

# *Pretty Good Year*

*by Mary Borsellino*



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## **CONTENTS**

*Contents 3*

*Foreword 7*

*Prologue: Fourteen twenty 12*

*Wasted a year 18*

*Wake up 19*

*Little flower 22*

*All they need 24*

*Dirty Water 27*

*Bag End Morning 32*

*Simple 35*

*Storyteller 39*

*Dusk 44*

*Talk 47*

*Excuses for celebration 50*

*Dictation 54*

## **CONTENTS - CONTINUED**

*Proper* 57

*Ridiculous behaviour* 60

*Break* 63

*Winter's Road* 67

*Perfectly Well* 70

*Best* 73

*Just the sort* 76

*Afternoon light* 79

*Dreamer* 82

*Three of a kind* 85

*Sometimes* 89

*Play* 92

*Common story* 95

*Always music* 97

*The twelfth of never* 99

## **CONTENTS - CONTINUED**

*Another day 104*

*Stone soup 107*

*Role reversal 112*

*Dusk and dawn 116*

*Easy 119*

*Season's turn 122*

*Gifts 125*

*Little heart 130*

*Once upon a very long time ago 134*

*Birthday party 139*

*Wind and rain 144*

*Fair 148*

*Tinker, tailor, soldier, 152*

*Outside 155*

*Inside 160*

## **CONTENTS - CONTINUED**

*Bonfire night 165*

*West of the Moon 170*

*East of the Sun 197*

## Foreword

Chronology is a strange thing.

For instance, most modern children who are ushered into the world of Narnia read the books in the order the things in them happen. CS Lewis didn't write them that way, the progression of authorial skill and the development of themes gets confused if they're treated in that fashion.

Another series this is true of is the Anne novels of LM Montgomery. The first time I read them as a child, I followed the chronology of Anne's age and found the end fitting but very sad. The last Anne book, if you follow the ages to pick the order, is called 'Rilla of Ingleside' and is about the sweethearts, wives, and sisters at home during World War One.

It's perhaps not surprising that I ended up being so fond of Rosie Cotton, considering the stories I raised myself reading.

But 'Rilla' isn't the last book about Anne and her family that Montgomery wrote. The year before her death, in 1939, another war was looming. It was a dark time, and her health was failing. That year the true finale of the series was published, 'Anne of Ingleside'.

'Anne of Ingleside' is a strange book, looked at on its own. There's almost no sorrow, hardly any of the everyday pain and grief of life that crops up in the rest of the stories. It's a story of children, children who the reader knows will grow up to be scarred and killed in war only a few years later. If 'Rilla' hasn't been read first, 'Anne of Ingleside' seems curiously candy-coated, but if it's given its rightful place at the end of the saga it

becomes a love letter to the characters who have been through hell.

There's a scene right at the very end of the book, where Anne looks in on her sleeping sons and daughters, and the fact of the impending tragedy is explicitly stated - 'The moon was shining on his pillow through the bars of the leaded window . . . casting the shadow of a clearly defined cross on the wall above his head. In long after years Anne was to remember that and wonder if it were an omen of Courcelette . . . of a cross-marked grave "somewhere in France." But tonight it was only a shadow . . . nothing more.'

The end is going to come, and cannot be stopped. But, and this is the important part that leads into the actual point of this foreword, it's not there yet.

'Anne of Ingleside' taught me a very important thing: sometimes the happy ending isn't at the end of the story. After all, there's a reason our language has different words for plot and narrative.

I had become acquainted with hobbits as a young child, as almost anybody who likes to read is. The only strong memory I have of my reaction is that I would no longer swim in the deep end of my grandparents' pool, for fear that Gollum would be lurking. But, when I was almost twenty, that glorious New Line movie was released. I must confess, my first reaction was a desire to write Boromir/Aragorn/Arwen, but then I went home and picked up my brother's copy of the book and began to re-visit this world that had so terrified me as a child.

It was somewhere between hobbits being called good-natured rather than beautiful, and Sam's tearful reaction to the prospect of seeing Elves, that I completely forgot about the tortured angstful manly men and their fey girlfriends and instead fell madly, irrevocably, totally in love with the hobbits.

I began posting messages in my online journal that were mostly inarticulate noises of adoration and the like.



And then I began posting stories - just little things, random ideas that popped into my head.

Chronology is a strange thing, and memory plays tricks. I was sure, before I sat down to write this rambling memoir of the story, that I made references to 'Anne of Ingleside' in my journal just before I began writing the stories that would become *Pretty Good Year*, but in fact it was a short while later. But maybe it was the 'proper' (ah, that word Rosie becomes so terribly fond of) beginning in many ways, because some of the things I wrote that day were:

(spelling errors have been left as a punishment to myself for not knowing how to spell Gardner)

'Anybody ever read the Anne Shirley books? the first one's Anne of Green Gables and then there's like, a lot and the last one's called Rilla of Ingleside? Anyway, I'd like to see a hobbitfic done in the style of the later books, the last two where it's all about Anne's brood of children climbing trees and being apple-cheeked and eating good home-cooked food. Because hobbits, in case you haven't noticed, make me happy. I wanna read about the Gardener children, with Elanor as the bossy older sister and Merry and Pippin living up to their namesakes' reputations.

'Argh! Get the bunnies off me! No! No time to write this! Aiiiee!'

We'll pretend that the factual errors and the random stupidity aren't there, shall we?

And then, less than an hour later, I posted again with the thought:

'In fact, I think I really, really wanna write fluff about the Gardener family. But I want Frodo there tooo, because I love him so. But it's wrong to change the end of *Return of the King*, because it has to end like that.'

Of course, it's easy to see the seed of the 'West of the Moon' ending in these rambling thoughts, but I believe that they're equally a testament to the mindset I was in when I wrote what my dear friend Hope has occasionally termed 'oldskoolpgy'. I wanted a happy ending, I wanted these poor battered people to have a reason to smile.

And, well, Elanor goes from being born to being half a year old with nary a word, and that's just asking for trouble when there's a fanfiction writer around.

I suppose I should talk more about the readers, and the small cult that's sprung up around this story - there are t-shirts and aprons and underpants. Sections have been translated into Finnish, German, and Quenya. There are gorgeous artworks and fan-poems and stories where the characters and vampires and werewolves and soldiers in world war one (I think Tolkien and Montgomery would both be especially bemused by that particular disregard of allegorical distance) and on one memorable occasion, pirates.

But I think most of those rambling thoughts would be better suited to an introduction to a collection of these things themselves. Because it's almost a franchise now, but in the beginning *Pretty Good Year* was just three hobbits, a baby, and a brief bright happy ending.

People were so worked-up and worried about how I was going to end it, while it was being written. Would I break the sacred order of canon, or would I destroy the small sweet family I had coaxed out of the tale? Of course, now everybody knows that I did both and neither. But before the 18th of May, 2002, when 'Bonfire night' and the two offshooting paths were posted publically, it was a huge cause for debate. People threatened, pleaded and persuaded to try to influence the ending.

They missed the point.

Sometimes the happy ending isn't on the last page.

'They all start laughing, and that makes Eleanor laugh too because she likes to see them happy, and that makes them laugh even more. Everything is perfect, just for a moment. And a moment's all they need, for now.'

- *Pretty Good Year*

*Mary Borsellino 30th July, 2003*

## **Prologue: Fourteen twenty**

1420

Most days she wakes up and lies perfectly still, letting the sun kiss at her bare arms and the warmth of the patchwork quilt keep her halfway to dreams. Frodo and Sam breathe softly, inside their memories that are forever beyond her reach. Their lashes flutter like strange skeletal insects, black against the blue-grey shadows under their eyes.

Sooner or later, they're going to leave her. She bites her lip and crosses two fingers and wishes for later to never come at all; but there's a place inside them, perhaps more obvious in Frodo with his stillness and his scars but there in Sam just as surely, a wound that won't heal. Such a little space, a tiny emptiness.

She kept all her father's ledgers in order for him when she was still a tween, she can sew a hem faster than any other hobbit she knows. Sam sighs sometimes and says he wishes people could see what Frodo did for them, and she wonders if he can see what she's doing even now. The darkness is still there, after all, and still needs fighting. It's not over until the cleanup's done, as Sam himself says, and there's so much inside them that needs repairing even now.

Rosie knows that they have reasons upon reasons to leave, pains that don't lessen even in sleep. But every day she searches out new reasons for them to stay, and perhaps some day the scales will be balanced again.

Her parents don't like the fact that she leaves her bed at night to go into the room where Sam's staying, but

marriage is a question of when, not if, so they don't go so far as to actually scold her. Nothing happens, anyway. She just likes to watch him through the dark hours before dawn. And Frodo and Sam have been sleeping together for so long that they've forgotten how to do it apart, it seems.

Sleeping together. That says a different thing to what it means, usually, but Rosie's never been one to mince words, and sleeping's all that's being done in that room. When Rosie hugs in close and breathes the smells of Sam, he shifts without waking, making extra space for her. He's far too good at sleeping with people, no unwelcome arms across her waist when she wakes or stolen covers. Sometimes, when the nightmares are especially bad, Frodo cries out, or kicks, but apart from those moments Rosie can hardly tell she's sharing a bed at all. Even with the two of them so close, it's a lonely way to rest.

Sam's away now, planting and building and making things new and whole. Rosie stands by the front gate, watching the early morning traffic of carts and wheelbarrows along the lane, and wishes he was there with her. *Make me new and whole, Sam*, she wants to say to him. Wants to be selfish, wants him to be selfish too. Haven't they earned that, just a little? It seems she's been waiting for her life's journey to begin forever, but it just treads the same old paths in a circle.

With Sam gone, Rosie keeps to her own bed, the same bed she lay in all her girlhood with dreams of husbands and babies and fairy tales, and Frodo stays in the one her father provided for him. She worries that he'll be cold, but Frodo's not the same as Sam. Sam she can boss, because she knows him backwards and forwards and inside out, has done for years. Frodo, though, is a different creature. Rosie doesn't even know where to begin with puzzling him out, and doesn't have the faintest whether he'd mind her needing closeness

after goodnights have been said.

There's a swirl of blood in the egg yolk when Rosie cracks the shell open on the edge of a bowl, and she can't remember if that's an ill omen or not. It hardly seems to matter. She puts the kettle on to boil and goes to see if Frodo's awake yet. The door's ajar, and her dad's sitting by the bed as Frodo's fevered hands grasp at the cuffs of his sleeves and at the gem at his throat.

"It is gone forever," the words tumble out in a mutter, breathless and whispered. "And now all is dark and empty."

"Quiet now," Rosie's father says in a slightly uncomfortable voice, the same tone he used to use when Rosie asked about hens and roosters or new lambs. "You just rest, Mr Frodo."

"I'll look after him if you like," Rosie offers before she realises she's going to speak. But oh, it hurts to see Frodo so pained. "I've got the morning spare."

"Don't know that he needs much looking after. He's more asleep than awake." With a shrug, Rosie's father leaves his daughter to play nurse. He's never really known how to deal with his girl-child, wants to take care of her as if she's a baby still. Sons are an easy matter, you just raise them as you would an apprentice, but daughters require all kinds of rituals best left to womenfolk.

"Frodo?" Rosie asks, slipping her hand between his as she sits down. The room's all shut up and shadowed, but seeing how grey the sky outside is it wouldn't do much good to open the curtains anyway.

"Sam?" Frodo's eyes are half-lidded.

"No, it's Rose."

His hands are trembling, heartbeat like a frightened bird under his skin. At the sound of her name, Frodo seems to wake a little out of his delirium, and gives a dry chuckle. "When you were small, you used to creep into the gardens of Bag End when you thought we couldn't

see you, and steal the blush roses when they were still buds. Bilbo thought it was adorable."

"Well, we don't have any roses half as nice here in Bywater," Rosie teases back, gripping Frodo's clammy fingers tighter as another spasm of illness or pain ripples through him and makes him gasp.

"But you never waited until they were fully grown, it used to perplex Sam. 'Roses are nicest when they've bloomed, why can't she wait?'" Frodo keeps his tone light but can't hold in a small whimper.

"I'm not the patient type." She touches Frodo's forehead and finds it clammy and cold. He's running chills and fevers all at once, and there seems no cure but to wait it out.

"Merry... Merry said that coming back was like waking from a dream," Frodo says, wetting his lips with his tongue. "But I feel as if I'm falling into one. Nothing... nothing quite feels real, now."

"Don't talk if it hurts you."

"No, I want to talk. I have to, it makes it real." Frodo forces himself to sit up on the bank of pillow behind him, shifts to make room so Rosie can sit on the mattress cross-legged. "Why didn't your father join up with the rest, Rose? Almost all the other hobbits with a bit of money did."

"He's a good sort," Rosie offers eventually. She's never thought about it before. "They'd've made him richer, but... he would have ended up poorer, if that makes any sense."

"Everyone's got their price," Frodo says, but Rosie doesn't take offence. She knows he's not talking about her dad anymore. "Their breaking point." Frodo sounds utterly lost.

"I wish I could understand what you and Samwise went through," Rosie admits. "But I can't. It's all as unreal as piglets flying or fire burning cold."

"You're not meant to. Strider... I should call him King

Elessar, I suppose, but he's still Strider in my head, spent years of his life protecting the Shire, in order that the hobbits would never have to know all the work he did for them. Do you see?"

"You're a hobbit, and you know it."

Frodo gives her a small, tight smile, but it's more like a grimace and it's obvious that the pain's terribly bad for him. It's a while before he can even speak again, and Rosie tries to remember if there's ever been another sickness like this in the Shire before that would give her clues to remedies.

"Perhaps some day you'll see the white city, meet its ruler," Frodo says. Rosie wrinkles her nose.

"Maybe. I'd love to see other lands, but there's grander things than kings. In fairy stories they're always the ones who get their heads chopped off or their castles knocked down."

Frodo laughs a little, and the sound makes Rosie's heart a little gladder.

"You'd make a good princess, Rose," he says, and she smiles politely even though she doesn't agree.

"Do you think you could eat a bit? There's broth if you can't manage anything stronger."

"No, there's no point."

"Please?" She doesn't mean to push but he's so frail, which is doubly sad seeing as how healthy and fair he used to look. It's as if all the years he's held off have fallen down on him at once.

Frodo nods, and Rosie goes to get him something to warm him, feed him.

The worst part is, she thinks as she hunts for a clean spoon, the worst part is that she's all pulled in two directions. She loves Sam, but she spent so long worrying about the journey he was on that it all got tied up together in her head and now she loves Frodo too. And it doesn't take more than two good eyes to see that Sam's stuck in much the same dilemma.



The worst of the worst, though, is that there's no real dilemma to it, because Frodo's not...

"Save your breath to cool your porridge, Rose Cotton," she chides herself, even though she wasn't speaking out loud. There's no sense in moping about like a wet kitten, somebody needs to buck up and do what needs doing. If Frodo's taught her anything that hobbit's don't generally know, that's it.

He seems to be dozing when she goes back in, it's hard to tell after the way he was earlier. But the lines are smoothed on his face, breathing more even. Rosie remembers one of the stories she grew up play-acting, the story of the princess who couldn't wake.

"Pricked her finger on a spindle," Rosie whispers, looking at the terrible scar where Frodo's knuckle ends abruptly. "And fell asleep, and nobody could rouse her."

It seems painfully apt, and a few hot tears fall from Rosie's cheeks into the broth. It isn't fair.

But there's always a way to make things right, in the stories. The soldier traps death in his sack, the youngest son defeats the dragon, the sister doesn't speak and turns her brothers back from ravens.

A kiss cures the sleeping beauty, if you can cut through the thorns.

Rosie leans over, putting the bowl on the nightstand where Frodo can eat it later if, miraculously, he's hungry. His breath is sickly-sweet and damp, hot little puffs of air. He barely stirs as she brushes her lips against his and then stands again.

"Sleep well, but not long. I'll wake you soon," Rosie tells him, closing the door behind her as she leaves.

## **Wasted a year**

You've wasted a year, I tell him. He keeps his peace, doesn't correct me.

Of course I know he didn't waste a year. But I don't want to understand the adventures he had, and the best way to do keep him from explaining is to play that I don't care. They're not mine to know, they're his and Master Frodo's.

Bag End's a good, solid place to grow a family, and I'm much thankful for the kindness shown. If Master Frodo can give me so much, I can offer that small part of my Sam for him and him alone.

## Wake up

"Rosie, dear, do you think you could -"

"No, I most certainly do not 'think I could'." Sam ducked his head to avoid the thwap of the teatowel. "It don't help him, you know that." Her tone was soft but exasperated.

"It's just a bite to eat. I'll make it myself if you feel so strongly about it."

Rose rolled her eyes up towards the kitchen ceiling, holding her palm out to stop her husband's stride as he tried to step past her.

"Don't you snap at me, either, Sam, not when you know I'm right. I'm here carrying a baby halfway to birthing and I keep the rooms clean and the dishes washed. Mr Frodo was so insistent you and I eat at the big table, and I'm saying the same goes for him. No more breakfasts in bed."

"He's not strong in the morning -"

"And he never will be if you coddle him so."

"Keep your voice down, lass, he'll hear."

"Samwise Gamgee, if you take that tray into that bedroom I will put you over my knee like a faunt and jolt some sense into you that way!"

Sam's brow furrowed. "His journey tired him out, and no wonder. He needs to rest. You know that."

"Yes." Rose rubbed her hard little thumb against the worry lines tracing Sam's face. "But not forever, dear heart. Even the most bone-deep sleep ends with waking at some stage, and it's high time you roused him."

"Sounds like something an Elf would say," Sam said with a small, wry smile.

"Wouldn't have been able to catch your eye if I didn't have a bit of that in me - oh, feel the kicking!" She pressed his palm against her belly. After a moment there was another flutter of movement and Sam's eyes widened in delight.

"I can feel it. So strong!"

"It's a boy, I'll wager." Rose smiled. "Wants his turn to kick and fight, can't wait to get out."

"A little longer, lad." Sam addressed the bump with a serious expression, shaking one finger as if scolding. "Grow big, don't come rushing out before we're ready for you."

"Everything all right?" Rose and Sam both looked up at the question, Frodo leaning against the doorframe, dark bruises under his wide eyes as if he hadn't slept in a week.

"Frodo, you shouldn't be up, I was going to bring your breakfast in." Sam ignored Rose's warning glare.

"I heard raised voices. Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"The babe's kicking, come feel." Rose beckoned him over. Frodo's hand was light and cool as it touched the soft fabric of Rose's dress. "Strong little fellow in there." Frodo smiled. "Sit down, Rosie, put your feet up. Sam and I can do anything that needs to be done today."

"No, Mr Frodo -" Sam protested as Frodo's hand covered his own.

"Don't worry about me, I'm not a child."

Rose raised one eyebrow in a clear 'I told you so' gesture, and with much aplomb sat herself down in the high-backed chair closest to the window.

"Well, if I'm to be waited on by the pair of you, you'd better bring my breakfast over on a tray, then." She grinned.

## **Little flower**

The faint silvery light of a sickle moon threw blue-grey shadows over Frodo's skin as he crept down the hall, silent as he could manage. His hands were shaking, a tremble that became almost nothing in daylight, went away close to entirely when he laughed or smiled. But this late, in the quiet, his palms were clammy and his bones shivered with old tensions.

Usually when rest eluded him, Frodo read a little by candle light, or sat by a window and watched the Shire slumber on outside. On his way to the haphazard pile of half-finished books in the corner, he paused, noticing a flicker of firelight from the kitchen.

Rosie sat, breathing softly in her sleep, in front of the lit stove, Elanor burbling happily to herself in the cradle of her mother's arms. Seeing Frodo in the doorway, the baby squealed happily, reaching her chubby fingers out towards him.

"Shh, little one, don't wake your mother," Frodo whispered, picking her up carefully and leaving Rosie to rest in the warmth. "Come watch the night with me."

Elanor squealed again, reaching out to grab at the fine chain around Frodo's neck and pulling on his hair instead.

"Ouch! Well, you've got your father's strength, that's for sure."

Her tiny fingers closed over his, patting at the scarred stump that was yet to fade from pink to white, wide infant eyes looking up at him as if to question where his finger was hiding.

"I gave it up, little flower. I gave it up for you, and for your father, and your mother, and all the other hobbits, and the Men and the Elves and Dwarfs. And most of them will never know any of it, but I'm glad of that," he sighed. "One day, you'll be grown enough to dance and laugh, and Sam can teach you to read and write, and you can make a beautiful story for yourself."

Elanor patted the corner of Frodo's absent-minded frown until he smiled again, bouncing her on his thin hip as he settled down in the rocking chair overlooking the garden. Her tiny eyes closed, her gummy mouth yawning widely as she drifted off.

"I gave up so much, but it was worth the price," the hobbit holding her gently whispered as she slept. "No ring in the world is more powerful than you are, Elanor. I hope you know that all of your days."

None of them had moved when Sam woke up shortly before dawn, smiling at the sight of the rest of his household curled in chairs, the warmth in the stove little more than a memory, and the early sunlight chasing the blue-grey dark away with bright gold.

Carefully, so as not to rouse them, Sam carried them one by one to their beds, Rosie and Elanor and Frodo, kissing their foreheads gently as he laid them down, as if he could somehow protect them in their dreaming.

## **All they need**

There's planting to be done today, like every other day, the Shire regaining its rich green life thanks to the diligent work of Sam and his little box of earth. The sun's bright but not too hot, and it's one of those days that makes all the other sorts of day seem worthwhile.

Rosie's chasing the spiders out of the corners of one of the cozy little bedrooms, dominated by a heavy oak chest against one wall and currently containing the owner of the residence, who is trying to burp a baby and keep out of the way of a dozen dispossessed arachnids. It's one of Frodo's good days, fewer now than a year ago, perhaps, but still common enough to give Sam and Rosie hope that he'll mend eventually. He jumps away from a particularly large spider, laughing as Elanor protests the sudden movement.

"You don't want to get bitten by any of these, little one, trust me. It's no fun," he tells the baby, pulling a face that makes her giggle.

"If you've energy to play with the babe you've got energy to help me," Rosie scolds, handing him a pile of linens. "These need airing."

"Yes ma'am," Frodo says, wearing a very serious expression.

"None of your cheek, either, Mr Frodo. Sam may treat you like you're an Elven king, but I survived a family full of brothers who thought they could lord over me, and I'm not going to start paying attention to rank now."

"Come on Elanor, your mother's in a mood," Frodo whispers to the little girl loudly. "We'll go outside and leave her to it."

"You'd be in a mood too if you had to clean out so much dust! It's only been three weeks I haven't been able to do it, with this terrible cold and Elanor getting sick as well. The whole time, I tell Sam to keep things tidy, nothing big mind you, just enough so I don't have to catch up when I'm well. *Yes, Rosie wife* he says to me, gentle as a new lamb. And then I find this! If it's not growing out of the dirt or boiling in a pot he doesn't know what to do with a thing."

"It'll still be here tomorrow, Rosie. Come into the garden with Elanorelle and me and enjoy the sunshine."

"Well... I should see to airing those sheets. You'll only make a botched job of it anyhow."





"Exactly. I'll leave them in the briar patch, won't I?" Frodo asks the baby, tickling under her arms and making her squeal.

"Don't let Samwise hear you saying there's a briar patch in the garden."

"He won't know I said it if you don't tell him."

"Why Mr Frodo! Are you suggesting I keep secrets from my husband?" Rosie drops the broom and wipes her brow with a smile. "Come on, let's pack a lunch and go find where he's run off to, I heard him say he was going to be nearby this week to make sure we were both feeling right enough to be left alone."

They take a basket full of early fruit and some seed-cakes left over from breakfast, and a bottle of fresh milk for Elanor, and set off down the road. Frodo's cheeks flush in the fresh air, and Rosie's glad to see he's looking healthy. She's kept away from him lately so as not to pass on her cough, but now it seems safe enough so she hugs him with the arm not holding the baby, hoping that soon enough she'll feel soft flesh on his sides and not fragile ribs.

"Sam! We've come to kidnap you!" Frodo calls when they spy him down in one of the fields. They wave hello at each other and sit down on the soft damp grass, watching the pale yellow butterflies flit between the wildflowers that seem to grow no matter how hungry the land gets for attention.

"We've surrendered Bag End to the spiders for the time being," Frodo explains between bites of apple. "But we'll stage a counterattack after lunch."

"Leave it, if you're not up to it," Sam says with a worried frown. "I can see to it when I get home."

"You've one child, Sam, not three," Rosie scolds. "You want to save the whole world, I think, but if we were the half-wits you suppose us to be we wouldn't be worth saving in the first place."

"There's logic you can't argue with." Frodo's smirk is hidden behind another mouthful of food.

Elanor notices a furry caterpillar climbing up a blade of grass, reaching out to touch it and then pulling her fingers back sharply as soon as they come into contact with the little creature. Her wide eyes turn to the three grown-up hobbits around her, as if they'll make the situation plain simply by being there. They all start laughing, and that makes Elanor laugh too because she likes to see them happy, and that makes them laugh even more. Everything is perfect, just for a moment. And a moment's all they need, for now.

## **Dirty Water**

Lately, Elanor was crying more than she had previously, waking everyone twice or more each night with her screams, refusing to be calmed. Sam was worried but Rosie just told him not to fret, she'd been a crotchety baby herself and it was nothing to get worked up about. They all slept in one room, because if it wasn't the baby yelling it was Frodo choking in his sleep, wailing wordless and unearthly cries softly and fluttering his hands up around his neck in restless patterns, and if it wasn't that it was Rosie's nightmares that Sam had left again without telling her where, and Sam couldn't bear to sleep where he couldn't comfort them all.

The crib was against one wall, the closest to the outdoors that retained the warmth of the day through the night, and in the centre of the room was the soft double bed used by Sam and Rosie. Frodo slept on a smaller mattress on the other side of the room, Sam felt that this wasn't right at all but Frodo assured him it was perfectly fine. He never seemed relaxed when he slept, though, and often Sam wondered if there wasn't a more sensible way of doing things.

Elanor began to whimper and Sam sighed into the pillow, finding the energy to get up and see to her. Rosie patted his back gently, stroking her fingers through his hair.

"Go back to sleep, Sam, I'll see to her," she whispered, slipping out of bed and picking the pale bundle out of the cradle, rocking the child. The cries grew louder, and Rosie cast a quick glance over at Frodo as he shifted in his sleep.

"I'm taking her outside until she quiets," Rose explained, slipping out of the room and closing the door against the noise of Elanor's turn. Sam sighed and tried to settle back into his dreams.

"Sam?"

His eyes flicked open at the word. "Oh, Mr Frodo, I'm sorry the baby woke you."

"It's all right. Those dreams are better ended anyway." Frodo sounded very old in the quiet, lonely and still and sad.

"Is that all there is behind your eyes at night?" Sam said into the darkness of the room, trying to make out shapes in the blackness. "Don't you have bright thoughts as well?"

"Do you remember the old water barrel the Bracegirdles used to have? They left it full and it stagnated, went green with scum. And they washed it out for hours, and filled it with clear, new water, but you could still see the marks where the dirty water had been, and the new water went foul almost as soon as they poured it in?"

"Don't you compare yourself to some rusty bucket." Sam's voice was hot with a melancholy sort of anger. Rosie's voice singing to Elanor drifted in. *All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again.*

"I'm sorry Sam. Go back to sleep," Frodo said in the long wordless quiet that followed Rose's song.

"I wish I could follow you in your dreaming, Mr Frodo. I can't keep you safe there, and it leaves me at a loose end." Sam paused. "Come over here, there's room in the bed enough. I'll keep you as safe as I can while you sleep, and maybe your dreams will be better for it."

Frodo laughed softly. "Rosie might have a thing or two to say about me taking up space in your bed."

"Well until you've a wife of your own she'll just have to share me with you," Sam said lightly. Frodo drew in a breath and didn't reply. "Mr Frodo?"

"Sam... I'm not going to marry."

"Don't be so sure about that. I didn't think I was going to either, until Rosie all but ordered me to ask her. She knew I'd never do anything I wanted for myself unless somebody else told me to do it first. Some lass'll catch your eye and you'll feel like a tween all over again."

A long quiet from Frodo's side of the room, then "Sam, that water barrel... when they poured the dirty water out, it was empty. Drained. There wasn't anything left."

"Time will fill you up again. I know it will." Sam *had* to know that. If it wasn't so, what had it all been for in the end?

"No. The..." Frodo choked a little, as if he was trying not to cry. "The ring sort of made me forget how to want anything but it, how anything but it could ever feel nice or good. I can barely taste food, even when you cook for hours, and my body... I'm all but dead, Sam."

Sam felt his own eyes sting. *It wasn't fair*. When he lay with Rosie it helped him forget all they'd been through, it was like coming home after a hard day in the field. To think that his dear Frodo would never have that broke his heart.

Swinging his feet over the side of the bed and doing his best to find his way through the dark, Sam stepped over to the side of Frodo's bed, pulling the coverlet back and lifting the smaller hobbit as carefully as he could.

"Sam, what're you -?"

"Hush, Mr Frodo, it's all right. Just thought you'd be more comfortable in the big bed."

He put Frodo down and climbed in beside him, slipping his arm around Frodo's thin chest, pulse thudding through the nightshirt fabric. Frodo sighed, curling in against Sam and inhaling the warm smell of

outdoors off his skin. Sam kissed his forehead gently, then trailed his lips lightly down over Frodo's temple and across his cheek. Frodo sighed again, eyelashes fluttering and his lips parting with a puff of breath. Without hesitating Sam shifted so their mouths met.

Frodo made a small startled noise and tried to pull away but Sam wouldn't let him, holding his head in place just as he steadied Elanor when he held her. After a heartbeat Frodo melted against him, tongue slipping out to brush against Sam's. There were tears on his skin but they were hot and Frodo was cool, so cool, so Sam supposed they must be his own.

He unbuttoned Frodo's nightshirt, slipping it off slowly, letting his fingertips trace over the thick, angry scars that marred the soft flesh. Frodo tried to pull away again but again Sam held him still.

"Beautiful. So beautiful," Sam whispered in a voice that was suddenly hoarse, kissing the old wounds lightly. Frodo whimpered in the back of his throat, arching into the touch ever so slightly. It was enough to make Sam move his hand down and stroke the elegant line of Frodo's hip, palm sweaty against the silken skin.

"Sam, oh Sam." Frodo gasped, burying his face in the crook of Sam's shoulder and letting out a fractured half-sob.

"Hush," Sam whispered again, sliding his leg between Frodo's and pressing in for another kiss.

They were almost silent after that, as if they were afraid to even breathe, afraid to break the spell. Frodo shivered and shook, crying quietly against Sam's skin, hands gripping at his back and scrabbling frantically, searching for some tether to keep him from losing this moment. Sam held him, worshipped him, touching every bit of flesh he could with his mouth and hands, with as much care as if he was holding fine china.

Frodo fell back against the pillows, boneless and damp with perspiration, breathing in short gasps.

"Now dream, and I'll protect you," Sam ordered him, one hand resting over Frodo's heart, for fluttering hands to find, should they seek comfort there in sleep.

## Bag End Morning

He didn't have nightmares. The dreams he had weren't happy, rather grey and damp and desolate, but they weren't nightmares. They didn't burn. He woke to find his good hand entwined with Sam's, and for the first time in living memory he felt warm all the way down to his feet, sleepy rather than tired.

The events of the night before came into focus and Frodo sat up abruptly, a dull blur of a headache threatening retaliation to the sudden movement. Sam shifted, turning over without waking. There was nobody else in the room.

It was mid-morning, later than either Sam or Frodo had slept in months, and the main hallway of Bag End had a soft yellow light to it. A smell of eggs and an old song shared the air, wafting through from the kitchen. *Lavender blue, dilly dilly, rosemary green. When you are king, dilly dilly, I shall be queen.*

Rosie was at the stove, Elanor playing around her feet with a slightly worn rag doll. Frodo's warmth fled as a cold lump of fear formed in his stomach. They'd all been so happy, or near to happy in his case, and now it was all changed and ruined.

"That cot-bed of yours is mighty uncomfortable," Rosie said breezily, looking over at where Frodo stood, half behind the doorframe. "My mother used to tell me tales of a princess who could feel a pea through her mattress, but I'll wager you're hiding pumpkins under that one."

"I'm sorry -" Frodo started to say, but Rosie held her hand up and shushed him.



"My Samwise isn't the only one who's been concerned for you. When he asked me to wed him, he said 'now, my dear Rosie, I should warn thee before your heart's all set. Mr Frodo's more important to me than air or water, and that's not a feeling that can be put away in a box'. Do you want tea while I finish these eggs?"

"Oh, yes, thank you," Frodo said, a little stunned. "But aren't you angry?"

"Oh, I like you well enough to share him." Rosie laughed, stepping around her daughter carefully and handing a mug of hot tea over. "From what I've heard there are ballads about the pair you being written in every corner of the world. I've always liked songs that had a bit of romance to them."

"You're no ordinary hobbit, Rosie Cotton," Frodo said in wonderment.

"That's Rose Gamgee, thank you very much. And there ain't been an ordinary hobbit living in Bag End for as long as I can remember." She sat down at the table. "I'll leave those eggs to cool. My bones are tied up in knots from that rock you call a bed."

"Here, let me." Frodo rubbed the kinks out of her shoulders. "Better?"

"Mm, yes. When we were young, Sam and the other boys used to chase the girls all up and down the hills, playing catch and kiss. I used to think it was terribly awful when one of them caught me, they were so sticky and smelly and rough. You were bigger than us, and so serious and quiet, you seemed like a different breed altogether. I told Sam that I wished there were more hobbits like you, and he said he did too. I felt all firey with envy at the way he talked about you, and realised that I didn't mind kissing Sam so much after all."

"That's a lovely story." Frodo smiled, pressing his fingers into the tense muscles on Rosie's back. "They should write a song about it."

"You could put it in your book," Rosie said with a smile, settling back against him as he continued the massage. Frodo gave a quiet laugh.

"No. It's not a happy tale. You and Sam deserve books of your own, full of summers and babies and laughter."

"And you, Mr Frodo. You do too." Rosie stood, turning to face him.

"Perhaps. I think I'd like to see it begin, at least," he agreed.

Rosie lent in and kissed him lightly, her mouth a little tart from a mandarin she'd pulled off the tree outside earlier, her lips sweet and warm, and when she pulled away she trailed her hand down Frodo's cheek.

"It wouldn't feel like a proper home or a right story without you in it too. And nobody should sleep on that awful cot when there's a big soft feathery one so close by."

She scooped Elanor up off the floor and put her in Frodo's hands.

"Now, do you want tomato with your eggs?"

## Simple

There were two sorts of people, Rosie decided. There were ones who slammed doors when they were angry, and there were ones who closed them gently, a soft snick as the latch fell into place. The second sort was worse. Sam had always been the second sort, and Rosie didn't entirely approve of it as a way of reacting. If you didn't have a chimney for smoke, the whole room ended up filthy and hard to breathe in.

So when she was hanging her hat up in the hall and finger-combing the wind tangles out of her hair, the sound of a door closing gently from down the hall made her sigh and roll her eyes up. What a wonderful way to start an evening, with some melodrama or another. And after such a nice day, too.

"Rosie? Where's Elanor?" Sam asked, coming up to give her a greeting hug.

"Tom and Marigold took her for the night. They're bickering about babies again, and wanted a loan of one to settle the argument." Rosie hugged him back. "Either you've been crying, Sam, or we're having onion pie and onion soup and onion salad for supper."

He nodded, pulling in a shaky breath. "I know it don't do any good, but I wish there was something more that could be done for him. He seemed so cheered this morning, but he's cold and weak again now. When I tried to get him to come outside and do his reading in the sunshine he said it hurt his eyes, but if he never gets any air how can he grow well again?"

"I don't think it's that simple, Sam," Rosie said sadly, tracing the curve of his eyebrow with her thumb, smoothing his hair back.

"Why not? Why can't it be? I don't understand." He began to cry again. "I carried him up a mountain, Rose, and now I can't even get him out of his room."

"Of course you can. What else can you do? This is worse than the mountain, you know that. You stayed by him then, and I know you wouldn't give up now just because it's not so clear what the right path is." She patted his shoulder. "Chin up. You Gamgees are made of stronger stuff than this, I wouldn't want you to father my babes if all you could do is wail and cry."

"You're my backbone, Rosie."

"Oh, I know that. Glad to be acknowledged for it. Now, do you want a bite to eat?"

Sam shook his head against her palm. "No, I'm going to go for a walk. Get away from thinking for a while."

"All right, I'll warm something for you when you get back." Rosie nodded. "And Sam?"

"Yes?"

"I love you. More with every day, if that's possible."

"I love thee too, Rosie-wife."

When he'd left, Rosie sat down at the kitchen table and put her head in her hands, rubbing the start of a headache away. She loved mothering, but she'd only one child so far, and felt more every day that she was keeping three. Sam worried about Mr Frodo so much that he hardly ever put his hands on her lately, and Rosie didn't think that was fair, because mother and wife were words that went together and she was only getting half her due.

Everything was complicated, she cared for Frodo like a brother and a son and a lover all at once, and Sam was her husband and her best friend and the father of her child, and the two of them were locked in some old

moment that wouldn't end. Sam was right to wish that things could be simple for once.

Rosie pushed her chair back and stood, nodding to herself as the decision was made. The past was a bleak thing for her, too, but the future was theirs to shape and own, and she wouldn't let them fritter more away with melancholy.

Frodo was in bed, not reading or sleeping or writing, just staring down at his damaged hands, flexing the fingers slowly. Rosie climbed in beside him, taking his hands in her own.

"You mustn't let dark thoughts haunt you so," she said, stroking the delicate lines of his wrists. "For when they hurt you, it hurts Sam, and me as well, and I know you don't want that."

"It isn't like I can choose to stop remembering, Rose." Frodo sighed, his fingertips stroking the pad of her thumb. "It's not that simple."

"Yes it is," Rosie whispered against his cheek, kissing his mouth before he could reply. Frodo made a small mew of surprise, Rosie doubted he'd known any touch but Sam's in his life. He wasn't as comfortable with her yet, but that was important and good. He needed to become better at doing things that made him uncomfortable, like going outside and laughing at jokes. She ran her hand up his thigh, wishing the muscles were stronger and firmer against her touch.

"You must promise me," she said, nipping at his earlobe with her teeth and guiding his hand to push up her skirt, "to come outside more. There's a gaggle of children from all around who've never heard a hero-story, they never knew Bilbo's wondrous tales. You have to promise me you'll sit with them in the fields for a morning and tell them of your adventures. If you don't, I'll climb out of this bed right now and set about doing some baking."

"I -" Frodo's breath hitched as his hand slid up under her petticoat. "I promise."

Rosie smiled against his skin. "I knew you would."

## Storyteller

Rosie loved watching children's games. They'd play all the same old ones she and her brothers had grown up with, hide-and-seek and statues and tag. Childhood went by so fast but remained forever, because there were always new small feet to flatten the grass, and tiny hands to pick the freshly-grown flowers.

Nobody was playing at the moment, though, a dozen small faces held in rapt attention by Frodo's words as he recounted stories more fantastical than any Rosie had heard as a lass. They sounded like much happier and less painful adventures in this version, and the children were cheering at almost every pause. Frodo had Elanor on his knee, and was bouncing her as he spoke, making her clap, a gummy smile on her mouth.

"It's good to hear him laugh again," Sam said beside her, and Rosie nodded. It was, it was as good as good had ever been, better than fresh cream with breakfast or a new melody to sing. Frodo's laugh was wonderful, and hadn't gone the least bit rusty with disuse.

Sam's hand slipped around her waist, pulling her against his side in a half-hug as they stood and listened. His arm felt good and solid and warm against her, and Rosie felt as if she might burst for being so alive.

"Come on." She smiled a secretive smile, pulling him across to a small circlet of trees she'd used many times for hiding games. "That tale's a long one, nobody will notice us gone."

He pressed her back against the rough bark of an old tree, she didn't know what sort it was and even though she was sure Sam would have the answer she didn't ask,

too busy pressing her mouth against his hungrily, hooking her ankle behind his knee. They could still hear the muted lilt of Frodo's voice, the liquid-joy sound of his laugh. Rosie wished that the quest had been just as he was telling it. Stories needed to end happily, after all. She'd known that all her life.

They adjusted their clothing and emerged from the trees as the conclusion to the tale was reached, the children all running off at full speed to play at being Dwarves and Elves and hidden kings. Adjusting Elanor in his arms, Frodo came over to stand with Sam and Rosie.

"There, I did as I promised." Frodo smiled. "Though I doubt you heard enough to know for sure." He reached over and plucked a twig, complete with a small green leaf, out of Sam's hair. "I'm shocked. What if the children had seen you?"

"They were too busy hearing about blood and fire to pay attention to any earth and love that was going on," Rosie shot back with a grin, pulling the leaves that littered her own hair loose. "Don't think you would have liked it, Mr Frodo. We can be mighty ungente when the mood takes us."

"I'm not made of glass, you know." Frodo's smile became a smirk as he passed Elanor back to her mother. Sam looked shocked at the remark, which led Rosie to mess his already haphazard hair affectionately.

"I like him better when he's shocking you, Sam, than I do when he's making you fret and worry." She turned to look at Frodo. "Though I must say you look exhausted to the bone now, as if you might fall over where you stand and sleep on the ground."

"Then I must look exactly how I feel," Frodo admitted. Sam supported him as much as he could without actually carrying him as they walked back to their home.



"There now, is that more comfortable?" Rosie asked when Elanor and Frodo were both tucked in their respective beds. Frodo nodded.

"Much, thank you. I'm not sleepy, though, could you pass me one of my books to read?"

"Only if you read to us." Rosie smiled. "I'd like to hear your voice for a while longer today."

"All right." Frodo nodded. "Climb aboard then, and I'll begin."

It was almost like being a faunt again, Rosie thought, curling up on the pillow and listening to a story in the early afternoon. Sam's hand found hers atop Frodo's concave stomach, twining their fingers together as Frodo began to read.

"Here, Sam, you'll like this one, it's from an old Elvish text. *Ye have spilled the blood of your kindred unrighteously and have stained the land of Aman. For blood ye shall render -*"

"Oh, blood and blood and blood. I'm bored of blood," Rosie muttered, freeing her hand from Sam's and playing with the buttons on Frodo's loose sleeping shirt.

"- *blood, and beyond Aman ye shall dwell in Death's shadow. For though Eru appointed -* Oh, Rose, stop, I can't concentrate when you do that - *to you to die not in Eae, and no sickness may assail you, yet slain ye may be,*" Frodo's words faltered as Rosie replaced her hands with her mouth, breathing hotly against the fabric across his chest. He swallowed and tried to find his place in the paragraph again. "*And slain ye shall be: by weapon and by torment and by grief; and your homeless spirits shall come then to Mandos.*"

"This isn't the cheeriest of texts, I must say," Sam pointed out. Frodo didn't answer, his head tipped back as Rosie reached the open collar of the shirt and lathed her tongue against the curve of his neck. With a wicked grin she looked up at him.

"Well, go on then with your horrible story. Keep reading."

"Uh." Frodo did not look capable of doing anything of the sort. She leant over him and planted a long, lingering kiss on Sam's mouth, locks of her long curling hair brushing against Frodo's face.

"Keep reading," she repeated, moving her mouth back to his throat.

*"There long shall ya abide - you two are the most beautiful creatures this world has ever seen -and yearn for your bodies,"* Frodo's voice got lost as his mouth felt thick, yearning to press against Sam's as he felt breath against his cheek. He didn't dare turn, because he knew if he stopped then Rosie would too, and she was halfway to his navel now, opening the shirt as if she had a lifetime to unfasten six buttons.

*"And find little pity though - mmmphmph."* Sam put a decisive end to the narration, kissing Frodo as Rosie finished her painstaking work removing Frodo's single item of clothing.

"Good. Couldn't abide all that moaning and groaning," Rosie said, tossing the book off the bed and pushing the covers out of the way. "I have an affection for your voice, Mr Frodo, but there are better uses for it than reading out such gloom." She moved her mouth down and Frodo let out a short cry against Sam's mouth, putting practice to her theory.

"Not made of glass, eh?" Rosie scolded. "Could have fooled me. You need some meat on your bones, and no mistake. It's not right to be so thin at your age." She paused. "At any age, for that matter. We'll have to remedy it."

Frodo's hand flailed to find her, his eyes shut as the kiss with Sam went on. He beckoned her up to where they were and pulled her in so her mouth was against the both of theirs. Rosie decided that hearing Frodo's laugh

wasn't quite better than *everything*, perhaps, not when there was this to be had as well.

"What did it mean, anyway?" she asked when they were through, lying boneless and warm on the big soft bed. Sam was already asleep, and Rosie and Frodo were halfway there. "That piece you were reading."

"It's about a land over the sea, where Elven spirits go when they die. Sometimes they sail there, too."

"Why do they sail there, if they're bound for it eventually no matter what?"

Frodo was quiet for so long Rosie supposed he must have fallen asleep before he finally spoke. "A person's life doesn't always end at the moment their heart stops. They might have been exhausted. Their loves and families might be dead and waiting for them already. Maybe they had no choice."

"Well, I don't think I'd like to go there. Not if I knew that was where I was going regardless. My family and loves could just sit tight and wait until I was finished here, as far as I'm concerned," she declared sleepily, trying not to yawn. "There's always more reasons to stay than to go, I figure."

There was no answer, Frodo was already asleep. Rosie curled against his chest and dreamt of sunlit forests.

## Dusk

"Here." Rosie put a tall glass of slightly opaque brown liquid on the bedside table, giving the spoon resting in it a final stir. "It's milkthistle, which is for drinking the morning after too much ale, but a headache's a headache after all, and I expect it'll do you more good than harm. Nothing else has helped, so perhaps this will."

She smile as she said it, but there was a twist of desperation in the corner of her mouth.

"Thank you, Rose." Frodo sipped the drink and made a face. "If the taste's anything to go by, it's sure to work wonders. Nobody could stomach this without the promise of miracles." That got a laugh out of Rosie as she sat herself down on the edge of the bed beside Frodo.

"I'll get you a honeycake to take away the bitterness when you're done. I hope it offers you some relief." She brushed along his hairline with the back of her fingertips. "I hate to see pain on your features."

"I'm sorry, I know you wanted us to all go to the market today."

"The market can wait, it'll still be there when you're better. I wish I knew how to mend you, I fear there's some deep infection in your scars and I don't know how to draw it out."

"I don't think there's any way."

"Oh, don't you start with that talk again, half the fight to getting well's in your head. And if you give up now, well, Sam and I are such *healthy* hobbits, we'll live nearly forever at my guess, and you'd have to wait in that

Elven country from your books for *years* without company, until we died and came to join you."

"I could use the time to learn to knit." Frodo took another quick swallow of the sour liquid. It wasn't having any affect on his head. "Or play the harp."

"Seems more sensible to stay and raise a brood of lovely little ones, and then all go to our rest together. You spoil Elanor twice as much as Sam or I do, you can't leave and deny her that." Her tone stayed light but her hand was on his shoulder, as if she was strong enough to keep him pinned in reality.

"Elanorelle doesn't need me, she'd got the best mother and father the Shire's ever seen."

"And if you'd had your mother and father, I suppose you wouldn't have cared at all about Bilbo, then?" Rosie raised one eyebrow. "Come on, outside into the sunshine for you, best headache cure I know."

"That's ridiculous." Frodo couldn't help but grin, despite the pain he was in. "Light isn't good for headaches at all."

"Well, it's dusk anyway, so most of the sun's been spent. I won't get your honeycake if you don't get out of bed."

"That's bribery and blackmail, and I won't stand for it!" Frodo laughed. "All right then, help me up."

The setting sun threw a deep gold wash over the world, heavy and warm as a kiss. Sam was tidying the edges of the front path, a smudge of dirt down one cheek. He looked up and grinned when Rosie pulled the door open and forced Frodo outside.

"There? See, wasn't the view worth getting up for?"

"Yes. It's lovely. It's so beautiful," Frodo nodded, and Rosie's heart hurt with wanting him to be well. A flock of noisy birds flew overhead, breaking the serenity of the moment, and she wasn't entirely upset about that. It was too easy to be sad and quiet, lately.

"Are we going to the markets tonight after all, then?" Sam asked, wiping sweat off his brow and leaving another smudge of dirt in his hand's wake.

"Maybe tomorrow, Sam," Frodo suggested. Rosie didn't know if he meant his words or not. "It'll be the twenty-fifth, Elanor will be four months old. We can put her in her prettiest dress and make all the other babies envious of her beauty."

"She'll like that. She loves preening." Sam's smile at the thought of his daughter was even more wrenching than the sunset to look at when the world seemed so fragile.

"Let's go around to the back." Rosie's voice sounded husky, like she'd been crying the tears that had been held in all day. "We should spend a while in the fresh air."

Frodo rested his back against a small hillock of grass, Rosie could feel his eyes burn on her skin as Sam unlaced the bodice of her dress and slipped the soft muslin sleeves off her shoulders. Frodo hardly seemed alive at all, except for those eyes, but when she began to undress Sam she saw a little colour come into his pale lips, his chest move with rapid shallow breaths.

They could make him live again. They would make him live again. If his heart ceased beating, they'd give him theirs. If his breath stopped, they'd breathe kisses into him. Love was strong enough to fight any sickness, Rosie promised herself.

And nobody ever went back on their promises to Rose Gamgee.

## Talk

"That's no normal child, mark my words."

"Of course it isn't normal, ordinary babies have two parents and she has three, all of them touched in the head if you ask me."

"She looks more Elf than hobbit."

Sam kept his head down, bent over the fruits on sale as if they held his attention completely, one ear listening to the faintly disapproving tones of the two older hobbit women as they stared at Rosie and Frodo playing with Elanor. The baby was tucked into a basket, white blanket pulled up to keep her warm. Rosie had her favourite red cloak on, she said it made her feel like a character from the stories she'd grown up with. She told those stories to her baby girl for hours, not caring in the least that the child was too young to understand them yet - never the princess tales, not Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty or Snow White, Rosie found them boring, and didn't think it was proper to tell of a human lady living with so many Dwarves, but yarns about girls who took baskets to grandmother, and girls who went exploring for porridge that was just right, and pigs who built houses that couldn't be huffed or puffed away.

Frodo was shaking a brightly painted rattle from one of the stalls in front of Elanor's face, pulling it away whenever she reached for it.

"Don't tease her," Sam heard Rosie scold, a smile in her voice. One of the gossips chattering beside him clucked her tongue, and Sam had to bite down on his lip to keep from laughing. He picked out a handful of fruits that the soil at Bag End couldn't sustain, paying for them

and adding them to the weight in his satchel. They didn't get out on a regular basis, so it was worth buying everything when the chance was presented.

The markets always smelt like an adventure to Sam, had since he was tiny. There were dishes being cooked and sold on every side, hot fried potato chippings and crunchy carrot sticks, and jars off all different flower water perfumes, the peach smell Rosie liked to wear and the lilac that always made him think of his mother. The animals didn't smell as inviting, of course, but their earth-scents were part of home to Sam, and he was glad to have them there as well.

The day had turned bright and hot unexpectedly, the morning had been grey and damp, just right for huddling under heavy quilts and cuddling in close to sleeping loved ones. Now the sun was overhead, if there had ever been a day for freckle-growing, as Sam's sister had termed it despairingly years ago, then this was the day. Sam bought a wide paper parasol from one of the vendors and tucked it under his arm, maneuvering through the crowd back to where his family stood.

"Here, this should give us a bit of shade," he offered, holding out the umbrella. "What else do we need while we're here?"

"Ink," Frodo offered, holding up his splatter-stained fingertips as proof that most of their supply had been used for writing.

"And thread," Rosie agreed. "You tear your clothes like a boy stuck in a thornbush, Sam."

"Ah, it's not my fault the ground's stronger than the hems of my sleeves," he shot back breezily. "Better a ripped shirt than a messy flowerbed."

"According to you, perhaps." The muttered grumble was coupled with a sunny smile.

"And some new water jugs, as well. There's a leak in one of the ones at home," Frodo remembered.



"Can it be mended, do you think?" Rosie asked, bouncing the basket holding Elanor a little to keep the baby from crying. "Seems a shame to get rid of one of those lovely old pots if there's a way of saving it."

"I'll have a look at it when we get home. I'm sure the break's not as bad as it seems," Sam promised. "I don't know about you two, but I'm ready for lunch. Will we head off home now, getting the things we need on the way, or eat here and spend a while longer with shopping afterwards?"

"Let's stay out." Rosie looked around. "People keep looking at us as if we're the strangest things they've ever seen, and I'm quite enjoying it."

Frodo looked around, surprised at the words. He hadn't noticed the gazes on his at all.

"They always thought you were a queer one, Mr Frodo, and now they think it of me and Rose as well for living with you."

"And what do you think of them thinking that, Sam?" Frodo asked with an amused smile.

"I don't think anything about it at all. People can think what they like and it won't matter to us one way or the other."

"And you, Rose?"

"Better to be strange than boring, if you ask me. Which you did, so now I'm saying it. I'd rather be 'that queer Rosie who lives with Samwise Gamgee and Frodo Baggins' than anything else in the world."

"What about you, Mr Frodo?" Sam asked, looking over at the two women he'd heard talking earlier. They were still watching every move the three of them made.

"I can't imagine anything better than for people to look at us and wonder. It means we've got something more than they can ever understand." Frodo smiled, his face looking cheered and healthy in the bright sunlight.

## **Excuses for celebration**

Often, Sam dreamed of the ocean just before dawn, the way the waves were almost nothing more than shadows in the night, the grey coolness as the stars faded back into the sky. In his dreams he felt as if a part of him was lost forever, leaving him in a world without colour or morning. The last time he'd had such a dream he'd woken to find his face pressed against Frodo's skinny chest, gentle hands in his hair.

"Hush, Sam, you were crying in your sleep," Frodo whispered. "What were you dreaming about?"

"I'd lost something important, and I couldn't even remember what it was. I knew I'd never find it again," Sam admitted, glad to be able to put his arms around Frodo and feel the solidity of the real world through that. But it was hard to hold him, lately, Frodo would pull away as if the lightest touch hurt his brittle bones.

"It was just a dream. Rosie's asleep beside you, and Elanor's in her cradle. Everything's safe and close by." The words were soothing and low. "Now go back to sleep."

"Mm, I feel good and protected with you here." Sam's own hand reached up to find Frodo's curls. "We'll keep each other safe in dreaming."

"Yes."

They stayed awake for hours, each thinking the other was already asleep.

Sleepless nights made for hard waking, so Rosie was already up and about by the time they emerged. She was baking a cake, mixing the pale lemon icing in a bowl twice the size she needed so that there was room to add

extra if she felt so inclined. There was no such thing, as far as Rosie could see, as too much lemon icing. Elanor was in her basket on the table beside her mother.

"Here's your Dad and your Frodo, Elanor, awake at last. Just when I was going to go and pour cold water over them, too." Rosie tapped the baby's nose with her finger and grinned at Sam and Frodo. "I'm baking her a four-month birthday cake, even though it was yesterday. We need to start finding more excuses to have celebrations around here."

"Do you want me to make some other food? We can have a feast," Sam offered.

"All right, I'm not saying no to help in this kitchen. Too many nooks and crannies to hide in, if you ask me. Easy to lose the things you need the most with so many cracks and shadows about. If you don't mind me saying so, Mr Frodo, I think you should consider having most of these shelves and cupboards replaced."

"Sounds like a good idea," Frodo agreed with a nod as Sam went to try and find another mixing bowl.

"Want to try some of the icing?" Rosie asked, offering the big wooden spoon. Frodo smiled and shook his head, so Rosie shrugged and dabbed a blob of it onto the end of his nose. Elanor giggled, clapping her hands. Putting the second bowl down on the table, Sam smiled at the scene unfolding and leaned over, swiping his tongue out to catch the icing off Frodo's skin and then pulling back as if he couldn't believe what he'd done.

"Oh, don't look so abashed, Samwise. You two need a little less protecting and comforting and a lot more silliness, if you ask me." Rosie stopped stirring. "Now, how does it taste?"

"Hm, didn't get enough to rightly know." Sam's smile grew wider and a little wicked. "Better let me have the spoon to check, Rose." She handed it over, only to get a long line of lemon confection down her cheek as Sam brandished the spoon like a sword. Frodo laughed,

jumping over and licking it off, making her squirm away.

"Ugh, your tongue tickles, don't!" She ran around to the other side of the table in escape, leaving Frodo to end up with blotches of icing on his chin and forehead as Sam waved the impromptu weapon around. Rosie grabbed at the edge of the bowl and put it aside carefully, to protect what remained of the icing, before running back over and tackling Sam to the floor, pulling Frodo down with her.

"Don't do that, you'll ruin your shirt! Look, now you've got icing everywhere!"

"Best if I take my shirt off then."

"Well it doesn't matter now, it's covered anyway."

"So are you saying you don't want me to take it off?"



"Nothing of the sort."

Elanor rolled onto her side in the basket and decided to go to sleep for a while. Grown-ups could be so silly sometimes.

## Dictation

Sometimes, they spent the whole day in bed, getting up only for food and to tend to Elanor, diving back under the covers as soon as possible. It was often said that the moon was made of honey for newlyweds, but that seemed like a poor consolation prize compared to the feast of stars and suns they found in the soft secret skin of each other.

They'd done all the work that needed doing, and weren't expected anywhere, but Frodo was having one of his days, which was a real pity. Rosie tried not to feel bitter about the situation, but lying on the bed beside him stroking his sweat-sticky hair off his brow, all she wanted to do was twist all Frodo's pain into a tight little ball and drop-kick it out the door, and make his skin glow with another sweat entirely.

"I'm sorry, Rose. You and Sam should be living a different life to the one I force you to have here in these musty rooms."

"Musty? I'll thank you not to insult my cleaning like that! And don't you start with that garbage, either, or I'll give Elanor two saucepan lids to bang whenever a headache takes you."

Frodo's smile was wan and loving. "I wonder if you're real, Rose, you and Sam. Sometimes I think there's no way you could be."

"Oh, we're real, Mr Frodo, and so are you, but this sickness isn't. It's just aftershocks and memory, and we'll beat it yet," Sam put in as he entered the room, putting Elanor in her crib and joining them on the bed, spooning in behind Rosie.

"I don't think you'd stand for anything else," Frodo pointed out. "I want to touch you both so much right now, but I can barely lift my arms." He sighed. "My blood's made of ice."

"Doesn't feel like that to me." Rosie put her palm on his fevered cheek. "Just you lie back and rest, and tell me and Sam what you'd like to see, all right?"

Frodo nodded, hoisting himself up against the pillows and then panting, the effort of the movement had exhausted him.

"Undo the lowest button on his shirt," he ordered Rosie in a soft voice. "And then the one above that."

Her fingers were nimble, revealing Sam's soft gold-brown skin inch by inch.

"Kiss his stomach." Frodo's voice was barely more than breath. Rosie bent her head down and tongued below Sam's navel, holding her laugh in at the muted gasp she heard from one of them. "Now open the next button."

Her fingers weren't as sure and quick this time. Without waiting for more instruction her hands slipped over the skin she knew as well as her own, the occasional freckle and scar accenting rather than detracting from the smooth expanse.

"And the next button, too."

She didn't even bother to try manipulating the eyelet, wrenching the shirt open with such force the button flew aside with a pop.

"Careful! I won't have any shirts at this rate."

"Maybe you shouldn't wear them in the first place, then," Rosie growled, letting her breath ghost across his chest in the same path her hands had taken, raising gooseflesh. "What now then, Frodo?"

"Kiss him." Frodo's whisper was almost a hiss now, and it sent a shiver up Rosie's spine. She turned to look, but it was no scary phantom, just Frodo with his tired and burning eyes, his fragile and lovely face.

Rosie had spent many hours of her young life daydreaming about Samwise Gamgee's lips, and it never ceased to amaze her how much better the reality could be than any childish fantasy. Summer lived the whole year long in his mouth, hot and humid and alive, like all the laughter in the world was contained and waiting to be released through him.

"Oh." Frodo's eyes rolled closed and his breath evened out, the knot of worry caused by pain softening a little between his eyebrows. Rosie broke her kiss with Sam long enough to plant a lingering goodnight on Frodo's mouth, then turned back to her husband, and carried on with undressing him without the aid of instructions.



## Proper

When Rosie announced that her mother was visiting for afternoon tea, Sam and Frodo suddenly remembered a very important meeting with Merry and Pippin, apparently planned for half the week.

"Fine with me," Rosie replied breezily. "I don't want you here any more than you want to be here. I've had enough male company to last me lifetimes, I want a chance for women's talk."

They hadn't yet left when Lily Cotton arrived, though, Sam watering the vegetables and Frodo playing peek-a-boo with Elanor.

"Where's the flower baby? There she is!"

Elanor scrunched her face up in delight.

"Off you go, and tell Merry and Pippin I said hello." Rosie took Elanor from Frodo and shooed him out the door.

"Here, I'll hold her," Lily offered when they were alone. "Come to your grandmother, little one."

Elanor's eyes went big with worry, chubby hands clinging to her mother's hair as Lily tried to take her.

"She gets pensive with people she doesn't see regular," Rosie apologised, taking Elanor back and walking through to the kitchen.

"She'd know me better if you came by more often. I feel like I never see you, Rose."

"You know I can't go out much, Mam, Mr Frodo needs looking after more days than not, and this hobbit hole's not the easiest place to clean."

"It's not your duty to look after that eccentric old bachelor." Lily sat down at the table and picked up one

of the small pies Rosie had made. "You're married to Samwise, not Frodo."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rosie gave Elanor one of her knuckles to suck on to keep her quiet, standing across the table from Lily with a stony expression.

"It means there's talk. That your marriage isn't proper."

Rosie looked down at her daughter's tiny, perfect face and gave a bitter laugh.

"Were you and Dad ever in love, Mam? Did you ever watch him sleep and ache with love for him so much you felt like singing and crying all at once? No, you don't have to answer. I know you love him in your way, because he's given you a good life and healthy children, but that's never been what I've wanted."

"It's those fairy stories I told you as a girl, they've filled your head with nonsense."

"When Sam was away, I got three offers to wed that I never told you about, because I knew you'd make me say yes. And some of those offers were from much richer folk than a Gamgee from Bagshot Row, but I didn't care at all. There's never been anything so proper in the world as my marriage, and that's that."

"You never think rationally, never consider what might come of a thing before you do it." Lily threw up her hands in exasperation, knocking a small vase of flowers off a shelf behind her. Rosie dived, reaching out, upsetting a plate of sandwiches but catching the vase before it hit the floor.

"Careful! You almost broke it." She scowled at her mother, putting Elanor in the baby basket on the table and replacing the vase on a higher shelf, where it couldn't be knocked. A few drops of water had fallen out of it onto her hand, Rosie sucked the nectar-sweet liquid into her mouth absent-mindedly and turned back to the argument.

"You're not a tween anymore, Rose. I tell you these things because I don't want to see you come to grief. You're not the princess in a story, you have to be sensible."

Rosie thought of the sheaf of loose papers Frodo wrote on every day. "No, I'm not the princess." *I'm the happily ever after*, she added silently but didn't say.

After she'd walked her mother to the end of the lane, Rosie wandered down past the lake to the field where the children were playing in the late afternoon light.

Sitting on the low white fence by the road, the same place she'd daydreamed years away, Rosie rocked Elanor in her arms and watched the village games, thinking about her mother's words.

By the time she got home it was almost dark, Sam and Frodo outside waiting for her. Well, Sam was waiting, with Frodo asleep on his thigh. He smiled comfortingly at Rosie as she sat down beside him with a sigh, taking the pipe he offered her gratefully.

"Sam," Rosie said after a short quiet. "When Frodo's stronger, in a few years perhaps, can we go away? Not forever, a year maybe. Just the four of us, and any more babies I have between now and then. I want Elanor to know there's worlds outside of Hobbiton, that this is one way to live but that Big People and Elves and Dwarves all have their own ways too. Then, even if she never leaves the Shire for the rest of her days, at least she'll know what's out there, that she's allowed to live in whatever way make her happiest. That there's nothing wrong with fairy tales, and no such thing as proper."

## **Ridiculous behaviour**

"Blast this weather!"

The kitchen was a disaster area, shelves and cupboards all emptied out, the contents strewn all over the floor in a jumble of pots, pans, jars, knives and ladles. Elanor was dozing in her basket while Rosie, Frodo and Sam attempted to sort out what utensils they actually used out of the mess. The rain outside, alternating between drizzle and downpour throughout the day, did nothing to help with the general mood.

"What about this?" Frodo held up a colander. Rosie shook her head.

"We do need it, but not often. It can go somewhere out of the way."

"And these?" A pair of ridiculously bent tongs this time.

"You've got eyes, don't you? Don't ask me about every single thing you pick up!" Rosie snapped, then softened. "I'm sorry. I just hate having to throw so much aside, it feels wasteful."

"Everything is garbage eventually," Frodo pointed out philosophically. Rosie just glared in reply.

"Here's that broken water pitcher." Sam held it up. "I see what you mean, it'll never hold liquid with that big crack down the side."

"Onto the junk pile with it then," Rosie said with a sigh.

With a sudden smile, clutching the jug in one hand, Sam ran from the room.

"What's he up to now?" Rosie followed him down the hall. He'd run outside, around the corner and out of sight.

She stood in the doorway, hesitant to go out into the grey weather.

"Sam! Samwise! You come back in here!" she shouted. Frodo came to stand beside her, he never moved anywhere fast anymore. A gust of wind made them both step back into the relative warmth of the entryway.

"What's he doing?" Frodo asked.

"I don't have the slightest clue, but whenever he's finished with whatever it is I'll give him an earful. This is not the weather for ridiculous behaviour."

Frodo didn't respond, smiling at her exasperated face and then dodging the smack she aimed at him. After a few minutes Sam became visible again, coming back from where he'd been still holding the broken jug, now filled to the brim with rich black soil, a cluster of bright yellow and red flowers planted neatly in the centre. He put it down beside the front gate, along the edge of the newly-neatened path. It looked as if it had belonged there forever.

"There, see? There's life in it yet. Things can still have another round left in them, even when they look done for, in my experience," Sam said, looking extremely proud of himself and also extremely drenched.

With a laugh of delight Frodo ran out of the front door, launching himself into Sam's arms. Sam spun him joyfully, and if their faces weren't covered in raindrops Rosie might have thought they were crying.

"All right," she called. "That's very nice, now come inside! You'll catch your death if you stay out there!"

They ignored her warnings for a long time, kissing happily in the wet garden, the little jug of flowers soaking up the rain hungrily and growing stronger for it. When Frodo finally sneezed from the cold, Rosie dashed down and pulled them both inside, scolding with about as much threat in her voice as a small fluffy kitten could muster.

"You're as bad as each other, the pair of you. I hope you're happy with your foolishness, because you'll pay for it with sniffles and red eyes tomorrow." She sat them down in front of the fire and made them strip off their clothes, wrapping a blanket around their shoulders and rubbing their hair until it dried in damp curls. Frodo pressed a chilly kiss against her cheek, and Rosie couldn't help but smile.

"I hope I only ever have girl-children, that's all I can say. Boys never have any sense at all."

## Break

She'd thrown up her breakfasts for almost a week, and felt the lazy, heavy *knowing* feeling, the same that she'd gotten when Elanor began to grow. But then she'd started to bleed, and fallen over in the garden, and her stomach had hurt like knives and stings and whipping.

She didn't tell Frodo, who was getting worse with time when it should have made him better, and she didn't tell Sam, who had enough on his strong shoulders as it was. She brewed herself pennyroyal tea and lay still until the pain passed, and then washed the marks out of the bedclothes as carefully as a good wife should.

Rosie wondered whose eyes the baby would have had, what smile.

Now she was washing up, the water slicking her already pruned hands, icy against her hot wrists. The residual food on the plates made her stomach lurch, but there was nothing left to bring up. She was hollowed out, empty.

Once the tears started to fall, she couldn't stop them. She hadn't cried so long and hard for years, since she'd had half of one of her back teeth knocked out when she was thrown off a pony. It had taken almost a month to fall out, and during that time the exposed nerves had made her feel as if her whole mouth was dying.

Rosie curled up in a ball on the floor, sobbing and sobbing until she had no energy left to do any more. She didn't even know what she was crying for, really. It wasn't like she wanted another baby just yet, and Frodo would surely get better some day. Sam would have time

to notice her troubles, and rub her back like he did for Frodo when Frodo was feeling poorly.

Standing up, Rosie tidied her hair carefully, and washed her face clean, and put her smile back in place, as carefully as a good wife should.

Frodo heard a muted thudding sound as he tried to concentrate on the books in front of him. It was hard to think about the world of stories when he could barely stay fixed on the one in rooms around him.

Relieved to have an excuse for leaving his books, Frodo padded down the hallway to the kitchen. Rosie was slumped on the floor by the soap-filled sink, a dark stain on her skirt.

"Rose?" Colour drained out of Frodo's face. "Rosie?!" He ran to her side. She was breathing but her eyes were bruise-dark, shadowed with illness and exhaustion. He cradled her on his lap, stroking her hair off her face.

"Sam! Sam!" Frodo's voice cracked with panic as he shouted. Elanor began to scream at the sudden noise. Frodo looked over at her grasping little arms, visible over the sides of her basket atop the table, "Hush, Elanorelle, hush," he said softly before shouting for Sam again.

Breathing heavily from his dash through the garden, Sam rushed into the room.

"My Rosie, Rosie-girl, what's wrong?" He reached at her face and shoulder and stomach lightly, as if afraid of hurting her simply by touch. "What happened?"

"I don't know." Frodo shook his head, trying to stay calm. "I heard a thud, and came in to find she'd fallen. I don't think she was feeling well today, I heard her lying down for a while this morning."

"Sam?" Rosie said muzzily, twisting her head from side to side. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure. You had a spill, my darling heart. Are you feeling all right?" Sam lifted her out of Frodo's arms



gently. There were bloodstains on his legs from where she'd been lying.

"I didn't want you to know." Rosie's voice was soft and sad. "I suppose I wasn't strong enough to carry another yet, so soon after Elanor."

Sam carried her in to the bedroom and cleaned her off, lying her on the bed as carefully as if she were a newborn baby herself.

"I'm sorry, Samwise." She was crying again. "You make the gardens grow so beautiful, and I can't even keep the seeds you plant in me."

"Oh, Rosie-girl." Sam kissed her forehead, hugging her so tightly she wasn't sure he'd ever let her go. "It's all right. The worst is past, you'll feel better in the morning."

He stayed with her while she slept, watching her dreams flicker uneasily across her features. Frodo cleaned up the kitchen, and played with Elanor out in the garden for as long as he could stand the glare of the sunlight. Sam came out to join them, sitting down with an expression as tired and sad as any Frodo had ever seen him wear.

"She wanted to be alone for a spell," he explained in a voice devoid of his usual sunniness. He took Elanor into his arms and kissed her feather-light on her temple.

"I'm sorry, Sam," Frodo whispered, knowing the words would never be enough.

"It happens to a lot of lasses after they have their first. It seems as if she's none the worse for it, thank goodness." Sam tried to smile, still clutching at his daughter. They sat in silence, until finally Frodo couldn't bite the words back any longer.

"Do you think it was me? Maybe I'm more changed than we think, and it poisoned her somehow."

"No, Mr Frodo, no." Sam blinked more tears back, shifting so he could hug both Frodo and Elanor at once.

"I'm sure it was nothing of the sort. Don't entertain such ideas."

"It's hard not to." Frodo looked off into the air at some sight in his mind's eye. "When I came in, and saw her lying there... I thought we'd lost her. I thought you'd lost your Rose, and my heart broke in two. There was only a little blood, but she was so still..."

"Everyone's all right, don't go thinking of all the things that could've happened. You can care for her as she cared for you, and read her some of those fairy stories she likes so until she's rested. And then we'll all be a family again," Sam promised.

## Winter's Road

"How do you stand to lie around all day?" Rosie threw her needlepoint aside in frustration, the thread knotted and tangled yet again.

"Well, I don't stand. That's sort of the point to lying down." Frodo picked up the discarded embroidery off the floor.

"Oh, *very* funny. I'm going mad here."

"Good, that means you're getting better. Three days ago you were sweet as honey and twice as docile, and I was rather worried. Would you like a drink of water?"

"No. And I don't want milk or tea either, before you ask."

"All right. One of your stories, then?"

Rosie sighed. "I've heard them all a hundred times already. Can't I just go for a little walk in the garden? I'm sure Sam would say that was all right."

"I've got strict instructions to see you stay in bed until he's home, and you're far less terrifying to defy the wishes of than he is." Frodo sat down beside the bed with a laugh. "I could sing for you, if you wanted."

"My ears don't need wounding on top of all my other troubles." Rosie teased. "I could make up a story for you, though, that might keep me occupied."

"Yes, tell me a tale." Frodo fluffed her pillows up and crawled beside her, laying down as she began to speak in a clear, even voice.

"Winter's Road.

"Once upon a time, there were four creatures that lived together in a wood. There was Summer, she had a laugh like morning and a smile like afternoon, and her

hair was like sunlight on sand. Then there was Spring, with his earth-stained hands and solid strong legs. Autumn had golden-brown skin, and she shook the leaves off trees to watch them dance on the wind.

"Lastly, there was Winter. He was as smooth and cold as new snow, and wore a glittering icicle around his neck on a silver chain.

"They lived, these four, in a fork in the road that ran through the wood. It had been a hard road to follow, and so afraid were they of losing each other again that they tied their toes together with silvery yarn from Autumn's sewing box. Every connection had a different hue to it, even though they'd all come from the same skein.

"Spring and Winter were tied with a deep blue, for loyalty and devotion. Autumn and Spring had red, the colour of heart's blood, for romance and passion. Autumn and Winter's bond was yellow as daisies, for they'd both been adventurous dreamers until they'd discovered that excitement didn't agree with them as well as sunny afternoons did.

"Little Summer was tied to Spring with the brilliant green of fatherly love, and her bow from Autumn was the blush peach of motherhood. Lastly, Summer was tied to Winter with a knot of brightest purple, the colour of the berries he'd feed her when her mother and father didn't seem to notice, spoiling her like the loving uncle he was.

"Everyone who saw the four of them living in the fork in the road was sure their threads were going to tangle, that it would all end in a mess. But the four knew better, and never so much as got twisted around.

"But there was a weight in Winter's mind, because he knew that some day they'd have to keep walking down the road. There were two paths to take, the righthand one, that was sunny and lively and led to a lovely land, and the lefthand, which was misty, and difficult to see down. Winter knew that Summer, Spring and Autumn

belonged on the sunny road, and hated to see them waiting at the fork without their happy ending.

"As well as the purple and blue and yellow threads, though, Winter had another string tied to him. It was as black as midnight, and stretched from far back down the difficult road they'd already walked. It led down the lefthand road, into the shadows, and was wrapped around Winter's neck so tight he knew he'd never be free.

"Now, Summer was just a baby, and Spring had done his best to protect Winter from the black thread for so long that Winter just didn't have the heart to tell him it was still there. So Autumn knew it was up to her to do something.

"She had a little pair of silver scissors, from her sewing box. Winter stole them sometimes, and tried to cut the purple and the yellow and the blue cords, so that Summer and Spring and Autumn could skip away down their bright path and not worry about Winter anymore. The threads would never sever, though, they were too strong.

"Autumn set about working away at the black thread, wearing it down day by day. Sometimes it was terribly hard work, for the black thread was at least as strong as the colourful ones, and wrapped so tightly around Winter's neck. Sometimes it made Autumn so tired she couldn't make her leaves dance, but still she kept at it, cutting away.

"Because one day, she knew, the black thread would break, and Winter would be free, and the four of them could walk the bright road together."

Frodo started crying when Rosie finished speaking, but his mouth was curled in the widest smile she'd seen him give in forever, so that was worth a thousand tears.

## Perfectly Well

"Home again!" Sam's call roused Rosie from her doze. "How's my beautiful girl?"

"Woefully bored," she answered as he came to the bedroom door. "Let me up, Sam, please. I'm perfectly well."

"Are you sure?" His tone was doubtful. "I don't want you worn out."

"Let her up Sam!" Frodo shouted from his study. "I'll never hear the end of her complaining if you don't!"

"Now you have to let me up, so I can beat the stuffing out of him."

"Oh, all right. Let me help you into the kitchen." Sam insisted on supporting nearly all her weight on the short trip down the hallway.

Frodo came and joined them as they were about to enter the room, exchanging a smile with Sam. Rosie didn't have the chance to wonder at that before she stepped inside and saw the beautiful dress laid out over a chair.

It was made of a dusky pink silk, with dark red roses curled out of ribbon around the skirt and neckline. A choker of the same ribbon lay beside it, a soft velvet circlet waiting to rest around her throat. It was the loveliest piece of clothing Rosie had ever seen.

"Hardly suitable for laundry and dusting," she managed wryly, blinking back the warm sting in her eyes.

"Then you'll have to dance more, and get wear out of it that way." Sam pressed a kiss against her pillow-tangled curls. "We miss your smile, Rosie-duck."

"Tom and Marigold have Elanor for the night, and Sam and I were wondering if you would like to go to the inn for a feast and a party, Mistress Rose?"

"I'd love to." Rosie smiled.

The dress fit like a dream, falling in soft gathers almost to her ankles, furling out when she twirled. The spin left Rosie feeling a little light-headed, but she breathed in deep until the dizzy spell passed. Nothing was going to ruin her evening.

They went to the Green Dragon, and it was so good to see all her friends again, and laugh and smile and make silly toasts with good ale. Frodo and Sam were persuaded to recite some of the poems they'd learned on their journeys, and got a loud and long applause for their trouble.

Rosie had always loved the way Sam danced, his face so nervous and his body so sure. Frodo watched them, and laughed and clapped.

Between songs Sam and Rosie crept out the back, like they'd done years ago, before they were old enough to think about settling down. They'd liked each other even then, in a fumbling, timid way, teeth-click kisses and clumsy hands. It seemed right to go back there now, let the night sky and air see what the young lovers had grown into, how their story had ended.

"Perhaps he felt tired, and went home," Sam said when they went back inside and Frodo was nowhere to be seen. Asking a friend or two confirmed yes, Frodo had gone, and had left a message for Sam and Rosie to stay as late as they wanted.

They danced for what seemed like hours, around and around the room in a whirl, before finally Rosie lost her footing and stumbled. Sam caught her before she could fall, and they decided to leave before she overtired herself.

There were no lights on in Bag End as they approached, which was an odd enough occurrence for

them to wonder at it. Even if Frodo had gone to bed already, it was usual for a candle to burn in the window until they were all home safe and sound.

"Mr Frodo?" Sam called hesitantly, swinging the door open. Rosie gasped, stepping back against the wall as they walked inside and saw the shambles everything was in, illuminated by the silvery light of the moon. Walking staffs snapped in two, hats and cloaks strewn on the floor, chests upturned and emptied.

"Lost, lost," a thin rasp of a voice whispered. "Thieves! Where is it? Lost!"

Frodo crept out of the shadows near Rosie, grabbing at her skirt with one hand. His three fingers and thumb were hooked into claws, catching one of the decorative roses around the hem and unraveling it into a crimson streak on the floor. Rosie bit back a scream and fell against Sam, who moved to pin Frodo down, holding him as he struggled.

"Thief!" Frodo's voice was almost a shriek, legs flailing and kicking as Sam tried to calm him.

"Frodo, please, it's your Sam, please just stop and come back to yourself."

Frodo's eyes narrowed, glaring up at Rosie. It made her shiver, there was nothing of the hobbit she knew and loved in that gaze. Lifting her skirt out of the way of his kicks as she stepped in closer, Rosie raised her hand and slapped Frodo's face as hard as she could bring herself to. Reason flooded back into his expression, the snarl softening as his limbs stilled. Nobody said anything for a long moment, until Frodo gasped, and began to sob.

"I'm sorry." Frodo cried. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Sam rocked him gently. "I'm sorry. Oh Rose, I ripped your beautiful dress, I'm so--"

"Hush." Rosie crouched down to hug them both. "It's easily mended."



## Best

Rosie was the last to wake up the next morning. It had been a restless night, full of half-dreams and worried thoughts, and she didn't feel very rejuvenated by the experience. She splashed cold water onto her face in an attempt to wake up some, but all it did was send shivers down her back.

Still, she wasn't going to let anything ruin her day. She'd convince Sam and Frodo to come down to the river, and the sun would hit the surface and make it diamonds, and everything dark would be washed away. Rosie was more than tired of shadows, and she wasn't going to stand for it. She'd thwap the nasty little spiders of the past with her broom and then sweep them out into Sam's garden, where they'd feed the soil and make the plants grown even nicer.

Frodo was sitting in front of the fire, Rosie's new dress spilling across his lap, needle and thread in hand.

"I wanted to repair the damage before you woke up," he said with what could almost have been called a smile. "But you didn't have any red yarn." He'd sewed the ribbon back on with neat stitches of black wool, delicately enough so it couldn't be seen unless it was looked for specially. Three more stitches and he was done, and it was closer to good as new than Rosie had dared to hope it could be.

"You didn't have to do that!" She hugged him. Frodo wouldn't meet her eyes.

"Yes I did."

"Don't dwell on it," Rosie scolded. "Come and help me make breakfast. I miss the kitchen." She paused for a

beat. "Usually you wouldn't let a chance to tell me I don't cook as well as Samwise slide, Mr Frodo."

Now he looked directly into her face, and Rosie wanted to cry for the pain in his eyes. "How can you stand to talk to me, Rose?"

"You silly creature!" She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed up and down his face, covering every tear-track with her lips. "If I didn't talk to you I'd have to talk to myself, and I'm not good conversation before I've had a morning cup of tea."

Frodo didn't speak again as they made toast and piled it high with sweet jam, and Rosie cooked porridge with cinnamon just the way she knew he loved it. She called Sam in from his early morning pottering about, he was no use to anybody before his first cup of tea either.

"I won't carry Elanor anymore, or sleep in a room with her," Frodo informed his plate, still not meeting their faces. "That's best."

"Don't be stupid," Rosie answered when it became clear Sam was in no condition to speak. "If you don't sleep in the same room as her, you won't be in the same room as us, either."

"I know. Perhaps that's best, too."

"I've had enough of this." Sam dropped his spoon against the china with a clatter and stood, walking over to Frodo's chair and kneeling beside him. "We knew what we were in for before we came here, Frodo. I hate to remind you of it, but I've seen you in far worse states than you were last night. If I thought for even a moment you were a real danger to my Rose or my Elanor, well, we wouldn't be here, no matter how terrible that made me feel. So stop with your sad eyes, because the turn's past and you've come back to us, same as I know you always will."

"I've put up with far too much from you to give up now," Rosie added, smiling to cover how much she felt

like crying. "Oh, Frodo, don't you love us as we love you?"

"What?" Frodo's voice cracked on the word. "How could you doubt it? I'd cut my own heart out if I knew that was a way to keep you safe and happy."

"But it wouldn't, that's the point of the matter." Sam's worn palm cupped Frodo's cheek gently. "You make us safe and happy, and we want you in our room and in our bed. And we want your heart safely in your breast, if it's all the same."

Frodo laughed then, throwing his arms around Sam's shoulders and knocking them both onto the floor.

"Careful! You'll upset the porridge!" Rosie scolded.

## **Just the sort**

"Can't we go home, Rosie? Please?" Sam begged. "I don't like this."

"Nobody's asking you to," she retorted, flicking a long arc at the bank where Sam and Frodo sat. Rosie stood in water barely waist-high, but they'd staunchly refused to come out even that far. Her wet hair hung in dark half-curls past her elbows, she loved the feeling of the small current lapping against her bare skin.

Elanor kicked up a small splash, tilting her face down to blow bubbles. Rosie held her tightly and laughed to see such a happy moment from her baby.

"Come on! It'll make you strong and quick."

"In that case I'll stay weak and slow," Sam declared, resting his arm across Frodo's back, rubbing small circles with his thumb on the fabric over the bony shoulder. "And you'll catch a cold if you stay in."

"Shan't. That water's warm. Elanorelle seems to like it just fine."

"Why are you so adamant that she learn to swim, Rose?" Frodo asked as he tucked his feet away from the shoreline.

"No baby of mine's going to grow up with silly ideas about what hobbits can and can't do. Swimming's good fun. My Elanor's going to have a big, wide, open brain, not one shut up like a dusty box."

"I suppose you still want to go away for a year, then?"

"What?" Frodo was startled by Sam's question. "You're going away?"

"With you as well, of course," Rosie added. "Don't think you can escape us that easily!"

"Oh, I thought you were leaving me." Frodo sighed with relief. Sam kissed his forehead gently.

"No, never. Rosie wants us all to go live in other parts, so Elanor grows up with more of a sense of the world."

"Let's go soon." Frodo grinned. "It'll be the right sort of adventure, a happy sort. You can see real kings and queens, Rose, just like in a story."

"Steady on!" Rosie laughed. "She's too little for it to do any good yet. And you're in an awful hurry to go on such a journey when I had to plead to get you out the front door today."

"I think she's right, Mr Frodo," Sam agreed. "Best take things slow. You've talked about going to see Bilbo for his birthday in a few months, see how that trip agrees with you before you undertake a longer one."

"Yes, you're right." Frodo's smile was tight and a little sad. "Silly of me."

"Not silly, just impatient." Rosie climbed out of the water, wiping Elanor dry and stowing her safely in the little basket before flopping down on the grass beside Frodo and Sam. "The world will still be there next year, after all."

"Put your clothes on, Rosie, you haven't been well," Sam chided.

"I'm comfortable as I am." She stretched her arms up above her head and smiled lazily. "You should join me, it's just the sort of day for sunbathing, and I have the feeling that the closest I'll get to either of you bathing in the river today."

"What if someone comes along?" Sam's voice was wary.

"Unless they're blind, they know what a naked hobbit looks like, and if they don't then they won't be able to see us anyway. Come on! Frodo?"

"No, thank you." He shook his head, but Rosie had guessed the reason.

"A tan will make your scars fade faster, they won't be so pink-on-white anymore. You'll look healthier, and feel it too. Hobbits need sun, just as plants do. Now, off with your clothes."

Laughing, Frodo and then Sam obeyed the order. The three of them kissed and made love on the lush green riverbank, lazy warm bodies on the cool grass through the afternoon and into twilight.

Sam had a length of twine in one of his pockets, and with that and a bent hairpin and a worm they dug up they managed to catch a fat silvery fish, scales glinting like chainmail in the fading light.

They dressed and walked home, Elanor still burbling from her swimming adventure. The fish was cooked and served with lemon and baked potato, and they ate it out under the night sky, singing old songs they often forgot the words to.

## **Afternoon light**

Sam often told Rosie she was more like an Elf than a hobbit. She chalked this up to flattery, and Sam's own peculiar tastes. But Frodo was most definitely not without a touch of the otherworldly in him.

After all, it wasn't like it was just another of their lazy days that they could waste with silly projects. Merry and Pippin were due over for dinner in half an hour, and there were still a million things to do, and Elanor had been windy and irritable all day, and of course this was exactly the environment Frodo decided to take up painting in.

"Try to look like you're completely in love, Sam."

"I'm completely something, that's for sure. Annoyed at this hat, perhaps, more than in love."

The hat in question was a floppy dark blue thing, with a long peacock feather drooping out of the brim and ticking at Sam's face every time he moved even an inch. Rosie was having a hard time maintaining her own expression of ethereal calm when he sneezed on her regularly.

Frodo had posed them in the front room, Sam down on bended knee gazing up at Rosie, who was standing on a chair. They were supposed to be Beren and Luthien, but with the smell of boiling cabbage and the sound of a cranky baby and a ridiculous hat in the equation it was hard to keep the mood.

"Can't this wait?" Rosie asked for what seemed the thousandth time.

"The afternoon light's best for working in, and if I get started now it'll be easier to come back to it another day."

"Why not just start another day, then?"

"Be quiet, Luthien, and try to look serene."

Rosie sighed and tried to hold her pose. Sam sneezed again. What sort of stupid name was Luthien, anyway? Might as well call your baby Cinderella or Snow White. Nobody could have fun with a name like that, they'd have to sit and sigh and wait for their prince to arrive. Rosie thought it was much more sensible to name children things like Thumbelina and Goldilocks and Rose Red - then they could have the adventures they wanted, and if a prince came along, well, that was nice, but not any nicer than any other husband.

Elanor gave another cry from her crib in the next room and Rosie climbed down off the chair.

"I can't leave her any longer. This will have to wait." She left the room, giving the peacock feather a flick with her thumb and forefinger on the way.

"Shall we leave it, then?" Sam asked, standing up.

"No, I can do detail work on your face. Come sit close by." Frodo mixed two of the paint pigments together carefully, trying to match Sam's skin tone.

"Why this story, Mr Frodo? Why do you want to paint it specially?"

Frodo smiled, swirling a dollop of bright blue for the hat.

"Their love was so powerful they were willing to give up everything for it. It meant more to them than anything else in the world possibly could."

"Not to be unkind about the story, because it's a story that's pretty as anything, but I think it's better to have a regular sort of life, and love somebody when they're boiling cabbages and getting in tempers and curling up beside you in bed every night. That's a much better kind of love than a pretty one that ends in sad and lovely



paintings," Sam mused, trying to keep his face still as Frodo copied his features onto the canvas.

"You're right. And that type's even more precious, and worth giving up everything for twice over," Frodo agreed, then sighed. "I think too much of the light's gone to do any more."

"We've still got a while before Merry and Pippin arrive." Sam smiled, kissing Frodo's cheek.

"Be careful of that feather!" Frodo laughed as it trailed in the blue paint. "Now that's going to get everywhere. Look, you've got some on your cheek." He rubbed at the smudge with his thumb, but it just made the mess worse.

"You could use it for a paintbrush," Sam suggested. "Why do you have a hat like this anyway?"

"I've no idea. It was Bilbo's, though I never saw him wear it."

"Can't imagine why." Sam moved his head and got a swipe of paint across his nose from the lolling feather.

"I can hear you in there! If you're not working on that picture, you can come and help me!" Rosie called. "But leave that hat in there, if I see it again I may chop it into pieces and feed it to the crows!"

Stealing another quick kiss, the two of them went to help her, and to put the hat on her head when her hands were full and she couldn't shift it.

Merry and Pippin brought bottles of sweet, light wine, and a loaf of herb bread as well, and teased Sam and Frodo mightily about the blue paint all over their faces. Rosie had wiped hers off carefully, but there were still bright flakes of dry paint in her hair, and she vowed revenge.

Watching everyone he loved best in the world laugh and sing and drink, Frodo decided that although afternoon light was good for painting, candle-lit nights were just as wonderful for their own reasons.

## **Dreamer**

There was only one dream Frodo had that wasn't terrible. Only one that didn't put hot acidic tears in the corner of his eyes for Sam to kiss away upon waking, only one that didn't end when Rosie shook his shoulder and begged for him to come back for the dark places he went in sleep. He couldn't say how many times he'd had it, if it ever changed at all.

It wasn't a vivid dream, just hazy half-thoughts mixed with memory. The ground underfoot, hands clinging to branches in childhood climbing games. Keeping silkworms in a wooden box and touching their fat white bodies with berry-stained fingers.

"Frodo!" a young voice called to him, and he hid in the long grass, not ready to share his strange exotic new pets. "Frodo, Dad says you've got to come wash for supper."

His father had died before he could get any siblings, so Frodo knew this dream was more imagination than memory, and this detached knowledge seemed to split the scene in two. Now he was an observer, standing in the evening field on his shaky legs, eyes misty from sleep, watching the small hobbit child hide from his sister.

An older sister, at that, hair pulled back in exasperated plaits, one hand on her hip and one playing with her hair ribbon in a gesture so like Rosie it was impossible not to smile.

"Frodo! I know you're there, you're playing with those stupid caterpillars from the mulberry tree. Rose and Merry will steal all your bread and dripping if you

don't come quick, and Pip and Goldy want a story." The girl brought her foot down in a stamp on the front step. "You're so annoying."

"Not so annoying as you!" the boy shot back, jumping to his feet. "You smell like the mess the ponies make, and you look like a squashed toad."

"Oooh, I'll get you for that!" She chased after him, giggling. A tiny child, only a few years old and still wobbly at walking, stood in the doorway wearing a pretty green pinafore and a blue hat three times too big for her, with a paint-smeared feather stuck in the brim.

"Elanorelle, Mummy says you left the onions cooking and now they're all yucky."

"Oh, spit," the older girl sighed, slowing in her pursuit. "Tell her I'll be there soon, Goldy-Goldy-Goldilocks. I have to dunk Frodo's head in the rain barrel first."

"Doing that to me won't fix your face!" The boy had scrambled up a tree by this stage, high enough to avoid people on the ground. "Elanor the fairly revolting, that's what they should call you!"

The dream faded as the real Elanor cried from her crib, making Frodo start awake with surprise. Extricating himself carefully from the tangle of Rosie and Sam, he walked over and picked the baby up carefully. He hadn't held her since the night he'd ruined Rosie's dress, and there was a buzzing swarm of fear in his stomach that next time it happened Elanor wouldn't be at her aunt and uncle's house.

"Was it you I dreamed of, beautiful?" he asked her softly as he bounced her tears away, wandering out of the room and down to one of the front windows. "Are you really going to be so lucky, so happy? I hope you are."

She grabbed at the stone around his neck, her fascination with it never seemed to wane. Frodo moved

it out of her reach and wondered about Elves and future-sight.

"Am I there? Do I sit you all down and tell you stories, read you poems like I used to for Sam when he was small? Does Frodo-lad know the one he's named for?" Frodo paused. "Do any of your brothers and sisters have my features?"

He didn't want to risk any harm to Rosie, and even though there was no true way of knowing whose baby she had lost, Frodo felt in his heart that it would have been his. But even with that knowledge it was hard to hold back the hopes for the future.

"It's one thing to save the world, and bring everyone you love great happiness," Frodo informed Elanor. "Even so, I'd love to give you a sister, Elanorelle. I'd love to see you and her grow together in the world I saved."

Elanor just smiled gummily up at him, and tugged at a lock of his hair.

## Three of a kind

The winds that came in the late afternoon this time of year meant the garden got uneven rain, but it was nothing that a watering can and a few hours of work couldn't fix. That was something Sam liked about plants, they were beautiful and complicated but at the same time easy, simple. It wasn't hard to make them flourish if you knew the basics.

As he bent over some seedlings that needed guiding as to the right way to grow, a hand tapped his shoulder. A boy, no older than twelve or thirteen, with tears on the knees of his trousers and grass marks on the elbows.

"Hullo. What's your name?" Sam asked, putting the watering can aside and rocking back on his heels.

"Jacky." The boy's tongue seemed to trip over itself. "Is... is it true? All the adventures people say you've had?"

"Aye." Sam nodded with a smile. "Most all of it, anyway. People like to add their own spice and flavour at times."

Jacky's eyes grew big and round. "Elves? You really saw them?"

Sam laughed and beckoned the boy to help him with the watering. "You're old enough to know a swede from a turnip, so if you don't mind doing a bit of work while I talk, I can tell you a story or two."

"Do your hands have to get so dirty just from watering?"

Sam laughed again. "No, 'cept I want them to be. The earth's alive, same as you or I, only difference being you can hold a piece of it in your hands and feel as it

breathes and grows. If you're not afraid of dirt, the ground can tell, and takes it as a compliment. No sense in getting off on the wrong foot with the ground."

Jacky smiled. "You're funny. Did you ever see a dragon? Or a battle? Are the Elves as wonderful as people say?"

"Do you know, I think you'd hear better stories from Mr Frodo than I could give you. He's working in his study, but I'm sure if you went and knocked on that green door there and asked in your nicest voice to hear a tale or two, he'd oblige."

"My dad says he's queer," Jacky admitted. "Not a proper hobbit. He says you're three of a kind here, all a bit touched in the head."

Sam was glad Rosie wasn't near enough to hear that, she wasn't fond of the word proper at all. Neither was Sam, when it came to it.

"Your dad should teach his children how to speak to folk politely. I've work to do now, if you want to hear the stories come back tomorrow and listen to Mr Frodo." Sam tried to keep his voice friendly, and the boy scampered away with a nod.

After dinner, as Elanor settled down to sleep in her cradle, Sam and Rosie and Frodo sat around the fire, puffing on their pipes and enjoying not doing much at all. It was nice to just be like this, nobody to impress or worry about, just family and home and comfort.

"Let's go to bed," Frodo suggested, standing.

"I'm not tired," Rosie replied absently, watching the flames flicker and dance.

"No, neither am I." Frodo's answer was coupled with a wide grin. Sam was more than glad to see that, he'd been especially worried about Frodo these past few days and it was good to see him playful.

Sam doubted he'd ever tire of seeing Rosie undress, the careful way she'd slip her skirt down her legs and put it out of the way, lithe brown skin all the way up her

thighs from her swimming and sunbathing. Her small, firm breasts were like ripe fruit, Sam could never resist putting his mouth there and savouring the taste of her skin. There were wavering, pale lines above her hips, where her belly had stretched with Elanor inside, and Sam loved those faint marks more than he could find the words for, because they were good scars, happy scars.

Frodo was just as lovely, in his own way, far too thin for a hobbit and such old, sad eyes, but when he did smile it could light a room up bright as midday. His scars were happy scars too, in their way, he'd gotten them protecting things that deserved to be saved. Sam was glad every day that they'd survived to come back and enjoy it all again.

Even when he wasn't tired, Frodo tended to just lie back, watching Sam and Rosie more than anything else, keeping his wide eyes open as if he wanted to sear the image of them into his mind. He let Rosie kiss him but didn't make any move to hold her close, to keep her body pressed flush against his. She pressed Frodo down against the bed and moved his hand up to the nape of her neck, lifting her curls aside so his palm cupped skin. Then, abruptly, she moved away, sitting on the edge of the bed with a wide and wicked smile.

"I want to watch the two of you together," she ordered. "You're prettier than anything I can think of to compare you to."

Sam loved kissing Frodo, loved the taste of safe-warm-home hiding in the corners of that mouth, the delicate softness of his lower lip. It was always surprising, the memory fading and slipping away when he wasn't right there, in the moment, so it never became familiar to him. Sam wouldn't be happy if it did, it was a gift he had the chance to receive for the first time over and over.

He moved down to lick and suck at the pale throat, knowing Rosie liked the sound of Frodo's voice and

liking it himself as well. His hand moved down, the thumb stroking at velvet-smooth skin in small and constant circles. Frodo arched up into the touch, one knee bent up, the foot pressing down into the mattress, the other leg turned out so the soft underside of the knee was visible. Sam shifted around until he could lick at it, lapping his tongue out as Frodo bucked up again.

Rosie joined them, never able to stay away for long, tracing the delicate point of Sam's ear with her fingertips, learning every piece of him off by heart before moving on and doing the same to Frodo. It was easier than easy to get lost in the feeling, the movement of skin on skin and breath on breath, and after a while Sam let himself fall under the spell, not thinking or learning but simply being, locked together with two of the three things he loved as much as he loved the earth.

"It's your birthday soon, isn't it?" Rosie asked Frodo when they were a boneless puzzle on the bed, halfway to sleep and halfway to melting into one being.

"Mhm. A little under two months." Frodo nodded. "Bilbo's, too."

"You don't have to share everything with someone else. You can keep some things as yours alone." Sam pointed out, breathing in the old-paper smell of Frodo's hair. "It's all right to think of yourself first on occasion."

"In Gondor, when a person has a birthday, other people give him presents instead the other way around," Frodo said conversationally.

"That makes no sense at all, and doesn't sound like much fun for the person with the birthday." Rosie snorted. "Don't hold your breath for any gifts from me, let me tell you that right now."

Frodo just smiled, closing his eyes and drifting off to dreams.



## Sometimes

When he couldn't sleep, Frodo would go to his study and write. The desk still had scratches on it, swirls and stars he'd put there with his pen knife when he was a child, long afternoons when he'd been bored with studying, and wanting very much to go out into the garden to play with sweet-natured little Sam, the gardener's son.

He traced his fingers over the marks in the wood, smiling to remember those hours where learning mathematics seemed like the worst torture life could offer. The desk had a pile of loose papers strewn across it, as well as two thick books for writing in, several pots of ink in various states of dryness, and a thick white candle for light. It was one of the ones Rosie made, a faint vanilla scent in the smoke, the flame bright and steady.

One book was the history the world needed written, the dark red cover worn at the corners, the pages crisp and neat. The other, smaller and thinner, less tidy and more haphazard with style, was the story that gave sense to the longer adventure. This book was where Frodo recorded the parties of the Shire, with fireworks like exploding stars and games for children, with paper donkeys filled with boiled sugar to be hit at with sticks while blindfolded. This book was where Elanor's handprints and footprints were pressed against the pages with the same blue paint that had ended up everywhere on their painting afternoon.

He was writing it for her. He didn't know if he'd give it to her himself, when she was old enough to appreciate

it, or if it would be left to Sam and Rosie to hand it over in his stead. Either way, she needed to have it, needed to understand.

*Sam is troubled, Frodo wrote. He hears what people say about me, the way I make them ill at ease. I might as well be invisible sometimes, but it doesn't bother me. Better they dislike a wounded hobbit than serve a dark lord.*

*Sometimes I find myself saying goodbye to the Shire, looking out at the view the same way as I did before leaving the first time. That seems so long ago now. But at other times I feel as if I'll never leave again, I'll be here to teach you your numbers and letters, queer Uncle Frodo with his stories and his songs.*

He had nightmares, of dead faces in water and icy fingers around his neck. He'd wake to find them true, his own betraying hand clutching for a precious prize, finding only a silvery-white jewel in its place. Sometimes he feared to touch Sam and Rosie and Elanor, in case he polluted them with the infection that made him feel hollow and rotten - of course, they never stood for this behaviour for long. When his hands opened and closed and shook for want of a lost ring, Rosie would be there with vegetable to chop and nappies to fold and knots to untangle.

When he got lost inside his head, Sam would touch their foreheads together, a wordless reminder that anywhere Frodo had been, would ever be, he wasn't alone.

*You were banging your rattle against the over door today. Frodo smiled as he wrote. It make a terrible din, and when your father scolded you, you just smiled at him and touched the rattle to his nose so gently it barely touched.*

*I bought him new pans, when he married your mother. He'd lost his old set on our travels. Thrown them down a crack so they couldn't be spoiled by Gollum. The*

*first thing he baked with the new set was a sultana cake for the Cottons.*

*He says he still misses the old pans, though, even with the new ones so shiny and nice. Your father's got such a big heart he never wants to leave anything out of it, when he has to, it tears him up. It's lucky that the four of us in our happy little life fit there so snugly, isn't it?*

Frodo yawned, covering his mouth with the back of his hand, his eyes heavy. The candle had almost burned down to guttering, if he left it he'd have light to find his way to bed by before it extinguished. Instead, he blew it out with a puff, walking carefully in the dark, leaving enough wick to light it again another time.

## Play

Hobbits can move as quietly as the breeze when they want to, sturdy feet as light as elfsteps on the ground. Playing hide and seek can last all day, because as well as silence they have stillness in their blood, even the most active can be a statue when they try.

Rosie was up to her elbows in suds, the dishes slippery and clay-warm between her fingers, a temperature retained from the steaming stew they'd held earlier. When she'd been young she'd had a small loop of twine her father had made her, that she could dip in the soapy water and blow huge iridescent bubbles through. She'd have to see about making something similar for Elanor when the girl was older.

Sam and Frodo were being as still and quiet as only hobbits could, standing near the doorway and taking turns in creep up behind Rosie, slipping the satiny ribbon that laced up the back of her dress out of the row of eyelets as slowly and methodically as any task had ever been done.

She was whistling faintly to herself, moving her head slightly in time with the tune and making her steam-damp curls bounce. Frodo took his turn to sneak across the kitchen floor and tug on the ribbon, which was halfway down her back by this stage.

Frodo was halfway back to where Sam was chuckling silently at the door when Elanor gave a little cry from her basket, banging her rattle against the wicker weave. Rosie turned to see what the trouble was, and her neckline slipped down over one shoulder. Freezing where he stood, Frodo gave a sheepish grin and made a

break for the door, fleeing the scene with Sam before Rosie could do more than look bemused at her sudden state of half-undress.

"You've got silly daddies, don't you?" she asked Elanor, picking the baby up and pretending to toss her in the air. "I'll wager that before too many years have passed you'll be more grown up than they are. Now, how are we going to get them back for their prank?"

Rosie decided not to do anything, this time, because it was good to hear Sam and Frodo laughing like children, hiding in one of the storage rooms down the hall in the hope she wouldn't find them. Finishing the washing up and then playing pat-a-cake with Elanor, it was hard not to smile as the giggling gave way to quiet and the occasional muffled thump. If they wanted to skulk around in the dust like a pair of tweenagers, Rosie would just let them do it. No sense in dreaming up punishments for people who got themselves into their own predicaments.

She made afternoon tea, hot buttered scones that filled the kitchen and the hallway with a lovely baking smell, and tea with sugar, and then sat down to count how many seconds it took before they gave in and came out of their hiding place.

It took one hundred and thirty ticks on the clock before there was a dusty sneeze and the creak of a door opening, and two bashful hobbits outside the kitchen.

"Hello Rose," Frodo said, trying to hold his smile in. Sam crossed his arms and tried to look serious and mature, and failed completely, largely due to the smudge across his nose and the tangles of his hair.

"Find anything interesting in the store room?" she asked, keeping her own laugh in check and quirked one eyebrow. "I thought there might be a few bottles hiding down there, I was wondering if you noticed any."

"Can't say I saw any. Maybe you'll come have a look yourself next time?" Sam suggested. Rosie had a sudden

flash of memory of one summer when she and Sam had been small, hiding behind the band stand at a party and watching all the grown-ups dance. Frodo had been cornered by a gaggle of flirty hobbit lasses, and Rosie had felt very sorry for him, stuck with all that boring stuff when there were so many adventures to be had at a feast like that. She'd poked Sam in the stomach and raced off, just fast enough so he wouldn't catch her, but slow enough so he thought he could.

What she hadn't known then, and still didn't in the bright kitchen years later, was that Frodo had seen the pair of them playing from his prison of tweenaged females, and had found his own eyes crinkling up and mouth curving into a smile at the sight of their fun. He had hoped that one day he'd rediscover that, the simple joy of nothing much at all.

## Common story

Rosie often found herself thinking of Frodo as two people. One was frail but smiling, with clever if imperfect fingers and a laugh as full and rich as any hobbit's. The other, the shadow-Frodo, was quiet and sad and still, and didn't like to be touched. On rare and worrying occasions this mood would end with him grabbing at her or Sam and leaving bruises on their skin, then cowering away from them when he came back to himself and saw what he'd done.

At first, she'd wished that there could be one Frodo without the other, just as she wished that Sam's eyes wouldn't have so many worry lines at the edges so early in his life, that there weren't scars from stabs and stings and bites on their skin. But she was coming to realise over time that one couldn't exist without the other, that there would be no such thing as *hot* without *cold*.

He was reading to Elanor again, as he did whenever he had the time and energy. Sam had joked on more than one occasion that Frodo was getting as much storytelling in as he could before Elanor was old enough to interrupt.

"*Caspian, dear,*" said Lucy. *"You knew we'd have to go back to our own world sooner or later."*

*"Yes," said Caspian with a sob. "but this is sooner."*

"I remember that story from when I was a lass," Rosie said, coming up behind Frodo and rubbing his shoulders. He sat in the rocking chair with the baby on his lap, a blanket over his feet. "Why can't you read her happy tales? That one's too sad."

"There are so many different versions of it, have you ever noticed? It's a very common story. A girl or a boy

goes on a magical journey with strange companions, and then, at the end, they have to say goodbye and go back to their ordinary lives."

"I can't imagine that you'd find something of yourself in those boys and girls." Rosie's voice was teasing. "And common or not, it's still sad. Lucy and Edmund are going to miss Caspian terribly in their ordinary lives."

"Have you heard all the stories in the collection? They do see him again eventually." Frodo put the book down beside the chair and spoke in whispers, Elanor's eyes closing. Rosie snorted.

"Yes, after they *die*. If it's all the same, I'll stick to my tales where the youngest son slays the dragon and the princess guesses Rumpelstiltskin's name at the end. Much happier than dead reunions, in my opinion."

"Not for Rumpelstiltskin and the dragon," Frodo smirked. "Now, help me stand without waking Elanor, and we'll go see if Sam's done for the day." His face was as sunny and gay as any hobbit's, and Rosie felt she knew why people wrote happy endings for tales so often. They were the best things in the world.



## Always music

Sam and Rosie talked about Frodo on occasion, compared worries and thoughts. He wasn't all they talked about when they were alone, of course, but they loved him like they loved their hearts, and knew it was up to them to fix him.

When Sam told his wife that Frodo has requested knitting lessons, she chewed on the corner of her lip until it was ragged and pink, a half-forgotten worry twisting in her belly. She told Sam about the book Frodo was keeping for Elanor, full of fond advice and random anecdotes.

They didn't discuss Frodo's dreams, because they didn't know about them. The nightmares were plain as sunrise, the way he'd thrash to and fro, crying out wordlessly from inside his own dark universe. But the other dreams, childhood afternoons playing house in the old chicken coop and making bark boats to float on the river, those were still his secret.

He wrote about them to Elanor, addressing the still-distant future as he would a letter.

*Dear Elanorelle;*

*Today is the last day of July. Don't fight with Sam's Gaffer so, you mustn't be so hard on him, he doesn't know how to react to a child like you. Learn all you can from him, from the age he knew, and forgive him the things you can't understand. I know he infuriates you, but try to see through his eyes.*

*Set a good example, Goldy looks up to you as her hero. You're the only hobbit she knows with hair and*

*eyes as light as her own. My uncle Bilbo used to say that babies with blue eyes would see the sun in any weather.*

If he tried to write for too long, though, Frodo's head would ache, and his hands would spasm painfully. Sam kissed the callouses and bitten nails with soft lips, rubbed the tremors away in sure strokes. Rosie would run her palms over his curls, which weren't as thick or lustrous as once upon a time. Rosie still considered Frodo's hair as pretty as Sam's windblown locks and Elanor's baby down, fair and crinkly on her tiny brow.

It was evening, the lights of Hobbiton dotted across the dark hills visible from Bag End, candles flickering in the mild breeze. The air smelt like pipe weed and wet soil.

"It's such a lovely night. You two should dance," Frodo decided.

"Either my hearing's gone, or your brain has," Sam replied, laughing. "There's no music to dance to."

"Oh, there's always music, if you listen. Go on, Rose, make Sam dance with you."

"Only if you dance as well. I'm not behaving like a lunatic for an audience. Come on." She pulled Sam and Frodo to their feet and spun them in a ring-a-rosy, faster and faster until it seemed certain they'd fall to the ground. They didn't, instead collapsing against each other in a waltz for three, to a tune only they could hear.

## **The twelfth of never**

"Home again," Sam called from the front door, walking through into the kitchen. Frodo was seated at one end of the table, papers and notes fanned out in a pale aura in front of him. Elanor was rolling happily on a blanket on the floor, and Rosie sliced and peeled apples by the window.

"Ran into Fatty Bolger, he invited us to dinner tonight. Said he told Mr Frodo last week."

"Oh, so he did," Frodo muttered in an absent-minded voice. "Sorry, I forgot."

"Well, that's perfect." Dropping her knife, Rosie tossed the ribbons of apple peel back into the bowl with the pale pieces. "Looks like the ponies get a treat for dinner too. You've got a brain like a colander, Frodo Baggins."

"Sorry." Frodo's tone made it clear he was still not even halfway concentrating on the conversation. Rosie picked Elanor up with an exasperated grimace at Frodo.

"Well, come on then, we shouldn't keep Mr Bolger waiting."

"There's been gossip lately, Fatty's been ordering enough food to feed a banquet," Frodo mused as they walked down the road. "I wonder if this is related to that?"

"If you're finding time to gossip, you should be helping me more." Rosie handed Elanor to Sam, who kissed her on the nose. "But I have to admit, I was wondering similar myself."

"Hullo! Hurry up, we want to eat!" a voice called as they started on the final stretch down the road. It was

Merry, and he walked up and down the length of the fence, balancing carefully as he waited for them to arrive. Fatty and his sister Estella were at the table already, along with Pippin, and a girl with soft, kind eyes, Diamond at birth and Dinny ever since.

"Sit, eat, before it cools," Estella ordered them with a warm laugh. Dinner was bean ragout with chicken and tomato and piles of mushrooms, hot and delicious.

"Hurry up Fatty, before the bottled news makes you burst." Diamond bit into a buttered roll and smiled a secret smile.

"Well," Fatty began. "I was talking to Merry here, despairing that between him and Pippin being so happy as they are, and Frodo swearing bachelorhood, and my Stel living with Dinny here these last few seasons, I don't expect I'll ever have the chance to be in a wedding party again. Not that I'm not happy for you and your lass, Stel -"

"Oh, shut it, before you dig your hold any deeper, and get to the point," Estella said, winding a long string of cheese around her fork.

"You have managed to collect quite a strange group for friends, I'll agree there." Sam thought of his own wedding, the flood of light and joy he'd felt when he realised that this meant he'd have his Rosie near him forever, that nothing could ever break their bond. Frodo had been first in line to kiss the new bride and groom, his eyes shining with happiness as deep as Sam and Rosie's own.

"Anyway, we sat down with Stella and Dinny." Pippin took up the story. "Because weddings are great fun, and eventually somebody's going to expect me to have an heir. Merry's good for lots of things, but as far as I know birthing's not one of them."

"Oh, haha, Pip." Merry cuffed him over the back of the head. "What this lackwit's trying to say is he's marrying Diamond, and I'm going to wed Estella. That

way, Fatty gets his weddings, and the family tree records won't have so many half-rubbed-out lines between names where the writers don't know what to put."

"I saw one that said I was Din's servant." Estella snorted, then blushed. "Not that there's something wrong with that state of affairs, mind," she assured Sam and Frodo.

"So, will you all share a house?" Rosie asked.

"I expect we'll have seperate ones, with the lads in one and lasses in another, under general circumstances." Pippin shrugged. Suddenly, Frodo laughed.

"Do you have a calendar, Fatty? I want to check if it's still Afterlithe, because I have a clear memory of a much



younger Peregrin Took declaring that he'd get married 'on the twelfth of Summerfilth, this is to say, never'."

"You certainly are fond of your cousins, Merry," Sam said, hiding his laugh behind his hand. "So when's the wedding day, then?"

Rosie excused herself from the table to check on Elanor, who had fallen asleep on a pillow by the fire.

"Oh, not for forever. I just wanted my brother to stop whining," Estella explained. "It'll keep the gossips quiet for a time, too... So, is there any truth to the things they say about what goes on up at Bag End?"

"Stel!" Fatty looked horrified. "You can't ask that!"

"Why on earth not?"

"Oh, you know Frodo better than that." Merry shook his head. "He probably thinks Elanor came from a cabbage patch, and that Sam and Rosie sleep in twin beds."

Sam was blushing as red as the fried tomatoes they'd eaten. Rosie and Frodo exchanged a glance and then raised their cups in a toast, to save him further embarrassment.

"To the happy couples," Frodo said. "Whatever combinations those couples may, in fact, be."

"Hear hear," Diamond chimed in, and soon they were all drinking in honour of two of the oddest engagements the Shire had seen.

"I think it's nice," Rosie said later, leaning against Sam in the middle of their bed, playing with Elanor. Rosie had cared for her share of small cousins and the children of friends, and never ceased to be glad her own baby was so good-natured.

"Yes. It's the beginning of a good age, in my opinion," Sam agreed. Elanor gurgled.

"She thinks so too, from the sound of it." Rosie rested her head against Sam's shoulder with a contented sigh. "I can't quite believe how lucky I am, Samwise."

"Nor can I, Rosie-heart. Nor can I."

They drifted off in the warmth of the firelight, the happy sleep of those who have been tired by a day of laughing.

Sam woke several hours later, Rosie breathing softly beside him with Elanor safe in her arms. Frodo hadn't come to bed, it was often his habit to stay up writing. The papers on the table were undisturbed, though, and Frodo wasn't anywhere to be found. A muted sound from outside led Sam to open the front door to check. Frodo was crouched by the bushes, vomiting quietly and shivering.

"I think I'm all right," he said shakily to Sam, making no move to stand. "Perhaps I should avoid mushrooms in the future. It doesn't matter, I never especially cared for them anyway."

Sam crossed his arms at that, knowing the statement for the lie it was.

"I'm sorry I made such a good night end on a bad note." Frodo wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, pointedly ignoring the faint tint of pink on his spit, an edge of copper in the taste.

"Can't be helped now, Mr Frodo. Come on, you'll feel better once you're safe and tucked in bed."

Frodo's skin was icy, and seemed to cool even moreso at Sam's touch, but the tension seeped out of him as he let Sam half-carry, half-help him into the bedroom. Rosie shifted over a little to make room, never really waking up, and Sam climbed back in beside her. Frodo curled in against Sam's side, his heartbeat like a fluttering caged bird underneath his chilled skin.

"It was still a good night," Sam said just before they fell asleep. "That's not changed by how it ended."

## **Another day**

The air was warm, the wind mild, and the sunlight not strong enough to hurt the eyes. Morning in Bag End had begun as it often did, with Sam waking first and seeing to milking, coming back inside to find Frodo putting the kettle on. Frodo put his arms around Sam's neck and kissed him hello, and if there was a better way to greet a morning Sam didn't know it.

They made Rosie breakfast in bed, because she did the same for them as often as she could and it was nice to return the favour.

They'd all started in their daily routines when Elanor awoke in a stormy mood. She was, for the most part, as sweet a baby as three parents could hope for, but when the fancy took her she had a set of lungs to rival a dragon's. Frodo had taken her out for a walk, to save Sam and Rosie from the noise for a few hours.

Nestled safely in a carry-sling, Elanor soon got bored of crying and began to babble in her baby language, chattering away happily as Frodo walked.

A group of girls painting a wagon a bright poppy colour waved as he passed, one of them daring to shout that if he'd wait about until they finished she'd give him a ride he wouldn't forget.

"I'm too old for you!" Frodo called back, laughing. The girl, so freckled she was almost evenly tanned, ignored the jeering of her friends and twirled around.

"You've got enough years left yet for me," she retorted. "Anyway, tales I've heard say Bagginses are long in more than lifespan. Is there truth in that?"



"Lila!" one of the other girls shrieked, horrified. "You'd get a switch across your rump if Dad heard that!"

Blowing a kiss to the cheeky Lila, Frodo continued on his ambling path. There seemed to be flowers of every shade, shape and size in bloom, blanketing the ground with rainbows. The whole day felt like a warm, sunny laugh.

"Ow, Jacky, stop, my feet hurt and you go too fast!" a young voice complained loudly. Frodo paused to watch as two boys, one a few years older than the other, came down the road. The one in front, Jacky, paused when he saw Frodo. The smaller boy jogged up, then grinned when he noticed what had caused Jacky to stop.

"Can I see your baby?" he asked.

"Yes, of course." Frodo smiled. "But careful, she's very small."

"She's not yours," Jacky cut in. "She's your gardener's. And she's not a proper hobbit baby, I heard my mother say so, she's got queer yellow hair."

Frodo's eyes narrowed. "What's your name?"

"I'm Jacky Fairbairn. Is it true you saw Elves? I asked your gardener but he was rude to me, he wouldn't tell me stories. You should put him in his proper place, my dad says."

"Seems your parents know what I should do about everything," Frodo said dryly. "With all their advice, did they teach you how to be polite?"

Jacky sniffed, then glared down at the smaller boy. "Come on slowcoach, keep up!" Running off, he shouted something, but it was impossible to understand. The smaller boy sighed, looking back at Elanor.

"Don't listen to my stupid brother," he said to Frodo.

"That's all right. I've dealt with worse than him."

"Yuck." The boy made a face. "I shouldn't like to meet worse than Jacky. My name's Fastred, by the way. She's a very pretty baby. Yellow hair's nice."

"She's going to be beautiful when she grows older," Frodo said with a soft smile. "People will fall in love with her wherever she goes."

"How can you possibly know something like that?"

"I just know it in my heart. And I'm pleased to meet you, Fastred. We were just on our way to the pond, would you like to come?"

"I caught tadpoles there once," Fastred enthused. "Can you skim stones? I want to know how, could you teach me?"

"I'm afraid I don't know myself. Maybe we can learn together."

They went to the water, and played at skimming stones, and Fastred tickled Elanor and made her squeal. It was great fun, but thoroughly muddy, and by midday they were brown from foot to head.

"I had a good time. Can I come visit you on another day and hear your stories?" Fastred asked as they parted ways.

"Any time," Frodo promised.

Sam and Rosie were highly amused by the dirty state of Frodo and Elanor when they got back to Bag End. They poured heavy jugs of warm water into the copper bathtub, collecting fluffy towels and thick bars of soap.

"I think you've made it too hot." Frodo shrank back. Rosie rolled her sleeve up and tested the temperature on the inside of her wrist.

"That's never hot! And Elanor seems happy as anything." She flicked a bit of water at the baby. "Your body holds a chill too deep. The heat will be good for you, and if it's too much for your liking you can just sit and wait for it to cool."

Of course, clothes ended up wet and hair sudsy, and it was more an excuse to splash than any actual cleaning. But none of them really minded that.

## Stone soup

Rosie believed in stories. The ones her father had told her when she sat on his knee as a lass, the adventures Bilbo recounted whenever the children begged him. The romances her mother held dear because they were so different to the life she'd known herself. Stories, stories, Rosie ate them up like ripe berries off a vine.

There were some stories that didn't have words, too. The story of Frodo's breathing when he was kissed. The sweet, full taste of Sam's skin was a fairytale, so was Elanor's pink little mouth when she yawned. The tale of the flutter of her hands on their arms when she traced the pulses there.

She wished there was a way to tell those stories, to pin them down like butterflies and study their form. But for that matter she'd never liked it when her brothers caught butterflies, they were far prettier flying on the wind than trapped behind glass. Rosie supposed it might be the same with stories, they were better left to float about in the air and change with time. Once something was written down it was still and flightless.

Sometimes she took old stories, ones she'd grown up with and her parents before her, and changed them slightly, because there could be new meanings found in them now, new fables. Frodo and Sam would lean against each other and listen to her speak, caught up in the world her words created.

"Once upon a time, three children lived in a cottage in the wood with their father, who was a kindly old shepherd. Two boys and a girl named Jasper, Garnet, and

Ruby. They were good and happy, and loved each other more than anybody could fathom.

"One day Jasper and Garnet were out playing in the hills when Jasper found a small box made of shiny red wood that somebody had left there by accident. The boys raced home to show it to their father, but the kindly old shepherd drew back in horror.

"That box belongs to the wicked queen who lives on the edge of the wood. You must take it to her castle and throw it in her oven, so it will burn to ash,' he said to Jasper and Garnet. 'Take these gifts for your journey,' and he gave them each nine slices of fresh bread and nine small rocks.

"The boys didn't want to go, but knew it was not their choice to make, so they kissed Ruby goodbye and set off walking.

"Down along the road they met a sparrow, who had a nest of lovely little eggs and a song that made their mouths turn up in smiles.

"That's a sweet song,' Garnet told the sparrow.

"Thank you,' she replied. "But I sing because I'm sad. My babies will hatch soon and I have no food for them."

"Here.' Jasper handed over his bread. 'Your little ones can eat this.' He turned to Garnet expectantly. Now, Garnet liked bread, especially the good, warm bread Ruby had baked them. But he knew Jasper was right to give the sparrow food, so Garnet offered up eight of the slices, keeping one in his pocket to share with Jasper later.

"Just then, a fat black crow flew down and tried to steal the sparrow's food. Garnet grabbed the rocks in his pockets and threw them at the crow, shouting for it to go away. Jasper did the same, and after all of Garnet's rocks and all but one of Jasper's, the crow flew away once more.

"As a thank you gift, the sparrow showed them where a knife lay in the grass, which somebody had left there

by accident. The boys stored the knife in Garnet's pocket and continued on their way.

"They were almost at the castle when suddenly the shiny red box grew and grew and grew into a cage, trapping Jasper inside it. A group of fierce wolves came out of the castle to carry him inside, and even though Garnet had turned white as bone with fear he followed them, because he couldn't leave Jasper.

"The wicked queen had enchanted the box to drain the life out of whomever was trapped inside it, so that she could take the life into herself and grow stronger. Garnet stayed hidden in the shadows for three days and three nights, waiting for a chance to save Jasper. Every day, the wicked queen would grab at Jasper and feel for his heartbeat, tossing him aside angrily when it became clear he still lived.

"The cage was doing its terrible work on the boy, every day he grew paler and thinner. On the third night, Garnet crept out of the shadow and over to the shiny red prison, giving Jasper the last piece of bread he had saved so that the boy would have some strength. They cried, because they were afraid, but knew what they had to do.

"Taking out the sparrow's little knife, Garnet cut off one of Jasper's fingers, weeping all the while. Then they waited for morning, Jasper in the cage and Garnet beside it.

"When the wicked queen grabbed at Jasper, he held the severed finger out for her to feel. It had no heartbeat, and with a whoop of triumph the wicked queen threw open the cage. Garnet ran up behind her and pushed, pulling Jasper out at the same time. Together, the boys slammed the door and locked it, then tossed the cage, with the wicked queen inside, into the oven.

"Screaming with outrage and defeat, the wicked queen shook her fists at Jasper.

"Curse you! You may think you have won, but it will be a bitter victory indeed. From this moment you will eat

nothing but rocks and stones and pebbles, and even in a banquet hall you shall starve and waste away!'

"Of Garnet the wicked queen said nothing, for she'd never even known he was there.

"The two boys fled the castle, running back to their cottage. Their father had gone away, but Ruby was there to kiss them both hello and put salve on Jasper's wounded hand.

"All was not well, though, for when Jasper tried to eat his dinner he couldn't keep it down, even the sweetest foods made him ill. Garnet wrung his hands and fretted for his brother, telling Ruby what the wicked queen had said.

"Ruby drew the last rock out of Jasper's pocket and put water on to boil in a big brass pot. She dropped the stone in and stirred.

"If that's all you can eat, then so be it. I'll make soup,' Ruby declared. 'Now, we have to let it stand for a while, to draw the flavour out.'

"They sat and waited, Garnet and Jasper very puzzled, for how could their sister make soup out of a stone? After a time Ruby lifted the lid off the pot and took a taste, nodding to herself.

"Yes, yes, almost done, just needs a pinch of salt,' she muttered to herself, adding the salt in. Stirring it through, she took another taste. 'Hmmm... nearly right. I might as well use up those carrots, though, since I'm cooking and all.'

"They sat and waited some more, and this time Garnet tasted some of the stone soup.

"Not quite yet... I wonder if there's any lamb left from supper last night? Seems a shame to waste it if there is.' In went three thick slices of lamb. 'And that potato will spoil if it's not used. Even if it's only stone soup, which will be foul as muck no matter what we do, better the scraps be used for this rather than nothing.'

"They sat and waited another while, then Ruby took the pot off the stove and spooned the soup into three bowls. Sure enough, the stone was still in the bottom of the copper pot, and Jasper was still cursed to eat nothing but rocks and stones and pebbles, but they had added so many nice things to the mix the children could barely taste the bitterness.

"In fact, the way Ruby and Garnet made it, Jasper could live happily on stone soup forever, and beat the wicked queen."

## **Role reversal**

"Stop, I don't want to hear any more!" Fastred wailed, covering his ears with his palms and shaking his head from side to side. "I hate this part!"

Frodo smiled softly and nodded. "All right, I've stopped. Hey, little one, it's all right." He touched the boy's shoulder gently. "I've stopped."

"I hate that part." Fastred sniffed, sullen. "It's sad and scary."

They were on a bench in the garden, the afternoon sun dappling everything with green shade and bronze light. Frodo looked over as Sam carried an armful of leaves and twigs to the compost heap.

"But you know it ends well."

"Doesn't matter. I still hate it. Gollum's awful." He hugged his legs to his chest and stared at Frodo with a pout.

"He wasn't awful. It wasn't his fault, really, that he was what he was."

"Mum says that about Jacky. She says he has growing pains." Fastred wrinkled his nose. Frodo caught Sam's eye and couldn't help but smiling. Sam dusted the dirt off his hands and came over to crouch beside Fastred.

"Mark my words, that brother of yours is going to meet real trouble one of these days. Too much sauce by half. If you're done with the story for now, you can come see to the garden beds with me. Lots of slithery worms in the soil there."

Fastred grinned and scampered off. Sam inclined his head, wordlessly asking if Frodo wanted to follow. Frodo shook his head and watched the two of them walk



over the hill together, tilting his head back with his eyes closed, the sunlight making red-pink patterns behind his eyelids.

Rosie was in one of the store rooms, putting some of Elanor's outgrown baby clothes away until they were needed next time around. The little girl was growing so fast, it seemed to Rosie she'd be walking and running in the blink of an eye. Frodo came up behind her and rubbed at the back of her neck, just at the spot where she always got the sore knots after lifting.

"If you promise to keep doing that, I might just have to marry you." Rosie sighed.

"Hardly seems fair to Sam."

"Oh, he can marry you too, I don't mind." With a smirk, Rosie swatted at Frodo's wandering hand that was cupping at her hip. "Not right now, go dunk your head in the waterbucket if you're feeling in that sort of mood. I've got too many things to do."

"Come out into the garden? Just for a minute. It's a lovely day."

"No, be off with you before I find some moldy old trunk for you to scrub."

Frodo laughed, hugging at Rosie and spinning her in a giddy half-twirl. "We've had a sudden role reversal, Rose. Usually it's you trying to get me to come out of the gloom into the fresh air."

"I'll come out later, once I've got this confusion of a room a bit more sorted," she promised. "Shoo! Go back into the sunshine."

Frodo did just that, pausing on the way to check on Elanor in her cradle. She tried to reach up and pull on the chain around his neck, then settled for kicking her blanket off and burbling baby talk. He tickled under her arms and then wandered outside. Sam was sitting on the bench, smoking a pipe with a mug of tea beside him.

"Fastred gone home, has he?"

"Aye. Wanted to go boast to his brother that he climbed to the top of one of those tall trees down by the road. I doubt he'll mention that I gave him a boost up, mind." Sam smiled. Frodo went and sat down beside him. They rested there, happy to exist in the quiet together.

"Our story certainly has ended well, hasn't it Mr Frodo?" Sam said contentedly, sipping at his tea. "Better than even I wished for, and my sister Daisy always used to say I had a head for wishing."

Frodo leaned up in the afternoon stillness and kissed Sam gently, tasting the light sweet herbs of the tea on the warmth of his tongue, the tenderness and strength that went hand in hand in making an excellent gardener.

"Any story can have a happy ending if you know where to stop it," Frodo suggested when he broke away from Sam.



"There's only a lucky few who get a happy ever after without the stopping, though." Sam's careful hands pulled Frodo close again, opening the top two buttons of his shirt and skating across the pale skin with rough thumbs. "And if I've any say in the matter, we shan't ever stop for anything."

"Not even dinner?" Rosie cut in, leaning on the doorframe with one hand on her hip. "Come on you two, you look very pretty out there but I doubt the rest of the Shire would agree with me on that point. We can eat and then go out the back garden, a little more private than this."

"Oh come on Rose, let's give them a show." Frodo smirked. "We could set tongues wagging for years if the right people walk past."

"Folk might want to join in, and we'd have to turn them away. Doesn't seem polite," Sam pointed out. Frodo laughed and the three of them headed inside.

"Oh, blast it!" Rosie grabbed a vase of flowers and dumped it over the stove, dousing flames that had been licking up far higher than they should have been. "One of these days I'll leave a candle burning and burn the whole place down, I just know it."

"I heard a story that you once set your brother's hair alight." Frodo carried plates over to the table.

"Well, not really. Singed it a little, perhaps," she admitted. "Nick likes to make a fuss."

"My firebug." Sam laughed, picking Rosie up and dancing her around the room. "If it's all the same to thee, lass, I think you might want to leave the cooking to me and Frodo after this."

"Hmph." Rosie rolled her eyes. "A fine bit of gossip that would make. That Rose Gamgee, can't even keep a house in order and cook for her men."

"Better that than actually cooking us." Frodo put in, then ducked as she went to smack him across the head.

## **Dusk and dawn**

Evening. Rosie could hear a group of tweens playing in the twilight outside, breaking all sorts of rules and laughing about it. The laughter abruptly turned to yelps of surprise as another smattering of rain came down, it had been showering sporadically all day, a soft quick pitter-patter and then the clouds passed and the sun came back.

The interior of Bag End was bathed in honeyed light from the candles and lamps placed around, illuminating every corner and cranny and chasing the shadows away. Rosie couldn't abide dark corners in pretty rooms. Sam was playing with Elanor, reciting little rhymes and clapping her hands together gently, and Rosie was doing some mending; rose bushes were very nice to look at, but the thorns were murder on clothes. Sometimes Rosie wondered why people bothered planting and tending to the difficult flowers, when there were so many easier ones that looked just as nice. Other times, it would make the most sense of anything in the world to her.

Frodo was lying on the couch, watching them. He was in one of his sad moods, even if he hadn't said anything Rosie would have been able to tell but he'd warned them anyway. "I won't be much fun tonight, I'm sorry," he'd said, as if they'd begrudge him a little bit of sorrow.

"What's your brightest memory?" she asked him now, setting her sewing aside. Better to light a candle than curse the darkness, as her father always said.

"My..." Frodo paused, lost in thought, then smiled. "This, of course. Right now."

Sam looked over at him skeptically. Frodo's eyes were bruise-tired, hair so limp it had almost lost its wave. He didn't exactly look the picture of robust joy.

"Pardon my saying this, but you don't look very happy at all."

"I am, Sam, I am. When you've had a long and exhausting day, there's nothing so nice as falling into a comfortable bed and drifting off to sleep. And I've had such a long day."

"Oh, enough of that!" Rosie shook her head, forcing her mouth to smile merrily. "I don't want any more bellyaching or being poetical. You tell me a nice moment now, Frodo, or I'll come over there and tip water on your head. That'll wake you up right quick."

Frodo chuckled. "All right, all right. There was one... about five years ago, now."

"Oh, no, don't tell that one!" Sam cut in, covering his face with his hands and laughing quietly.

"I think I will." Frodo's smile grew wider. "What happened was, Sam was going to bake a carrot cake, but when he went to crack one of the eggs open there was a chick inside. It looked rather put out at being woken so rudely, by someone banging it against the edge of a mixing bowl. Sam fell utterly in love. What ~~dd~~ you name her, Sam?"

"I don't know if I remember."

"Yes you do, I'd bet all of my toes on it," Frodo grinned. Sam mumbled something under his breath. "What was that? Didn't catch it."

"Rosie. I named her Rosie. You remember that as clear as I do, you just wanted to force me to say it."

"That's true enough." With a laugh, Frodo continued the story. "Now, Sam's gaffer wouldn't have a chicken in the house, of course. And Sam couldn't bear to part with her, so I said he could keep his Rosie-chick here in Bag End, in the old coop that isn't used anymore. There has never been a bird more spoiled, in all of history. Sam

kept a jar beside him whenever he was weeding, to collect worms for her. Then he thought she might get lonely, so he put a rooster in with her. Rosie-chick decided she was going to crow at dawn every morning, same as her new husband, but she never quite got the hang of it. Every evening when the sun set she'd puff her feathers up, proud as anything, and cock-a-doodle as loudly as she could. So Sam tried to teach her the correct way, and one morning I was woken by the harmonious sounds of a chicken, a rooster, and a sleepy gardener all crowing at the dawn. Naturally, I did the most sensible thing, and joined in."

"You were best at it out of all of us," Sam smirked.

"Then people started coming to the door, to see if we were all right. They thought something must be terribly wrong, because of the awful noises we were making."

Rosie shook her head, shoulders shaking with laughter. "You two... I don't even know words strong enough to call you. Mad would be the easiest of course, but it runs much deeper than simply that."

"That's what you like best about us, though, isn't it?" Frodo pointed out, and Rosie had to admit he was right.

## Easy

"Mmm... I'm never moving again. I want my story to end right at this moment, so I don't have to get up." Frodo stretched out, catlike on the bed, then curled against Sam's back once more.

"Seems a shame to end it when everything's going to well," Rosie murmured, scooting in closer to inhale the old-paper smell of Frodo's hair. He didn't answer, matching Sam's sleeping breath rhythm, but Rosie could tell he was still awake.

"It *is* going well, isn't it? You're getting stronger, for the most part."

"Sam and I once talked of stories, and we decided it's better for everyone involved if they don't know how their own story ends."

"I'll agree to that." Rosie slipped her arm around Frodo's waist, still too thin for her liking but rounder than it had been. "There's no fun in the telling if you know the finish."

"Have you ever noticed that you can sometimes guess at the ending, when you're nearly there? You might not know the details but you can see the shape of it." Frodo curved into her touch, tipping his head back and to the side so her chin brushed his shoulder. She looped one leg over his and pressed in against the line of his back, feeling the spine shift under the skin.

"Don't go counting chickens, or I'll make you crow at dawn every morning," Rosie teased. "Nobody knows how the story really ends, not yet. There's still so much left of it. Blank pages stretching off to forever."

"Those pages might not be for me, though. It's almost September."

"And what of that?" Rosie propped herself up on one elbow and stared down at Frodo. "Yes, it's almost September. And then it'll be October. And come Yule we'll make the whole Shire look beautiful, because it'll be Elly's first. Don't make milestones for no good reason, you'll just put worry in Sam's heart."

"What about you, are you worried?"

"I'm too angry at you to be worried. Why can't you ever let things be easy? Why can't you sit down by the tavern on market day and show off your scars and argue about grain prices, and come home and bounce Elanor on your knee? Why aren't Sam and I enough to make you happy?"

"It's not that simple." Frodo shook his head, rolling over to face her and raising one hand to stroke a lock of hair away from her cheek. It was the damaged hand, Rosie thought he'd probably chosen it deliberately to remind her of the wound. Well, she was used to that game. Her brother Jolly had lost two toes to a sickle one year, and it had never stopped him doing anything, though he'd complain like anything about his sore foot when it was his turn to do chores. "If you think I'm going to sit by and watch you shut yourself up in the dark, you're mistaken. You're my kin, Frodo, by heart if not by blood."

"I love you, Rose." Frodo's fingertips trailed across her lips. Rosie bit at them playfully.

"Of course you do. And when I'm old and vague you'll make sure I've got a scarf on before we go out walking."

Even in the dark, she could tell his smile was sad. Rosie sighed, and reached over to shake Sam awake.

"Hm, what's wrong?" he sat up abruptly.

"Nothing, Sam, nothing. Just wanted to hear your voice."



"And you've the cheek to say I'm the mad one," Sam mumbled, turning over. "Go to sleep, you two. Leave the fighting until the morning."

"We weren't fighting," Frodo replied, but Sam just waved him off and buried his head in the pillow.

"If you want to make it a fight, go ahead." Rosie kissed Frodo on the shoulder. "I reckon I could beat you in a wrestle, and if that's what it takes to make you start living again, I will."

## Season's turn

Autumn seemed to sneak up overnight, carpeting the roads and gardens with copper orange and brass brown leaves, putting a bite into the morning breezes. Autumn meant raking, taming the copper and brass back before it overran the green entirely. Frodo sat on a log and watched Sam, the afternoon sun complementing the rusty shades of the season. It was an odd log, very old and half eaten away by unseen insects, but dry and clean and solid.

"Are you feeling well?" Sam asked, readjusting his grip on the handle of the rake. "You and Rose were bickering again, that happens when you've taken a turn for the worst, as a rule."

"I'm fine." Frodo sounded distracted, as if there were other things taking the majority of his attention. "We weren't bickering, anyway. It was just a conversation."

"She's worried about you, she don't show it but it's eating at her like anything."

"What about you, are you worried about me?"

"Somewhat," Sam admitted. There was firewood chopping to be finished but the monotony of moving leaves into neat piles was lulling him into a complacent daze.

"Don't be." With a grin, Frodo kicked some of the leaves up into a flurry. "You two spend all your time telling me I should cheer up and stop feeling sorry for myself, but I'm having the time of my life. I'm the luckiest hobbit in the Shire, and I don't need reminding of that to know it."

Sam didn't say anything, but his expression suggested that he would be more likely to believe it if Frodo said the sky was turning red.

"Don't give me that look, Sam. If Rose is right, and this is an argument, then it's one we've had to death."

"There's a reason for that, and it's not the fault of me or Rosie. I'll believe it's true enough that you're happy, but it ain't a happiness that moves and grows as it should. You hold joy so tight it chokes to breathe."

Frodo shook his head. "I don't know what you mean at all."

"Well, when I eat a good cake, I enjoy the eating of it, but I know there's another one on the cards for tomorrow. You seem sure there's no tomorrow-cake, so you nibble the one you have so slow the tea's growing cold. When are you going to see that we're home, it's over, there's naught left expected of us but long lives?" Sam's voice was close to pleading. Frodo blinked, as if seeing Sam clearly for the first time in weeks.

"You've really blossomed, haven't you, Sam? Once upon a time you were timid and meek as a scared little bird. Now you're father and husband and hero. You've found parts of yourself you didn't even know you had."

"I didn't do nothing special, Mr Frodo, only what all folk would have done in that position. You're the one who carried the burden."

"No, don't go shrugging all you've done off on other people. You bore it too."

"Then pardon my asking, but shouldn't we both be blooming or wilting together?"

Frodo just smiled his sad smile in response. They stayed there a while longer, until the light faded and became no use at all, and then set off back home. A set of swinging ropes tied to a sturdy branch stirred listlessly in the wind and the small swing, inexpertly made by little hands out of a plank and two ropes, creaked as it settled after a day of use.

"Fancy a push?" Sam asked Frodo, and the two of them climbed onto the abandoned play equipment and set about working themselves in broader and higher arcs into the air. They fell off, laughing, and Sam noticed how beautiful Frodo looked with his hair out in a dark halo around his face, caught through with metallic-shaded leaves and tangled in unruly curls. Laugh lines traced out in thin spiderwebs from the corners of his eyes, and for a moment Frodo looked as unreal as an Elf or a dream. Then he was just Frodo again, who tried to look dignified and worldly as he brushed leaves off his vest.

"You're getting a bit of grey in your hair, there," Sam teased. "When Elanor's grown I'll tell her she put them in your head, that she was a terror of a baby."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. You're going to spoil her rotten, and we both know it," Frodo retorted, wincing as he rotated his shoulder. It was his bad one, and he'd fallen hard on it. Sam noticed the movement, even as Frodo tried to hide the pain with another smile, and went to rub on the sore spot.

"Poor Rosie will have to play the wicked mother, then. Elanorelle will complain like anything - 'but Mum, Sam-dad and uncle Frodo let me eat berries before supper'."

"But Mum, Sam-dad says I'm old enough to smoke a pipe," Frodo put in.

"But Mum, uncle Frodo gave me a pretty new dress and I want to wear that, so I can't do cleaning," Sam added to the list. "Oh, she really will be a terror if she grows like that."

"She won't. She's going to be as lovely and sensible as her parents," said Frodo. "My heart knows it."

## Gifts

Eowyn was in the habit of sending random packages and gifts to her hobbit friends, never anything hugely useful but always trinkets that made them smile. Merry was the recipient on this occasion, though of course he divvied the horde up with everyone else. Stel, Dinny, Merry and Pip came up to Bag End for dinner, because if Frodo wouldn't go out into the Shire, the Shire would come in to him. They planted themselves in comfortable chairs around the fire and started to go through the gifts.

There were delicate carved ornaments, birds and dragons and butterflies, made out of wood and iron. A soft doll for Elanor, almost as big as the baby herself. Rosie, Diamond and Estella each got silver-backed sets of a comb, brush and mirror, and, because Eowyn knew that these alone were a pathetic present, the pretty little cases also contained thin flutes that gave clear notes, a pair of mugs with flowers etched along the handle, and a matching tinderbox. "Firebug," Sam said as Rosie squealed in delight.

There were piles of creamy thick paper and pots of shiny black ink, beads and yarns and exotic seeds, and package after package of fine new clothes. Merry and Pippin kept most of these, because the extra inches in the legs and arms made a welcome change from their usual troubles with outgrown winter coats that had fitted well once and now left ankles and wrists freezing. Pippin especially seemed loathe to admit that his favoured jackets of old were no longer any use.

"Mittens, scarves... what's she think we're going to do with these, then?" Merry snorted, holding up the thick

woolen socks that matched the gloves. "They're never going to fit."

"They might. They look stretchy." Pippin grabbed one and tried it on. It didn't even fit across his toes.

"See, I told you so. Anyway, I like your feet, I don't want them hidden." Merry jumped at Pippin's foot, pulling the sock away and tweaking at the big toe.

"Careful!" Pippin shouted as his chair overbalanced and he fell backwards, pulling Merry with him into a chortling confusion of limbs and packages on the floor.

"That's my future husband you're handling there, careful!" Dinny giggled. Merry cast a wicked grin in her direction.

"You'll have to share him with me, though, as Rose shares Sam with Frodo."

Estella snorted behind her hand, her head a little worse for wine after dinner. Rosie was still too overjoyed about her new tinderbox to do more than roll her eyes at Merry's comment.

"None of that." Frodo laughed. "I remember when your aunts used to box your ears for being cheeky to me, and I think I could probably manage a fair imitation of their actions."

Sam was red as anything at the teasing and Merry noticed, but a warning glare from Frodo kept any further remarks from being said.

"Hush, Meriadoc," Estella put in, not seeing the look exchanged. "You know as well as anybody that gossip's not worth the air it takes to say."

"Here's a use for the socks, anyway." Pippin jammed his hand into the one that had been on his foot, keeping his thumb in the heel as he bent the fingers, so that it curved in like a mouth. He repeated the action with the other sock on the other hand, picked himself up off the floor, and went over to where Elanor sat on Sam's lap.

"Hullo, duck. Let's pretend these two funny fellows are your Dad and Frodo. Have they been up to anything

that your uncle Pip should know about?" He made the socks pounce at her, tickling at her tummy. Elanor screwed her face up, looking very puzzled and worried about the talking fabric worms at the end of Pippin's wrists. She raised her new doll and slapped it against Pippin's arm, then burrowed in against Sam's shirt with a squeak of fear. Sam pushed Pippin's arms away and curled his arm around his daughter tightly.

"The sock puppet Sam and Frodo can just clear off, now, thank you," he said firmly. "Elly doesn't like their kind, and I can't say I blame her."

Pippin grinned apologetically and patted Elanor's head.

"You used to be so clever and funny, Pippin. Did you forget how?" Rosie cut in with a grin, to take the edge of Sam's scolding. Pippin poked his tongue out at her, looking for all the world like a child himself for a moment.

They were all like that, Rosie mused to herself later as she tidied the mess, all four who'd been away. Part of them was old, and part was young and free in a way most hobbits lost as they grew up. Nobody but the four of them could ever really know what it was like, she and Diamond and Estella could just attempt to understand.

Sam and Elanor were both in bed already, and Rosie was just about falling asleep on her feet. A crack of light still seeped out from under the door of Frodo's study, scarcely enough to see by, much less write to.

Rosie rapped her knuckles against the old wood of the door. "Come on, it's well past the hour when sensible hobbits sleep."

"Can't stop now, oh no, so much left to write. Have to get all the words out before they slip away, put it down on paper." The mutter was almost below Rosie's range of hearing, but she caught enough of it to feel chills in her spine.

"It's time for bed." Her voice was firm. "I'm coming in now, so finish your writing if you don't want me to see."

She cracked the door open, spilling more thin light into the hallway. Frodo was scribbling away at a feverish pace, his other hand opening and closing in an absent-minded twitch. Dark heavy beads of blood were leaking out between the fingers.

"What have you done to yourself?" Rosie ran to grab his hand but Frodo pushed her away, still murmuring to himself.

"Have to remember it all, have to write it, tether it down so it can't follow where I go. Have to leave it, so much left to do, no time."

"Mr Frodo, I need to see your hand, put your writing aside now," Rosie ordered, cursing the lack of real light in the room. Abruptly Frodo stopped, sitting still as she uncurled his clenched fingers. There was a shard of mirror embedded in the palm.

"I looked so real," Frodo said in a vague sort of voice, staring down at his hand as if he hardly recognised it. "In the glass. My reflection, it looked so alive. I wanted to ask him if he was happy. Sometimes I can't tell for sure, so I thought he could help. Then the glass broke, and I wanted to see if I bled."

"Oh." Rosie bit back her tears and eased the mirror out of the cut, pressing her thumb on his fragile wrist so the blood didn't flow too strongly. "This needs to be bandaged, come inside where there's more light."

"It's Autumn now," Frodo said in the same eerie, airy voice as she led him down the hall. "Have you heard that story, about Autumn and Winter and Summer and Spring? I think I used to know it but I've forgotten."

"Hush now, let me bind the wound." Rosie's hands shook so much she had to stop and breathe before she could wind the cotton strips evenly on Frodo's hand.

"Why are you crying? Was it your mirror I broke?"



"Yes, but I don't care about that any more than I care about a torn dress. This isn't just your flesh to hurt, it's Sam's and mine as well, and I know you don't want to cause us injury."

"Sam." Frodo smiled slightly. "Is Sam here? I'd like to see him."

"I'll get him for you." Rosie nodded, her eyes bright and stinging.

"There's still so much to be done. I have to get back to my writing now."

"All right, all right, steady on. Sit here until your Sam comes for you."

Rosie stumbled down the hall and shook Sam awake. "Samwise, Sam, wake up. Frodo's having a terrible turn; I think you'll have to sit with him until it passes. He's asking for you."

Sam nodded without a word and climbed out of bed. After a few seconds Rosie heard soft voices down the hall. She picked Elanor up out of the crib and curled under the still-warm covers, burying her face in the soft baby hair and sobbing until her heart was dry.

## Little heart

She found Sam sitting against the wall of the study, just below the window, Frodo curled against his chest. Rosie doubted that Sam had gotten any more sleep during the night than she had, but Frodo was dozing lightly.

Catching sight of herself in the round unbroken mirror hanging in the hallway, Rosie stopped and stared. She looked like a mother and wife, in her sensible nightdress with her hair in a haphazard braid, Elanor burrowed in against the crook of her arm. It took her aback for a moment, because inside her head she was still young and free, it had never occurred to her that somewhere along the way she'd grown up.

Sam's expression was a mix of care and sorrow, one hand resting gently against the bare angle of Frodo's pale shoulder, where the collar of his shirt had slipped aside. Rosie came and sat beside him, kissing him lightly and nuzzling at his cheek, coaxing a wan smile out eventually. She'd loved Sam's smile since before she could even remember. He pressed a kiss to her forehead.

Elanor leaned over and tugged on a lock of Frodo's thinning hair, making him shift and grunt in his doze, eyelashes fluttering. Sam stroked his cheek until he settled back into sleep, face so full of love and sadness that Rosie's heart hurt.

There was a bit of mess to the room, papers torn and books knocked to the floor, split-spined in a heap. Sam was crying quietly, Rosie took his hand and squeezed it tight, wishing there was something, anything she could say.

Later, when Sam had carried Frodo in to bed and was doting on Elanor to soothe his nerves, Rosie decided she had to get out of the house or suffocate under the misery of it all. They weren't doing Frodo any good, sitting around and sighing and fixing up the damage after it was done.

She was almost at her parents' house when she met her father coming along the road, leading a dappled pony.

"Hullo Rose, I was just on my way to the smith's. The Rumble pony here's thrown a shoe again. Want to come along?"

Rosie walked alongside her father, glad of the simple solidity of his conversation. At heart, she was like that herself, a personality type she'd heard referred to as Shire-bred, as if most hobbits were bred somewhere else. She liked her dreams and her songs, no mistake about that, but they didn't put food in her daughter and husband, they didn't get Frodo out in the sunshine with his cheeks red from the wind.

Rosie smiled to herself. She really had grown up, after all.

She sat off to the side in the forge, watching the heat and the noise at one remove, distracted by tiredness and worry.

"When you were a lass, Rosie, you liked nothing more than seeing horse shoes made. What's wrong?" her father asked, sitting down beside her. "Who's hurt my little girl's heart?"

"Dad, what can you do for a person who just doesn't get well? Who should be healed and whole a dozen times over by now but isn't?"

"This is Mr Frodo you're speaking of, then?"

"Aye."

Farmer Cotton sighed. "Be careful, something about his manner tells me he's never going to heal. You and your Sam can make him happy and comfortable, but

beyond that I don't think there's anything to be done. Sometimes you have to let go."

Her eyes stung with tears, she wiped at them with the edge of her apron and tried to smile.

"Do you love him, Rose? There's talk amongst the womenfolk. They say you dishonour your marriage."

"Never." Rosie shook her head. "I'm not unfaithful to Sam, I never could be. I'd sooner pull out my heart than hurt him. But I do love Frodo, I can't deny it. I've never loved anything in my life as I love him, except for Sam and Elly. I see how he hurts, and I know he just wants to give up and slip away. That might be the only way for him to be free, but I'm selfish and demanding and I just want him with us, and happy, forever. Why can't things be easy, like when I was small?"

"They never are when you're grown." Her father patted her shoulder. "But chin up, lass. I could be wrong about the whole thing. Perhaps, come summer, he'll be right as rain."

Rosie nodded, and leaned against his touch, wishing she were still young enough for that alone to make her feel better.

It was mid-afternoon by the time she walked back up the hill to Bag End. Frodo, Sam and Elanor were all in the front garden, Elly was playing with some of the recently fallen leaves, gathering up fistfuls and shoving them at her dad.

"I was beginning to wonder if you were ever coming back," Frodo called, teasingly. His eyes were hollow and dark, and his hand still bound, but otherwise he seemed himself again.

"I wasn't, but then I remembered that neither of you can give Elanor milk as I can, and thought it only fair to her to come back," Rosie retorted. Frodo laughed, and met her by the gate with a warm hug.

Her father was wrong, Rosie knew it in her heart. Frodo would be all right in the end, even if she had to pull him into the light by the tips of his ears.

## Once upon a very long time ago

1391

"Blast it, Rosie, go home." Tom scowled at his little sister. "You're too small to come with us."

"I am not." She folded her arms across the bib of her pinafore. "You took Jolly last time and he's not seven yet. I'm halfway to eight."

Tom glanced over at Sam and made a face. "I bet Marigold never asks Sam to take her with him."

"Marigold's a boring old pigeon." Rosie scowled right back, stamping her foot against the front path. "All she does is play tea parties. I want to play with you boys instead."

"Come on, go play with Marigold. You'll have more fun, she's a sensible lass, not a ninny like you." Tom pushed Rosie's shoulder. "Shove off and leave us alone."

"If you like Marigold so much, maybe *she* should be your sister. And Sam can be my brother, he's much nicer than you! You let me come, Tom, or I'll tell Mummy it was you who upset the milk all over the tablecloth, and not Nick at all."

"Rosie." Tom groaned. "Don't be such a pain."

"It's all right, she can come along," Sam put in, squinting up at the sun overhead. "We should be off, if we want to catch Mr Burrows."

"If we've missed him because of you..." Tom scowled at Rosie. She poked her tongue out at his back and then ran to catch up, the ribbon on one of her plaits coming loose.

They hadn't missed Mr Burrows, who made a trip out as far as the crossroads halfway between Hobbiton and the Brandywine bridge every fortnight, with a cart full of things the families out that way had ordered from the village. Sam and Tom had begged permission to ride along, as long as they were back the same day they left. Rosie secretly hoped they wouldn't be, she'd never slept away from her own bed before.

Tom ignored her the whole trip there, hours on the back of the cart between sacks of flour and fat coils of rope. Sam was nicer, he showed her how to chew on the long stems of grass that grew for miles, to get the sticky-sweet juice out. He pulled the ribbons off her plaits and made her hair curl out around her face, and she giggled and blew a dandelion at him.

Tom wouldn't talk to either of them when they reached their destination, stalking off without a word. Sam just shrugged, and Rosie tapped him on the nose and said he was It for tiggy.

It was one of those days where everything was so pretty that Rosie's toes curled and her heart felt like a big bubble, all shiny and floaty and wonderful. There were flowers everywhere, crawling up over fences and strewn across the ground, and dark green leaves, and bright green grass, and big trees to climb in.

They scampered and explored, keeping the time in mind so they wouldn't miss their ride home. They frightened the birds off an old scarecrow and flopped down, laughing and breathless.

"Never been this far from home before," Sam mused, looking up at the sky.

"Ha! I've been further than you, then!" Rosie boasted, getting up and taking long strides out into the field.

"We should go back." Sam sat up. "With Tom in the mood he's in, it would pay to tread careful."

But Tom and Mr Burrows and the cart were gone.

"The wee boy said you two had found another way home, that Milo didn't have to wait about," a farmer explained, hefting one of the sacks of chickenfeed over his shoulder and walking off.

Rosie sat down by the side of the road and burst into tears. Being so far away had seemed a great adventure, but now she was tired and frightened and wanted to go home.

"Hush, we'll think of something," Sam soothed. "You ought to stop crying, you'll make your face all blotchy."

"But now we won't get home for days, and Jolly will steal all my pretty things, and Dad will cut my hair off for disobeying again."

"Well." Sam paused in thought. "I reckon you can steal your things right back, then. And your hair's pretty as anything, no mistake, so I'm sure your Dad will let you keep it."

"Aren't you scared, Sam?" Rosie sniffled. "You must be terribly brave."

"I'm not. But somebody has to keep a clear head, and you're just blubbing like a big wet hen." Sam ruffled her hair. "Cheer up, we'll find a way home. And then I'll put cow dollops in all of Tom's pockets for leaving us in this mess."

Rosie giggled, despite herself. Sam plaited her hair back into the two long tails she'd set out with, as carefully as he could. They were quite good, as far as Rosie could tell.

"We'd better get walking, it's a long way." She smoothed her skirt and stood up, trying to look fierce and strong. Sam nodded, taking her hand. Rosie was glad he offered, because she didn't want to seem like a baby but it was all as scary and as strange as anything had ever been.

They walked for what felt like forever, until the sun had slipped down low and Rosie thought she'd fall asleep on her feet for sure. She'd stumbled twice now, fallen on



her hand and torn the skin, and her dress was dirty on the knees. She didn't cry though, because she was nearly as big as Sam and he was brave as a character in a story, a prince or a warrior.

Eventually they were too tired to go further, lying beside the road and trying to sleep. But everything was noisy and shadowy, and Rosie imagined there were trolls and monsters all around, even in the middle of the Shire. She heard a clip-clop noise, and thought for sure it was something come to eat them, but it was just a pony pulling a carriage, the sort hardly ever seen in Hobbiton. Sam sat up at the sound too, and then cried out with joy and waved to the people inside as the carriage drew up alongside them.

"Why, it's little Samwise! What're you doing here?" the hobbit inside asked.

"Begging your pardon, Mr Bilbo, but we're lost. Could you see to driving us home, if you've got the room to spare?"

"Oh, I think so." Mr Bilbo's eyes twinkled. "Come on up. And who's this delicate little Miss?"

"Hullo," Rosie said shyly, chewing on the end of one of her clumsy braids. "You're Mr Baggins that Sam's Gaffer works for."

"That's me, all right. Climb up, child, this night's too cold to stand about it."

"How was your visit to your cousins, Mr Frodo?" Sam was asking the other occupant of the carriage as Rosie climbed in. It was a boy, younger than Mr Bilbo but older than her or Sam, with nice blue eyes and a big smile.

"Great fun. It seems every time I'm there they've grown bigger. Baby Pippin's crawling all over the place already." The boy grinned. "What adventures have you been up to, Sam?"

"We were lost, we might never have been found," Rosie piped up, her confidence returning. "But we weren't scared at all, even when I fell and hurt my hand."

"Ouch." The boy held her palm up carefully. "I bet that smarted. Shall I kiss it better for you?"

"Yes." She nodded. "I'm Rosie."

The boy kissed her scrape so lightly it felt like a butterfly's wings. "Pleased to meet you, Rosie. I'm Frodo."

"I fell too, but I'm not sooking about," Sam grumbled, nursing his hand as if it were twice what Rosie had suffered. The big fibber! Rosie had seen his hand and it was hardly anything at all. Frodo laughed and kissed Sam's hand, too, and Rosie bit her tongue to keep from poking it out. Sam had been very nice to her when they were lost, and Mr Frodo's kisses were lovely things to get no matter what whopping lies you told to get them.

"It's too late for small ones like you two to be awake. Lean against me and get some sleep, and we'll wake you when we get there," Frodo ordered. Rosie rested against his side, meeting Sam's eyes as he snuggled under the offered arm. Tom could just go jump in the river for his trick, she'd had more fun this way anyway.

"Never fear," Frodo whispered when Rosie was almost on her way to dreamland. "People almost never get so lost they can't be found again."

## **Birthday party**

1401

"Hello, anybody home?"

Sam hurried through to the front door and pulled it open.

"Mr Frodo? Didn't expect to see you here, today of all days. Many happy returns!"

"Thank you." Frodo grinned. "I just stopped by to give you your present, then I have to get ready."

"You shouldn't have -"

"It's my birthday and I'll do as I like. Anyway, it's nothing much, it just seemed something you'd appreciate."

Sam unwrapped the small cloth parcel Frodo had put in his hands. It was a knife, fork and spoon set, with leaves etched into the handles, and a small painted spinning-top.

"That's because I'm too old for toys like that now, I have to be wise and serious from today on." Frodo's eyes crinkled up, showing a few tiny laugh lines at the corners.

"It's very kind of you." Sam ran his fingers over the little gifts happily. "But I have to get back to cooking, I've only just started on the stew and me Gaffer and sisters get home soon."

"Just started? The party begins soon, you'll be late!"

"Not to worry, I wasn't invited."

"What..." Frodo's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Of course not! Parties aren't even half as fun without the sneaking in. Why, if it wasn't my own and Bilbo's I'd try

and not be invited myself, just so I could creep about without permission. I never meant for you to think you weren't welcome, Sam."

"Oh..." Sam furrowed his brow. "No, it wouldn't be right, it would be disrespectful. Thank you for my present, and have a nice time."

Frodo snorted. "Perhaps I'm not the one too old for play after all." He pushed Sam down towards the kitchen. "Come on, I'll help, and then you'll be ready faster."

There were several potatoes waiting for peeling on the table. Frodo picked one up and flicked a knife along the skin deftly, pulling a long scroll off the white flesh underneath. Sam felt a blush warming his cheeks. Everything was going topsy-turvy, it was Frodo's birthday and here he was helping Sam make stew and inviting - sort of inviting, at any rate - him to the party tonight.

"Rosie won't miss a dance and a drink," Frodo said slyly. "She's probably fixing ringlets in her hair and knotting a ribbon at her throat right now. A lass of seventeen's not going to want to spend time with all Bilbo's ancient friends, and I fear my evening will be spent fending off suggestions that it's time I married. You have to come so she's got somebody to dance with."

"Do you fancy Rose? As a wife, I mean."

Frodo had to bite his lip, because Sam might think it was laughter at him and take offence.

"I think she has her sights set elsewhere. And I'd infuriate her before a week was out, I'm not very easy to spend time with."

"Yes you are!" Sam cut in. "I mean, if you were willing to wait until she's grown, Rosie'd be lucky to have you."

"I think you're giving me more credit than is due, but thanks all the same," said Frodo. "Your Rosie might object to hearing you pair her off, though."

"She ain't anybody's Rosie but her own, especially not mine." Sam shook his head.

"But you'd like her to be, wouldn't you?" Frodo pressed. Sam didn't answer. "Then come to the party and spend time with her. You can give her the bangle I bought her for my birthday, if you like."



"I still don't know if I should come at all..." Sam trailed off meekly at seeing Frodo's droll expression.

"Yes. You should. Go wash your face and brush your hair and we'll walk down together. Hurry up!"

It wasn't quite dusk, the light hazy from an earlier drizzle, softening the lantern lights on the party field into a flickering blur. Everyone they met on the road stopped to wish Frodo a happy birthday, clap him on the back and joke about having to be grown-up and sensible. Sam smiled despite himself, because for all Frodo's excellent qualities he was never going to be a properly sensible sort of hobbit. He'd need somebody like Sam around, to remind him of things like eating and sleep.

A little boy, plainly up to no good whatsoever from his cheeky smile, was being piggybacked along by a slightly older and equally mischievous looking friend.

"Merry, look, here's Frodo now!" the younger lad called, pointing. "You haven't given me a present yet, Frodo!"

"I will, Pippin, later. The wait won't do you any harm," Frodo teased back. "Merry, don't carry him like that, he's far too big."

"Am not!" Pippin retorted, wrapping his arms around Merry's neck tightly.

"Argh, Pip, don't, I can't breathe... I was starting to wonder if you were ever going to get here, Frodo. We were on an expedition to come find you."

"Well, I'm found. I can tell you two are up to something, you're never this cheerful unless there's half a dozen flustered aunts waiting to give you a thick ear."

"That's not always true." Pippin sniffed haughtily.

"Yes it is," Merry reminded him. "Come on, Frodo, come say hello to everyone. Fatty's already upset the custard everywhere."

Frodo turned to Sam, who'd hung back through the short conversation.

"Here, give this to Rose. And have a good time!" Pressing a small silver bracelet into Sam's palm, Frodo ran off with his cousins.

Sam cast one last glance back towards Bagshot Row, to the oven-warm kitchen where his family would be sitting down to dinner. Then he looked down at the bangle in his hand, and remembered how much he liked to watch Rosie dance, and set off down the road towards the celebration.

## Wind and rain

Wind and rain in the night usually passed the inhabitants of Bag End by completely. Thick walls and snug covers meant that they'd oftentimes wake the next morning none the wiser of the storms they might have missed.

On this night, though, the catch on the window wasn't quite clicked into place, and blew open with a crash and a gust of icy air. Frodo woke with a shout, clawing at his neck for the white gem hanging there, and Elanor began to cry.

Rosie raced to shut the window against the chill, and Sam, after checking Frodo was himself, went to comfort Elanor. Lighting a little fire in the grate and putting her palms close to it to warm them, Rosie rolled her shoulders and smiled sleepily. Rain outside when you were inside was always a lovely situation.

"Bring her into the bed here, Sam," she ordered, climbing back under the covers and drawing them up to her chest.

"She didn't wake fully, it were just a muttering in her sleep. She'd been keeping good hours lately," Sam explained, snuggling in beside Rosie.

"Yes, she's growing up fast," Rosie and Frodo said at the same time, then laughed at the jinx. The firelight painted their faces with autumn colours and shadows, making their eyes shine as they watched the flames. The bed was warm, they were comfortable but not quite sleepy, and the sounds of the rain were heavy and loud.

"Were you having a nightmare before you woke?" Sam asked Frodo, who simply nodded. Rosie moved



forward and lapped her tongue along the small red welt Frodo's blunt fingernails had left at the curve of his throat. His breath caught when the warmth and wet touched him, and Rosie smiled against his skin.

Sam's hand moved down the line of her back, slipping between the soft curves of her thighs, touching her with the careful strength that defined his nature. She couldn't help but arch into the feeling, tipping her chin up as she rolled her head back. Frodo whimpered at the loss of her lips on his skin but then got his own back, enmeshing his fingers into her hair and nuzzling at the pulse in her jaw below her ear.

The steady drum of the rain outside drowned out the soft cracking sounds of the fire; the world seemed a very large and dark place around their bright little room.

Rosie rolled onto her back, pulling Sam so he lay half-atop her, squirming until her hand was pinned against the pillow under Frodo's shoulder blade. Her nails weren't much longer than his, kept short by hard work and smooth by vanity. Still, they were enough to tease along the planes and edges of his ribs and spine.

One of Sam's hands lay palm-flat across her breast, moving just enough to make Rosie wish for more. The other cupped at her buttocks, lifting her up. Frodo rained feather-kisses across their shoulders, down Rosie's arm to where her hand clutched at Sam's solid side, then up the faintly sweat-salty body to the nape of Sam's neck.

Sam, breathing guttural and fast, moved his hand down from where it rubbed at Rosie's nipple and pulled Frodo up to where their mouths could meet, sleep and warmth and home and happy endings on the taste of the slick slide of their tongues together, loss and pain and despair and gentle cleansing autumn storms.

"Sam," Rosie said again and again, the word spilling over itself and into nonsense, sometimes becoming 'Frodo' and sometimes no word at all, matching the movement of their bodies.

Lightning outside and low in Rosie's belly, flickering shots of brightness that felt so good they hurt, the dull ache of being filled and warm and pressed against clean linen sheets.

Frodo was biting at the lobe of Rosie's ear now, suckling at the skin and worrying it between his teeth with enough pressure to nip.

Sam could remember every time he'd been filled up to bursting with love, whether it be out in the orchards with mud between his toes all cold and full of growing, or in terrible stone towers better forgotten. He'd never found a thing as filling as this, though.

A little of the rain had come down the chimney, making the fire smoke, but it had a nice herbal smell to it and tickled at the throat like a laugh.

Sam moved away a little as Frodo snaked his hand down to rub against Rosie. She hissed at the clever cool fingers, bucking up against the heel of his hand as Frodo moved again, now using the same clever fingers to make Sam arch and groan, slicking his length with Rosie's wetness.

Rosie and Sam kissed again as Frodo moved to position himself on Sam, Rosie's teeth gnashing together with a sharp sucking breath as Frodo's hand returned to its earlier task. She imagined how his fingers would taste, the flavour of soap and ink still strong under the ripe earthy scent of herself.

Sam's mouth was bruise-hard against hers as Frodo slid onto him. Rosie rocked with the movement of them, Frodo's hand still making teasing little pinches and strokes. The rain outside was pounding down hard now, the fire and smoke and humidity inside making the air as lush and heavy as in a jungle.

They looked so opposite, Sam golden and glowing with health, Frodo almost silver-white, luminous with an unreal kind of grace, yet they fitted together like they'd been made as a matched set. Rosie knew with

astounding clarity that she'd kill anyone who so much as tried to hurt either of them.

Sam was lost inside the feeling of Rosie's body against his side, the way Frodo looked with his head tipped back and his mouth open slack. His Rosie. His Frodo. Everything that had happened in the world since time began had happened to lead them all to this moment, this place, the overwhelming familiar heat of it all.

Rose and Sam kissed and kissed, their mouths sharing secrets without words. Frodo's own lips flushed with the want of them, the wish to be part of that kiss.

It was his kiss even without him though, for every part of them was his. Rose's unimaginable heat around his hand, Sam pulsing and hard and strong inside him.

Their voices moaned and gasped and choked together, closer and closer to release with every breath, like the edge of a dark warm cliff looming before them. Then, with a final arch and press and push they all tumbled together, voices in choral harmony as they all vowed 'mine' at the same moment, eyes spilling over at the depth of love they felt in that instant, the promise and the threat and the truth one little word could hold.

"Mine, mine," they said again between soft kisses, until speech faded to whispers and then to sleep. The rain pounded on, a lullaby to send them into dreaming.

The storm had passed by morning, leaving the world scrubbed clean and fresh. They sat on the bench by the front door, Frodo sipping on hot sweet tea, Rosie feeding Elanor, Sam raking up the wet leaves that had been blown about. Out in the sky, arcing down to the limitless green of the fields, was a rainbow.

## Fair

"We used to play with these when I was a lass, my mother and I," said Rosie, making one of the pegs walk across the grass to tap Elanor on the nose. "You draw a face on the top, here, and wrap a handkerchief around the middle, and the peg part acts as legs."

It was a windy day, an orange-and-yellow day, and now that the washing was out Rosie and Elanor rested under the big tree near the line, Sam and Frodo beside them. Frodo was dozing, his head on Sam's knee, and Rosie had taken the chance to wind small white flowers through his dark locks.

"Do you remember that party down at Bywater, it must be almost ten years ago now. It started raining and everybody hid under the big tent, but that wretched Olivia Boffin knocked the support beam over and brought it down on our heads?"

"Aye. The Gaffer called me a blue streak of names when I came home wit my best clothes all muddled."

"Mmm, my Mam wasn't what you'd call impressed. Said I'd end up with my face in the dirt if I didn't keep my feet on the ground, then told me I'd best find some dusty old hobbit with more money than sense to keep me if I intended on ruining my clothes so frequently." Rosie laughed. "And she was right enough, really."

"Weren't our fault that Livvy had feathers where her brain ought to have gone, anyway."

"She fancied you something fierce." Rosie made the peg-doll kiss at Elly's nose again. "Whenever the two of us were dancing together she'd stamp her foot down on my toes and try to steal you, and you'd yelp and scurry

off to see if your dear Mr Frodo needed helping. If he'd been a girl you'd have hidden behind his skirts and cried for Mummy, she scared you so."

"You were just as bad with the lads who tried to court you, don't think that's forgotten," Sam teased back. "You jumped if they so much as put a hand on your arm."

"Well," sniffed Rosie. "They weren't gentlemen. I wasn't going to have people whisper about me, and I knew they would if I gave dances to all the boys."

"They whisper about you now," Frodo pointed out, waking up and rubbing his cheek against Sam's knee sleepily.

"The dances I get are worth their whispers," Rosie declared. "Now, I should get a stew started for dinner. Can I leave Elly out here with you two?"

She could hear Elanor's squeals and giggles from the kitchen as Frodo and Sam put on a peg-puppet show. Singing to herself as she worked, Rosie chopped potato and carrot and pumpkin. She spilled the salt and threw a pinch over her shoulder for luck, then rolled her eyes at her clumsiness and silliness. It began to rain and she called the others inside, not really surprised when the dallied. It was shaping up to be rather a wet season, perhaps they'd have a dry winter as a result.

*Roads go ever ever on  
Under cloud and under star,  
Yet feet that wandering have gone  
Turn at last to home afar.  
Eyes that fire and sword have seen  
And horror in the halls of stone  
Look at last on meadows green  
And trees and hills they long have known.*

It was one of Bilbo's songs, and Rosie's favourite. Happily-ever-afters always made her heart feel nice. Humming to herself, she looked up at the painting

hanging on the far wall, the one of the star-crossed lovers that Frodo had painted not so long ago.

Sam, clothes damp from the wet outside, crept up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Looking at our picture, then?"

"It's silly." Rosie cocked her head to one side, then shook it. "She's supposed to look like the most beautiful thing there ever was, and she just looks like me trying not to laugh at you in your stupid hat."

"Then she's the most beautiful thing, no mistake." Sam blew on the curve of her neck, making her squirm at the tickle.

"Look at the newlyweds," Tom said, leaning in the doorway with Marigold beside him. Rosie silently cursed the fact she'd let it slip that they'd all be home today.

"We're not newly wed, it's more'n a year past now," Sam pointed out.

"If you're still playing games in the kitchen and saying sweet nothings for no reason, you're newlyweds." Marigold smiled to take the sting off the comment and moved over to help with the cooking.

"Where've Frodo and Ellyelle got to?" Rosie asked Sam, who shrugged.

"We're here, Rose. She needed changing." Frodo came in, nodding hello to their guests and sitting down at the end of the table with Elanor still in his arms. Sam went over and took her off him, leaving Frodo to his writing.

"What do you think, Mr Frodo? Are these two a pair of giggling tween newlyweds?" Tom asked, ignoring the writing Frodo was attempting to get done, plunking down into the nearest chair. Sighing, Frodo shut his book.

"I think they're in love, yes." He nodded, smiling softly over at where Sam had an arm around Rosie's shoulders, Elanor cradled between them.

Marigold snorted. "A house full of dreamers. Love don't put clothes on baby's backs or food on the table. You three don't have a cup of sense to share between you."

"Don't take that tone with me, Marigold." Sam shook his head with a grin. "I remember how you and Tom here used to look at each other down by the Dragon at night. You know what love is well as I do."

"It passes, Sam, it passes." Marigold sighed, adding carrots to the boiling water.

"Not if I have any say in it, it won't," Rosie said.

"What makes you think you do?" Tom shot back.

"So much bitterness ain't the right mood for dinnertime, so you can just shut your mouth and leave Mr Frodo to his papers," Rosie informed her brother, handing him Elanor. "Play with your niece now and stop being such a wet blanket."

"That goes for you, too, Marigold," Sam agreed. "I've seen enough misery and the like to last me forever, so I think it's only fair that I get all the happiness I could ask for in return."

"'Fair' isn't what life's -"

"It is in this house," Frodo cut Marigold off. "And they're the fairest pair of lovers the world has seen, so that's the end of that argument."

Tom and Marigold rolled their eyes, but said no more.

## **Tinker, tailor, soldier,**

Feverfew and vervain, crushed peppermint and ground hypericum. Rosie had learned more about herbs to heal the mind than she'd thought possible, and Frodo had sipped at more woody, spicy teas than he could remember. Sometimes they helped a little, too.

He was wearing one of Sam's shirts, thicker and warmer than the fine lightness of his own clothes, better for keeping out the grey wind of the weather. The sleeves pooled at his wrists, the collar gaping at his neck, and it made Frodo feel rather small, and young, remembering times long past when Pippin had covered his own clothes in mud or something equally filthy and draped himself in Merry's much larger articles quite happily.

It wasn't the best sort of day for walking, a mackerel sky in the early morning slipping into a promise of heavy rain by early afternoon, but Frodo didn't mind. Rosie had insisted he take an umbrella with him on his stroll, but he'd left it down by the stile at the edge of the Proudfoot property, continuing on with his hands in his pockets and face turned up to the sodden sky.

It was an apple-stealing, hide-and-seek, adventure sort of day, half a dozen children romping and galloping for every parent harvesting and working.

There was a group of them down by the water's edge, sailing leaf-boats out onto the river.

"Addie, you cheat! I saw you toss that stone at mine!" a little boy shouted at an equally small girl, stalking away angrily. She poked her tongue out at him and turned to her friends.



"I never did. You saw, didn't you? I don't cheat."

The other children shrugged, the spell of the game broken, and wandered off, leaving only Addie and a slightly older boy whom Frodo recognised as Jacky Fairbairn.

"Hello there." Frodo walked in close to them.

"Fastred said he climbed your tree. Did he really?" Jacky asked, wiping mud off his hands onto the sides of his pants. Despite the cloudy day his nose was sunburnt.

"Yes. You can come by and try as well, if you like," Frodo offered.

"Fastred's so strong," Addie said with a happy sort of sigh.

"Here now, I'm stronger," Jacky objected. "He still gets scared by storms, but I hardly ever do. And I can swim twice as far as him."

"Nobody's doing any swimming while the water's so choppy," Frodo put in. "You're old enough to know better than that."

Addie pulled one of the late-blooming flowers up out of the ground, pulling the petals off on each beat of her rhyme. "Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor." The little yellow tear-shapes fell onto the shoreline in a bright rain. "Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief."

"I'm going to be a rich man," Jacky told the little girl. "I'm going to be a lawyer when I grow up. I'll wear a smart suit and you'll have to call me sir. Do you want to be a lawyer's wife?"

Addie snorted. "No. I'm not going to be anybody's wife, I'll live by myself for ever and ever."

"That sounds rather lonely," Frodo said as the three of them walked along the riverbank.

"You're not married, and you're not lonely, are you?" Addie asked.

"No, but I don't live on my own."

"Fastred says your home is always wonderfully happy, that it's like a storybook," said Jacky.

Frodo smiled at that. "Yes, I suppose it is, rather, since I'm writing it down like a story."

"You mean all of this, living in Hobbiton and sailing boats on the river and climbing trees, is all part of your big story with the Elves and spiders and battles?" Jacky's eyes were wide. Frodo laughed.

"A very important part. I write it all down, every word, on bits of paper, and then I copy the important parts, or the parts that make sense of the rest, into my red book. That way people who want the whole story can find it, and those who only care about the core tale can know that."

"So we'll be in it? You'll write down this talk today?" Addie clapped her hands.

"Yes. But it won't get in the book, only in the sheaf of papers, for I finished the book this morning."

"Really? It's all done? The adventure's over?"

"Finally, Jack, finally. And I'm not that sorry to see it completed, for it was a difficult journey to live through."

Jacky shrugged. He'd heard the stories from Fastred, and it all sounded like grand fun.

"How does it end, then?" Addie wanted to know.

Frodo tilted his head back, letting the first light drops of rain fall on his eyelids and cheeks.

"The only way it ever could," he said in a quiet voice, smiling at the children.

## Outside

"Hullo, Marigold. Didn't expect to see you again so quick," Sam greeted his sister, ushering her inside. His cheeks were red from the effort of lifting and carrying, he'd been shifting furniture around in one of the bedrooms to make it nice for Elanor, when she was old enough to want a space of her own.

The little girl liked more light than most hobbits did when it came to indoors, so Sam had put a window box on the sill and planted all the bright flowers he could think of, snapdragons and sunflowers and nasturtiums, to make the room seem airier.

"Where's everyone else?" Marigold asked, pulling her bonnet off and fluffing her hair out. When they'd been children, Marigold had taunted Rosie with that hair, for Marigold's was warm earth colours all through and springy and thick, fat brown ringlets on her cheeks, while Rosie's had tended towards unruly waves and coils that had to be roped back into place with ribbons, and frizzed up when the weather was dry. 'My ears are prettier than hers, though,' Rosie had sniffed more than once, and that much was true. Elanor had inherited Rosie's ears, but her red-gold curls were unlike any hobbit before her.

"Let's see... Rosie and Elly have gone over to see Bella Grubb's new baby, a boy complected almost as pale as my Elanor from what I hear. And Mr Frodo's in with his writing as usual."

"I still don't know why you married her, when so many better lasses would have had you. I once saw her spit at Billy Ferny's feet when he asked for a dance,

without saying so much as 'no thank you' first. Sally Birchwood wanted you to speak for her, you know she did, and she's to have her Dad's farm when she weds."

"Bag End's twice the place the Birchwood farm's ever going to be, and that Sally's a flighty little complainer who couldn't cook water if it heated itself up. I'm not going to tolerate you coming into my home and saying things about my Rose, Marigold, and if -"

"It's not your home!" Marigold interrupted with a shout. "And from the talk I hear and what I've seen with my own two eyes she ain't you Rose, neither. Don't tell me you're too half-wise to see it, Sam. Mr Baggins has you living here because he's bedding your ugly little wife. I always said that Rosie Cotton was a hus--"

"Now see here." Sam's red cheeks were white with rage. "I've never raised my hand to you or Daisy or May, but that don't mean I won't if it's warranted, and if you finish that word it will be. Rosie's a Gamgee now, and you'll respect her as your sister-in-law. I thought you better than a gossip, Marigold."

Marigold's jaw was clenched tight, one eyebrow raised with cool anger. "I don't need gossip to see the truth, not when it's clear as water. Mr Frodo had flowers through his hair when Tom and I visited, like a tween fresh from a roll in the fields. Don't even try to lie and say that weren't her work. And he changed Elanor when she was soiled, which leads me to thinking maybe her strange looks have a simple reason to them. Why else would he care, unless she's his?"

Suddenly Sam laughed, a sad and sharp sound.

"Your life must be such a grey place for you to hate love so. Rosie is my wife, Elly my daughter, and I don't reckon there's a word yet for how I feel about Frodo but, whatever it is, he's that. And if Rose were Frodo's wife and Elly his daughter I'd love them just as I do as things are."

It took a second for the blow to sting after Marigold slapped his cheek. Her eyes welled with tears.

"What happened to you, Sam? I don't know you at all anymore." Her gaze flicked over to the study door behind Sam and she glared.

"I think you'd better go," Frodo said in his most polite, even voice.

"Come with me," Marigold begged her brother. "Leave them to their life and have a proper one yourself."

Sam didn't reply, and Marigold finally nodded and walked away. Frodo hugged Sam, stroking his hands through his hair and kissing gently where a livid handprint was rising on the skin.

"I'm sorry," Frodo whispered. "Oh, Sam, I'm sorry."

"No." Sam shook his head. "Stop it with the sorries, for we've nothing to be sorry for, and saying it makes it seem that we do. Marigold don't mean half of it, at any rate, she only says it because she's unhappy in her own life."

Frodo nodded. "I know. Come sit with me for a while? I'm going to drown in words if I keep at it for any longer, revising's even harder than the writing was."

Dust danced on the sunlight in the air as they sat together, blowing lazy smoke rings and talking about nothing much.

"There's talk of having bonfire night early this year, the trees grew so green in summer that there's more leaves on the ground now than folk have room for. I've heard people say they want it close as this coming Sunday."

Frodo shook his head in amazement.

"Time does get on, doesn't it? Seems like only yesterday we got home, and the day before that we left."

"Yet at the same time it's as if we've been here, living with Rosie, forever. I feel like there's a pair of Sam

Gamgees, one and adventurer, and one just a plain ordinary hobbit."

"Yes." Frodo smiled, lapsing into thoughtful silence. Then, with a small nod to himself, as if some decision had been reached, he spoke again. "It will be Bilbo's birthday on Thursday, Sam, and he will pass the Old Took. He will be a hundred and thirty-one!"

Sam remembered Bilbo's party twenty years before, how Rosie had kissed him on the cheek and then run away, her own cheeks pink with blushing. She still had the silver bangle he'd given her that night, kept stored away for Elanor to wear in time, Rosie's own wrist too grown for it now.

"So he will!" Sam laughed to think of Bilbo growing so old when he'd always been so young at heart. "He's a marvel! And your birthday, too, don't think we'd forget that. Rosie will want to make it a party to remember."

"Well, Sam, I want you to see Rose and find out if she can spare you," Frodo pulled a pile of old maps out of one of the bookshelves. "So that you and I can go off together. You can't go far or for a long time now, of course." His voice sounded a little sad, wistful.

"Well, not very well, Mr Frodo," Sam agreed. "Nor can you, with your health being what it is, though I suppose a spell in Rivendell will do more good than harm, and we'll muddle through until you come back. Elly and Rosie can't be left on their own for too long, though, otherwise I wouldn't dream of leaving you."

"Of course not. But never mind." Frodo grinned, holding Sam's hand in a way meant to be comforting, the gesture slightly marred by the scarred nature of his own hand. "You can see me on my way. Tell Rose that you won't be away very long, not more than a fortnight, and you'll come back quite safe. And she's not to fret about me, either, for I'll be happy and safe myself, though I'll miss my little family."

Frodo blinked a few times, as if the smoke had clouded his eyes, and squeezed Sam's fingers.

"I wish I could go all the way with you to Rivendell, Mr Frodo, and see Mr Bilbo... and yet the only place I really want to be in is here. I am that torn in two."

"Poor Sam." Frodo smiled, eyes still overbright from the smoky air and the light of the fire. "It will feel like that, I am afraid. But you will be healed - you were meant to be solid and whole, and you will be."

"I reckon my healing's all bound up in your own, though. So when you come back to us happy and strong, both the Sam Gamgees in my head, hobbit and journeyer alike, will be complete as anything."

"Don't say that." Frodo shook his head. "Take the words back, Sam. It might be that day never comes, and you deserve a joy not tied to a wounded old cobweb like me."

"They're not wounds anymore, they're scars," Sam corrected, skating his fingertips over the stump where Frodo's hand became a knot of tissue. "And I love them as I love the rest of you. Don't dwell on old things that can't be changed with wishing, look ahead to what comes next in our story. We've still got an inkwell or two's worth of tales between us."

Frodo rested his head on Sam's shoulder, watching the fire burn down to embers, thinking about stories, and happily ever afters.

## Inside

"Room at the table for one more?"

Rosie looked up at the voice, smiling at Pippin and motioning for him to sit down. Elanor was being doted on by three of the young waitresses, leaving Rosie to enjoy her afternoon tea in peace. She offered Pippin a scone, which he bit into without a moment's hesitation.

"I didn't know you were coming to Hobbiton. Is Merry with you?"

"Aye, and Stel and Dinny besides. We're staying here, as a matter of fact, though the others are out causing some sort of trouble at the moment. We're here for the bonfires tomorrow night, you've got far more leaves to spare round here than anywhere else does." Pippin took the mug offered to him by one of the serving girls with a nod of thanks and drank deeply before speaking again. "What're you doing out and about anyway, mistress Rose? I'd heard that those who lived up at Bag End never came outside any more."

"Very funny. We've been visiting, Elly and me. Seeing the new Grubb baby."

"Ah, he'll probably end up having his heart broken by her some day, you know. That girl of yours is a pretty little one."

"I'll bet my last biscuit any child of yours will be twice the heartbreaker of the pick of my brood, Mr Peregrin."

"We'll just have to wait and see, won't we?" Pippin said with a smile, munching on his second scone. Rosie covered her mouth with her hand as a wide yawn escaped her. Pippin's expression grew sympathetic.



"Ah, that's a look I recognise, sad to say it. Seen it in the glass on my own face too often."

"Merry has nightmares too, then?" Rosie asked in a quiet voice. Pippin nodded.

"Terrible ones. I do too, at times, and I'm sure Sam's no different. But Merry and Frodo... it hurt them more, I think. They're not the same hobbits they were a few years back."

"None of us are, Mr Pippin, none of us are," Rosie said sadly, then sighed. "But anyway, let's talk of happier things. Do you remember years ago, you can't have been very old at all, when Gandalf came to bonfire night and put different colours on the flames?"

"I can remember it happening in quite a few occasions. He did love to see the parties we had." Pippin's small grin at the memory was sad and pinched, and Rosie wondered how someone still in their tweens could look so weary. "He came to see Merry and me last week, you know."

"Really? I'm surprised he didn't stop by Bag End, then. Frodo and Sam would have loved to get a visit."

Pippin hesitated. "I think he knows he'll see them soon enough. Now, Rosie, there's a few things I want to tell you, and I only say them at all because I think our dear Frodo would kill me if I tried to put more worry on Sam about him, but one of you deserves to know at least. If it were Merry..." Pippin paused, then roused himself and started speaking quickly, letting all the words free in a tumble. "Sometime very soon Frodo's going to go away, he'll say it's to see his uncle Bilbo in Rivendell. But he won't be coming back from the trip, he's planning to sail with the Elves. That's why Gandalf came, he thought we should know to see them all off."

"Oh," Rosie said. Someone dropped a plate to the floor by the counter, it landed with a clatter. Elanor cooed under all the attention she was getting. The scones

and jam and cream on the table suddenly smelt too sweet, like rot. Rosie felt as if she was going to be sick.

"Oh," Rosie said again.

"When I was young, I used to sit and annoy Sam when he was trying to work whenever I visited Frodo. I'd make him teach me about the garden, and some of the things he said have never left me. Even when all the plants are pulled from a bit of earth, it's still good for growing. The only time it's done with is if somebody puts salt down, and then there's no way to remedy it. Sa... Sharkey's voice was a dangerous thing, and I think he made Frodo believe there was salt in his heart. Make him see that flowers can still grow there, Rosie. It's up to you, because when he looks at Sam he can see the dark times if he chooses to, but all you mean to him are good bright things."

"Is that why you and Merry latched on to your Miss Diamond and his Estella?"

Pippin nodded, smiling softly at the thought of the two lasses. Before he could say anything, though, the door opened and Marigold marched inside. She didn't have a hat or bonnet on, and her hair was wild around her face.

"Want to join us, Marigold?" Pippin offered, pulling another chair over. She noticed them and glared, then spoke coolly despite her obviously worked-up state.

"Why Rosie, Peregrin, so nice to see you. And Elanor's looking well, she's got that queer-shaped face like all Baggins children but I suppose that can't be helped."

Rosie's head jolted back as if she'd been stung, the malice in the words sharp enough to cut and entirely unexpected.

"You should go live in Bree. The Men there wouldn't notice how loose you are, on account of the size difference," Marigold hissed. "You and Ferny deserved each other."

Silence fell like the swing of an axe, everyone pausing and turning to watch the scene. Pippin moved to stand but Rosie stilled him, putting her hand on his arm, then pushing her own chair back with a deliberate and long scraping sound.

Pippin's eyes flashed with anger, the weariness in his face revealed as strength, and knowing, and a steely kind of love that wouldn't bend or waver under any onslaught.

Rosie stood up, half a head taller than Marigold, her jaw clenched. Stepped forward and Marigold flinched back, eyes suddenly showing a sheen of fear. Then Rosie shook her head, and turned to pick Elanor up.

"I've exactly what I deserve, Marigold, and the same's true for you."

Head held high, Rosie walked out of the still-open door, Pippin beside her. She made it all the way around the corner and down the lane before she sat down in the dirt and began to sob. Pippin rubbed her back gently as she cried.

"Nothing works, Pippin, nothing. Not Black Hellebore or Ginger or even Kingsfoil, and that used to help him at first. I want him to stay, but for what? So he can be in pain all the time, and listen to ridiculous talk from folk like Marigold?"

Pippin didn't say anything, just kept up the small soothing touches and pats.

"She's wrong, anyway. El's as Gamgee as she is, more so even if you're judging by nature as well as blood. I don't know where the fairness came from, but it wasn't Frodo. Elanor isn't his baby, though..." Rosie hesitated. "There was a brother or sister for her that was lost, and it might have been."

Pippin nodded. "I thought so. We heard about your troubles and couldn't help but wonder. Rose, Sam's going to heal in time, and so will I, and every day I'm surer Merry will too. If we all can, so can Frodo. You can make him see that."

"Yes." Rosie dried her tears on the hem of her skirt, nodding to herself. "I can."

## Bonfire night

"Bonfire night, the stars are bright, every little hobbit all dressed up in white. Can you eat a biscuit, can you smoke a pipe? Can you go a-courting at ten o'clock at night?"

"Fastred, stop singing this instant." Rosie stuffed a sausage in a roll into the boy's mouth to quieten him. "You'll wake Elanor."

"Mmph mmphfth mm." Fastred pulled the sausage out of his mouth. "She shouldn't be asleep anyway, she's missing her first bonfire night."

The air was smoky, shot through with tiny sparks from the crackling leaf-piles. Sausages cooked outside tasted very different, and much better, than the ordinary sort, and everyone was tucking in greedily.

"Come on El, wake up." Fastred tickled her, she just grumbled and swatted his hand away.

"Leave her be, lad," Sam chided. "Come on, I'll pig-a-back you down close to the big fire if you like."

The two of them galloped off, leaving Rosie, Elanor and Frodo on the hill, faces lit by the spotted fires on the fields below.

"It's an early party for your birthday, since you won't be here come Thursday," Rosie said after a time of quiet.

"Don't, Rose." Frodo put his hand over hers. "Let's not talk of it yet."

"All right, but you don't get off with that forever," she warned. "I've got a lot to say on the subject."

"I'm sure you do." Frodo kept his face as serious as he could, then hugged her. "I hope, in the interests of

poetic justice, that Elly grows up as thorny as her mother Rose."

"You're terribly funny. I mean that," Rose said dryly.

Some clever hobbit decided to throw a handful of little squib crackers onto one of the fires, sending up a popping line of sparks.

"It'll end in tears if they keep mucking about like that." Rosie paused. "Oh, no, I've turned into a responsible mother, like my own before me. Whatever can I do? I'll go jump in the millpond, wash all the logic off."

"What's this about the millpond?" Merry asked, climbing up the hill to flop down on his back beside Frodo, shortly joined by Pippin and Diamond, Estella wandering up a few moments later and sitting down on Merry's legs. He grunted in protest but she paid him no heed.

"I hear the four of you were causing trouble at the bakery yesterday," Frodo said. "You were adding extra bits to the gingerbread men, and stealing all the currants out of the buns when old Rondo Softolive's back was turned. I think you've managed to find the only two lasses in the Shire as wicked as you."

Diamond laughed. "The history books will tell of Thain Peregrin, hero of the free peoples, and the floggings he got for making all the gingerbread men excited."

"Rondo wouldn't flog me. Used to have me run messages for him, whenever I stayed with Frodo. Said I was the best helper he had."

"That's just because he doesn't know about the chocolate cakes we used to sneak," Merry pointed out diplomatically.

"Have you decided on a wedding day?" Rosie asked, rubbing Elanor's back as the little girl began to stir. Estella shook her head.

"No, it won't be for a while yet. We're all still too silly to settle down and be married. Anyway, they haven't made a bed big enough for us, yet."

Pippin threw a handful of grass at Estella and called her a few choice names. Merry threw more grass back, with the same names.

"Rose here is a living testament to the fact married folk are capable of silliness, too."

"That's quite enough from you, Mr Baggins." Rosie handed Elanor to him. "She's fretting, you're the only one who can calm her in these moods."

"It's the gem, it fascinates her." Frodo touched the white stone on its chain. "You're too little for it yet, Ellyelle, but when you're older it can hang around your pretty neck. Your mother will mind it for you."

"Don't you need it though, Frodo?" Merry asked. Frodo shook his head, stretching his legs out and curling the toes.

"Not anymore."

"I want more sausages," Pippin and Dinny declared at the same moment.

"Yes, rather," Estella agreed, climbing off Merry. "Want us to bring you up any?"

"We'll come down soon," Frodo told her, resting back on his elbows and watching the silhouetted figures run around the fires, their calls and cries to each other indecipherable at this distance. Elanor settled in against the crook of his shoulder, still talking in her baby-talk. He reached out, playing with the tips of Rosie's long curls, tracing the line of her ear.

"If we were in a picture book, I think this would be the last page," she said, her voice tight, soft. "Here on the hill, watching Sam play with the children he helped build homes for, burning the leaves of the trees he tended. I love him like I love sunshine and air."

Rosie turned to Frodo then, blinking tears out of her eyes, shining tracks in the golden light. "And you, I love

you like stars and water. I would talk a thousand hours if I thought it would do any good, but there's nothing I can say, is there?"

"Yes, Rose." Frodo nodded. "One thing. You can say good-bye."

He didn't cry, his face calm and smiling, as if his eyes had seen secrets Rosie couldn't dream of. Kissing away her tears, Frodo moved so that her head was resting on his lap, his palm smoothing her hair down as they watched Sam chase Jacky and Fastred around the fire.

"It isn't fair," Rosie said. "It isn't fair you gave so much and fought so hard just to lose it anyway. It isn't fair that the hero doesn't get a happy ending, doesn't have a reward when the journey's done with."

"I don't think I've been cheated, Rose," said Frodo, stroking his hand down her back. "I've had you, and Sam, and El, haven't I? But nobody can live at the crossroads forever, and it's Winter's time to walk. Shh, don't cry. After all, I had a pretty good year."



Choose a path:

**West of the moon**

page 170

or

**East of the sun**

page 197

## **West of the Moon**

They didn't argue, that last day. Rosie was going to, but she woke up cold and sad, Frodo already out of bed and Sam curled in on himself, and she knew there wasn't a point to wasting these hours with fighting. They'd be off too early the next morning for any sort of real goodbye, so this was the time that had to count.

She cooked all the breakfast foods they'd eaten together, a little bit of egg and a few small pancakes and bacon on fresh bread. She kissed them both good morning as they came to the table, then asked them to watch Elanor as she ran out to the tree near the washing line and tried to stop her tears.

Sam tried to do odd jobs to keep his hands busy, but there was nothing that really needed to be done and the sky felt heavy above them, raining for a while every so often.

Eventually Frodo thought he'd be smothered by the density of emotion in the cosy little home, and went out for a walk. It was wet and cold and windy, but it didn't seem fair to the Shire he loved so much to rug up against it, to hide from what it was.

He was lost in his own thoughts when he heard the first scream, down near the river. The water was slate-grey and fast flowing, utterly wrong for any sort of swimming or boating. The shout came again, and as Frodo drew closer he could see a child submerged up to his neck, splashing out near the middle of the widest stretch. Breaking into a run, Frodo raced down to the bank, looking around for a way to get closer. There was half a cut-down tree lying in the mudflats, mostly

covered by the current but with some branches still above the tide. Frodo held onto them as he lowered himself into the water, ignoring the shock of the cold, and moving towards the boy.

It was Fastred, his heavy clothes weighing him down as he struggled to stay afloat, teeth chattering together and chopping all his words apart.

"Jacky," he managed to gulp out as Frodo got him back to the shore. "Jacky's still there. We were in the boat and it tipped..." Frodo ran back to the river, gasping for breath, a stitch burning up his side, and dived in before he could think twice about it.

The water bit deep, a chill knife through to the bone, washed to the Shire by the storms from colder parts. Frodo kicked down, moving with the agonising dreamlike slowness of swimming. It was grey, it was freezing, murky and difficult to see, and for just a moment it seemed like the simplest thing in the world to let go and drift, let the river decide all the things too confusing to face on the surface.

Then Frodo caught sight of the upturned boat on the river bottom, Jacky's waist and arms tangled in the cord he'd been using to fish. Shaking the wheedling promises of oblivion out of his skull, Frodo redoubled his kicks. Jacky's eyes were wide and scared, freckles like dark splotches against his white skin in the roaring blackness of the water. He had struggled so much that the cord around him was impossible to untangle, without hesitating Frodo grabbed the lines that connected the boy to the ruined rowboat and bit down hard on them, snapping the strong black threads. He caught the edge of his tongue in the bite too, and tasted hot copper in the cold silt.

Frodo turned to see if Jacky's legs were free enough for him to kick, but Jacky's eyes were half-lidded now and bubbles were escaping his blued lips. Ignoring the fire of his own lungs, Frodo grabbed Jacky by the collar

of his shirt and kicked up, trying to reach the branches above again. The undertow wasn't as strong as it might have been, which was lucky because Frodo certainly wasn't up to fighting anything more powerful than the slight current. It was a small mercy, but enough to get him to the surface.

As soon as he saw the pair of them Fastred ran to the water's edge, dancing from foot to foot in worry and fear, as Frodo inched his way along the branch back to the bank. Jacky's nose was bleeding, and there was a little watery blood seeping from his ears as well. He didn't breathe.

"Come on, Jack, wake up," Frodo said, in the same voice he'd used to scold his cousins when he was a child himself. He pulled the cords off as quickly as he could, leaving long bruise marks on the skin of Jacky's arms and legs. "Jack, Jack, come on, breathe."

"Jacky, Jacky," Fastred sobbed. Frodo rolled Jack onto his side, ignoring the angle his head lolled with the movement. His skin was waxy and waterlogged, hair caught with twigs and dirt. After a terrible, eternal second, Jacky coughed a gulp of filthy water out and gasped wetly, eyes springing open as he vomited up half the river.

"Jacky!" Fastred shrieked, throwing one of his arms around his brother's neck, holding the other at his side carefully. Frodo fell back against the ground, suddenly the softest thing he'd ever felt. Softer than a bed, softer than skin. Soft enough to sleep on, and never wake up.

When he did wake, he was wrapped in a blanket so tightly it felt as if he was a caterpillar in a cocoon, stifled by the warmth. His hair was still damp. For a moment, everything was fuzzy and comfortable, a hazy memory of rain and water, Elanor's coos from where she lay in her crib lulling him back towards sleep. Then Frodo sat up sharply, the memory coming back.

"The boys, are they going to be all right?"

Sam and Rosie were both sitting beside the bed, looking relieved that he'd finally stirred.

"You saved them, no mistake," Sam assured him. "Their father couldn't decide whether to beat them or hug them when I got them home."

Frodo sighed with relief. "Oh, thank goodness... so they're not hurt? Jack had blood in his ears."

Rosie nodded, biting on her lower lip. "He's lost his hearing, the force of the river made something tear. One of his eyes might be hurt, too, they can't tell as yet. And Fastred's broken an arm. But they're safe, at least, and well apart from that."

"Oh," Frodo said softly, sinking back with a shuttered expression on his face. "I didn't pull him out fast enough, then. He won't be able to do so many things, now. He'll miss half the fun of being alive."

"Better half than none," Sam pointed out diplomatically. "If you hadn't happened by when you did, I don't reckon he'd have that."

Elanor's burbling turned into irritated little mewls, the sound she always made just before one of her crying fits. Rosie went over and picked the baby up, singing nursery rhymes under her breath and bouncing Elanor against her hip.

Frodo sighed. "Well, I'm glad they're safe, but I wish I could have saved Jack's hearing and eyes, too." His fingers plucked at a loose thread on the hem of the blanket, unravelling the weave. "But there's no reason for me to be talking about it now, is there?"

Sam shrugged. "We've nothing else to do, it's too early in the day to sleep and no chores need finishing."

"You used to tell me there was no sense in dwelling on things, that I'd never forget them if I kept talking about them. I try not to."

Sam rubbed at his forehead with an exasperated sort of smile. "You know I'd never speak a word against you, Mr Frodo, but you take what others say without minding

what was meant by it. There's no logic in walking old paths time and again, that's right enough, but there's no harm in telling people when you're wounded by life."

"How could you ever think Sam doesn't like to talk about his troubles? Never met anybody so prone to bellyaching," Rosie put in from the other side of the room, earning a small chuckle from Frodo. "Come now, tell us what you're thinking."

Frodo was silent for a long pause, then spoke softly while his fingers continued to pull on the wool of the covers. "When I was living in Brandy Hall, I used to tell myself that if I'd been out with my mother and father the night they died, I could have saved them. But today, at the river... I did all I could." His voice caught in his throat and he looked up at Sam, eyes shiny with tears. "I did all I could, and it wasn't enough."

"Oh..." Sam touched at Frodo's shoulder softly, and then pulled him into a gentle hug. "It were more than enough, never doubt that. Nothing turns out perfect, but everything's far closer now thanks to you."

The tears turned into crying and the crying into sobs, Frodo's hands shaking like the falling leaves outside as he clung to Sam's arms, face against his shoulder.

"It turned out to be three times what anybody ever could have asked of you, and enough. It's finished and done," Sam whispered. "Please believe that."

"No, no," Frodo choked out.

"Yes." Sam's voice was firm; he held Frodo's face carefully between his palms and met his eyes. "Don't you leave us, Frodo Baggins. Don't you dare. I walked the world with you, and all I'm asking now is that you don't walk at all. Time will heal you yet."

"Sam, I -"

"Don't say anything." Rosie shook her head, climbing back onto the bed beside them and putting Elanor in Frodo's arms. "Unless it's a 'yes, dears, I won't go anywhere' promise. We've all talked ourselves a hole in

the ground. Home and hearth's got more healing in it than a lifetime in -" she stopped for a fraction of a moment, blinking three times fast, "- in Rivendell."

"Frodo," Sam said, then didn't say anything more, kissing Frodo's tear-salted lips as lightly as a breath.

Frodo began to cry again, then. Rosie couldn't remember ever hearing anybody cry like that, much less Frodo, who always seemed so wise and tired. He cried, holding them both as if he'd drown if he let them go, and despite the early hour fell into a deep sleep when the tears were used up. Sam sat and cradled him, and Rosie kissed them both gently, and went to unpack the bags they'd meant to take on the journey.

Merry and Pippin turned up in the late afternoon.

"Didn't expect to find you here, we heard you were going away," Pippin said to Frodo, exchanging a furtive glance with Rosie. She nodded her head once and his mouth curled up in a wide and happy smile. "We were on our way to see you off."

"Decide to stay, did you?" Merry guessed. Frodo nodded. Sam knew what it was that nobody was saying, but seeing as how it wasn't happening anyways there didn't seem to be a reason to talk of it.

"And here I was, thinking I'd get a few weeks' peace." Rosie refilled everyone's tea, pausing to drop a kiss on the top of Frodo's head. "Though I can't say I'm sorry to have lost that chance. This place would be right lonely without you."

"To staying, then," Pippin toasted.

"To staying!"

"At this rate, Frodo-lad will talk before she does," Fastred said with a sigh, holding Elanor with the careful earnestness of one child rocking another.

"She's only two and a half, May didn't say a word until she was four," Sam pointed out diplomatically as they lazed under the shade of one of the sturdy fruit trees.

"Yes, but for all your sister's good qualities, she's not the brightest twig in the kindling," Rosie teased gently. "I think Fastred's right, it's about time she started talking."

1422 had been as good as the year before it, and this year seemed to be following suit again. There were still bad days, but they were somehow more tolerable, not as wrenching on the heart. Sam supposed it was because now they all knew that a good day would follow the bad one eventually.

Frodo-lad was a bonny little baby, with warm hazel eyes and sturdy legs that invariably kicked off any blankets. It was almost a joke that they'd named him Frodo, because he looked so much like Sam.

Elanor loved her little brother, she'd chat to him for hours in her cheerful baby talk. She was very clever and quick, getting in everywhere underfoot and patting the soil down around the yellow flowers Sam had planted for her. But talking seemed to be something that held no interest for Elly, and whenever anybody tried to teach her she'd just giggle and put her hands over her face.

"Can you say Fastred?" Fastred asked her. She wrinkled her nose and giggled. "What about Mummy? I bet you can say Mummy."

Elanor shook her head with a contrary grin.

"Dad. Say Sam-dad, Elly," Rosie coaxed, but the little girl would have none of it. Frodo took her out of Fastred's hands and threw her up in the air, catching her gently.

"You'll talk when you're good and ready, and once you start you'll babble on until we long for the silence. You're going to love words, Ellyelle, but don't feel you



have to hurry to them. There's all the time in the world." Frodo tossed her again, not as high as the first time.

"No, Fo, up, up!" Elanor squealed. "Up!"

## 1428

Sam-dad was crying. Sam-dad hardly ever cried, and when he did it wasn't like this, big sobs on the bed while Mummy rocked him. Uncle Frodo had made all the little ones come into the study, Frodo-lad sitting with little Rose on his lap by the window, looking out at the garden, baby Merry making grumbly noises and banging his rattle on the floor.

"I'm not too small to understand," Elanor insisted, tugging on her uncle's sleeve, even though she was a bit too small, really. She didn't quite see why Sam-dad's Gaffer was gone for ever and ever. Nothing had ever changed without changing back eventually in Elanor's memory. Summer always came back after winter.

"Shh, Elly, hush," Uncle Frodo soothed her, stroking her hair. Everyone liked to touch Elanor's hair; it was all soft and shiny. "Your dad's very upset right now, you don't want to disturb him when your mother's almost got him to sleep. He's been sitting up in a vigil for two days, he needs to rest."

"I was mean to Dad's Gaffer last week, I called him a stupid old goat and stuck my tongue out at him, because he said I shouldn't be playing wrestling with Frodo-lad. I was going to say sorry the next time I saw him, because you always tell me I should try and understand him better. How am I going to say sorry now?"

Then she started to cry, she wasn't exactly sure why but she felt terribly, terribly sad, and she wanted to see her Sam-dad's Gaffer again and pull on his hair and ask for a story. "Is everything going to go away? Will all the trees die, too? And the stars?"

"No, Elly, no. The stars are still there." Uncle Frodo kissed her forehead, and held her until she fell asleep.

1430

That summer was a fertile one, for crops and for children. Estella and Diamond gave birth within a month of each other, boys named Boromir and Faramir. If people thought these queer names for hobbits they didn't say it, because everyone knew that with parents like that no child could expect an ordinary name.

Rosie fell pregnant too, but lost the child, and nearly her life as well when she fainted while swimming. Frodo sat by her bed, and thought of his mother and father.

To console Rosie, and cheer Frodo out of his guilt, Sam went and got one of the litter the Rumble hound had recently sired. A puppy coloured grey as storm clouds, it romped from room to room and then sat down decisively on the floor between Rose-girl and Goldy's beds.

"What's his name, Dad?" Frodo-lad asked.

"That's for you to decide between you, though I don't recommend anything you can't shout across a field."

"Ark ark arky," Merry piped up, toddling a few steps towards the small dog before falling on his backside.

"Yes, lad, that's near to the noise he makes," Sam agreed.

"Arky, then," Elanor said happily. "Arky Gardner of Bag End."

1432

When she was eleven, Elanor liked to spend her free time (of which there wasn't much, because with her new brother Hamfast taking up her parents' time it was often left to her to see to the other five) down by the mill,

watching the wheel turn in the water. She had several good friends, and was well liked by most people. Her favourite playmates were Dora Bracegirdle, Goodwill Whitfoot, and Fastred, who loved reminding her of her strange exploits as a small child. Elanor's worst enemy in the world was Adaldrida Boffin, who would talk loudly about how ugly tall pale hobbits looked whenever Elanor was in earshot, about how Gardners had even more queer blood than Took.

Adaldrida liked Fastred, and hated Elanor because it seemed Fastred had eyes for no other. Elanor considered this the stupidest thing she'd ever heard, because Fastred was silly and loud and had once rubbed a cowpat in her hair when she'd stolen his red whistle. And even if Fastred did like Elanor (which he most certainly did not), that didn't mean he couldn't like Adaldrida as well (except she was a mean smelly witch who deserved to fall in the river). After all, Elanor's Mum and Dad and Uncle Frodo all liked more than one person at once.

She had a cut on her hand, because her uncle had taken one of his turns and Pip had been so scared and had screamed for Ellyelle to save him. Not knowing what else to do, Elanor had knocked Frodo over the head with a nearby vase, which had shattered and cut into her palm.

She'd felt horribly guilty for a week, Frodo wouldn't meet her eyes and Elanor hated herself. But then one day he came and sat on the end of her bed, and said how very, very sorry he was that she'd had to do that, that she and her brothers and sisters should never hesitate to protect themselves from him. He'd been crying by the end of it, and Elanor had scrambled in close to him and thrown her arms around his neck, and called him Fo, like she had when she was small.

Everyone else called her Elanor the Fair, but Uncle Frodo called her Elanor the Brave.

1434

Sam paced back and forth because he didn't know what else to do with himself. Even at the worst moments in his life, there had always been something required of him, and that made things simpler. Now he couldn't fight or walk or help, not even sit beside the bed and wish like he'd done in Rivendell so long ago.

Rosie's ninth pregnancy (if the two that were lost weren't counted) had been different from the start. Where the other babies had plumped her pretty face up and filled her eyes with a happy glow, this time left her pale and tired and cranky. She wasn't entirely well from one month to the next, and in their darker moments Sam and Frodo almost wished the whole thing over, though they never said a word to that effect out loud.

"I hope it's a girl," Rose-girl declared whenever anyone would listen. "With brown hair, like me. It's not fair that Ellyelle and Goldy and now Daisy all have golden hair and I'm just mud-coloured like the boys."

"Oh, hush, Rose-red, you'll wake your mother if you complain so." Sam pulled her onto his knee. "You're as pretty as your sisters, and I reckon you know that. 'Sides, when you're a mite older I fancy you'll find that many a hobbit is more partial to dark than to fair."

"I hear the women talking when they're picking fruit and reaping fields. The say *Oh, those Gardner girls, heart-breakers the lot of them with their yellow hair*, but I'm a Gardner girl and my hair's not yellow."

"That makes you special, silly," Elanor chimed in, coming into the room with fat little Daisy in her arms. "You're different to the rest."

"Not for long! Just you wait and see, this baby's going to be as dark as I am!"

The months wore on, and Rosie seemed to be losing life rather than growing it. Whenever Frodo tried to say

what he and Sam were both thinking, Sam would shake his head and walk away.

Lily, Rosie's mother, and Marigold and May, two of Sam's sisters, came to stay in the final month. Elanor wanted to help with the midwifery but Sam and Frodo forbade her. It seemed unlikely things would turn out well.

And now the fateful night had come, weeks early, and Sam paced to and fro, and Frodo sat by the bedroom door with Goldy and Hamfast on his lap and tried not to despair before anything had happened. They flinched at each cry of pain from inside, each panicked remark between the three nurses, and wished the shouts would stop. Then they did stop, and the silence was a thousand times worse.

Finally, as dawn broke, the children all dozing in a heap in the corridor, the soft mewl of a new voice came from inside the bedroom. Sam and Frodo nearly fell over themselves in their hurry to get the door open.

The first thing Sam saw was Marigold's face, dark as thunder, eyebrows knit together in a hard v-curve. For a moment he faltered, fearing the worst, his blood going cold in his veins. Then he saw his Rosie, lying sweaty and worn out on the bed, the sheets marked red in places and crumpled under her. She smiled at him, and Sam's heavy heart leapt with sweet relief.

Rosie held a tiny bundle in her arms, smaller than any other had been at birth but otherwise perfect, little face screwed up in confusion, fingers grasping at the air.

Lily and May were just as stony-faced as Marigold, but Sam and Frodo didn't notice at all as they gazed at the little boy. He had a shock of black hair already, and delicate points on the tips of his ears. Wide and impossibly blue eyes and a tiny bow of a mouth.

"He certainly didn't come out without a fight," Rosie said, offering the baby up to Sam and Frodo. "I think I've earned a good long rest, now."

"Yes, Rosie-sweet, you certainly have," Sam said with a soft laugh as Frodo took the child. "I thought I'd lost you."

Rosie snorted. "What, leave you two to raise the brood? I wouldn't wish our children such a fate."

"What's he called, then?" Lily snapped, arms crossed and a scowl in place.

"Sam," Frodo said, stroking a lock of babyfine hair off the small forehead. "His name's Sam."

May stormed out of the room, slamming the door only to have Lily and Marigold open it again as they left too. There would be a wildfire of gossip all over the Shire before long, but Sam and Rosie and Frodo couldn't have cared less. Awoken by the slammed door, the children ran inside to see their new brother.

"Not another boy!" Rose-girl wailed in dismay. "Oh well, at least his hair's not just brown like everyone else's."

"Hullo Sam," said Frodo-lad, taking the bundle from his namesake. "I hope you like us."

"Of course he will!" piped up Merry. "We're the best family in the whole world."

1435

Rosie recovered from Sam-lad's birth fast enough, and in the following autumn Rose-girl got her dark-headed sister; named Primula but always called Primrose so they would match. Estella had a beautiful daughter that she named Molly, and Diamond gave birth to an equally lovely girl called Meli. It was a good harvest year. The only dark spot on that season was Arky, who grew thin and listless and then lay down on the hearth and didn't get up again.

"There now, don't cry," Sam comforted the children. "He had a few good summers and all the scraps he could

eat, and you lot threw sticks whenever he was in the mood for a play. That's as much as any pup could want from life, and more than most get."

## 1441

When Elanor was invited to stay in Gondor for a year as a maid to the Queen, she was so happy she climbed to the top of the tallest tree she could find to whoop with delight, realising too late that she had no easy way of clambering down. Her brothers had to help her, and she tore her skirt on one knee when she landed.

"She wants to go with all her heart, and that's a fact," Sam mused as he sat drinking with Frodo and Rosie that evening. "But she's still young in her head, I don't know that I'm happy to see her go off for so long alone."

"Well, why don't you two go with her? Go have a holiday." Frodo had recently started another book, this one a story about a king who drew a sword from a stone, and his fingers were splotched black and purple from the ink.

"What about you, thought? And the other children?" Rosie asked.

"Don't worry about us, we'll be fine. And Tolman could take a turn as mayor while you're away, Sam, you know he's had his heart set on it for years."

"I don't know..." Sam shook his head.

"Come on, we've been talking about you showing Elanor the world since she was a baby. Rose, don't you think it's a good idea?"

"I do. But it's a long way to go, and a long time to be gone."

"Not that far, and not that long. Elanor will be pleased to have you there."

"Your brother Tom has had his eye on governing for a while," Sam conceded to Rosie. "If you want to, Roseflower, we will."

Rosie sat for a moment in thought, taking a gulp of her ale and then nodding.

"All right, then."





1442

"Uncle Frodo?" Rose peeked her head around the edge of the doorframe. "Are you busy?"

"No, no, come in Rose-girl. How're you?" Frodo paused for a moment. "You smell like an orange tree."

"Lemons, actually." Rose looked down at her feet. She was wearing a dress she'd owned for years, it was a little short in the length but still fitted well enough across the bodice, for compared to most hobbits Rose was slim as a willow switch. Unfortunately for any pride she may have felt, Elanor was far thinner still, and though in the last few months Rose's blouses had begun to fill out with the same round swelling curves her mother had, Goldilocks was obviously going to be rounder and curvier. There was a bright tree stitched onto the fabric of the skirt, when Rose had been younger she'd loved nothing more than stories of Ents and Entwives. Now the only time she climbed trees was to see if she could do it better than any of her siblings.

"And why," Frodo's mouth quirked up at the corners, "do you smell like lemons?"

"Sweetpea Chubb told me that putting lemon juice in your hair makes it turn fair if you sit in the sunlight. But it's just made my head itch." Rose sighed. "I'm never going to be pretty."

"If you're ugly, 'pretty' must be an amazing sight indeed."

"Oh, I know I'm not hideous." Rose curled up in a chair, resting her chin on her knee. "But I'm not special. There's nothing about me to set tongues wagging."

"Get your foot off the cushion, or I'll tell the gossips what a great clumping brute you are. You're never content; if I'd behaved as you do when I was young my uncle Scattergold would have ducked my head in the water barrel. For a whole month last summer you

wouldn't eat crusts because you wanted your hair to go straight as an ironed shirt. That's not behaviour for someone of your age. Come on," Frodo patted her shoulder and guided her to the door. "I've got an idea."

They went along to one of the back storerooms, where things unused from one year to the next were kept.

"I knew this was still here." Frodo held up a long case, a sheen of polish still visible through the dust. "This was my mother's, your sister Primrose takes her real name from her."

"A fiddle?" Rose eased the lid open with an intake of awed breath. "For me?"

"It's going to need tuning, but yes. Unless you'd rather improve your embroidery skills until people talked about that, instead."

"Blow embroidery! Any boys who care about that are too stupid for words. I bet you and Dad don't care at all if Mum can sew."

"Ah, so that's it. I thought it might be." Frodo smiled softly. "Why do you want a boy so badly? You're still so young."

"Because soon enough Goldy will be big enough for them to notice, and Elanor's going to come back even more lovely than she left. This is my only chance."

"Rose." Frodo hugged her. "You silly, silly creature. One day you'll fall in love with someone who loves every hair on your crazed little head, and he'll think you twice the beauty of your sisters."

"When you say it, I almost believe it," she whispered. "Now come on, I want to show the others my fiddle."

"Isn't my fault," Daisy said, chin stuck up half in defiance and half in a pout.

"Oh yes?" Goldilocks raised one eyebrow, curls bouncing haughtily. Daisy's own hair, brushed so carefully that morning, was a tangle of disarray, ribbons halfway pulled out. Her nose had a smudge of icing across it and her pretty little lip was spilt and bloodied. Her white muslin party dress, however, was spotless. Daisy was always careful of her clothes.

Sam-lad's good shirt and pants were less uninjured, a tear at the collar and dirt on the knees. One of his eyes was purpled and shut.

"Isn't," Daisy said again. "'s Jeremy Tunnelly's fault. He called Sammie a runt and a changeling, and a dozen worse names too. I don't care if it's his birthday, no hobbit talks about my brother like that. I just wish I'd gotten more hits in before they pulled me off him."

"From what I hear, you got quite enough in. Young Jeremy's lost two teeth and cracked a finger," Rosie said, coming in with a cold cloth to put on Sam-lad's eye. "And what were you doing attacking him, either of you?"



First Daisy jumps him and then little Sam enters the fray. You're as bad as each other."

"He didn't have the right to say those things." Daisy sniffed at the same moment that Sam cried "He punched her! I had to get him for that!"

Even Goldy couldn't hide her grin as she cleaned Daisy's lip.

"In future, just laugh at the stupid things people say, all right? You end up less damaged that way." "He's a nasty so-and-so," Daisy grumbled. Sam-lad leant over and kissed her on the cheek.

"You're the best sister ever, Daise," he said quietly. She hugged him, mussing his dark hair.

## 1449

There had been bad winters before, like the year Ham and Merry and Goldy all caught a cough within two days of each other and didn't recover for three weeks, or when the damp made everyone ill and tired. But 1449 was worse than any before it, and seemed to stretch on forever. None of the Gardner children would ever forget that year, not even Tom, who was only seven at the time.

The year began well enough, with Fastred proposing to Elanor and Primrose winning a contest with her baking. Then, in March, Frodo fell ill. This happened quite often, but this time he couldn't shake free of the sickness. Through April and into May he kept to himself, not interested in anything, books left to gather dust, his ongoing chess game with Ruby unplayed. Sam and Rosie did what they could, but nothing roused him out of the darkness he was caught in.

Though Frodo's mood picked up a little as June began, his health failed, leaving him pale and feverish.

"Are we going to be sent away?" Robin asked Frodo-lad, trying to ignore the sounds of their mother crying in

the hallway. "Like my friend Cattie was when her mother was sick?"

"No, Cattie's mum had scarlet fever, what Uncle Frodo's struck with can't be passed by breathing or sharing food. It comes from inside him," Frodo-lad answered.

"Is he going to die?"

"I don't know, Robin, I don't know."

In July Elanor overheard her parents talking softly, watching Frodo as he slept. They spoke of Elf-ships sailing, of the three of them together over the sea. But the children weren't all old enough to be left, not yet, and time might not give them the same chances later.

"I'll stay," Rosie said, stroking Frodo's hair off his forehead. "You and Frodo go, Sam. Let him heal. I'll raise our babes, and tell them all our stories."

"No!" Elanor cried, running in to hug at them, careful not to wake Frodo. "I can raise the little ones, Mum. You know I can. Me and Fastred."

"No, duck, you have a life of your own," Rosie said. "This should have been your year, El, for dreams and planning. I'm sorry it turned out as it has."

"Frog-spit. Fastred's not my family yet, and Fo always will be. So this year is just as I'd want it, with all of you most important in my heart. Though, of course, I never would have wished him this illness."

"None of us would have, El," Sam said in a tired voice.

It became a treat for Frodo to sit at his place at the table's end at meals, Daisy and Prim would put vases of flowers and the best spoons and forks out for him. Nobody would bicker and they'd act as sweet as kittens. August and September were almost peaceful, in their way.

But as the weather grew colder Frodo slipped into a fever that kept him half-asleep. The children went to stay

with their Aunt Marigold and Uncle Tom, which didn't please any of them.

"She says I'm skinny as a dead pony," Elanor groaned.

"I have to help with hammering and sawing and whitewash," Hamfast grumped.

"They never give us second breakfast," wailed Merry.

"They pinch Sammie," Daisy implored.

"Let us stay, Dad!" they chorused together as he walked them down the hill.

"Hush. You'll be back in a month, things will be decided by then, for good or no."

Robin hugged Sam. "We'll be strong, Daddy. Tell Mum and Uncle Frodo that we love them, and you as well. We want him to get better."

"I know, Robin, I know."

They all endured the visit as best they could. Primrose and Hamfast made sure that one or the other of them was with Daisy at all times, so she didn't have the chance to go spare at her aunt and uncle. The way they treated her Sam rubbed at her like anything.

Marigold's vitriol at her brother's family had mellowed slightly over time, and she did love a good number of the rabble that called her auntie. Sam-lad, though, and Elanor, and Daisy, felt the sting of her dislike, and the weight of the chores she found for them.

Goldy contented herself with flirting with the uncle's apprentice, then felt guilty and spent long hours writing soppy letters to the half-dozen suitors she was stringing along like beads on a necklace.

Merry, Pippin, Frodo and Bilbo, with Robin and little Tom in tow, spent the days as far away from their cramped little room as possible, venturing out to see what adventures they could find. Ruby kept to herself and always seemed fresh from a long cry, her eyes red and sore.

Rose would sleep late, ignore the names her uncle called her like lazybones and layabout and goodfornothing, and then stay up into the night staring out at the lights of Bag End on the hill. Her brothers and sisters would join her for a while, then go to bed, but Rose never seemed to tire of it.

Then, in the third week they were there, no lights could be seen up at Bag End. All the children stayed up that night, pacing and fretting (but quietly, so they wouldn't wake their aunt and uncle).

"What does it mean, El?"

"I don't know, Robin, I don't know."

In a voice soft as a kiss, Rose began to sing an old lullaby their father had soothed them with from time to time.

*"In western lands beneath the Sun  
the flowers may rise in Spring,  
the trees may bud, the waters run,  
the merry finches sing."*

Primrose came and sat beside her, and took up the harmony.

*"Or there maybe 'tis a cloudless night  
and swaying beeches bear"*

Now Ham, Daisy, Sam-lad, Bilbo and Elanor were all singing too.

*"the Elven-stars as jewels white  
amid their branching hair."*

All the children, even those who weren't children anymore really, sang together in hushed voices. It was something they never would have done usually, but on this night in this room it somehow felt right.

*"Though here past journey's end we lie  
in darkness soft and deep,  
beyond all towers strong and high,  
beyond all mountains steep,  
above all shadows rides the Sun  
and Stars for ever dwell:  
we will not say the Day is done,  
nor bid the Stars farewell.  
Still we sit and think of you;  
We see you far away  
walking down the homely roads  
on a bright and windy day.  
It was merry then when we could run  
to answer to your call,  
could hear your voice or take your hand;  
but now the night must fall.  
And now beyond the world we sit,  
and know not where you lie  
O Frodo, will you hear this call  
and answer to our cry?  
Though here past journey's end we lie  
in darkness soft and deep,  
beyond all towers strong and high,  
beyond all mountains steep,  
above all shadows rides the Sun  
and Love for ever dwells:  
we will not say the Day is done,  
nor bid our Heart farewell."*

There didn't seem to be any more to say, so then they slept.

Daisy was the first one awake in the morning. She thought about getting as much extra rest as she could before everyone woke up, but her curiosity won out in the end and she decided to wake Sammie and get some



extra breakfast, because Marigold was always stingy with them when it came to food.

She shook him awake, putting a finger to her lips so he'd know to be quiet. Bilbo stirred too, and they beckoned for him to follow.

They found dried apple pieces in the pantry, and each grabbed two handfuls, heading out to the front step to eat their spoils.

"Dad!" Bilbo shrieked, dropping the fruit slices as he ran down the path to meet his father. Sam obviously hadn't slept in a while, his eyes dark and skin pale, but he was smiling as he caught Bilbo up in his arms.

"He's awake," he told Daisy and Sam-lad before they could even ask, and their hooray-shouts were enough to rouse the whole household.

"What is it?" Marigold asked, running to the door in only her sleeping dress.

"Frodo's awake!" the children cried. Marigold let out a huge breath and hugged her brother so tight Bilbo had to squirm out of the way to avoid being crushed.

They didn't want to wait about for a moment, running home in their nightclothes, shawls around shoulders slipping down over and over in their haste.

"Frodo! Frodo!" The smaller children jumped onto the bed with him, covering his face with kisses.

"My precious darlings, I've missed you all so much!" Frodo kissed them all back, beckoning the older ones to sit on the bed too.

"We sang for you last night, did you hear us?"

"I don't know, Robin, I don't know. Perhaps. I was very lost. I didn't know if I could ever find my way back. But your Mummy Rose and Sam-dad made me promise long ago not to leave them, so I kept looking for the path home until I found it."

Elanor's eyes stung and her heart hurt at the sight of Frodo, so exhausted, face lined and cheeks sunken. He

kissed her and stroked her hair, and smiled to show it wasn't so bad.

Winter barely came at all, the weather sunny and a little cool. Frodo stayed in the big bed, and that room became the hub of household activity. Tom learnt to read sitting beside the window, reciting bits of stories and poems for Frodo and whoever else was nearby at the time. It seemed the season would never turn.

Then, on the last night before Old Year's Day, the whole Shire was blanketed in snowy white. The children tumbled outside, building forts and starting wars.

"You haven't been out of bed for weeks," Sam pointed out with his arms folded when Frodo wanted to join them. "You're not going out in that cold, no mistake."

"Come on, Sam, one snowball fight. You, me, Rose and the children."

"Oh no, you're not getting me out there," Rosie cut in. "Anyway, I've got a feast to cook. Go have your play like the overgrown faunts that you are, I'll have mulled wine and hot chocolate ready to warm you when you come in."

"I'm not playing war," Ruby sniffed. "I'm making snow babies. Holly and Ivy, pretty little ice girls."

Bilbo threw a handful of slush at her then, and with a scream of outrage she chased after him.

There were two teams, the girls and Sam in one camp, hiding behind a hastily constructed half-wall to avoid the onslaught from Frodo and the boys. Marigold and Tom arrived, Elanor and Goldy and Rose followed them inside.

"I'm going to go have a nap by the fire before lunch," Tom declared, tipping his hat to them as a hello.

"Layabout," Rose-girl said softly. Uncle Tom gave a big jolly laugh and handed her a toffee as she ran to join the others outside again. Marigold went to help Rosie with the food preparation, but when Elly and Goldilocks

tried to do the same their mother thwapped them with a tea towel.

"Out! Too many cooks spoil the broth."

"Broth?" Goldy made a face. "I don't want broth. I want pumpkin pie, and leg of lamb with mint sauce, and strawberry jam tarts."

"Then clear out and let us work," Marigold snapped, and the girls remembered that their aunt was more than capable of being sour, and they shouldn't take the sweetness for granted.

The two of them went to the front windows to watch the snow games.

"Look! Here comes Meli and Molly and their folk!" Primrose called as Merry and Pippin herded Estella and Dinny and Boromir and Faramir over the hill, the two girls running ahead in their half-matched coats of red and green.

Sam and Prim ran down to meet them, and Frodo called 'strategy meeting!' and beckoned all the girls to huddle into the discussion too, planning a full-scale attack on the approaching visitors. Goldy sighed, and turned to Elanor.

"He'll never be well, you know."

"He's well enough."

"Or strong."

"He's strong enough."

"Or happy."

Now Elanor grinned, tearing her gaze away from where Frodo spoke in earnest tones with the children. "He's happy enough, Goldy. And loved enough. You can't deny that."

"All right, he's happy and loved. That doesn't give him his health back, or put more years in his future. You can see as well as I can he don't have long to live."

"Long enough," Elanor nodded, fingers playing with the thin chain at her throat. "I don't know how I know it,

Goldy, but the story's all played out in my head. My heart knows it, and it's a happily ever after."

"Nobody gets a happily ever after."

"Well, this is so close the difference can't be told, anyway. And that's enough."

## **East of the Sun**

They didn't argue, that last day. Rosie was going to, but she woke up cold and sad, Frodo already out of bed and Sam curled in on himself, and she knew there wasn't a point to wasting these hours with fighting. They'd be off too early the next morning for any sort of real goodbye, so this was the time that had to count.

She cooked all the breakfast foods they'd eaten together, a little bit of egg and a few small pancakes and bacon on fresh bread. She kissed them both good morning as they came to the table, then asked them to watch Elanor as she ran out to the tree near the washing line and tried to stop her tears.

Sam tried to do odd jobs to keep his hands busy, but there was nothing that really needed to be done and the sky felt heavy above them, raining for a while every so often.

Eventually Frodo thought he'd be smothered by the density of emotion in the cosy little home, and went out for a walk. It was wet and cold and windy, but it didn't seem fair to the Shire he loved so much to rug up against it, to hide from what it was.

Fastred and Jacky were playing with marbles down near the riverbank, Frodo called out to them not to get too close and they ran up to meet him, asking questions about adventures and places as they always did. They came back to Bag End for afternoon tea and then scampered off to play more games. Rosie and Sam and Frodo spent the rest of the day and the evening playing with Elanor, peek-a-boo and round-and-round-the-garden and all the other games she loved, and when she

drifted off they sat up late into the night, later than they should have with such an early start before them, and talked of unimportant things, and then went to bed together.

In the morning they set off, Rosie waving goodbye at the gate after kissing them both.

"You come back to me, you hear?" she said to Sam in her sternest voice, then turned to Frodo. "I'm not going to say it, though I've been thinking and I do see the good in this goodbye. But it's not a goodness I want, or want for you, so I won't say it."

"I love you too, Rosie," Frodo said, and kissed her, and then left.

Sam and Frodo met up with Bilbo and the rest, and somehow Sam had forgotten how lovely Galadriel was, and realised it all over again.

"Well, Master Samwise," she said. "I hear and see that you have used my gift well. The Shire shall now be more than ever blessed and beloved."

He couldn't find the words to answer. Frodo and Bilbo were talking of birthdays, and a journey to come. And suddenly Sam realised that his worst suspicions were true after all. Frodo was leaving, and he couldn't follow.

"No, Sam. Not yet anyway, not further than the Havens. Though you too were a Ring-bearer, if only for a little while. Your time may come." Frodo smiled. "Do not be too sad, Sam. You cannot always be torn in two. You will have to be one and whole, for many years. You have so much to enjoy and to be, and to do."

"But I thought you were going to enjoy the Shire, too, for years and years, after all you have done," Sam said in a defeated voice.

"So I thought too, once," Frodo said softly, looking down at his hands, curling and uncurling the remaining fingers. "But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me."

He didn't say any more for hours as they rode on, and neither did Sam, who understood now that Rosie had somehow known what was coming, and had kept the terrible knowledge to herself. It made him love her even more, and wish that he had been able to comfort her hurt.

As night fell and everyone made to stop for the night, rolling out bedrolls in a routine as familiar as breathing, Frodo spoke again in a whisper. The words were not meant for anyone else to hear, and they were pleading. "It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them. But you are my heir: all that I had and might have had I leave to you."

Tears slipped from his eyes, and still Sam didn't move, letting Frodo finish what he was saying. "And also you have Rose, and Elanor; and Frodo-lad will come, and Rosie-lass, and Merry, and Goldilocks, and Pippin; and perhaps more that I cannot see. Your hands and your wits will be needed everywhere, they weren't meant to be just for me as much as they have been. Somehow I know in my heart that you and Rose still have a place in the story I'm following, and I'll wait forever to see you again if it's true."

Sam, unable to bear the sad speech any longer, silenced Frodo with a kiss, undoing the buttons on his shirt in the same way as he had a hundred times before, on nights when Frodo's hands were too sore or tired to do it for themselves. Crying and kissing and touching, and it didn't matter anymore who saw them. It had never mattered.

"You will be Mayor, of course, as long as you want to be, and the most famous gardener in history," Frodo went on as Sam kissed his shoulder where the skin puckered in a jagged line. "And you will read things out of the Red Book, and keep alive the memory of the age that is gone." His voice choked and he clutched at Sam's

hair. "So that people will remember the Great Danger, and so love their beloved land all the more."

Frodo slept curled against Sam that night, and it was warm and comfortable, and their dreams were full of love and softness.

"And that will keep you as busy and as happy as anyone can be, as long as your part of the Story goes on. The last pages, and the happily ever after on them, are for you," Frodo said in the pre-dawn light, as Sam lay beside him, apparently asleep. Punctuating his promise with a kiss, Frodo got up, and never saw the tears that slipped from Sam's eyes.

Rosie sat by the window and looked out at the Shire as dawn broke, and hoped against hoping that two ponies would ride up the lane with two small riders, and Frodo would hug her up and say 'I'd never leave you, silly!'. But she knew it wouldn't be so, and that it was, perhaps, better this way. That was the hardest thing to realise, really.

The bed had seemed huge and empty, and it made Rosie's heart hurt to know it would never be properly full again. On October the sixth Sam came to the door and knocked three times, two short and one long, just as he always had. Rosie had cooked chicken and potatoes and peas for dinner, and it was all laid out and hot. Bag End was too big for three, but there would be more voices to fill the silence before too long.

Sam sat down, and bounced Elly on his lap as she smiled to see him.

"Well," Sam said with a deep breath. "I'm back."

They didn't cry. It felt as if it would be wrong to cry. They just held each other through the night, and smiled at the memories their hearts held, and waited for the first morning of their new life.



Evening in Bag End was just about the cosiest thing in the whole world, the fires lit and dancing merrily, children running about and complaining that it was too early for bed and never time for baths, exasperated shouts from older siblings who got in the way of stampedes, and the relative quiet of the study, where Sam and Elanor both hid from the tumult.

Elanor had never learned to wait for anything patiently, and now was no exception. She kept making subtle coughs, glancing over at where her father was working at his desk. Eventually she rolled her eyes.

"Don't write any more tonight. Talk to me, Sam-dad. Tell me about Lorien. Does my flower grow there still, Sam-dad?" The firelight made her face look older than it was, or maybe that was just the fact that it was uppermost in Sam's mind that she was growing up. Fifteen years old already, her eyes so wide and fair and knowing. Elanor seemed to feel it too, and had ended almost every phrase and question with 'Sam-dad' or 'Mummy', depending on whom she was talking to, all day. She was in no hurry to grow up yet.

"Well dear, Celeborn still lives there among his trees and his Elves, and there I don't doubt your flower grows still. Though now I have got you to look at, I don't hanker after it so much."

"But I don't want to look at myself, Sam-dad. I want to look at other things." Elanor scowled, because Rose-girl had been at her all day about how pretty she looked, and it had become exceedingly boring. "I want to see the hill of Amroth where the King met Arwen, and the silver trees, and the little white niphredil, and the golden elanor in the grass that is always green," she sighed. "And I want to hear Elves singing."

Sam patted her arm, the childhood plumpness already smoothing into adult curves. "Then, maybe, you will one

day, Elanor. I said the same when I was your age, and long after it, and there didn't seem to be no hope. And yet I saw them, and I heard them."

"I was afraid they were all sailing away, Sam-dad. Then soon there would be none here; and then everywhere would be just places, and -" She bit back on her words, sighing again and gazing into the fire.

"And what, Elanorelle?"

"And the light would have faded."

"I know," Sam nodded. "The light is fading, Elanorelle. But it won't go out yet. It won't ever go quite out, I think now, since I have had you to talk to." He paused, as he always did when he was trying to find exactly the right words to explain something to her. "For it seems to me now that people can remember it who have never seen it. And yet even that is not the same as really seeing it, like I did."

"Like really being in a story?" Elanor scratched at the side of her nose, screwing up her mouth and chin as she thought about it. "A story is quite different, even when it is about what happened. I wish I could go back to old days!"

"Folk of our sort often wish that," agreed Sam. "You came at the end of a great Age, Elanorelle; but though it is over, as we say, things don't really end sharp like that." He smiled softly. "It's more like a winter sunset." They sat together in the quiet for a while, thinking thoughts they didn't venture to share with each other. Then Sam spoke again.

"The High Elves have nearly all gone now, with Elrond. But not quite all; and those that didn't go will wait now for a while. And the others, the ones that didn't go, will wait now for a while. And the others, the ones that belong here, will last even longer. There are still things for you to see, and maybe you'll see them sooner than you hope."

Elanor rested her chin on her hands, eyes fixed on some distant point beyond the warm little room.

"I did not understand at first, what Celeborn meant when he said goodbye to the King," she said. "But I think I do now. He knew that Lady Arwen would stay, but that Galadriel would leave him... I think it was very sad for him. And for you, dear Sam-dad, and for Mummy, for your treasure went too. I am glad Frodo of the Ring saw me, but I wish I could remember seeing him. I wish I could remember what things were like when the four of us lived here together."

"It was sad, Elanorelle," said Sam, kissing her hair. "It was, but it isn't now. For why? Well, for one thing, Mr. Frodo has gone where the Elven-light isn't fading; and he deserved his reward. But I have had mine, and your mother hers, too. I have had lots of treasures. I am a very rich hobbit." Sam stopped for a moment, and dropped his voice low.

"And there is one other reason, which I shall whisper to you, a secret I have never told before to no one, nor put in the Book yet. Before he went, Mr. Frodo said that my time maybe would come, and that there's a place for our Mistress Rose in the story still to be written. I can wait. I think maybe we haven't said farewell for good. But I can wait," Sam said again, and Elanor thought maybe he was reminding himself more than he was telling her. "I have learned that much from the Elves, at any rate. They are not so troubled about time. And so I think Celeborn is still happy among his trees, in an Elvish way. His time hasn't come, and he isn't tired of his land yet. When he is tired he can go."

"And when you're tired, you will go, Sam-dad, and Mum. You will go to the Havens with the Elves. Then I shall go with you. I shall not part with you, like Arwen did with Elrond."

"Maybe, maybe," Sam kissed her hair again, and tickled her as he had when she was smaller. "And maybe

not. The choice of Luthien and Arwen comes to many, Elanorelle, or something like it; and it isn't wise to choose before the time. And now, my dearest, I think that it's time even a lass of fifteen spring-times should go to her bed. And I have words to say to Mother Rose."

Elanor stood up, and passed her hand lightly through Sam's grey-flecked hair. "Good night, Sam-dad. But -"

"I don't want good night but," Sam smiled, pushing Elanor gently towards the doorway. "Even birthday girls need sleep."

"But won't you show it to me first? I was going to say."

"Show you what, dear?"

"The King's letter, of course. You have had it now more than a week."

Sam sat up, surprised, then started laughing. "Good gracious, how stories do repeat themselves! And you get paid back in your own coin and all. How we spied on poor Mr. Frodo! And now our own spy on us, meaning no more harm than we did, I hope. But how do you know about it?"

"There was no need for spying," said Elanor, with a cheeky grin that showed how far she still had left to grow up. "If you wanted it kept secret, you were not nearly careful enough."

Sam showed her the letter, proud of the ease and quickness with which she could read. They chatted for a little longer, about queens and kings and adventures, and then Elanor moved to go to bed. He stopped her, reaching into one of the heavy bottom drawers of his desk.

"This was meant for your twentieth, but I reckon I'm not doing anything wrong by giving it early. This here's your book, Elanorelle, written by Frodo of the Ring, as you call him. He wanted you to have it. Happy birthday."

Elanor took the slim volume out of her father's hands, awed and surprised. "Thank you, Sam-dad. I'll go read it now."

"No, now you'll go to bed. You can read it tomorrow," Sam corrected.

"All right, all right," Elanor agreed, with a breeziness Sam knew meant she'd do nothing of the sort. Shaking his head with a smile, he watched her skip down the hallway, then went to find Rose out by the front door, watching the stars.

Elanor lit a candle, glad to have a bedroom all to herself, and settled down to read her unexpected present. There was a marker tucked near the back, a faded blue ribbon. She opened it to that page, finding handprints on the paper. Two of them, one small and obviously her own from when she was a baby, the other delicately shaped and missing a finger. She placed her own palm over it, wondering at the touch that had left the mark years before.

On the next page was a letter, addressed to her.

*My dearest Ellyelle,*

*Happy birthday! So, twenty years old. How lovely you must be. You're lying in your basket on the table beside me as I write this; you keep pulling on my hair. Doubtless you've broken yourself of this habit by now.*

*Your parents have probably told you a thousand stories about me, all of them good I hope. Now I have a story for you, a fairy tale. Your mother loved fairy tales, perhaps she still does. I hope you do.*

*Once upon a time there was a garden. It was a magnificent garden, full of every kind of plant and tree, perfect weather from one year to the next.*

*In this garden lived a race of people as happy and kind as any in the world. One of these people was named... well, let's be plain and call him Frodo, for*

*although this is a fairy story you are clever enough to know it is based on the truth.*

*Frodo lived in his garden with his Sam, and loved his Sam dearly. They were as full of joy as any two beings could be without bursting from it. Everything was perfect.*

*The owner of the garden was a jolly man who loved to sing, and all the people would sit and listen and sing along with the parts they knew.*

*But one day Frodo sat under an apple tree, and noticed that one of the fruits was not red and plump like the rest but black and small and hard.*

*A sleek shining snake, scales a beautiful white-gold, slipped down the tree to where Frodo sat, and spoke to him.*

*"That apple will make the whole garden rot, if you leave it there."*

*Then the snake took Frodo down to the edge of a nearby river, and told him to look into it. He looked in and saw the whole garden filthy and burning, his beloved Sam weeping and beaten.*

*"What must I do?" Frodo asked the serpent.*

*"The apple must be eaten, contained within a person. Then the spread will stop."*

*"But what will happen to me? Will it turn me as dark as it would have the garden?"*

*The snake nodded sadly. Frodo cried, because he didn't want to leave Sam. But he knew what he must do, even if he was afraid to do it.*

*The snake coiled around him, but it was not a comforting embrace.*

*So Frodo ate the apple, and felt the rot bubble inside him like a black swamp. He would have died then, but Sam wouldn't let him go, nursing him through a night longer than any before it had been.*

*The garden was safe, and it seemed Frodo was too. Sam sobbed for joy, and wed a girl named Rosie who*

*was pretty as cherry flowers. It worried Frodo when Sam and Rosie kissed him, though, because he knew there was poison in him, and didn't want them tainted.*

*The apple grew evil grasping vines inside Frodo, wrapped around his heart and squeezed it iron-tight.*

*Sam and Rosie had a baby, named for a flower that resembled a star, and this baby glittered as bright as the night sky. Frodo held her, and choked on the taste of apple, and knew his sickness was worth the pain, that the garden was more valuable than even he had imagined.*

*One day the happy laughing owner of the garden came to Frodo, and Frodo knew it was time for him to leave. And he kissed Rosie and Sam and their baby goodbye, and walked out the gate.*

*The point of this tale, Elanor, is that sometimes people have to give up what they love so other people can keep it. If Frodo hadn't eaten the apple, the garden would have been lost to him anyway, but at least this way I know you and your parents can stay there.*

1439

Elanor at eighteen was slim by hobbit standards, her skin creamy-pink and her hair showing every single one of the hundred brushes she gave it before bed. When she went out dancing, in her mother's party dress with the ribbon flowers at the hem, there wasn't a hobbit that looked at her who didn't fall in love.

She knew this, and if she ever forgot it her sister Rose would be quick to remind her, but she couldn't bring herself to care very much. People told her she was beautiful, but all saw in the mirror was her own familiar face, her mother's eyes and her father's mouth.

For all her envious complaining, Rose loved to watch as Elly got ready to go out, the way she'd use a pumice stone until her feet looked almost as soft as her hands.

They were chatting about nothing much at all when Fastred arrived, joking in the way they sometimes did. They bickered less as the years went by, growing more alike with age.

Once she'd listened to Rose tell Prim and Daisy a bedtime story, the same tale Elanor herself had been told and had passed on to Rose and Goldy in turn. It had changed a little with time, as stories do, and Elly wondered if one day she'd meet it again and not even recognise that it was the same one.

"So the two brothers pushed the wicked queen into the fire. They wanted to leave a trail behind them as they walked him, so that they could come back later and take all the gold and jewels with them. But they'd used up all their stones, if you remember, so all they had left to mark the way were bits of bread. And a little sparrow hopped down and ate the bread up, and the boys never found the treasure."

Elanor was sure that wasn't how it had finished when she'd heard it, but couldn't quite remember how the end was supposed to go.

Often Elanor would get home from dancing after everyone was already asleep, but they always left a lamp burning to help her find her way home. She could never bring herself to put it out, though, because it seemed to be lighting the way for someone else to safely come back through the gate and up the path.

1442

Pressing the palm of one hand and the back of the other on the glass, lining up thumbs and forefingers, Elanor created a rough frame, resting her head against her arm as she peered through.

"What are you looking at?"



It was Queen Arwen, her luminous face worn a little by time but still lovely beyond compare. When Elanor had first met her it had been hard to feel comfortable, Arwen was a regal and cool ruler, apart from everything despite her mortality and love.

"My Mum and Dad." Elanor looked out at the garden again, the manicured lawns so different from the controlled riot of the plants at home.

Sam and Rosie were lying on the grass together; he'd tucked one of the big red flowers from the snaking vines behind her ear. She was laughing, swatting Sam's hand away as he tickled at the soft inside of her elbows.

"They act... all squishy. Lovesick, like they must have been when they were my age. I heard Mum giggle the other day... giggle, like a little girl. They're very happy here, she's going to have a baby before long I think."

"Do you like having so many brothers and sisters?" Arwen asked with a small serene smile.

"Yes. We're our own little world. But sometimes I feel like I don't fit in with them completely, because I look so strange. My sister Goldy - her real name's Goldberry but everyone calls her Goldilocks - has light hair too, and so does Daisy, but they still look like hobbits are supposed to. My Dad says that when I wear the long dresses everyone wears here, and my feet are covered, I look more like one of your daughters than one of his."

"Yes, you look like my grandmother, you have the same shaped face, and your hair is almost as fair."

"Milady, you know more about love than anyone else, I should think. I don't know anything about love, but I have a question. Maybe you can answer it?"

"I'll do my best." Arwen sat down on one of the high-backed chairs along the wall.

"Do lovers have happy endings outside stories? I don't know if I believe in them anymore."

"It's got a lot to do with what you consider a happy ending." As always, Arwen's voice was soft and a little sad. "There are no free rewards in the world, Elanor of the Shire. For my own definition, I would say love is anything you are willing to lose everything for. I love Estel, my husband and King, enough that I would trade a thousand thousand years for his company. Your father and Frodo the Ringbearer had a love for your home. To have felt a love like that at all is a gift few come close to having."

Elanor rolled her eyes, but not so Arwen could see. "I beg your pardon, but I'm sure now that I'm a hobbit at heart and not as Elvish as my Dad supposes. Just being able to love isn't a happy ending, and nor's saving what you love unless you get to enjoy it. You love your husband enough that you'd give up your life, but here you are with a life as lovely as any could wish for. And my Dad, he has all he wanted, or nearly so... this gem I wear at my neck, it used to be yours, didn't it?"

"Yes."

"And now it's mine. But for a little while it was Frodo's, Mr Baggins. I don't remember him, though my mother says he adored me as if I was his own. Why didn't he get a happy ending? He deserved one as much as anybody else."

"You seem so sure that the story's done with." Arwen tilted her head to the side slightly, studying Elanor. "My husband has a saying, that we leave more behind than memory. I believe that's true. Perhaps in a way you're his happy ending, as well as your father's."

"But I'm not Dad's happy ending, he's got his own right there." Elanor waved her hand towards the window. "And I can't be Frodo's, either, not when he's not here to see it. And my Mum and Dad miss him, and they're never going to seem him again, and no matter what you consider a happy ending that's not it."

Arwen's smile grew even more beautiful and sad.

"They may yet. We leave behind more than memory, but some things we take with us when we leave this world. Perhaps they'll find each other again beyond these lives."

"Well, I certainly hope so." Elanor put her hands against the glass and made her frame again. "Because this ending's so happy for some, and so empty for others, and it doesn't balance right at all, if you ask me."

"Perhaps fate should consult you next time." Arwen couldn't hide her smile. Elanor considered being offended for a moment, then smiled back.

"I'm going to have adventures, you know." Elanor sat herself down in front of Arwen. "Like my Dad. I want to explore the world, to build houses and start towns. Places that are already settled are like warm pudding, all heavy and sticky in the stomach."

"The Shire doesn't have anywhere left to settle, though, does it?" Arwen asked. Elanor sighed and shook her head.

"No, it's all full up of homes and farms already. But I don't really want to leave it, not forever. I'd miss it too much, I think."

"Perhaps the borders of the Shire could be extended, and you could settle the new area?"

"Now that would be fun," Elanor agreed. "And there'd be nobody to say I wasn't normal, because I'd be the only one there and that would make me completely usual."

"Unusual doesn't mean bad," Arwen reminded her. Elanor shrugged.

"Yes, well, neither does 'clean' but my little brothers never listen to that, either."

They got back to Beg End mid-morning on a sunny Treowesdei. Rose and Merry were the first to meet the returning party, running down the hill like children half their age, followed by Goldy and Frodo at a slightly more dignified pace.

Goldy and Rose cooed over baby Tom, with his thatch of rusty brown curls and freckled snub nose. The boys were more interested in the stories their parents had brought back, second-hand adventures. So many welcome-back hugs were exchanged Rosie and Sam felt sure their arms would fall off if anyone else wanted to say hello.

Elanor sat down on her bed with a bounce, sneezing at the cloud of dust that flew up.

"I still can't believe none of you took my room while I was gone." She grinned over her shoulder at her sisters as she clambered over the bed to open the windows wide. "I've got so many stories to tell you. Real Kings and Queens, Goldy, just like in our games. And all the most beautiful women there have dark hair, Rose, they thought me quite wan and plain."

"Did you bring us presents, Elly? Did you bring us silk fans and shiny hair slides?" Ruby jumped up and down with excitement.

"Yes, yes, I've got things for all of you." Elanor's year away was faintly audible in her voice, mostly on the r's and vowels. "I want to hear about what you've been up to, though. Primrose, Daisy, you're both so big! I feel as if I've been away for ten years."

"Adaldrida Boffin and Jacky Fairbairn are married," Goldilocks said with a conspiratorial tone. "And your friend Dora is working at the tavern now, they say she dances pretty as a sunbeam on water."

"What of Fastred? And Goodwill?" Elanor prompted. Goldy's smile slipped a little, but she rallied quickly.

"Now that Jacky's wed, Fastred's the one all the lasses are chasing. He wanted to be seen about with me, to

throw them off, but Farry Took said he'd sooner Fastred ate rotten fish."

"You and Faramir, Goldilocks? For all your princess dreaming, I must say I never expected that," Elanor teased, making her sister blush. "What about Goodwill?"

"Elanorelle..."

"What? What's wrong?"

"Goodwill's been dead these past six months."

"Oh."

It was hours before Elanor came out of her room, going to her parent's bed as she had when she was tiny. Sam and Rosie held her as she sobbed, stroking her hair and letting her cry.

"I feel like my heart's ripped in half," she choked out after a long time.

"Yes. It is, for a while," Sam said, rocking her like she was still a baby. "But the pain gets easier, like. You start to see the sweetness in things again."

"You'll laugh harder, because you'll laugh his share too." Rosie's voice was thick with her own tears. "Perhaps one day you'll have a son, and name him for the love you lost."

"I don't even know if I did love him. I'll never know."

"Yes, Elly, you did." Sam kept rocking her, soothing her into a grieving sleep. "It don't hurt like being ripped in two except when you love with your complete self. But some day you'll wake and find yourself whole again, whole and healed, even as you love him still."

1448

"Rose? Are you awake?"

"Well, I am now, stupid," Rose snapped at her older brother. "Fro, it's the middle of the night."

"I know, but I wanted your help. I want to bake Mum and Dad a cake."

"Get El to do it. She's a better cook than I am."

Rose hid her head under the pillow and tried to go back to sleep.

"I like your cakes better, you're not all persnickety about getting the icing just right and the slices all the same like she is."

"Really?" She perked up at the compliment. "All right, then. But why now? It isn't a birthday, or their wedding anniversary. It's not even one of their sad days when they sit about and sigh and tell us how much we should appreciate everything, those come in March and October."

Frodo shrugged. "It's a just-because cake. They're the best sort."

"Go out to the coops and see if there are any fresh eggs, they mix up better. I'll go stoke the oven," Rose took charge. The two of them crept down the hall, Frodo opening the door as quietly as he could and sneaking outside. Rose went into the kitchen and checked there was enough milk and cream left in the jug from supper, reaching up on tiptoes to get the sugar bowl down. She was taller than Goldy but still smaller than her mother or Elanor, and sometimes things were put far too high by arms that didn't know what it was to be ordinary-sized.

When Frodo hadn't returned with the eggs after a good quarter hour, Rose went out to see what the trouble was, stubbing her toe on the tin water barrel in the dark. With a yelp and a muttered curse, Rose kicked at the rusty bucket in annoyance.

"Ouch," said Frodo. "That clanging noise hurts my ears."

"Where have you been? It doesn't take this long to look for eggs."

"I got distracted. Look at the stars, Rose, look how lovely they are."

"Yes, they are beautiful, aren't they?" Rose agreed, tilting her head back so she could look up at the whole sky.

"What on earth are you two doing up at this hour?" their mother asked, coming out to stand beside them with a bright blue shawl around her shoulders, some of the lacing gone to moth holes thanks to Merry and Pippin's failed attempts at seasonal clothing storage.

"Looking at the sky, Mum. And baking cakes," Rose answered, dodging when Frodo tried to kick her in the shin for giving the game away.

"Well in that case I shan't scold you." Rosie laughed. "Do you want help?"

"It was supposed to be a surprise present," Frodo admitted regretfully. "For you and Dad."

"Oh, then I'll just go back to bed. I'm sure by morning I'll think all this a dream, and be wonderfully surprised," Rosie promised, turning. "Don't stay out here too long, those cats you lot insist on feeding scraps will get inside and into the cream."

"Yes Mum," they chorused dutifully.

"And ducklings?"

"Yes?"

"I love you. Always know that."

Rose smiled. "We do, Mum. We're your happily ever after, after all."

Rosie shook her head.

"Nobody gets a happily ever after, blossom. But sometimes you make all make me so happy I forget that, and get so close to one the difference can't be told."

Little Bilbo, not really little anymore at eighteen, had a habit of sitting on the hill just above the front door, feet hanging down to get in the way of anyone who wasn't paying attention. Sam would tug on his toes and pull him down, at which point Bilbo would grin and run around to climb back up. It annoyed Primrose and Ruby like

anything, who were closest to Bilbo in age and hated being lumped together with him as scallywags.

Primrose could usually be found down in the cool dampness underneath the bridge, watching the water rush past, playing with a small shell she'd found and scratching at the sandy ground, listening to the sounds of a distant sea.

Tom, youngest of the Gardner clan, was twelve, but almost as soon as Sam and Rosie stopped having children the grandchildren started turning up, Rose-girl





finally doing something before her older sister had a chance and giving birth to a bonny little girl named Lillian, which was cut short to Lil by all and sundry. It had been a hurried wedding, the bride and groom didn't know very much about each other except that there was perhaps a shared tendency to have too much ale at parties, and when he didn't return home from a trip to Bree one day Rose simply shrugged and moved back to Bag End. There were rumours she was romancing Dorian Applegate from Michel Delving, but none knew the truth of that save for Rose and Dorian themselves.

Little Lil was almost as tall as her young uncle Tom, and the two of them got up to more trouble than most could believe.

Frodo-lad, who lived over the hill with his bride Firiël, was expecting a son or daughter before the year turned, as were Elanor and Fastred. They had settled in Westmarch, an area of land gifted to them by the King, far rougher and less tamed than most comfort-loving hobbits would be happy with, but Fastred and Elanor adored it.

Firiël sometimes joked that she'd only married Frodo-lad because her name was too queer for any other family to want her. She was named for a lass in a song, a sad poem about not being able to join an Elven ship as it sailed. Elanor had always had a fondness for the tune but never sang it, because it made her mother cry.

1482

They'd said everything that needed saying long ago, in happier times, so they didn't speak as Sam sat on the edge of the bed, holding one of Rosie's hands between his own. Eventually her eyes closed and she let out a long sighing breath, like that of a traveller finally returning to home and hearth. It was another long while

again before Elanor came into the room, leaning past Sam to kiss her mother's forehead, long curtain of hair tied back in braids.

Night had fallen, the sweet heavy smells of the garden wafting into the room as Elanor pushed the windows open.

"Look, Dad," she sounded almost surprised. "The stars are still there."

## 1483

It was a mild summer afternoon, Goldilocks' eldest daughter Rowan chasing bees from flower to flower as Goldy and Elanor sat together and missed their parents.

"Farry thinks his dad's planning to go away with uncle Merry, to Gondor perhaps. They only stayed to see Ro grow up from a babe to a lass, it seems likely, and now that she's eleven and can remember them, they'll be off."

"I used to wish that I could remember Frodo, but lately it's occurred to me that I all but can. He's been in my life as sure as Mum and Dad were, in tales and stories they told us. Maybe he's still alive, out over the sea," Elanor said in her soft voice.

"Well, I hope for Dad's sake he is," Goldy snorted. "Though how Dad was so sure he would be is a puzzle."

"I don't think it matters in the end, if Frodo's still alive or not. I think things are different over there, more different than we can dream, and nobody's really alive or really dead anyway. Just happy. And I think Dad's boat pulled up on the beach, the sand white and hot under his feet, and Frodo and Mum were there to meet him. They smiled at him and said 'Hullo Sam, you haven't hurried, have you?', and now they're all lying under a tree somewhere, daydreaming and telling fairy stories." Elanor smiled. Goldy shook her head.

"It's a pretty dream, El, but we put Mum in the ground. Remember that song that used to make her cry, about the earth-born maid who couldn't sail with the Elves? She's not with them, Elly, not now and never again."

"No." Elanor shook her head, fingers playing with the thin chain at her throat. "I don't know how I know it, Goldy, but the story's all played out in my head. My heart knows it, and it's a happily ever after."

"Nobody gets a happily ever after."

"Well, this is so close the difference can't be told, anyway. And that's enough."

THE END

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