discussion Questions & Prompts

- Duty is a big part of Tolkien's worldview, but both Éomer in book 3 and Faramir in book 4 neglect their direct duties and allow strangers to pass in their lands. What does this further tell us about Tolkien's worldview?
- Sam has a "debate" with himself in chapter 10, similar to Gollum's debate with himself in chapter 2. How are these similar? Different?
- Tolkien writes of Gollum's eyes glinting green or grey throughout this book as he fights against himself. How does this emphasize his internal debate?
- Is Gollum irredeemable?
- How much responsibility does Sam bear for Gollum's fate?

Frodo's Commitment: "It's my doom, I think, to go to that Shadow yonder, so that a way will be found. But will good or evil show it to me? ... Is it the will of the Dark Tower that steers us? All my choices have proved ill."

Tolkien on Faramir: "A new character has come on the scene (I am sure I did not invent him, I did not even want him, though I like him, but there he came walking into the woods of Ithilien): Faramir, the brother of Boromir – and he is holding up the "catastrophe" by a lot of stuff about the history of Gondor and Rohan. If he goes on much more a lot of him will have to be removed to the appendices – where already some fascinating material on the hobbit Tobacco industry and the Languages of the West have gone." — (Letter 66, 6 May 1944)

The Same Tale Still: "Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on. Don't the great tales never end?' 'No, they never end as tales,' said Frodo. 'But the people in them come, and go when their part's ended. Our part will end later—or sooner.'"



