Bell's Table

by Elwen of the hidden valley

Summary

Scenes from life in Hobbiton, from Frodo's arrival to Bilbo's departure. A look at life in the Shire, based around Bag End and Bagshot Row, featuring both canon and original characters. Simple interactions of a simple folk.

This is a reworking of a previously published tale. Some of the chapters remain the same but have switched order, some have been tweaked and some are wholly new. Individual chapters or groups of two or three chapters can be read as freestanding stories if preferred.

Notes

I do not own the characters, main events or settings of these stories. They were conceived by the fertile imagination of JRR Tolkien and are now owned by his heirs and executors. I am only playing in his sandpit and hope he will forgive me the liberty.
Bilbo settled on one of the benches by the kitchen table and Bell smiled as she placed one of her best teacups before him, pouring milk and adding the strong tea. Little Samwise pushed the honey across the table and then continued to shell the large mountain of peas before him.

The master of Bag End watched in amusement as the lad rescued a large fat green caterpillar and walked gravely to the door, laying it down on the grass by the front step. It was a good job Hamfast was not around, for he would have told Samwise to kill it. In his mind, Bilbo could hear him chiding even now.

“I don’t grow vegetables for no caterpillars. I grows ‘em to feed people.”

Sam returned and continued his work and Bell reached out a hand to ruffle his curls as she finished slicing carrots. Bilbo stirred a spoonful of honey into his strong tea, careful not to use too much. He made a mental note to find a reason to send across a jar at some point. Honey was expensive and he knew that the Gamgees rarely used it in tea themselves, keeping it for cooking instead.

Wielding a small, sharp knife . . . it’s blade worn into a concave arc by years of sharpening, Bell did not look up as she spoke.

“So. How is young Master Frodo? It must have been a long trip for him from Buckland . . . him havin’ been so ill an’ all. I hope it don’t cause him to relapse. I’m surprised the doctor let him travel.” Her voice held a note of censure. But then, it always did when she talked of Buckland. Like most people in Hobbiton, she considered the folk who lived beyond the river a bit “touched”. “He should’ve been left tucked up in bed for another week at least after that influenza, if ye ask me.”

The implication of her words was not lost on the bachelor hobbit. “And you think I should have had more sense, Bell?” he asked quietly. He had been dubious, to be sure. But the doctor had offered cautious approval and Frodo had managed, although he had nodded against his uncle’s shoulder for the last two hours of the cart journey and Bilbo had shooed him straight to bed when they arrived. He had left the lad still sleeping soundly this morning.

Bell pursed her lips and started peeling onions. “Beggin’ yer pardon an’ all, Mr Bilbo. But ye’ll not be used to carin’ for young uns.” She looked towards the sink and the sound of splashing.

“Daisy, ye be sure to get all the blood clots out o’ that beast heart. I don’t want to go sticking my hand in to stuff it and coming up all bloody again, like last time.”

Daisy looked contrite. “Ma . . . I’ll do it right, this time. I ain’t never done it before last time. I’ll flush it out good. I promise.”

Bell nodded. “There’s my good lass.” She went on to start dicing onions and Bilbo noticed little Samwise wipe his eyes. Bell followed his gaze. “Why don’t ye move a bit further down the table, Sam? These onions are a mite strong.”

Sam nodded and slid himself and the peas further down the bench.

Bilbo sipped his tea. “I must admit that I wondered whether it would be safe to move Frodo. But the doctor seemed happy. And when I checked him this morning he had no sign of fever. He just seems tired.” A note of uncertainty crept into his voice. “Do you think he will be alright? Perhaps I should go and check on him again.” He made to rise and little Samwise’s eyes grew wide in alarm, but Bell’s calm voice cut the rising panic.
“Ye sit there an’ finish yer tea. If he didn’t start a fever durin’ the night he’s not goin’ to start one now. He’s young. He’ll bounce back. Youngsters usually do,” she announced sagely.

Daisy brought the cleaned heart to the table and set it in a roasting tin while her mother added the diced onions to the stuffing mix waiting nearby. She looked at Daisy for a moment, assessing. Then she pushed over the basin of sage and onion stuffing. “Here’s another job for ye, lass. Ye can stuff the heart. Make sure ye get it right down inside, mind ye.”

Daisy beamed at being entrusted with this extra responsibility. “Yes, Ma.” She took up a handful of stuffing and forced it down one of the holes widened in the top of the heart . . . her tiny hand disappearing inside as she forced the breadcrumb and suet mix down as far as she could reach.

Bell took up a larger knife and began to chop up some turnip. “Sam, lad. Will ye go to the pantry an’ fetch that little bowl of broth for me?” The turnip was firm and Bell struggled to get the large, razor sharp knife through the orange flesh.

“I put some beef broth aside for Master Frodo last night. It’s got a few vegetables in it but I’ve chopped ‘em extra fine for him. I weren’t sure how he would be feelin’. From the sound of it he’s taken no harm but he might like it anyhow.”

Sam crept carefully across the room from the pantry, a small basin held firmly between both hands. He concentrated on the sloshing liquid, tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth and relinquished it to Bilbo in relief, returning to his pile of peas and popping one in his mouth as reward. Bell grinned.

Bilbo inhaled the fragrance of the broth, a very thin layer of fat crazing its surface like ice on a puddle. “I am sure Frodo will love it, Bell. The doctor said they were still having to tempt him to eat and I can think of few things more tempting than your cooking.”

Bell kept one eye on her knife as she glanced up at her guest. “I don’t know about that. Although I’ve learned a few things, bringin’ up this brood. Anyhow, yer a fair cook yerself, Mr Bilbo. The lad won’t starve, that’s for sure. Talkin’ of which . . . I think tis about time ye should be checkin’ on him. Tis an hour since ye came in.”

Bilbo’s eyes widened. “Oh my . . . that long?” He rose, hurriedly. “I should check, shouldn’t I.” His eyes fell to the basin of broth and he lifted it carefully. “He may be looking for his breakfast even now. Dear me. Some Uncle I am.” He hurried to the door and Sam rushed ahead to open it for him. “Thank you, Bell,” he called over his shoulder.

With that, he left, and Sam stood in the doorway, watching him hurry up the hill to the big smial, hoping to catch a glimpse of the new occupant.

“Samwise Gamgee . . . ye come in here and finish yer job. T’aint polite to rubberneck.”

Daisy giggled and her mother glared at her, reaching over to score the flesh of the beast heart that now lay, stuffed and ready for roasting, in the tin.
Broken Wings

Bell dropped the chicken head into a dish, sighing, and Daisy hung her head.

“I’m sorry, Ma.”

“Never mind . . . can’t be helped now. But next time make sure ye ask the butcher to dress it afore he weighs it. I reckon nothin’ to paying for the weight of a head and feet I’m not goin’ to eat. Bill Bracegirdle saw ye comin’, lass.”

Daisy ducked her head once more and Sam hid a smile as he bent to his slate at the other end of the large scrubbed wooden table. He painstakingly formed the letter ‘A’ with his stub of chalk and checked it against the one flowingly scripted on the small piece of paper on the table at his side. The young lad sighed when he compared them and wished the learning would go faster so that his letters would look as beautiful as Mr Bilbo’s.

Bell took one of the yellow feet in her fingers and slit the skin around the joint, using the sharp knife to cut the sinews before bending the foot back, slicing through the bottom layer of skin and adding the severed foot to the head in the bowl. The second foot followed the first and Daisy rushed to dispose of the evidence.

Deciding that the point had been made, Bell relented when the girl returned. “Tis alright, lass. Everyone makes mistakes. It weren’t yer first and it won’t be yer last. Yer forgiven.” The small sharp bladed knife was run down the skin of the neck from shoulder to end and Bell began to peel back the skin. Finding the joint between the bones at the windpipe she sliced the neck away and placed it in a fresh dish.

Her eldest daughter smiled in relief. “Thank you, Ma.”

“Finish gratin’ that stale bread fer the stuffin’,” Bell instructed, as she turned the bird around and cut around the vent.

Daisy picked up the grater and the remains of the loaf and added crumbs to a growing mound in the basin.

Sam watched in interest as his mother slid her fingers inside the bird and moved them around a bit, then she seemed to grasp something right up at the neck end and began to slowly draw her hand out. With it came all the inner organs of the bird. Curiosity got the better of him and he left his seat to stand at his mother’s elbow. Bell noticed his presence.

“There now, Sam. All that came out of that bird. And most of it we can’t eat.” She fished around in the mound of sweet smelling offal.

“Why not, Ma?” Sam asked curiously, watching as she severed the tiny heart and added it to the neck, sitting in a dish. That bit he recognised from the shape. It was the same shape as the beast heart they sometimes had . . . although it was much, much smaller.

Bell cut away the liver, carefully dissecting and discarding the gall bladder. “Well, a lot of this is used for digestin’ its food so it’s got half eaten stuff in it. Ye don’t want to be eatin’ that. And some of it is very nasty tastin’.” She pointed to the tiny gall bladder she had just discarded. Bell added the gizzard and kidneys to the heap in the bowl and then waited while daisy removed the wooden board to dispose of the rest.
Sam’s mother took up a waiting damp cloth and wiped around inside the now empty cavity. She slipped fingers in either side of the vent and pulled out two pads of fat, which she laid on one side to sit on the bird’s breast when it was put in the oven.

Daisy returned and began to add warm water to the stuffing mixture, filling the room with the smell of sage and onion. Her mother looked up at the smell.

“I hope you added suet to that mix or it’ll be a stodgy mess.”

“I did, Ma,” Daisy assured her mother hurriedly. She was not about to make any more mistakes today, especially with Sam watching.

Bell caught Sam frowning at the carcass. “What is it, lad?”

“What’s that red mark on the thing on the side?”

His mother looked down in confusion, trying to find the source of his question. Sure enough, on one wing . . . about half way down the last set of bones, was a bruise. Bell rubbed it between her fingers, feeling the grating of broken bone.

“Poor thing had a broken wing. Mayhap that’s why it were killed . . . farmer put it out of its misery.”

Bell accepted the stuffing bowl from Daisy and began to fill the cavity, after folding the empty skin of the neck over the hole at the other end of the body.

They all jumped at a loud thumping on the door, and for a moment they were too stunned to react. Then Bell ran to open it, wiping her hands on her apron as she went. Whoever it was they were obviously agitated because they banged again before Bell could cover the short distance from the table. She flung open the door to find Master Bilbo leaning, gasping on the doorframe, his face red and covered in sweat.

“Why, whatever is it Mr Bilbo?” asked Bell, reaching out to help him across the threshold.

Bilbo waved her off, finally finding the breath to speak. “Frodo . . . Frodo fell. Think he’s broken his arm . . . possibly his wrist.” He took another deep breath. “Need one of your lads to . . . fetch doctor . . . if you can spare them.”

Bell blinked. “They’ve all gone off to help Tom Cotton with his harvest. There’s only me and Daisy and Sam. May’s taken Marigold down to watch and Sam’s too young to go runnin’ about the Shire on his own.”

Bilbo sagged against the doorframe. “I had forgotten. I can’t leave the lad. I’ll try further down the row.” He made to leave but Bell stopped him, untying her apron and throwing it onto the corner of the table.

“They’ve all gone to harvest.” With surprising strength she turned Bilbo around. “Ye go fetch the doctor and I’ll go sit with Master Frodo.”

Bilbo sighed with relief and managed a weak smile. “Thank you, Bell. You’re a treasure and Hamfast is lucky to have you.”

Bell blushed and pushed him lightly on the shoulders. “Get on with ye! He knows well enough what he’s got. Now off ye go.”

With one final, relieved smile Bilbo headed off down the path at a trot. Bell turned back to the smial
to find her two children still open-mouthed. She stuck her hands on her hips.

“Would ye look at the pair of ye. Faces fit to catch flies.” Two sets of jaws snapped shut and Sam ran up to his mother, brown eyes threatening tears.

“Are they goin’ to kill Master Frodo?”

Bell knelt down and gathered him up. “Gracious no, lad. Whatever makes ye ask that. He’s just broke an arm. He’ll be fine.”

Sam sobbed against her shoulder. “But they killed the chicken. I don’t want them to kill Master Frodo.”

Bell sighed and squeezed him before pushing him away to look into his tearful soft brown eyes. “They only do that with chicken’s, love. The doctor will put a splint on young Master Frodo’s arm to hold it still while it heals, and he’ll be right as rain in a few weeks.” She reached out and brushed away his tears with her fingers, leaning forward to kiss his forehead as the little face cleared.

“Now . . . ye’ll have to help here while I go and sit with Master Frodo. Think ye can do that?”

Sam pulled himself up to his full height . . . which wasn’t very much . . . even for a hobbit. “Yes, Ma.”

Bell gave him one last squeeze and stood up, looking across the room at Daisy.

“Finish stuffin’ that bird, then truss it and put it in the oven. Ye’ve seen me do it often enough and I won’t shout if ye don’t get it right this time.” She turned Sam and pushed him back towards the table, still addressing her daughter. “When ye’ve done that ye and Sam start the vegetables. May can help if she comes back in time. Get them on to boil when the bird’s near ready. And don’t give Sam that sharp knife. He’ll manage well enough with one of the others. Then clean out the gizzard and when ye put on the vegetables, put the giblets to simmer for the gravy.”

Daisy blinked, her face filling with panic. “But I ain’t never got a whole meal ready on my own. What if things ain’t ready and the bird is cooked?”

“Then take the bird out and we’ll eat it cold. It won’t come to no harm. Just use a skewer like I showed ye to make sure it’s cooked through.”

Before Daisy could say more, Bell pulled the door shut and hurried off up the path to Bag End.

She found the door open and headed down the hall, trying to remember which of the many ones lining it led to Master Frodo’s room. After a moment it became easy enough to find and Bell just followed the sound of soft sobbing. She found Frodo, lying atop his bed and curled on his side, his left arm cradled gingerly in his right.

The boy looked up when he heard her steps and sniffed, then turned his head into the pillows to hide his tears.

“There now, lad. Yer Uncle Bilbo’s gone for the doctor and I’ve come to sit with ye ‘til they get back. We’ve not been introduced. I’m Bell Gamgee from number three.” She settled on the bed and combed her fingers through his thick chestnut curls and he turned huge blue eyes up to her.

His voice was a little shaky but she noted that his manners had been learned, for he gave a formal, “Pleased to meet you, Mistress Gamgee.” Then he swallowed before adding, “Please . . . I’m awfully cold.” And to confirm his statement his body gave a small shudder.
Of course he would be cold. His body had just had a nasty shock. “Ye silly hobbit, Bell Gamgee . . .
anyone would think ye’d no young uns of yer own,” she murmured. Rising, she set too making him
comfortable and within a few minutes Frodo was tucked up in his bed, supported by a mound of
pillows, with his clothes loosened. Bell laid a damp cloth on his brow and slipped a pillow gently
beneath his left arm.

Frodo sighed in relief at the temporary reduction in his pain. The cornflower blue eyes, which had
clanched shut as soon as she had moved him, opened once more. “Thank you, Mistress Gamgee.”

“Yer welcome, lad.” Bell settled on the bed once more and used another damp cloth to wipe his
tearstained face. “However did ye manage to fall? Did ye trip?”

Frodo made to shake his head and stopped when the cool compress threatened to slip over his eyes.
Bell adjusted it. “I fell out of a tree.”

“A tree? Whatever were ye doin’ up a tree?”

His reply was rather sheepish. “Reading.”

Bell fought hard to suppress a smile. “Well now, I’ve found most people use a chair, although I
confess I’ve seen ‘em reading on the floor. But up a tree is a new one on me. Is it somethin’ they do
down over the river?”

She would believe just about anything about what they did down there. They were strange folk,
those Brandybucks, and Bilbo had done right by the lad, bringing him back up to Hobbiton to live
amongst proper folk.

Frodo gave a little laugh, wincing when the consequent movement of his chest and shoulder jostled
his arm. “No. It’s just something I do. Usually I don’t have any trouble . . . and I hadn’t climbed
high. But the book slipped off my lap and when I reached to catch it I lost my balance.”

“Well, tis a hard lesson to learn and mayhap I’m takin’ a liberty . . . but I can’t help feelin’ it were a
warnin’ to ye to stay out of trees. T’ain’t natural for a hobbit.”

Frodo smiled. “You may be right.”

Bell recognised the look in his eyes. She’d seen it in her young ones too often. He’d be back up a
tree as soon as the splints came off. Well. It was none of her business.

“Would ye like a sip of water, lad? Ye look a mite feverish.” Although Frodo’s face was ashen
beneath his summer tan Bell could see two points of pink colour in his cheeks and his face was
bedewed with perspiration.

Frodo looked as though he were going to give a grateful, “Yes please.” Then he looked down at his
injured right arm and left wrist and back at Bell. “No thank you. I’m alright.”

Bell sniffed and filled a cup from the jug at Frodo’s bedside. This young Baggins was a stubborn
one. “Nonsense. Yer burnin’ up.” She held the cup to his lips. “Pride’s a good thing, in its place but
the sick bed’s no place for it.” When Frodo made no move to open his lips she met his gaze squarely.
“T’ain’t no shame to accept help when yer poorly. Especially from folk’s that love ye. Love needs
room to show itself.”

Now it was Frodo’s turn to be surprised and he opened his mouth obediently, greedily sipping the
cool water. Bell simply nodded in approval. He was stubborn but teachable.
They both looked to the door as the sound of a conversation and the soft slap of footsteps announced the return of Bilbo with the doctor. Frodo’s face filled with relief when he saw his uncle.

The older gentlehobbit assessed his nephew and turned to Bell. “Bless you, Bell. I don’t know how you managed it but he looks better already.” He turned back to Frodo and smiled, reaching out to pat the lad’s knee.

“I only made him comfortable,” Bell announced, as she rose to give the doctor access to his patient. As she got to the door she turned, searching for those blue eyes. “Now ye mind what I said, Young Master. And I’ll send Sam across with a bite to eat later. I doubt yer uncle will have the time to cook today.”

Frodo smiled. “I will. And thank you.”

Bell nodded in approval and turned back to her own brood.
Tendin' with Taters

The table was full; and a line of bottoms filled the benches on either side. But there were three empty spaces.

Bell stood at the range, stirring a small pan, with Sam watching closely. She fished out the chicken giblets, leaving them on a small plate that Daisy provided. Bell forked up the tiny liver and offered it to a pleasantly surprised Sam, who chewed it delightedly. That titbit was usually reserved for his Da but Sam would have to wait for his dinner until he had run his errand, so Bell knew that her husband would not object on this occasion. There was, after all, no sacrifice greater to a young hobbit than to ask him to delay eating when food was on the table.

Bell left the pan to bubble and, with two large forks, lifted the roasted chicken onto a serving plate, which Daisy laid before her Da, following it with basins of piping hot vegetables. Meanwhile, Bell added the meat juices from the roasting tin to the giblet broth. She handed Sam a cup of white liquid.

“I've another job for ye, lad. This is flour and water. I want ye to trickle it very slowly into the gravy as I stir. Do ye think ye can do that?”

Sam swallowed the last of the tiny liver. “Yes Ma.” Behind him he could hear plates being filled and knew that his Da was making sure that there would be one ready for him when he returned from Bag End.

Bell began to stir the broth briskly and Sam trickled the flour paste in very slowly, watching in fascination as the broth thickened and turned a pale toffee colour, the fat from the roast forming sparkling lace curtains on its surface. Her family was firmly convinced that Bell Gamgee made the best gravy in the Shire.

“Well done, lad. Now fetch me that little dish of mashed potato and we’ll pour some of this over it for Master Frodo.” Sam obliged, his mouth watering as he watched the golden liquid being spooned over a little mound of creamy mashed potato. There were those who argued that Bell Gamgee also made the creamiest mashed potatoes in the Shire . . . adding milk, butter and pepper and mashing them until they were smooth as silk. If those arguers all belonged to her own family it mattered little to Bell.

Daisy bustled up with a jug and the rest of the contents of the pan were used to fill it. Bell set the bowl of potato and gravy on a couple of tea towels spread out on the wooden draining board, waiting. Sam covered the bowl with a plate and Bell wrapped it all carefully in the towels to keep it warm.

“Off ye go, then, Sam. Quick as ye can so it stays hot, but don’t go trippin’. One broken arm on the Hill is more than enough.” She ushered Sam out of the door and watched a moment as the lad set off at a quick walk towards Bag End.

She returned to the table as May began to cut up the chicken in little Marigold’s dish. Collecting Sam’s filled plate, she covered it with a bowl and set it atop a pan of boiling water to keep warm. If she knew Sam he would probably wish to get his first look at Bag End’s newest occupant.

Daisy snorted as her mother sat. “Fancy breakin’ an arm. What was he doin’ up a tree, anyway? No sensible hobbit should be climbin’ trees.”

It was her father who answered firmly. “Taint none of your business to ask and taint none of your...
place to comment on the doin's of your betters, Daisy Gamgee. You remember your place, my girl. The Baggins’ have always done well by this family. ‘Tis the wages Mr Baggins’ pays me that’s put this meal in front of you and don’t you forget it . . . and he pays above the goin’ rate for the job. Young Master Frodo deserves the same respect.”

Daisy offered a properly contrite, “Yes, Da.”

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Sam rang the bell by the big green door and it was opened within moments by Mister Bilbo Baggins.

“Hello Sam. Is that the potato from your mother?” He made to take it from Sam but the young hobbit relinquished it very reluctantly.

“Could I visit Master Frodo for a bit? . . . I won’t stay too long. I expect he’s not feelin’ very well at the minute.”

“I’m sure he’d love to see a new face, but won’t your supper be getting cold?”

“It’s alright. Ma said she’d keep it warm for me.”

Bilbo considered for a moment. Sam was much younger than Frodo but he was a quiet and thoughtful lad, much like the younger Baggins. Perhaps he would help to take Frodo’s mind off the pain until Bilbo could make up the tea the doctor had left.

“Very well, Sam. You can take in the tray. He’ll be more likely to eat if you’re there. The doctor says he’ll be feeling right as ninepence by tomorrow but he’s a tad feverish at the moment and it’s making his stomach a bit offish. You may be better at tempting him than I.”

He led the way to the kitchen, where he unwrapped the dish and placed it on a small tray with an equally small bowl of custard. Bilbo inhaled approvingly. “I do believe your mother makes the best gravy I have ever tasted.”

“Yes sir. She does,” affirmed Sam, quite willing to agree the merits of his mother’s cooking.

Bilbo took up the tray and led the way to Frodo’s bedroom where the lad was sitting propped up by several pillows. His right arm was in a sling, made from one of Bilbo’s expensive silk scarves, and Sam could see the hard outline of splints beneath the fabric. The left wrist also sported a light bandage. An open book lay upon the lad’s lap, although when they entered the room his eyes were closed. He opened them when he heard their footsteps.

Pain had turned Frodo’s complexion almost grey and the eyes were clouded but Sam found himself looking into wide eyes the blue of summer skies, set in a fine boned face and framed with curls the colour of roasted chestnuts. He almost imagined that this was one of Mr Bilbo’s elves, and for a moment he was struck dumb.

Bilbo smiled. “Here we are Frodo, lad. Some nice smooth mashed potato with gravy, courtesy of Mistress Gamgee, and a little custard . . . nothing too heavy on your stomach. And here’s young Sam Gamgee to help you with it.” Bilbo set the tray on his nephew’s lap as Sam stretched up to grab the book.

Frodo looked at the tray listlessly. “I’m not very hungry, really, Uncle.”

“Nonsense lad. The doctor said you couldn’t take the pain medicine on an empty stomach so eat up while I go and get it ready,” Bilbo replied . . . his tone brooking no further argument on the matter.
As he left he handed Sam a spoon. “He has trouble managing with his left hand . . . sprained the wrist. You'll have to feed him.” He left quickly, closing the door firmly behind him.

Sam looked about. There was a chair by the bed but he was too small to be able to reach Frodo’s mouth from there. Ever practical, he shrugged his shoulders and clambered onto the big bed, sinking into the soft feather mattress. He wished his own bed were as soft as this. He would never want to get up again. Frodo winced a little as the movement jostled him.

“Sorry, Mr Frodo.”

“It’s alright, Sam.”

Sam dipped his spoon in the potato and held it to Frodo’s lips. At first he thought the older hobbit was going to refuse but, after a moment, pale lips parted and took the proffered morsel.

Frodo blinked in surprise. The potato was as smooth as could be; not a lump to be found. And it tasted of butter, with a slight edge of salt. The gravy was smooth too, mildly flavoured with chicken. It slid down his throat with little effort and his tender stomach showed no signs of rejecting it. When Sam offered another spoonful there was no further hesitation.

“I feel such an idiot, having to be fed like a baby,” Frodo confessed between mouthfuls.

“My Ma says there’s nothin’ to be ashamed of in acceptin’ help when you need it. You can’t help it, and you’ve got to eat,” Sam announced, sagely.

Frodo smiled in spite of his pain. The arm was throbbing, his wrist ached and the combination of that, with a mild fever, was also making his head ache. But Sam was trying hard not to jostle him, now that he had managed to get onto the bed, and he was keeping his voice quiet, as though he knew.

The stomach, which had been complaining only a few minutes ago, was now settling. Perhaps Bilbo had been right and hunger, rather than fever, had caused the discomfort there. He had not eaten since first breakfast and had been in too much pain to bother over much about anything else until the doctor had set his arm.

Sam could stand it no longer. Despite his Da’s words curiosity got the better of him and he could not resist. “Would you mind if I asked a question, Master Frodo?”

“No Sam. What is it?”

“Why was you climbin’ a tree?”

Frodo suppressed a wince as he chuckled, wondering how many times he would have to answer that question. “It’s a habit I got into when I lived at Brandy Hall. I like to read but the Hall was so busy that I was always getting interrupted. I discovered that if I climbed a tree I could be out of sight and enjoy my book in peace. It’s not a problem here, of course, but old habits die hard.”

Sam nodded. “Will you be stoppin’ climbin’ trees in future, then?”

Frodo thought for a moment. “I don’t know, Sam. I quite like it . . . you can see so much more of the world from the top of a tree and I would so like to explore that world one day. I wonder if that is why Big Folk travel so much . . . because they can see farther than us and want to go and visit the places that they can see.”

His helper absorbed that piece of information and filed it for future reference as he moved on to
attack the custard. They were nearly finished when Bilbo returned with two cups.

As he crossed the room Bilbo took in the scene. Sam was settled on the bed, facing Frodo, offering him the last mouthful of custard. Both bowls were empty and Frodo was resting comfortably against his pillows. Some of the dullness about his eyes had gone, he was smiling gently and his face did not look as ashen. It seemed that Sam Gamgee was good for him. Perhaps he would pass on to Frodo the task of teaching Sam his letters.

“Here we are, lad. This is the willow bark tea and some milk to wash it down. Two big swallows and the medicine will be gone.” He handed over the smaller of the cups to Sam, who put it to Frodo’s lips at once, tipping in the suggested large mouthful. Frodo’s eyes widened and he swallowed quickly, his mouth turning down at the corners in an involuntary grimace. Sam gave him no time to pause as he delivered the second mouthful. He had been given this tea once when he broke a finger and he knew it tasted very bitter. As soon as it was swallowed Bilbo handed Sam the milk and Frodo drank it greedily, desperate to be rid of the horrible taste of the medicine.

“Well done, Frodo,” Bilbo praised. “Now let’s get this tray out of the way and you can take a little nap.” He removed the empty tray and Sam clambered down as gently as he could. The older Baggins helped Frodo scoot down beneath the covers, tucking them under his chin as soon as he was comfortable. Blue eyes closed and Bilbo signalled for Sam to follow him from the room. Frodo was exhausted by pain and shock and the willow bark tea would ease him enough to let him sleep now.

As they reached the door a small voice whispered, “Thank you, Sam. And please tell your mother that she makes the best mashed potato and gravy I’ve ever tasted.”

Sam blushed. “I will, Mr Frodo, and I hope as how you’re feelin’ better soon.”

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Bell and Daisy were washing and May was drying the pots when Sam got home. Hamfast was playing with Marigold on the floor by the fire.

His Ma brought the warmed meal to the table and Sam tucked in. “Mr Frodo says to thank you and that you make the best mashed potato and gravy he’s ever tasted,” Sam reported.

Bell preened a little, although all she said was, “Well, he’s probably never had proper mashed potato and giblet gravy, livin’ the wrong side of the river as he was. But I’m pleased he liked ‘em.”

“How’s he doin’?” asked Sam’s Da.

“He’s broken his right arm an’ hurt the left but the doctor says he’ll be right as ninepence tomorrow. Mr Bilbo gave him some of that horrible willow bark tea and he was goin’ to sleep when I left.”

Bell nodded approvingly. “Sleep and good food’s the best thing for him. I’ll send ye across with some sweet potato puddin’ tomorrow. That’ll set him right.”

Sam grinned. Oh yes, Ma’s sweet potato puddin’ would set anyone right, and if they were lucky, they would all get a taste of it.
“Can you pour the tea, Frodo?”

Frodo lifted the lid and stirred the fragrant contents of the teapot. “Yes Bilbo. I can manage that at least,” he replied a little ruefully. Even this had to be done slowly for he was naturally right handed and that was the arm in splints. His left wrist sported a supporting bandage too, although the pain and swelling had reduced considerably in the past few days.

Bilbo added a couple of rashers of bacon to each plate while Frodo filled their cups and joined him at the table. Just as he was reaching for the milk jug there was a loud knock at the kitchen door. “Sticklesbacks!” There was nothing more frustrating to a hobbit than being interrupted when about to tuck into second breakfast.

Grinning, Frodo went to answer the summons. “Hello, Mister Gamgee. What can I do for you?”

Hamfast tugged at his forelock and held out a handful of letters. “Me and Halfred met the postmaster on his way up the hill so we said we’d delivery these for him.”

“Thank you, Ham,” Bilbo called from the table, where he was cutting up Frodo’s bacon for him. “I’ll pop out after breakfast to have a word with you about the roses.”

“Aye, Mister Bilbo, sir. Me and Halfred will get on with the weedin’ ‘til then.”

Frodo settled down at his place just as Bilbo finished cutting the bacon and he nodded thanks as he handed over the post. Bilbo grabbed a mouthful of scrambled egg before sifting through the envelopes.

“There’s one for you.” He handed over a cream envelope and Frodo accepted it with raised brows. It was the first letter he had received since moving to Bag End and he recognised Aunt Esmeralda’s round script at once.

He tore open the envelope and perused the single sheet of paper it contained, his brows drawing down now. “It seems Aunt Esme has heard about my fall. She’s asking if we would like to celebrate our birthdays and the Harvest Home at Brandy Hall.”

Bilbo looked up a little sheepishly. “I’m afraid I was the one who told her. I thought it would be better to hear it directly from me than through gossip. I suspect that by the time the gossip reached Buckland, Esme would be told that you had broken every bone in your body when I flung you from a tree.”

Frodo had to grin, knowing only too well how the gossip tree worked. He forked up a piece of bacon, judging it a little crispy for his liking but grateful that Bilbo was willing to take the greater share of the work at present.

“Would you like to go back and visit, lad? We can if you wish.”
Frodo did not need to consider for too long. “I feel as though I’ve only been here five minutes. I think I’d like to celebrate our birthday here this year. If that’s alright with you.”

When Bilbo did not reply Frodo looked up to find his uncle reading a letter on the same cream paper. “I have a letter from Saradoc,” he announced baldly.

“You don’t sound very happy about that,” Frodo observed with growing concern.

“Esme’s letter may have been a suggestion but Sara is not so diplomatic. We have been summoned to Buckland. It seems he is concerned about my ‘parenting skills’.

Frodo set down his fork, suddenly losing interest in his breakfast. “Oh dear. I am so sorry, Bilbo. This is all my fault for being careless.”

Bilbo threw down the letter. “Nonsense, lad. It was an accident . . .pure and simple. Saradoc was never happy about your adoption. He thinks this crusty old bachelor has no right to be looking after a tween.”

“Well, he’s wrong! I love being with you.”

Bilbo sighed. “I’m afraid there’s nothing for it. I’ll send Halfred over to Bywater to deliver a message for Tom Carter. He will still be around after delivering the mail and if he’s heading back Buckland way he may be able to take us as passengers.” He nodded to Frodo’s arm. “You’re in no fit state yet to walk all that way.”

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It seemed to Frodo that half the occupants of Brandy Hall were gathered at the large front door to greet them. Esmeralda was smiling and ran forward to kiss his cheek and then envelope him in a careful hug. She held him at arm’s length for a moment to study him. “Well, you look a little tired but otherwise well,” she pronounced with a knowing glance aside to her husband.

Saradoc was not smiling as he shook Bilbo’s hand. Others came forward to greet the pair and then, suddenly, there was a shriek and a tiny figure bolted forward, flinging his arms about Frodo’s waist. “Frodo!”

Frodo staggered under the momentum of his attacker but recovered quickly. “Hello, Merry!”

“Up!” the faunt demanded, reaching up his arms.

“I’m afraid I can’t, Merry dear.” Frodo could almost feel the ice coming off the glare Saradoc gave Bilbo. “I’ve hurt my arm.”

Merry’s eyes widened as Frodo pointed to his arm, in its sling. He had made a conscious decision to discard the bandage on his other wrist the day before, aware that Saradoc needed no further ammunition. The little lad reached up to touch the sling, stroking gently along Frodo’s forearm. “Poor Frodo,” he pronounced as he turned to his mother. “Mama, kiss it better,” he demanded, with all the faith of any faunt in the healing power of a mother’s love.

Esmeralda tucked her son into her skirts. “I’ll kiss it later. But I think what Frodo needs now is a wash, something to eat and a nap.”

Saradoc motioned for them to enter the hall. “While you see to that, Bilbo and I will have a chat.”

Bilbo offered Frodo a wink when the lad looked as though he would protest their separation. “You
Saradoc led Bilbo into his study, it’s neatness a strong contrast to Bilbo’s eclectic muddle. For some minutes, they talked stifledly of the weather and travel, the state of the crops and whether Eglantine Took’s recently announced pregnancy would finally produce a male heir for the Thain. The older hobbit recognised this for what it was... a delaying tactic... and played along readily enough.

Esmeralda swept in a few minutes later with a smile and a flurry of fine lace petticoats. “There now. I’ve put you and Frodo in the blue room. I thought you’d like to share and it’s a nice big room.” She smiled, her green eyes filled with warmth. “I’ve left Frodo unpacking.”

Saradoc bristled, “On his own... with only one good arm?”

Esmeralda rolled her eyes as she began to pour a fine red wine into three glasses. “He’s only broken the one arm, dear. He’ll manage well enough.”

Bilbo settled onto a settee, hiding a smirk, but Saradoc noticed and it was all that was needed to let slip his temper at last. “He shouldn’t have to manage. That’s the whole point.” He sat down bristling at Bilbo across the clear expanse of his huge polished desk.

His wife handed him a glass of Winyards, turning to perch on a corner of the desk, between the two protagonists, before offering Bilbo his. “Frodo’s always been a very capable lad, Sara,” she responded calmly. “Capable of getting into mischief you mean.” Saradoc took a large swallow from his glass and Bilbo cringed at the blatant disregard for such a beautifully mellow wine.

Esmeralda chuckled. “We used to call him the Terror of Brandy Hall. If there was trouble to be had, Frodo Baggins would find it.”

Seeing now, how the land lay with Esmeralda and Saradoc Bilbo relaxed a little, taking a moment to savour a sip of wine before making his own observation. He couldn’t resist bating Saradoc, however. The fellow was just too, ‘upright’. “He’s a Baggins, through and through.” He had to bite his cheek as his words had the desired effect. He’d always been able to dig himself beneath Saradoc’s skin.

All the anger he had been holding at bay for days bubbled over and Saradoc exploded upward to pace before the row of three round windows behind him. “I was against this adoption from the start. That lad’s had enough trouble in his life. He doesn’t need to be led into any more by ‘Mad Baggins’.”

Esmeralda’s eyes widened as she watched Bilbo, but ‘Mad Baggins’ continued to sip his wine.

“And I have no intention of doing so. I have had my adventure, and very enjoyable it was. But Frodo is yet too young to be tramping off after wizards.” In truth, Bilbo felt a little uncomfortable with that statement, for there were moments of his adventure that could only truly be considered enjoyable when viewed through the softening lens of time.

When Saradoc began to turn puce his wife stepped in. “Do stop blustering dear. You know the doctor says it’s not good for you.” With a sigh, she led him back to his chair and placed the glass in his hand once more and to his credit, Saradoc allowed her to do so.

Esmeralda stood at her husband’s shoulder. “I don’t share Sara’s opinion about the adoption, as you know. I think the undivided attention of one person is exactly what Frodo needs. But you really must
Bilbo shifted uncomfortably. Had he been too absorbed in his own interests? He confessed that there were occasions, in the middle of a particularly difficult translation, when he lost track of time as well as Frodo.

Noting his hesitation, Esmeralda pressed on. “I think you and Frodo are good for each other. He will keep you grounded.” They all winced at that wording. “And you will keep that sharp mind of his occupied. It was boredom that was at the root of many of his pranks here.”

Saradoc’s features had faded to a more normal colour as his wife spoke. Now his tone was exasperated, rather than angry. “Did you even know he was up a tree?”

Bilbo had regained some of his own composure. “I did not. Although he tells me he did so first whilst living here.”

Now it was Saradoc’s turn to squirm for he had not been privy to that particular fact. Esmeralda laid a gentle hand upon her husband’s shoulder. “I knew. As he grew, the ‘Terror’ was slowly replaced by the ‘Scholar’. That’s another of the reasons I thought you would be so well suited.”

Saradoc laid a hand over hers. His outbursts of temper were always short lived. “The lad needs nurturing, Bilbo.”

Bilbo nodded. “I know and I am trying my hardest. We’re rubbing along nicely most of the time and he’s certainly turning into a very good scholar.”

Saradoc shook his head. “He’s a tween. There should be more in his head than books. Are there any lasses of his age in Hobbiton?” he asked pointedly.

Bilbo blinked. His own tweenage years had been so long ago that he had forgotten the heady discovery of lasses, the flirting, the uncertainty, the anguish of first rejection. Frodo had only just entered his tweens though. Surely there was time for him to grow into that? He had a sudden very sobering thought. Had Saradoc told Frodo about the birds and the bees? Was Bilbo expected to tackle that subject?

Noting the thoughts flitting across Bilbo’s face Esmeralda smiled. “How old were you when you had your first proper kiss, Bilbo?”

Gilly Brownlock’s freckled features formed in Bilbo’s mind. Now, there had been a willing participant in his first attempts. Of course, she had been eclipsed by the arrival of Pansy Berrydown in his young life. Bilbo pushed down the image of glossy chestnut curls and laughing eyes the colour of new holly leaves. Marriage and faunts had not been for him but Frodo was not Bilbo. “I don’t remember precisely.”

Saradoc set down his glass. “We are not telling you to throw him into the arms of the next willing lass, but at least make sure that he gets out and about amongst lads and lasses of his own age. I know there’s not the choice in a small place like Hobbiton that we have here, but there must be some. There’s more to life than books and tall tales, Bilbo.”

Half an hour ago Bilbo may have bristled at that last comment but now he considered carefully. “I suppose I just assumed that, as he showed such an interest in my books, he was getting all he needed. But you may have a point. I shall make sure he attends social occasions more often.”

Esmeralda raised finely arched brows. “And how will you do that, Bilbo dear?”
At first inclined to make some glib comment about shoving the lad out of the door, Bilbo was suddenly reminded of something his father had once told him. “The best way to teach is not to tell but to show.”

“I suppose we could start by attending Harvest Home here . . . together.”

Esmeralda’s face broke into a smile. “I think that would be a very good idea. He can help with the harvest again and get re-acquainted with some of his old friends.”

“And just how is he supposed to help with harvest when he only has one good arm?” her husband enquired with a frown, still a little unwilling to let Bilbo off the hook.

Esmeralda smacked his shoulder playfully. “He can keep Merry out of trouble for a start.”

Bilbo chuckled. If he knew Frodo Baggins at all, he suspected that before long he would be getting Merry into far more trouble than he would be keeping him out of.
Sam stood on tiptoe to ring the bell hanging beside Bag End’s round green door. As he waited for what felt to the youngster a very long while, he studied the sky. It was overcast and he hoped Old Widow Rumble was right when she had told him that it would not rain today. A loud groan of hinges announced the opening of Bag End’s door and he spun about to discover himself face to face with Mister Bilbo.

“Hello Sam. What brings you out on this cold afternoon?”

“Beggin’ your pardon, Mister Bilbo, but Da sent me to ask if you was needin’ any greenery for the yule decoratin’ in Bag End. Only me and Halfred and Da is goin’ into the woods to collect some.”

Bilbo smiled down at the lad. “How very good of you. But I wouldn’t want to put you to any trouble. I bought a few sprigs of holly at market yesterday.” He bent down to whisper, “Between you and me they’re a bit straggly, but they’ll do in a pinch.”

Samwise drew himself up to his full height to announce with some certainty, “Oh, my big brother, Halfred, knows where there’s some mistletoe and Da always finds the best holly bushes. Nobody else knows about ‘em. We can bring you some pretty stuff.”

Bilbo considered for a moment. “Very well. If you think you can manage to carry enough for Bag End as well, yes, I would love some.”

Sam beamed. “We’re goin’ to take the handcart so we’ll be able to get lots.” He spun about to race back down the hill, shouting over his shoulder, “Goodbye Mister Bilbo.”

Bilbo closed the door pausing once inside to chuckle at the exuberance of the very young. Frodo stepped out of the parlour, hefting a set of ladders. “Was that Sam Gamgee?”

“It was. You had better leave those here for it seems we are to have lots of decorating to do upon his return.”

Frodo sighed with relief as he leaned them against the wall and blew hair out of his eyes. “I thought you had decided not to do too much decorating this Yuletide.”

His comment was met with a sniff. “Well, I’ve changed my mind. Come and help me mix the Yule pudding. Then we need to put some oil on that door hinge.”

Frodo grinned. There was just no telling what Burglar Baggins would do next. That was one of the things he liked most about his uncle. Bilbo could be infuriating, absent minded, even self-absorbed upon occasion, but he was never predictable.

It was dark by the time Sam, Halfred and their father, Hamson Gamgee, came ringing at Bilbo’s door again. Light spilled out from the hallway to reveal a handcart piled high with the deep, glossy sheen of holly, the vibrant glow of red berries, blue green spikes of sweet scented pine and pale green and white clusters of mistletoe.

“Oh my! You three must have worked like an army of beavers to collect all that in just a few hours.”

Ham chuckled. “T’were a hard afternoon’s work I’ll grant you but twas worth it. Just let me know how much of this you’ve a fancy to and me and Halfred will bring it in for you. No sense in all of us getting scratched.” He held out his hands to show liberal smears of blood amongst the grime.
“Oh dear. Holly does not like to be cut, does it? But shouldn’t you find out how much Bell needs for your smial first? I know how she loves to decorate for Yule.”

Ham and Hal began tugging at the holly. “Oh, she’s had her pick and Daisy and May are goin’ to be busy tonight I can tell you,” Hamfast assured him. “No Sam. Don’t you go touchin’ the mistletoe. Leave that to the grown-ups.”

“Oh, she’s had her pick and Daisy and May are goin’ to be busy tonight I can tell you,” Hamfast assured him. “No Sam. Don’t you go touchin’ the mistletoe. Leave that to the grown-ups.”

“Just pile it in the corner over there if you would,” Bilbo advised. “I think just one clump of mistletoe and perhaps half of the holly and pine that you have there.” He stood back as Hamfast and Halfred began dragging branches into the hall. “How much would you like for them?”

Frodo appeared from the kitchen, blinking when he saw the green bounty. “Hello Master Gamgee, Halfred. Surely that is not all for us?”

Hamfast paused to acknowledge the young master before adding a large clump of mistletoe to the top of heap. “Bless you, Mister Bilbo. I don’t want no money from you. Look on it as a Yule gift from the Gamgees to the Baggins.”

Halfred winked. “We’ll sell the rest at market tomorrow. There’s always someone leaves it ‘til last minute and tis much better than the stuff Sandon Grubb was sellin’ the other day. I reckon this were an afternoon well spent. Mayhap we should try it every year.”

Hamfast tutted. “Not every year, lad. Give the poor trees time to regrow. It don’t pay to be too greedy with nature.” He touched fingers to his forelock. “We’ll say goodnight, sir. My Bell will be waitin’ supper on us and no doubt you’ll be wantin’ yours.” He nodded to the wooden spoon in Frodo’s hand and the lad grinned.

“Goodnight Hamfast. And thank you for the gift. I’ll see you at the celebration tomorrow.”

Hamfast and Halfred headed back down the hill with their much lighter cart while little Sam Gamgee skipped on ahead to number three.

“Have you the kindling bag, Frodo?” Bilbo grunted as he made final adjustments to the huge oak log in the parlour fireplace, setting loose a soft expletive when one of the sprigs of holly decorating it scratched his wrist.

“Here, Uncle. It took some finding. What was it doing in your study?” Frodo held out the small hemp bag and Bilbo opened it, scattering ashes and small lumps of charred wood from last year’s yule log around the base of this years.

“I seem to remember having an idea for a translation that I was working on at the time. I thought I’d better write it down before I forgot so I set the bag on my desk.” Bilbo shrugged. “Then things got away from me, and for the rest of the year I just kept moving it from place to place.”

Frodo giggled. “You mean, from pile to pile.”

Both Baggins stood back to admire their day’s labour. The mantle and window sills were all but hidden beneath swags of holly and pine, with a few pinecones and some red ribbon bows for good measure. Sprigs of mistletoe hung on either side of the freshly scrubbed fireplace and pale candles stood ready in every sconce. The room was filled with the scent of greenery, laced with beeswax, mingled with the spicy richness of mulled wine and baking that drifted in from the kitchen.

Bilbo clapped his nephew on the shoulder. “Not a bad job if I say so myself. Is the bonfire ready
down the hill?”

Frodo nodded. “I helped Mister Gamgee haul up the holly crown myself. It looks rather grand. We didn’t have that tradition in Buckland. Is it true that everyone will be coming to the bonfire?”

“Oh yes. All are welcome at the Yule fire.” Bilbo glanced toward the window. “Speaking of fires, I think I see the first star so we’d best light our own. Being top of the hill, so to speak, it all starts with us.”

Half a dozen eager steps brought Frodo to the parlour window. Sure enough, although it was getting dark, not a candle showed down in Hobbiton. “Goodness. It looks so sad with no lights. But for the kitchen chimney smoke you’d think it was deserted.”

Bilbo took flint from his pocket and bent to the hearth, beckoning Frodo to join him. “Then let’s make sure they don’t sit in darkness for much longer.” He struck flint to the kindling in the hearth and blew gently. The wood shavings caught first, their edges shimmering yellow as each curl burned from outside to centre. Soft wisps of grey smoke drifted through the larger twigs and soon they caught, spitting and cracking. The charred wood from last yule’s log kindled next, its light more blue than yellow as it licked at the green of the holly leaves decorating this years. Finally, the yule log began to char. It had been drying out for weeks so that it would burn well but it was the bark that took first, whistling as steam escaped through cracks, followed by tiny spurts of yellow flame.

Keeping another for himself, Frodo handed his uncle a twig of dry holly, its leaves curled and brittle for it had been cut some days before.

“Time to say goodbye to the old year, lad.” They knelt together before the fragrant fire for some time, each contemplating the events of the past year. Both smiled softly as they came to the independent conclusion that there had been more good than bad. It was Bilbo who leaned forward first, flicking his holly into the growing flames. Frodo followed suit only a moment later.

The older hobbit clapped his hands and grinned at his nephew. “Now that we’ve dispensed with the old year, let’s start the new one.” He selected a twig from the kindling basket, lighting it from the fire and then setting it to the wick of a large fat candle offered reverently by Frodo. As the golden glow began to light their faces they recited the yule blessing together. “May we have hearth to comfort, fire to cook and candle to guide us home.”

Frodo stood, shielding the delicate flame as he crossed to the window and placed it in a lantern set amongst the greenery; Hobbiton’s first light of the new year. Bilbo brought another lantern and its candle was lit from the one in the window. Frodo ran into the hall to collect their cloaks as his uncle took a moment to place a wire guard before the fire.

As they made their way down the hill Frodo saw folk drifting out of their darkened smials, to stand in their gardens. Someone from each smial held an unlit candle. Bilbo stopped at the gate of number three. “Yuletide greetings to you, Hamfast.”

“And to you, Mister Bilbo.”

Bilbo opened the door of his lantern and Hamfast reached in to touch his candle to the one burning warmly within. As the wick caught Bilbo bowed, intoning, “May you have hearth to comfort, fire to cook and candle to guide you home.”

Frodo saw now that the whole Gamgee family was standing in their darkened doorway. Bell stepped forward solemnly to light a candle from her husbands and, followed by the girls, took it indoors to light their own yule log and set a lantern in the window of number three’s kitchen.
Hamfast stepped on down the lane, followed by Frodo and Bilbo, to where Harry Mugwort waited at the gate to number two Bagshot Row. Ham offered greeting then repeated the blessing as he watched Harry light his own candle and pass the flame to his mother, Clover Mugwort. The yule log was lit at their home and the flame passed by Harry, to Arty Sedgebury.

Slowly the yule flame passed from hand to hand. From their high point half way down the hill, Bilbo and Frodo watched little pinpoints of golden light bob from smial to smial, spreading outward along all the lanes of Hobbiton. Frodo was reminded of a morning glory, spreading open her petals to the sun. Soon a candle shone in every window and a log blazed in every hearth.

Then the light merged from single points to groups and then lines as it contracted once more, converging upon the Party Field at the foot of the lane. The residents of the hill formed a golden river of their own, that moved off to meet with others until there was a long candle lit procession, with Bilbo at the front. Excited faunts skipped along at their parents’ side whilst others, too sleepy, were carried in father’s arms. Kitchen chairs were dressed with ribbons and pressed into use to carry the old folk and, here and there, a good natured jibe was muttered about dropping some particularly cantankerous aunty. There would be music and singing on the way home but now there were only whispered greetings and the occasional reedy voice of a faunt.

All Hobbiton formed a circle about the huge bonfire in the Party Field, waiting.

Once more it was Bilbo who stepped forward with his lantern. Lifting out the candle, he pushed it deep into the centre of the holly crowned pile that stood three times as tall as a hobbit. Once more smoke curled, wood crackled and an orange glow began to peep through the carefully stacked branches and logs. Youngsters cheered as the first sparks flew heavenward.

Other candles were lobbed into the growing blaze as folk joined hands about the fire. With one voice the cry went up,

“Tis the time of endings.
Tis the time of beginnings.
Health, Hope and Happiness.
Light, Love and Laughter.
Prosperity and Peace to all!”

Bilbo turned to hug those closest and found Frodo. “Health, hope and happiness, lad.”

Frodo’s bright eyes brimmed with life and he grinned as he was released. “Light, love and laughter, Bilbo.”

Bilbo drew him into another hug. “Prosperity and peace to us all.”

Behind them someone struck up a drum and the first few notes of the Yule Circle sang out from a fiddle. Bilbo grabbed Frodo’s hand and Buttercup Rumble took his other as all around the fire a circle was formed. A chord was struck and the circle began to move as everyone’s feet trod the age-old pattern.

His feet long used to the ancient measure Bilbo used the time to watch his nephew. The lad’s face was filled with a light that had nothing to do with the glow of the fire about which they danced. Bilbo had to shout to be heard over the voices of the singers. “I’m so glad you’re here to share Yule with me this year, Frodo.”

Frodo face broke into a joyous grin. “Oh, so am I, Uncle. So am I.”
Their voices joined the chorus while, before them, the bonfire sent showers of golden sparks upward to blend with Elbereth’s silver stars, wheeling in their own ageless circle about the night sky.
“Let me see those hands afore ye sit down, Sam,” Bell demanded as she set his plate on the table at the side closest to the fire. The lad had just come back from helping his father clear snow from the garden path at Bag End and the cold air had turned his nose and ears quite purple. Dawn had brought with it an unusually heavy fall of snow.

What a waste of time that had been . . . and Hamfast was off to Hobbiton to help Widow Rumble with her path. Bell looked up from the sink drainer, where she was drying pots, and rubbed away some of the condensation from the window. Within five minutes of Hamfast leaving the snow had started up again and a strong blustery wind was dashing large wet flakes against the windowpanes. Bell hoped that her husband would soon be inside. She knew that Buttercup would at least keep him warm with plenty of cups of hot tea once he reached her smial.

A small tug at her apron told Bell that Sam had finished washing and she examined the sturdy little hands, turning them over to check the finger nails. Not that Hamfast and the lads ever managed to keep their nails clean . . . but Bell insisted that they at least try. She reached down and ruffled his hair.

“Ye’ll do. Go eat yer elevenses. And don’t go gobblin’ up all the bread. Leave some for luncheon.”

Sam’s face, which had lit up at sight of the big plate of bread and butter, fell. He tucked in nonetheless, ignoring Daisy’s snigger. They all looked up at a tentative tap at the door. Daisy suddenly became engrossed in her mending and Sam started to get up, but Bell put a hand on his shoulder.

May would have stood from her place by the hearth, where she was sewing a new doll for a currently napping Marigold. Her mother waved her down as well.

“Go see who’s at the door, Daisy.”

Daisy sighed and made a big show of securing her needle and folding the cut down nightshirt she had been making over for Sam.

“Spit spot, lass. Whoever’s there is standin’ in a blizzard,” chided Bell and Daisy jumped to obey, aware she had taken one step the wrong side of a line. Sam ducked his head to hide a smile and May suddenly concentrated hard on her stitching, but Bell knew enough about siblings to cast a disapproving eye at each.

Daisy opened the door, admitting a flurry of snow and revealing a figure in a thick green hooded cloak. From the depths of the big hood a light but cultured voice asked, “Good morning, Miss Daisy. Is Mistress Gamgee at home please?”

Not used to being addressed in this manner, Daisy simply blinked and turned back to her mother for instruction. Bell realised who it was as soon as he spoke and bustled forward, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Bless me, lass. Invite poor Master Frodo in. He must be half froze, standin’ on the doorstep. And close the door proper after him. Don’t go lettin’ in any more cold air.”

Daisy stepped back and Frodo entered quickly, turning to close the door himself, before pushing back the hood of his cloak and wiping his feet on the mat. The young lass assessed him critically, having previously seen him only from a distance, and dismissing him at once as too skinny and pale.
than was proper for a hobbit, returned to her sewing.

Bell took over as hostess. “Come in, Young Master. Let me take yer cloak. Ye must be froze. Come sit by the fire.”

Frodo made to protest at first but within seconds she had unfastened his cloak, draping it over a chair to warm by the range, and shepherded him to sit on the bench beside Sam. Frodo grinned down at the lad. “Hello again, Sam.”

“Mornin’ Master Frodo, sir,” Sam replied with a shy smile.

As soon as the doctor pronounced Frodo well enough to travel after his tumble, Bilbo had escorted the lad back to Brandy Hall for a visit. Bell suspected that they had been summoned. They had celebrated their joint birthday in Buckland, only returning in time for the Yule festivities. Cold weather had ensured that the Gamgees had seen little of either Baggins for some time after their return.

Frodo returned his attention to his hostess. “Thank you, Mistress Gamgee. I did not think to interrupt your elevenses. Bilbo asked me to run down to enquire if you could spare any yeast. He had intended to go into Hobbiton to buy some, but with the weather as it is . . .”

Bell set a cup of tea in front of their guest and pushed the honey pot towards him. Frodo eyed the nearly empty pot and shook his head. “I don’t take honey, thank you.” His mouth dropped open. “Oh . . . that reminds me.” Tugging at his jacket pocket the tween pulled out a small jar, holding it out to Bell. “Bilbo asked if you could find a use for this honey. He bought it in Hobbiton last week but is not terribly fond of the flavour. He usually buys from Charlie Proudfoot and it will only be wasted if we keep it.”

Bell smiled as she looked at the unbroken seal, recognising the ploy but willing to accept because she knew it was kindly meant. Sam licked his lips as he eyed the pot.

“Thank ye, Young Master and please pass on my thanks to Mister Bilbo. I were goin’ to bake some cakes this afternoon and this’ll come in right handy. I’ll send Sam across with one later for yer tea.”

Frodo’s eyes lit up at the mention of cake and Bell bringing the warmth of summer sun on this bleak day. The lad had the makings of a handsome catch for some young lass in the future.

“Yeast, did ye say? I’m sure I’ve got some in the pantry. Let me check.” Bell disappeared through a small door, returning a few moments later with a small covered basin. “Did he say how much he wanted?”

Frodo nodded, the scrape of a fork on china drawing the young gentlehobbit’s eyes inexorably to the contents of Sam’s plate. Dark eyebrows drew together in thought as he stared at the thin squares of pale cream and grey, dressed with malt vinegar and salt. “Enough to make three loaves, he said.”

Noting the direction of his gaze, Bell considered the contents of her pantry and decided she could do without elevenses today. “Have ye eaten elevenses? There’s plenty of pig bag left if ye care to join Sam.”

Frodo blushed. “Oh, thank you for the offer, but Bilbo was about to make some bacon sandwiches.” His dark brows drew together once more. “What is pig bag?”

For a moment Bell was surprised, and then she considered the young hobbit’s upbringing. His diet had probably never included such items. She knew that Mr Bilbo didn’t eat much offal, apart from kidneys and liver, and she didn’t want to even consider what those strange folks in Buckland ate.
“Why don’t ye try a mouthful? Give him a bit of yours, Sam.” She handed Frodo a clean fork from the draining board and Sam slid his plate towards their guest.

Frodo’s blush deepened. “Oh, I couldn’t eat some of your elevenses, Sam. Goodness knows but you’ve earned it with all the hard work you did this morning,” he stammered.

“T’aint no trouble, Master Frodo. I can spare a mouthful,” Sam assured him gravely.

Frodo speared a small piece and popped it in his mouth. It had a mild flavour... the grey layer a little dry and crumbly and the cream layer a chewier texture, with a thin smear of fat between. He nodded in approval as he swallowed. “It’s very nice. But what is it?”

“We get it from the butcher in Hobbiton. Tis a messy, smelly job preparin’ and cookin’ it yerself. Tis boiled pig’s stomach, chopped up.”

The pink tinge in Frodo’s cheeks, so recently conjured by the cold weather, suddenly faded and he took a large swallow of strong tea. “That’s interesting.”

Bell rescued the used fork, throwing it in a basin of washing up water in the sink and in her chair by the fire Daisy sniggered.

“Daisy Gamgee, ye hold yer tongue. Likely as not they eat different the other side of the river. T’aint polite to laugh at a guest and I taught ye better manners.” Bell turned back to the sink to hide her own smile. In future, she would have to remember that the young master was squeamish about such things. She divided her yeast and popped some in an old cup that had long since lost its handle, turning back to hand it to Frodo.

He accepted it gravely. “Thank you. I’d best get back, or Bilbo will have the bacon burned,” he announced, draining his teacup and rising. Bell shook out his cloak and laid it about his shoulders, fastening the large buttons and pulling up the hood without thinking... treating him as one of her own. Frodo found he quite liked it and stood still to allow her to do so.

“Now ye keep that yeast inside yer cloak and don’t let the snow at it. Or ye’ll have bread as flat as pancakes.”

“Yes, Mistress Gamgee. Goodbye.”

Sam ran ahead to open the door and, with a final nod of thanks, Frodo slipped out, running as fast as he could back to the warmth of Bag End.

“Well, close the door, Sam,” called Daisy, happy to be able to catch her younger brother in the same fault of which she had often been guilty. With a last glance at Frodo’s retreating figure, Sam closed the door.

Daisy’s jibe had not been missed by her mother. “That’ll do, Daisy. Have ye finished that shirt yet?”

“No, Ma.”

“Well, get a move on then... or Sam will have grown out of it afore ye’ve finished. And small stitches mind ye. I’ll have none of yer cobblin’.”

Sam returned to his meal, glancing at his sister, whilst trying to hide a grin, and Daisy checked that her mother’s back was turned before sticking her tongue out at him. May had the sense not to become involved.
“He’s a skinny one,” Daisy commented, mainly because she could see that Sam had taken a liking to the new Baggins but also because she enjoyed shocking her younger sister. “They say he’s sickly too. I like my lads with a bit more meat on ‘em,” she announced, boldly as May’s mouth dropped open.

Bell did not bother turning from her washing up. “We don’t listen to nor pass on no gossip about the Baggins family, Daisy. And I should hope that ye were not takin’ a serious interest in any lads, whatever their build, until ye come of age, young madam.” She set the freshly washed fork on the draining board once more. “He’s got plenty of time to fill out and he’ll be a good catch one day. I dare say Mister Bilbo will make sure he’s well provided for. The lad’s got a nice way with him an’ a pleasin’ face.”

At mention of Frodo being “well provided for” Daisy began to re-assess her comment. Perhaps he would be worth her notice after all. She would add him to the bottom of her list of potential’s.

Bell turned and caught her eldest daughter staring off into the fire. “Daisy Gamgee, stop wool gatherin’ and start sewin’.”

“Yes, Ma.”

Her mother sighed. Daisy was getting to that age.
A Mother's Touch

Frodo called a hello to May Gamgee, who was supervising her young sister, Marigold, as they gathered strawberries from the patch in the garden of Number Three. From the bright red lips of both girls, the stains down the front of Marigold’s pinafore and the only half-filled basins, Frodo suspected there was very little supervising and a great deal of nibbling going on.

He hesitated before the door. A light spring breeze ruffled Frodo’s hair and he turned his head in irritation as a few stray strands of fringe got caught in his eyelashes and whipped across his high cheekbones. Perhaps it was too long but why couldn’t Bilbo cut it?

A loud, “Ouch . . . Daisy!” came from beyond the yellow door and Frodo took an involuntary step backwards. Maybe his hair wasn’t that long after all. The conversation beyond the door continued at a loud volume and Frodo grimaced.

“Good grief, lass. Ye’ve taken off half my ear.”

“Serves you right for movin’. I told you to sit still.” Came Daisy’s shrill reply, with more than a little sadistic glee.

“Come here and let me look. Tush lad. ‘Tis nothin but a clip. Ye’ll live. Get on with ye,” Bell’s firm voice encouraged. “Go help yer Da and young Sam with the taters at Bag End.”

Too late, Frodo turned to leave but there was nowhere to hide and he had no sooner turned on his heel than Halfred threw open the door, pausing to roll up his sleeves. Turning back, Frodo’s eyes were drawn inexorably to the small drop of blood at the tip of Halfred’s left ear.

“Oh! Mornin’ young Master Frodo. I nearly bowled ye over. I didn’t hear ye knock.”

“Errr. No. I was just about to, when you came to the door.”

Halfred and Frodo were near enough in height and the Gamgee lad leaned close. “Don’t let Daisy loose on yer hair. Ye’ll look like a half-drowned kitten when she’s finished.” He half turned and shouted over his shoulder, “I’ve seen better jobs done on hedges.”

Both he and Frodo dodged when a damp towel flew towards them, followed by Bell’s raised voice. “Halfred . . . ye stop yer teasin’ and Daisy . . . stop throwin’ about my good towels.”

Obviously used to his younger sister’s antics, Halfred had plucked the wet towel out of the air with ease. With a conspiratorial wink and a whispered, “Good luck,” he pushed it into Frodo hands and ushered him across the threshold into the steamy warmth of Bells kitchen. “Yes Ma. Sorry. Here’s Master Frodo.”

Bell beckoned from the other end of the huge scrubbed kitchen table, accepting the towel with a smile. “Come in Young Master. Take off yer jacket and have a seat. I’m just waiting for the next lot of water to boil. She fanned her red face with her apron and peered through the thick dimness of the small-windowed room.

“Daisy lass. Tis worse than wash day in here. Go open the windows for a while to let some of the steam out afore we all drown. And hang up this towel while ye’re at it.”

Frodo shrunk aside as Daisy moved to comply behind him, her skirts brushing his calves on the way past. The room was a little over cluttered with furniture, but not enough to warrant her stepping quite
that close. He removed his jacket and took some time to drape it carefully across the table before perching nervously upon the end of a bench.

“Won’t be long now, Mr Frodo. Mr Bilbo said yer hair could be cut dry, but we can see better what’s going on if it’s wet. Daisy, have ye got the clean towels ready and the soft soap? And for goodness sake, give those scissors a good rinse and wipe.”

Frodo winced as Daisy flounced onto the bench directly opposite him and began to wipe and clean the scissors. He found his eyes drawn to the small smear of blood on the cloth, evidence of her last victim. She met his eyes with a suggestive glint and ran the cloth slowly up and down one blade, then the other. Frodo could feel himself blushing and tried to look anywhere else, without seeming impolite.

“Right now, come and help me fill the basin with hot water, Daisy . . . Daisy?” Bell’s voice paused and even Frodo cringed at the final, “Daisy Gamgee. Ye put those scissors down and come here at once. And when ye’ve helped me with this ye can go and feed the sow.”

“Sow! The lads always draw lots over that job when it’s hot. It’s horrible.” Nevertheless, Daisy helped her mother ladle hot and cold water into a large enamel basin on the table. Her compliance did not win her a reprieve, however, for Bell handed over the bucket of slops.

“Off ye go, lass. And don’t forget yon sow likes a drink too. As you say, tis a hot day. Make sure she’s got some water.” Her words were almost lost in the sound of the back door slamming. Finally, it was just Frodo and Bell. Frodo let out a long breath . . . blowing his fringe out of his eyes.

Bell slid the basin across the table. “That lass will be the death of me,” she muttered as she turned back to the range.

Frodo sincerely hoped Bell was wrong but could well understand the sentiment as he stared at the firelight glinting on the blades of the scissors. He tore his gaze away, trying not to consider his fate at the hands of Daisy Gamgee. She had a reputation for a sharp tongue and in Frodo’s opinion putting a set of blades in her hand was asking for trouble.

A warm fire glowed in the kitchen range and a large iron casserole sat towards the back, its lid shuddering gently. Bell lifted a cloth and moved the dish closer to the cooler edge of the hob, causing the lid to settle. Still, from it arose the tantalising aroma of stewed rabbit and vegetables. Doubtless a supper supplied by the nearby woods.

“Come round here, if ye please Master Frodo, and sit on the bench in front of the bowl,” Bell instructed. “And slip off that fancy weskit.”

Frodo complied, a little warily. Would he have to take his shirt off? What would happen if Daisy returned? He all but jumped when Bell’s work worn fingers began to tuck under the collar of his shirt. She paused a moment then continued. “We don’t want to get this wet now, do we?” she soothed. “I usually make the youngsters take off their shirts but I reckon ye’ve got sense enough to sit still.”

Frodo breathed a small prayer of thanks to whichever of the Valar had the job of protecting young hobbit lads from the unwanted attentions of young hobbit lasses, wielding sharp scissors and sharper tongues.

Bell produced a small but exquisitely carved wooden comb and began to run it gently through Frodo’s dark curls. He yipped as she found the first knot but once she had his measure Bell managed to untangle the rest relatively painlessly. Frodo found himself surrendering to the process; the firm
pressure of one hand upon his scalp while the other pulled the comb over a small area until a knot was worked out. And then there were the long strokes as all the tangles were gone, the feeling of the teeth of the comb scraping lightly down his scalp in steady rhythm. It all became quite soothing.

He blinked when she laid the comb aside, surprised to see how much of his hair was caught in the fine teeth. Just how much hair did he have? Perhaps she had already combed most of it away and Daisy would not have to cut any more off. Bell knew nothing of his thoughts, placing firm hands on his shoulders and pushing down until Frodo’s head hung over the steaming basin.

“Here, lad.” Frodo looked aside to find Bell offering him a folded facecloth and looked up at her in confusion. “Hold it over yer eyes. It’ll stop any stray runs of soap getting in.”

Only half convinced of the efficacy of this suggestion, Frodo nonetheless held it in place. Any attempt at keeping soap out of his eyes was better than none and his Aunt Calli had never even offered him the option. His eyes used to tear for hours after she washed his hair. Frodo had been washing his own hair ever since he came to Bag End. He was a tween now, after all. He removed the cloth and glanced up. Whatever must Mistress Gamgee think of him? “I can wash it myself, Mistress Gamgee.”

The cloth was guided back at once and Bell filled an old cracked cup from the basin before leaning over Frodo’s hunched shoulders. “I’m sure ye can. But I like washing hair. Besides, knowing young lads I’ll warrant ye’ll have water all over my floor and yerself by the time ye’ve finished.” She tweaked his ear playfully and then poured the warm water gently over Frodo’s head. He was left with no option but to replace the cloth.

Warm. The water flowed from the back of Frodo’s head and down to his temples, where it ran off back into the basin in little splashing trickles. Bell’s fingers followed the path of the water across Frodo’s scalp, gently using liquid and hand to smooth the thick dark hair forward. By the time she had his hair fully wet, Frodo was beginning to relax again, unresisting as her hand guided his head to one side or the other.

Aunt Rosemary had been the last person to wash and cut his hair and Frodo still shuddered at the memory of her rough handling. He and Bilbo had been visiting Brandy Hall for Harvest Home and his elderly aunt had insisted that Frodo have his hair cut for the event. Then she had proceeded to half drown and shear him like some wayward sheep.

The wetting stopped and Frodo flinched as something cold was dabbed upon his head. Sensing his reaction, Bell paused.

“‘Tis alright Master Frodo. ‘Tis just soap shavings softened in water a while. ‘Tis easier than using a block of soap, though I confess it’s a bit cold. It’ll warm when I lather it up.”

Without further ado, Bell’s strong fingers began to swirl in his hair, creating a thick, creamy lather that crackled in Frodo’s ears. Any tension caused by the chill soap was soon worked away by the firm but gentle touch of Bell’s fingers and Frodo’s body drifted down closer to the bowl as the muscles of his back relaxed.

Aunt Rosemary’s hands had scrubbed and tugged but this was a slow massage of kindly fingers. Frodo was glad that his face was hidden and he swallowed against a sudden lump in his throat as he remembered another’s touch. Aunt Esmeralda loved him, to be sure, but he was one of several youngsters fostered in her care. She had little time to provide the individual love of a mother. For a moment a need to be cherished warred with the need to show that he was an adult. The need for the touch of a mother’s hands won and he was glad of the facecloth covering his watering eyes.
Bell seemed to sense his mood and continued to rub her fingers across his scalp in silence for a few minutes before starting the first rinsing. “There, now, lad. That’s the soaping done so ye can let go that cloth if ye like, while I get fresh water.”

Frodo peeled it away, to find his nose scant inches above the cloudy water. He had not the time to contemplate it, however, as Bell draped a warm towel over his head and slid the basin away.

“Now just ye sit there while I fill this for the last rinse.”

Frodo felt no inclination to do otherwise. The room was warm and still damp and the air was a strange mixture of lavender scented soap and rabbit stew. For a moment he imagined that the feet moving around on the flagstone floor behind him had burnt chestnut hair instead of rich loam brown. But then the basin, filled with fresh, steaming water, was slid back by Bell’s lined, square hands. His mother’s hands had been smooth and long fingered.

“Let’s just add a drop of this to cut through the last of that soap.” A slightly pungent liquid was poured into the water and Frodo sniffed tentatively. It actually didn’t smell too bad.

“What is it?”

“Tis just cider vinegar. Soap can be nasty stuff to get out of yer hair. Ye’d best put that facecloth back. Don’t want vinegar in yer eyes.”

The air felt cold on Frodo’s scalp as Bell lifted the towel but the chill was soon washed away by the warm water running over it once more. Frodo surrendered to the sensation of water running through his hair, chased by Bell’s capable fingers. He could hear the squeak of clean hair as she combed her fingers through; the sound setting his teeth on edge. Too soon, it seemed to him, the rinsing stopped and his head was draped in a warmed dry towel.

“Up ye come, lad and let’s see how long this tangle really is.” He lifted his head slowly, watching little motes of light dance before his eyes for a moment as his body adjusted to the change in position. Once more Bell’s fingers massaged his scalp, this time through the fabric of the towel, and Frodo could not help a pleasurable smile at the relaxing feel of it. Bilbo loved him dearly; he had no doubt of that. But only a mother could give this kind of loving touch, and he had missed it for far too many years.

A nagging worry began to make itself felt however, as he considered what Daisy would make of the cutting. Hers was anything but a mother’s touch. But there was no sign of Daisy’s return and it was Bell that set the scissors on the table before him.

Bell pushed the basin out of the way and removed the towel. Then she reached aside for a small glass bottle. Opening it, she dabbed a little of the contents onto a finger and rubbed the pale glistening drop of liquid into her palms. Frodo recognised the scent of lavender as Bell began to smooth her palms over his hair.

“This will help ease out the tangles and make it shine. ‘Tis just oil with a touch of lavender to make it smell nicer. Although I don’t think ye need any help with the shine. Ye’ve got a fine head of hair.” She took up the comb again, having pulled out the fluff of hair from her previous attempt at ordering, and ran it through his now damp locks. To Frodo’s relief, any tangles were soon dealt with and he could feel the teeth of the fine comb running from crown to nape with no resistance.

Bell’s deft fingers pushed up the hair at his crown several times until she found the little whorl of growth that marked the natural centre and combed the thick, almost black hair out smoothly from it in all directions. Then she fished about in her apron pocket and produced two smaller combs, which she
set upon the table. These were not as fine as the one she had used before, obviously carved from animal bone and with some of their teeth missing.

Once more, Frodo responded trustingly to the confident fingers that tilted his head forward, hoping against hope that it would be Bell cutting his hair. He felt her run the comb across his neck and then blinked in surprise as first one and then the other of the old combs disappeared and he felt them tucked into his hair, holding the upper part out of the way. He swallowed hard as the feel of a similar touch flashed through his mind. Frodo tried to place the errant memory.

Aunt Callendula had always sat a pudding basin on his head and cut around it. Frodo cringed at the memory and the teasing he used to get from the other lads. Aunt Rosemary just seemed to take up random chunks of hair and chop them off. It didn’t look too bad when it had grown out after a couple of weeks but for the first few days it stuck up on end in every direction which, when combined with his large blue eyes, gave him a permanently startled look. A small tear ran down Frodo’s cheek as the memory finally settled into place. Mamma’s combs had been delicately carved from dark wood but she had used them in this same way.

Bell pushed his head a little further forward and Frodo felt the blade of the scissors slip along the skin at his neck . . . heard the long quiet crunch . . . and felt the tiny wet feathers of liberated hair settle coldly upon the sensitive flesh of his nape. Using the corner of a towel, Bell brushed the leavings away, moving to deal similarly with the other half of the layer. The next layer was sectioned off and Frodo resisted the slight tension as Bell pulled it away from his scalp between her fingers and snipped. This process was repeated over and over as Bell’s gentle and comfortable fingers worked meticulously up his head, layer by layer. And all through the process, Frodo’s tears tracked silently down his cheeks. So long . . . so long since he had been the recipient of such tender attention.

“Well now, that’s the back done,” Bell announced. “Turn around and stand up to face me now, and I’ll do the sides and front, Frodo, lad.” Bell had gradually lost all the formality between servant and young master as she worked, so absorbed was she in the task. Frodo sniffed and tried to wipe his tears away before standing, hoping that Bell would see it as him disposing of a stray hair or two.

Standing, he was almost Bell’s height nowadays, and when he turned he found himself looking into her warm eyes. Frodo dropped his gaze when he saw concern settle there. He knew at once that he had not fooled her. “I’m sorry, Mistress Gamgee.”

“What is the matter, lad. Did I tug too hard?”

“Oh, no,” Frodo rushed to reassure her. “I’m being silly, I’m afraid. It’s just . . . just . . . that you reminded me of . . . Mamma.”

There was only a moment’s pause before he was enveloped in soft strong arms, his nose buried in the warm linen of Bell’s neckerchief, inhaling the motherly scents of soap and baked bread. Frodo let out a strangled little sob and leaned instinctively into the embrace, wrapping his arms around her ample waist.

“And why should ye be sorry for rememberin’ yer Mamma?” Bell murmured as she rocked gently, in the instinctive way of all mothers. “Ye hold on to them memories, lad. Treasure them and don’t ever be ashamed when they come up on ye unawares. Them’s the memories that’ll help ye through the bad times.”

The words poured into Frodo’s mind like fresh spring rain on parched grass. “I . . . I didn’t want to embarrass you. I’m supposed to be a grown tween. Crying is for faunts, or so my Uncle Saradas said.”
Bell pushed him back gently and lifted his chin with a touch of her hand. “Well now, I don’t hold with young lads crying at every little thing. And I’m not so grand thinkin’ as yer Uncle Saradas, I reckon. But the loss of a mother . . . ‘tis not what I’d call a little thing and it don’t do no good to hold all that pain inside. Ye’ll find many an old gaffer dropping a tear or two, so don’t ye ever be ashamed of cryin’.” She blotted his face with a corner of her apron. “And ye won’t never embarrass me. I’ve raised bairns and seen enough of life to know all about tears.” Bell smiled softly and Frodo found himself smiling back. He took a deep breath, feeling as though a tight weskit had suddenly been undone, so that he could inhale the full glory of the air around him.

Bell smoothed down her apron and picked up the scissors once more. “Now. Let’s cut the rest of this hair. Mister Bilbo said he wanted to see them blue eyes of yours again and I can see why. I’m thinkin’ ye’ll have no problems finding dancin’ partners at Ferdy Brownside’s birthday party next week.”

Frodo blushed and his smile widened into a grin as Bell lifted her combs.

“When I’ve finished this we’ll have a nice cup of tea and an apple tart, afore my brood start coming back and demanding their supper.” She lifted the scissors to his brow. “Close yer eyes so I don’t get any clippings in them.”

Frodo obeyed willingly and felt her begin to section off some hair from the crown as she continued.

“And mayhap, when ye open them again the world will look a bit better.”
Bell sighed, setting down her sewing at a knock on the door. She had wanted to get this pillowcase finished before the rest of the family invaded once more. She signalled and it was a suddenly serious little Marigold Gamgee who ran to open the round yellow door, sticking her tousled head around the edge to peep through a six-inch gap.

Bilbo grinned despite the rain running down his neck and bent down to her level. “Is your Ma at home?”

“Ma . . . ith Mithter Bagginth from up the hill,” called the little girl as she abandoned the door and ran back to hide from the legendary gentlehobbit behind her mother’s ample skirts.

Bell smiled apologetically. “Come in, sir. I’ve been tryin’ to teach Mari how to answer the door proper but she still gets a bit shy.”

Marigold ducked her head, green eyes peeping up at Bilbo from beneath a mop of copper curls. Bilbo only chuckled. As a confirmed bachelor, he used to find it difficult to relate to youngsters but it seemed to get easier as he got older. Maybe there was something to that old wives saying that with age you come into a second childhood. “That’s all right, Bell. She’ll get the hang of it with time.”

Stepping out of the wind and rain, he swished the mud off his feet in a waiting basin, wiped them on the old mat and closed the door behind him. “It started out promisingly enough but, my goodness, it’s turning into a wet spring this year.”

“Ye’ll have a cup of tea, will ye? Sit yerself down by the fire.” She handed him a towel from the drying rack on the ceiling above the range. “Ye’ve surely not got so wet from just comin’ down the hill? What brings ye out in this?”

Bilbo ran the warm towel over his hair and used it to flick rain from the shoulders of his old tweed jacket. “I’m afraid so, and that would be lovely. Thank you,” he replied as he took one of the only two chairs in the room, either side of the big hearth, and leaned in toward the heat. Bell’s basket of sewing materials sat on the floor at the side of the other, along with a big and slightly threadbare cushion. “I was hoping to talk to Hamfast about my vegetable garden.”

“Ye know Mister Bilbo. Ye’ve seen him many a time. Mind yer manners now and say hello proper.”

Marigold tried her most beseeching look but her mother only folded her hands at her ample waist and waited. So, straightening little shoulders, Marigold took the four steps required to bring her before their grey-haired guest. She dropped a rather wobbly curtsy and, in a pale pink voice that would have better suited a mouse, whispered, “Good day to you, Math . . . er . . . Mithter Bagginth.”

Smiling indulgently, to Bells surprise Bilbo arose and executed a perfect bow. “And a good day to you, Little Miss Marigold.”

Showing a missing top tooth, Marigold broke into an ecstatic smile that warmed Bilbo from head to foothair. Behind her daughter Bell, too, grinned widely and bobbed her head in thanks to the older gentlehobbit as she reclaimed the towel and deftly flipped it back over the drying rack above her
head.

Fishing a key from her always overstuffed apron pocket Bell used it to open the small corner cabinet, taking down two matching sets of cup, saucer and side plate.

Marigold ran over to watch curiously as her mother rinsed and dried them. These were Ma’s best and she’d never actually seen them outside the cupboard, so it was a delightful surprise to discover that each had a little line of yellow daisy’s dancing about the rim. She followed her mother in awe as Bell laid them out upon the long kitchen table.

Bilbo waited in silence, watching his foot hair steam and aware that he was being accorded a great honour. He knew that Bell Gamgee had but four full place settings of these crocks (he had watched her parents gift them to the newlyweds) and that they were usually only produced upon special occasions.

“It’s very quiet in here. Where are the other children today, Bell?” he called as she disappeared into the cool pantry.

Her disembodied voice returned to him. “With all this rain, The Water’s burst its banks an’ one or two of the closer smials have flooded. They’ve gone down with Ham to help Widow Goodbody move her things. She’s going to stay with her sister ‘til everythin’ dries out.” She reappeared with the remains of an apple pie in its tin balanced on her arm, a pitcher of milk in one hand and a small jug of cream in the other.

“Although when that’ll be I don’t care to think. There’s no sign of this rain lettin’ up.”

“Pansy Goodbody . . . my, my. I nearly offered for her once upon a time. How it flies,” Bilbo murmured. And then louder, “I remember warning Will Goodbody not to delve so close to the river when he started digging a smial for them there.”

“Aye. Will was a stubborn one. And there I’ll leave it for it don’t sit well with me to speak ill of the dead,” she added.

Before Bilbo could offer assistance Bell had expertly navigated the kitchen and deposited her load upon the table. “Ye’ll be doin’ me a favour to share this pie. There’s not enough left to feed all of us an’ ‘twill save arguments,” the mother commented as she collected cutlery. Here, she was not able to match the splendour of her crockery and so Bilbo watched her set out two dented teaspoons and three mismatched and slightly bent desert spoons. He filed this away for use when compiling his next birthday present list. He would present the Gamgees with a set of spoons. Not as fancy as Bilbo’s silver ones of course, or Bell would only lock them away with her best crocks.

“I would be honoured to share the pie. Mistress Bell Gamgee is famous throughout Hobbiton and beyond for her shortcrust pastry.”

Bell blushed. “Well, it’s won a prize or too but I dare say ye tasted better in Tookborough last week. I hear The Thain keeps a good table at Great Smials.” She cut the pie in half, placing a large wedge on each plate and all but drowning them in rich, pale yellow cream. Bilbo felt his mouth fill with saliva. “An’ how is the new little master?” Bell asked as she placed the honey pot on the table.

Swallowing, Bilbo dragged his eyes away from the plates to follow Bell as she collected her huge brown teapot and the caddy. “He’s a lusty bairn with a mop of hair the colour of a harvest sun. If I didn’t know better I’d say he was a Brandybuck. But then, those families are so intertwined through the generations, that’s no great surprise.”

Taking up a padded cloth Bell lifted the now steaming kettle off the hob. Pouring a little water into
the teapot, she swirled it for a moment and then tipped it into the sink. Bilbo watched the ritual comfortably. No matter what your rank in society the making of tea remained the same. Although Bilbo suspected that Lobelia Sackville-Baggins would have turned up her nose at Bell’s homely brown earthenware teapot with its chipped lid.

“I expect his Ma and Da is happy, no matter what colour his hair. But birthing bairns can be a hard business. How’s his Ma?”

Three large spoons of tea were carefully measured and water added then, tilting the lid into place, Bell set the brew firmly upon the table between their two place settings. Marigold had retired to the cushion by the hearth with her rag doll, but her eyes followed every move her mother made, particularly when she saw her pull out one of the everyday saucers and Marigold’s own little cup.

“Well, he’s her fourth so I understand the birthing was quicker than some. Eglantine looked well enough when we left and Paladin was strutting about like a prize stallion. After three lasses they’d all but given up on a son.”

Bell laughed as she beckoned her little daughter to the sink, where she rubbed at grubby fingers with a soapy cloth and then pointed to a place at the table by her mother’s setting. Bilbo had to hold back a smile at the speed with which the little faunt clambered onto the bench.

Bell cut her serving of pie in half and slid it, and a goodly amount of cream, onto the lass’ dish. Marigold’s eyes grew as wide as her saucer at the prospect of this unexpected bounty, and Bilbo noticed that she had to sit upon her hands to prevent herself from grabbing the spoon.

“Aye. Ham and me were happy to have the lads but I was hoping for a lass by the third. Daisy’s always been a bit of a handful but she’s a good one at heart and a big help to me now she’s older.”

Both Bilbo and Bell now sat, side by side, upon one of the benches set either side of the long, white scrubbed table. Having visited many times, Bilbo felt enough at home to pour milk into all three cups whilst Bell was stirring the pot. He recognised several bits of Gamgee jumpers in the multicoloured knitted stripes of the cosy Bell wrestled onto the pot. When she poured the brew was a deep brown, and Bilbo mused that were he to remove the cup the tea was so strong it would probably stand up on its own.

He was relieved to see Bell pour additional milk in her daughter’s cup. Stirring in a good spoonful of honey Bilbo pushed the pot aside to Bell, who added a very liberal dose to Marigolds and none to her own. The wealthier hobbit suspected that honey was rationed this week and Marigold had just been given her mother’s share. He also suspected that the slice of pie he was about to consume was originally scheduled for Bell’s husband. Bilbo felt guilty enough to determine to send Frodo down the hill later with a seed cake by way of replacement, but not so guilty that he was about to give up the chance to taste Bell Gamgee’s prizewinning apple pie.

Anyway, the fresh although wet air would do the lad good. He’d been sitting indoors with his books for far too long of late. The Brandybucks may be ones for hiding indoors in bad weather but Baggins’ were made of sterner stuff. As it seemed to do more often of late, Bilbo’s mind drifted away to memories of dark woods and darker caves, mild aired valleys and sunsets viewed from high peaks.

Bell cleared her throat and lifted her spoon to take a surprisingly dainty bite of her pie, nodding for Marigold to follow suit.

“Do you hear much from Hamson and Halfred nowadays?” asked Bilbo as he came back to the here and now and took a larger mouthful of his own helping.
He was immediately anchored firmly in the present as he all but melted with pleasure. The shortcrust pastry was light and sweet but with just a hint of salt to prevent it from being cloying. And he hardly needed to chew, as it dissolved against the roof of his mouth. The tartness of the apple had been softened by a good helping of honey (which would explain the shortage on the table) and a liberal sprinkling of cinnamon. And those apples had been cooked just enough to soften but not so much that they had turned to mush. Thick cream rounded the whole thing off to absolute perfection and Bilbo had to make a conscious effort not to roll his eyes heavenward.

“Hamson sent word with his cousin, Anson, that he was settlin’ in. And Anson says as how his Da is pleased with his work,” Bell replied, seemingly unaware of her guest’s rapture.

Bilbo swallowed reluctantly but was too much of a gentlehobbit not to do so before speaking. “I’m pleased for you. Roping is a good trade and there are only so many gardeners a place like Hobbiton can support.” He smiled. “Goodness, but it doesn’t seem five minutes since the lad was Marigold’s age.”

Bell paused to wipe a drop of cream from her daughter’s chin with a corner of her apron. “Mayhap. An’ tis one less mouth to feed here. Not that such was the reason for him leavin’,” she added hastily. “We manage well enough.”

“You and Ham are doing an excellent job with all your children.” Bilbo assured her. “And what of Halfred?”

“He’s settled in Oakbottom, over in the South Farthing. There’s no gardenin’ to be done there but he’s been taken on as farm hand tendin’ pipeweed. A friend of his was passing through here last month . . . Billy Marshbrown . . . an’ gave us word from him. Says he’s got his eye on a farmer’s lass.”

“He’s only just a tween,” Bilbo commented in surprise, before devouring the last mouthful.

“He’s near enough Master Frodo’s age and he’s always had a sensible head on his shoulders,” Bell replied as she set down her own spoon and gave Marigold’s mouth another swipe with her apron. “But lookin’ aint courtin’ and courtin’ aint weddin’. It’s good for him to cast about a bit at that age and when he’s a bit older I’ll not stand in his way when he finds the right lass. Neither will Hamfast if he listens to me.”

Bilbo smiled inwardly. It would be a foolish husband who ignored Bell’s opinion. Bilbo remembered the courtship of Bell Goodchild and Hamfast Gamgee with much amusement. Bell had made no secret of her intentions to marry Ham. Like a force of nature, she had swept the young gardener off his feet and Ham had been struggling to keep them under him ever since. That was six children ago and Bilbo could think of no kinder soul in all of Hobbiton. He’d come to rely upon her good hobbit sense many a time when dealing with Frodo over the past year.

He took a good swallow of his tea, trying not to make a face as it seemed to coat his teeth and tongue. He was used to a subtler blend but the Gamgee’s could afford no such luxury and he had learned to tolerate it.

Marigold downed her milky tea in one long and slightly noisy string of swallows, finishing by running her tongue around her lips appreciatively. Her mother nodded indulgently. “Have ye finished?”

“Yeth, Ma.”

Bell waited, looking over the rim of her teacup at her youngest. “Then what do we say?” she
prompted.

“Oh . . . Pleathe may I leave the table?”

“Yes, you may,” Bell replied formally and then with a smile, “Down ye get and go play, lass.”

Clambering from the table, Marigold gathered up plate and cup and stretched up to place them carefully on the wooden draining board next to the sink. Then she returned to her cushion by the fire and began to undress her doll.

Bilbo sipped at his tea, watching the exchange. When had Bell Gamgee developed those lines about her eyes? And there were some grey glints among the brown in the curls of her hair. Once Marigold was settled he asked, “Is it me, or are folk marrying younger nowadays?”

Bell glanced at him sidelong around a sip of her own tea. “Some do . . . some don’t. An’ I think sometimes it just seems that way as the folks watchin’ gets older. Ye, most surely, know that.” As soon as the words were out Bell wanted to swallow them back again. Folks didn’t mention Bilbo Baggins’ age . . . not to his face at least.

For his part Bilbo only turned thoughtful. “I had not considered it that way,” he replied wistfully. He continued to drink his tea in the pregnant silence that followed and, a little flustered, Bell began to gather up the plates and fill a jug with hot water from the boiler to wash them.

She was relieved when the door burst open and a pile of wet and bedraggled hobbits stomped in. “Put the kettle on, Bell love. You’ve got four cold and wet Gamgees to warm up,” called Hamfast. Then he noticed Mr Bilbo at the table and snatched off his hat.

Hurriedly rinsing their feet, Daisy and May bustled their little brother, Sam into the dark interior of the smial to dry off and change clothes.

“Well, good afternoon Mister Bilbo. Can I do ought for you?” asked Hamfast. Not so long ago Hamfast would have been surprised to see the master of Bag End sitting comfortably at his table, but since his nephew’s arrival at Bag End Bilbo had become almost a regular sight. Bringing up a tween was not a job usually undertaken by someone of Bilbo’s age and the Gamgees had become his encyclopaedia.

“Well, I came to discuss the spring planting for my garden but it can wait. And Bell and little Marigold here have entertained me royally. But now I think it’s time to see what Frodo’s been up to in my absence. Why don’t you pop around tomorrow and we’ll see what the rain will allow us to salvage of my plans for Bag End’s vegetable plot this year.”

Bell handed her husband a towel and he began to rub at his hair, sensing something in the air but unable to fathom what it could be. “I can come around later if you like, sir” he offered.

Bilbo stood, fastening his jacket and turning up his collar against the weather. “I won’t hear of it Ham. From what Bell’s been telling me you’ll have seen enough rain this day to last a while.” He smiled and made for the door. “How is Pansy Goodbody, by the way?”

Hamfast accepted a cup of tea and a peck on the cheek from his wife. “She’s settled in with her sister. We managed to save all her furniture and bits and Tom Cotton has put ‘em safe in one of his barns until the river goes down.”

“You’ll let me know if Pansy needs anything, won’t you? I remember her fondly.”

“Aye, sir. I will an’ thank you.” He moved to open the door for Mister Baggins.
“Goodbye and thank you for the tea, Bell.”

“Yer always welcome, Mister Bilbo,” answered Bell and Hamfast together.

Then Bilbo was gone, trotting back up the hill through the rain.

Ham dropped gratefully into his chair by the hearth, tea in hand, and bent to ruffle Marigold’s fiery locks. She gave him a broad grin before turning back to the important task of redressing her doll.

“What was that about?” he asked as Bell collected up her own and Bilbo’s cups and poured hot water into a basin in the sink.

“What was what about?” replied his wife a little too nonchalantly.

“Come on, lass. Out with it. You an’ Mr Bilbo surely haven’t had words?”

Bell turned about and leaned her hip against the sink. “Not really. We was talkin’ about the age folks get married and I just let slip that sometimes it only seems like folks get married younger because those watchin’ are gettin’ older.” She began to wipe her hands on her apron. “Then I suggested he’d understand that better than most.” Wincing, Bell looked at her husband. “I didn’t mean anythin’ by it. It just popped out an’ then I couldn’t take it back without makin’ it worse. He knows well what folks are sayin’ about him not looking his age.”

Ham set down his cup and opened his arms. “Come here, lass.” With a sigh of relief Bell came into his shelter, perching on his lap and leaning her head against his.

“Never you mind. Mr Bilbo don’t bear grudges,” he murmured. Then he added, “Unless you’re called Sackville-Baggins.”

Bell chuckled. “Yer clothes are wet,” she commented matter-of-factly. “And ye smell of wet chickens.”

Ham leaned back in his chair and met his wife’s gaze with a twinkle. “Oh I do, do I? Then mayhap you’d better help me out of these smelly wet clothes afore I catch cold,” he suggested with a waggle of bushy brows.

Bell slipped from his lap, swatting away hands that would have recaptured her. “Hamfast Gamgee, tis the middle of the day and yer been dressin’ yerself this many a year. Go off with ye and I’ll start tea.”

Hamfast did as instructed, but was still grinning as he left the room.
“Bilbo, should I wear the brown waistcoat or the red?” Frodo stood in Bilbo’s bedroom doorway, holding up a waistcoat in each hand.

His uncle paused in his own sartorial primping to study the garments. “The red one goes well with your black breeches but appears to be missing a button.”

Frodo examined the garment more closely. A clump of loose threads and a small tear was evident where a brass button should have been. He sighed. “The brown it is, then” he stated with a philosophical air as he disappeared back to his own room.

Bilbo hoped it was in order to brush his hair, which at present seemed to be sticking up in all directions. He frowned for plain brown cord was not the most elegant for such a social event. Still, it was clean and appeared to be unscathed by Frodo’s activities. The lad seemed to have a knack for destroying clothes, whether by his extensive hiking or his writing. Bilbo supposed that at some point he would have to take the lad to his tailor.

Half an hour later Bilbo was standing in the hall when Frodo reappeared, with a covered basket over his arm. His uncle was pleased to note that the lad had brushed his hair, both that on his head and on his feet. He also smelled pleasantly of the scented oil Esmerelda had gifted him on his birthday last year. His black breeches were pressed, the white shirt was freshly laundered and the waistcoat had been sponged to revive it. In truth, Bilbo was rather impressed that Frodo had managed to do all that in such a short space of time.

Aware that he was being studied closely, Frodo grinned. “Will I do?”

“I do believe you will. Is that the cake?”

Frodo lifted the basket. “Yes. And the scones. I have added flour to our shopping list for tomorrow. We used the last on the cake.”

“Good lad. Come on then. Let’s go and join the revellers.” He led the way out of the smial and down the lane. “Remember what I told you about Hamfast’s home brew. Stick with the cider instead. I don’t want to have to carry you back up the hill.”

Walking in the dark, Frodo risked rolling his eyes. “I remember, Uncle. Cider only.”

Bilbo cleared his throat. “There will be lots of lasses there of your own age. Just you remember that you’re a Gentlehobbit and a Baggins. I don’t want to have to explain a tweenage wedding to your uncle Saradoc.”

Once more Frodo was grateful for the cover of darkness for he could feel the blush climbing his face. “Bilbo! I do know about the birds and the bees.”

Bilbo’s sigh was audible. “Good. Just make sure you remember them when you’ve had a half or two of cider.”

By now they had reached the bottom of the hill and the Party Field. The noise level was quite astonishing for everyone from miles around was celebrating the safe gathering of the harvest. Anyone who helped with the harvest, even in the most minor capacity, was welcome at the Harvest Reel. It was the event of the year.
Gaffers gathered around tables with beer and pipes to discuss the relative merits of this year’s harvest against those of previous years. Gammers sat in another corner, discussing the antics of absent family and neighbours. Matrons wore their best skirts and crammed themselves into bodices with straining laces. They were setting out the food on long trestle tables on the far side of the field, where awnings had been erected in case of rain.

A motley group of musicians were grabbing a few mouthfuls of cider while lines of lads and lasses were forming up for the next dance. Amongst all this faunts ran in squealing trails, like butterflies dancing in a summer sky. It was late for some and in a corner farthest from the band, beneath another awning, a small area had been set aside, spread with blankets and tended by some of the younger matrons. There some bairns could already be seen, curled in little hummocks of sleep and oblivious to the noise and clamour around them.

Suddenly, May Gamgee appeared before Frodo. Her sandy hair, with its usual riot of curls, was dressed with green ribbons and she wore a pretty bright green dress to match. She smiled shyly up at him. “Would you care to dance, Master Frodo? The next one’s to be the Cotters Line.” She gnawed at her bottom lip. “I used to dance with Halfred but he’s not able to get home this year.”

Bilbo knew that Halfred always made a point of partnering his younger sisters for at least one dance at the Reel. “Go on, Frodo. I’ll take the basket.”

Frodo handed it over and then bowed low to the young lass. “Miss May, would you do me the inestimable honour of accompanying me in the next dance?”

May’s brown eyes widened at such an invitation. Halfred had always just said, “Come on, lass.” She executed her very best curtsey and if it was a wee bit wobbly from lack of use Frodo made no comment. “I’d like that very much, sir.”

Frodo took her hand to help her rise and then tucked it into the crook of his arm to lead her to the end of one of the lines of dancers. Almost as though they had been waiting for that very last couple the band struck up and the dancers were off.

Bilbo watched as the lines of dancers drew together and parted, formed squares and cartwheels, skipped and pranced. Some of the less experienced made missteps and were pushed good-naturedly to the correct position by their companions but Frodo led his partner through the figures faultlessly.

Bilbo smiled as he wondered how many dancing lessons the lad had endured at the hands of his Aunt Esmeralda. The torture was paying off now at least for many a lass was glancing his way as they endured the graceless leadings of their own partners. Hobbiton lasses were not backward at coming forward, as Bell Gamgee would say. No doubt Frodo would have a gaggle of lasses fluttering their lashes and swinging their skirts to gain his arm for the next set.

“Here you go, Mister Bilbo. I saw you comin’ down the hill so I got this ready for you.” Hamfast Gamgee held out a half pint tankard and Bilbo recognised the heady smell of Ham’s home brew. He accepted it with a grin, along with the expectation of a thick head tomorrow.

“Thank you, Ham. I’m just on my way to deliver my contribution to the ladies table.” He took a careful sip and licked the foam from his lips appreciatively. “My, but that’s a good brew. You’ve excelled yourself this year.”

Ham followed him as they threaded the edge of the dance square. “I was thinkin’ the same. I think it’s the hops. They was a good crop this year.”

Bilbo took another sip, making a mental note to pace himself or it would be Frodo carrying him up
the hill at the end of the night. “Here we are, Buttercup.” He relinquished his basket to the gnarled hands of Buttercup Rumble who gave him a toothless grin.

“Thank ye, Mister Bilbo. I hope there’s some of yer scones in here.”

“There are indeed, and a coffee cake. There can never be too many cakes at a party.” He looked down at a gentle tug on his coat tail, to find little Marigold Gamgee staring up at him with sleepy eyes. “Can I have a danthe, Mithter Bilbo?” she asked artlessly.

Hamfast rolled his eyes and leaned in to whisper . . . at least it would have been a whisper but the noise level was such that he almost had to shout. “She should be sleepin’ but she says she won’t go ‘til she has a dance with you. I hope it’s not an imposition, sir.”

Bilbo smiled down at the faunt and handed off his beer to Hamfast. “Of course you may have a dance.” In a sudden movement, he swooped down to gather up Marigold, who squealed with delight as he began to prance about with her in his arms.

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Two hours later the noise level had not reduced one jot, even though the children’s corner was now quite filled with little bundles of sleep. Bilbo mused that the volume was probably due to the amount of beer and cider which had been dispensed by the now rather tipsy Ted Hoarfoot. Beer and cider was provided free by the local farmers at this event but Ted undertook the job of unofficial bar tender every year, and was usually snoring under the table by the end of the night . . . at which point everyone just helped themselves anyway.

Bilbo watched as a particularly lively reel began to wind down, noting that the dancers were growing more inventive as the night progressed and pleased to see that Frodo was still in control of his feet. He was dancing with Ruby Brockbank at present and the lass was taking every opportunity to flounce her skirts to give Frodo a glimpse of her knees. Bilbo smiled appreciatively for they were a very shapely pair of knees to be sure.

Something sharp suddenly jabbed him in the ribs and he glanced aside to find Bell Gamgee grinning at him. “Ye just get that twinkle out yer eye. Ruby Brockbank is young enough to be yer grandbairn.”

Bilbo snorted. “I’m old, not dead. And where have you been all evening?”

Bell settled upon the grass at his side with a relieved sigh. “I’ve been servin’ at table most of the night. Then there was nothin’ for it but Hamfast would have a dance. By the time we’d done that I had to put down May and Sam. Poor Sam was all but asleep on his feet but he would have it that he had to say goodnight to Master Frodo. And as yer lad’s been on the dance square most of the evenin’ that weren’t easy to manage.”

Bilbo nodded to where the dancers were starting to break up. His eyes followed Frodo assessingly as he escorted Ruby to the visit Ted Hoarfoot. “Well he’s off the square now,” he murmured.

Next to him Bell grinned into her cider mug. “He is that. Looks like Ruby’s takin’ him off somewhere quiet to drink their cider.”

When Bilbo made to rise she dragged him down again. “Leave ‘em be. Yer lad has a good head on his shoulders and he’s been doin’ too much dancin’ to be in his cups. He knows what’s what, and well enough to keep it in his breeches.”

Bilbo choked on his beer and Bell had to strike him firmly between the shoulders once or twice.
When he could breathe again Bell continued.

“Ruby Brockbank shakes her skirts a lot but that’s as far as it goes. She’s a good lass at heart.” She took a thoughtful sip of her cider. “I expect it’s ‘cause she’s the only lass in the smial. Her Ma died a few years back and she’s been lookin’ after her Da and three older brothers ever since. I reckon getting’ the local lads a bit bothered now and again gives her a bit of power.”

Bell pointed out a taller, rather well-built hobbit threading his way through the crowds and into the shrubbery at the edge of the field in the general direction Ruby had taken Frodo. “That’s Ruby’s brother, Bartimus. Him and his brothers always keep an eye out fer Ruby.”

“Oh dear. Will Frodo be alright.”

“Bless you, yes. Bartimus wouldn’t hurt a fly. He’s got his sister’s measure. He’ll probably just crash around a bit in the bushes and call out fer her.” Bell took another sip of her cider.

Sure enough, a few minutes later Ruby sashayed out from the bushes with her brother a few paces behind. Bilbo continued to worry until Frodo appeared a little later. The lad looked a little flushed but there were no signs of a black eye or a limp. In fact Frodo looked rather pleased with himself, which Bilbo found even more worrying. “You’re sure about Ruby?”

Bell laughed. “I’m sure. Although from the look of the lad Ruby’s given him a lesson or two in kissin’ and canoodlin’ he won’t forget in a hurry.”

-Bell stood, arching her back to stretch out the kinks, and lifted the basket of weeds she had just grubbed up from the tiny flower bed outside number three Bagshot Row.

“Good afternoon, Bell.” Bilbo Baggins leaned upon the garden wall.

“Hello there, Mister Bilbo. How are ye today?” She smiled warmly.

Bilbo grimaced. “I think I had one too many of Hamfast’s home brew last night but I think I’ll survive.”

Bell chuckled. “I reckon ye won’t be the only one sufferin’ today. Harvest Reel is a good excuse to let loose and more than a few do just that.” She spotted the basket by his feet. “Are ye comin’ back from market?”

“Yes. We just needed one or two bits. How is Daisy today? Every time I looked about last night she was dancing with one lad or another. I felt tired just watching her.”

Bell shook her head. “She’s been like a bear with a sore head all day. Between you and me I think she had a mite too much cider between dances but she’ll not admit it, and I couldn’t keep an eye on her every minute of the evenin’. Why don’t ye come in for a cup of tea? Shoppin’ is thirsty work and so is weedin’.”

Bilbo grinned. “I cannot disagree with that. I’d love a cup of tea. Thank you.” He followed Bell into the wonderfully cool interior of the Gamgee kitchen.

“Ham’s gone down to help clear off the last of the tables and awnin’s in the field so settle yerself down in his chair. It’s more comfortable than a bench. Sam went with him.” Bell shifted the big black kettle onto the hob and began to gather the accoutrements for tea.
Bilbo settled into the large cushioned seat with a sigh, the darker interior of the smial giving some relief to his sore eyes and pounding head. “So, where is Daisy?”

“She’s gone down to help Buttercup Rumble with her laundry. Butter don’t cope so well with scrubbin’ with her arthritis and May’s taken Marigold over the hill to play with Fern and Lilly Bracegirdle. I’ve got the place to myself.”

Bilbo chuckled. “I bet you don’t know what to do with yourself.”

“Oh, yes I do,” Bell asserted with a snort. “Whatever I like. What did Master Frodo make of the Reel? Ye missed last years.” She handed Bilbo a cup of strong tea and placed the honey within reach.

“I think Frodo enjoyed it very much. He seemed to have no shortage of dancing partners.”

Bell settled in her rocking chair at the other side of the hearth. “That’s no surprise. He’s a polite way with him and when ye add in those big blue eyes I don’t reckon there’s a lass wouldn’t like his attention. Did he say aught about Ruby Brownlock?”

“No, and I don’t think I want to ask. I have to trust Frodo at some point, but it’s hard not to fret after the run in I had with Saradoc Brandybuck over his falling from that tree last year. I think he may very well kill me if Frodo suddenly had to get wed!”

“Well, ye know my opinion on those folk over the river but I have to say that they seem to have done well by the lad when it comes to manners at least. And with ye teachin’ him common sense he’s doin’ alright. He’ll not get caught unless he’s ready to be and that’s not yet if I’m any judge.” Bell took a good swallow of her tea. “I wouldn’t worry too much about Ruby. She’s a nice enough lass but Master Frodo will be lookin’ fer more than a shapely leg. Ruby’s likely not the one for him.”

“I confess I wonder if he’ll find a lass in Hobbiton. I cannot see any of them discussing the finer points of elvish translation.”

“Well, now, I don’t know nothin’ about elvish and neither will they. But there’s many a lass has a good sensible head on her shoulders too. There’s more to runnin’ a house and raisin’ bairns than can be found in yer books, and I hope I don’t give no offense by sayin’ so.”

“No offence taken, Bell. I suppose you’re right and one scholar is enough for any smial. Maybe there’s something in the old adage that opposites attract.”

Bell looked about her cramped kitchen and her reply held a wistful note of envy. “I’ve always thought it a shame that Bag End’s never held a big family. There’s plenty of room for bairns to grow up in there.”

Bilbo took a good swallow of his cooling tea. “Perhaps Frodo will raise a big family there one day. I can remember having great fun as a faunt, sliding up and down that hall on a rug. Indeed, when Frodo visited as a faunt I showed him how to do that . . . much to his mother’s annoyance I may add.”

Bell pursed her lips. “Well, I don’t like to speak ill of the dead but Primula Brandybuck was a bit of a one fer the airs and graces. She kept that poor bairn on a tight rein.”

Bilbo shrugged. “She did like to keep him close. She and Drogo had almost given up on the idea of having bairns when Frodo arrived so he was particularly precious to them. I have to say that she wasn’t as fussy when they were in their own home. I think she was worried he would damage the furniture or something in Bag End. I’m afraid that fifty years ago I was much the same.”
“A lot of water under the bridge since then,” Bell commented, taking a sip of her tea.

“Indeed. There’s nothing like being chased by a group of giant spiders to bring home to one the relative unimportance of grandma’s doilies.” Bilbo smiled wistfully. “I do hope that one day Frodo does teach his own faunt slide down that hallway.”

Bell grinned. “With his winnin’ ways he’ll find the right lass and there’ll be plenty of Harvest Reel’s to find her before he comes of age.”
Carpets and Cupboards

“Be sure and put them books back as ye found ‘em, Daisy. Mr Bilbo won’t thank ye for losing one if he’s in the middle of readin’ it.” Bell Gamgee swiped her damp duster along the bedroom mantelpiece, tutting as she turned it over to examine it, before rearranging to a clean bit to make another pass.

Her daughter scowled but did as instructed; carefully replacing the pile she had dumped on the counterpane in order to polish the bedside cabinet. Her mother nodded approval as she stepped over to collect the tin of beeswax and polishing cloth. “Ye’ve done a good job there, lass. I can see my face in that. Mind ye, buffing aint a chore when furniture’s got as many layers of polish as Mr Bilbo’s. He told me some of these pieces came with his Ma from Great Smials in Tookborough.”

Daisy beamed at the praise, then scowled again as she realised there was still the chair in the corner to be tackled. She hated chairs. All those stretcher thingies between the legs at the bottom seemed to be there for the sole purpose of collecting dust. Her Da had once explained patiently that they were there to stop the chair legs splaying when a body sat on them. But Daisy was of the opinion that they had been invented just to make her life difficult. With a huff she dropped to her knees and set too with the dusting cloth.

The room had smelled of books and dust, pipe weed and Mr Bilbo’s cologne when they entered an hour before. Now the tickling smell of dust had been replaced with the sweet clean scent of beeswax and lavender polish. They were nearly finished in here and then they were to move on to Master Frodo’s room. Daisy was curious to find out what it looked like. He’d come up from Buckland after all. And they were odd down there. She wondered if he had any boots because she’d heard tales that folks down there wore them. Daisy had never seen boots.

Her musings were interrupted by the slap of running feet and her youngest brother, Sam, burst into the room, clutching Mr Bilbo’s chamber pot in both hands. He came to a skidding halt at a glare from his Ma.

“Samwise Gamgee, what did I tell ye about runnin’ with Mr Bilbo’s things?”

Sam hung his head, although having done so he suddenly found himself fascinated anew by the ring of blue dragons, chasing each other about the rim of the pot. He pulled himself back swiftly enough to mumble an apology. “Sorry Ma.” And he could sense, rather than hear, his older sister sniggering in the corner.

Having issued her censure, however, Bell nodded. ‘Let me see it then, lad. Not that it needed much cleanin’. That’s one thing Mr Bilbo is very clear about. Cleans ‘em out himself every morning’. There’s not many posh folks as does that.”

Sam filed away that bit of information as he held up the pot proudly for inspection. His Da had given him his very own workspace outside the back door, with buckets of water, cloths and cleaning stuffs. And there he sat, cross-legged, cleaning whatever Ma or Daisy brought him. Mr Bilbo’s chamber pot had already been sparkling but Ma had insisted that it was better to clean everything, just in case. “In case of what?” he had wondered. But Sam had set too, with a little bit of salt on a damp cloth first. Then white vinegar and water. He had grown quite fond of the blue dragons by the time he had rinsed and polished with a dry cloth . . . a scrap of his Ma’s old petticoat.

Sam held his breath as Bell’s eyes narrowed. She made great show of turning the pot this way and that in the light from the open window and running her fingers around the inside. After what seemed
an age to her little son, Bell handed it back with a smile. “Well done. Put it back now.”

Sam made to slide it under the bed but his Ma tutted. “No lad. In that cupboard under the washstand.” His eyes widened at the idea that there could be a piece of furniture specially made to house a po. Crossing to the corner washstand Sam opened the door to discover that, sure enough, it was the perfect size. It was with some sense of reverence that he replaced the po and closed the door; standing to stare for a moment. His own po was brown earthenware, had a chip in the rim and was kept under the bed. Never in his wildest imaginings had he considered that there would be a piece of furniture specifically made to house such an item. He had an auntie who always called hers a “guzunder” which seemed to Sam an eminently practical name for an item that goes under the bed. Did Mister Bilbo call his a “guzinto”?

His gaze travelled up the stand to take in the fine white marble top, the little porcelain dish with its lemon scented soap, and the matching dragon laced wash basin and jug. To one side was a rail, over which was draped the finest white towel he had ever seen. Oh, it wasn’t the whiteness that took him. His Ma had the whitest whites in Hobbiton in his opinion. It was the soft fluffy look of it. Checking his ma wasn’t watching; Sam wiped a hand on his breaches and reached out a finger to stroke it. Yes. It was as soft as it looked and he crushed a handful experimentally. As soon as he released it the fluffy material sprung open with not a crease left behind. The towels they used at home were of thickly woven linen with not a “fluff” in sight.

With a quick glance over his shoulder to ensure Ma had not seen him, Sam skipped from the room to return to his workplace and Master Frodo’s po. Bell only smiled as she continued to buff polish on the mantelpiece with a fresh rag.

Bell and Daisy worked silently for some minutes more, passing cloths and polish tin between them in the easy rhythm of those much used to the task. As they were reaching the end of their toil there was a sound of loud puffing. “Watch out for them cloakpegs,” announced the arrival of Hamfast and Cousin Holman. Sure enough, the two appeared in the doorway with one of Mr Bilbo’s best rugs rolled up on their shoulders. “In front of the hearth, if ye please,” instructed Bell as she stepped out of the way.

“I don’t hold with all these carpets. A good earth floor, or wood, is good enough for most folk,” announced Holman as they dropped the offending item and began to unroll it.

“Other way round,” instructed Bell and the two rolled eyes at each other as they took opposing corners and spun it about.

“Well, they do hold a lot of dust it seems,” replied Da as they straightened it. His wife was not about to argue that point. Beating carpets was a hot and dirty job and she sighed as she considered the bath she was going to have to heat water for later. Ham’s face was grey with dust, except where perspiration had tracked clean lines on his flushed forehead. And there were deep circles of sweat under the arms on both hobbit’s shirts. Looking at them Bell decided she’d better let Holman share the bath, before sending him home to his wife, Daffy. Mayhap she should also send him home with a fresh loaf in apology for the laundering of that shirt.

Daisy was replacing the last of the cleaning stuffs in Ma’s pretty storage box. “They’re nice ‘neath your toes, though,” she announced as she ran an appreciative foot across the brightly coloured pile.

Her father scowled. “Don’t you go gettin’ ideas, my lass. Folks like us can’t afford carpets.” Daisy ducked her head, lips pursed mutinously, but did not dare to contradict her Da. If all else failed, mayhap she could marry someone with a carpet. Daisy considered for a moment more. If it came down to carpet or love what would she choose?
Bell changed the subject. “Have ye more to tackle?”

Ham and Holman turned to leave. “Just the one, thank goodness; the one for Master Frodo’s room. You said as how you were doin’ that one last,” her husband called over his shoulder.

“I hope it rains later,” Holman could be heard to comment as they disappeared down the hallway. “Or that vegetable plot will have to be watered tomorrow. Aint never seen a grey cabbage afore.”

Ham’s voice was fading as he replied. “Aye, well. Tis better a grey garden than grey windows if we’d done it at the front of the smial. I don’t fancy cleaning all that glass again.”

“All them windows in a smial aint natural,” was the last comment Bell and Daisy heard.

Bell stood in the middle of the room and turned a slow circle. “I do think we’ve finally finished in here. Now there’s just Master Frodo’s room and we’re done. An’ a good job too with the masters due back from Buckland tomorrow.” She stepped aside to close the window and tweak a curtain. It was hard work, but Bell quite enjoyed spring cleaning. But it made it much easier when Bag End was empty and Bilbo and Frodo had obliged her by visiting relatives for a week.

Daisy picked up the cleaning box, eager to see inside Master Frodo’s room at last but her Ma reached to snag it from her grasp.

“I can fettle the last room alone. Ye get home and set the copper boiling. Yer Da and Uncle will need a bath when they’re finished or all we’ll be doin’ is movin’ Mr Bilbo’s muck over to our smial instead.”

Daisy pouted. “But Ma. We could do it a lot faster with two and still have time to boil the copper,” she wheedled. “An’ I aint never seen inside Master Frodo’s room since he moved in.”

Bell drew her lips into a thin line. “Aye. I know. An’ t’aint right for a maid to see inside a lad’s bedroom. So ye be setting off back now.”

“But I’ve seen my brother’s room afore,” the lass argued.

Her Ma only pointed at the doorway. “I know yer game, my girl. Yer settin’ yer sights too high an’ tis time ye came down from the clouds and dug yer feet in the good soil where they belong. Ye could do worse than Will Brownfoot. He’s comin’ courtin’ tomorrow, aint he?”

Daisy could scarce prevent her feet stomping as she left the room and Bell allowed herself a quiet laugh as she heard her daughters muttered comment from the front door.

“Aye. But I’m guessin’ he’s no carpets and no cupboard for his po neither.”
Marriage and Mathoms

It was full dark as Hamfast reached the lane that wound about the hill to Bagshot Row. Candles burned in a couple of the windows of Bag End and Bilbo could be glimpsed at his desk in the study. The rest of the hill was dark, the occupants having followed the old rule of going to bed at sundown and getting up at sunrise. Candles and oil cost money and firesides were all well and good but gave only light enough to chat by. There was yet one light on Bagshot Row, however. A small flickering candle glowed welcome in the window of the Gamgee home. The Gaffer smiled, knowing that Bell would have water heated for his wash, a bowl of stew and fresh baked bread ready for the table . . . and a warm hug.

He let himself in, quietly, aware that all the young ones would be abed by now and was a little surprised when Bell jumped up from her chair by the fire and spun towards the sink, a pool of pale fabric landing at her feet. She cleared her throat before speaking.

“Did ye get Widow Bolger’s garden cleared of weeds, then?”

Curious, Hamfast rounded the large, scrubbed table and joined his wife at the sink, where she was filling a basin with warm water from a jug and laying out a towel. When her husband turned her about Bell realised that standing facing the light of the fire had not been a good idea. Its warm flicker was easily enough for her husband to see the glistening tracks of tears on her cheeks and she looked down at her apron, drying her hands.

“What’s the matter, Bell? Is somethin’ wrong with one of the young uns?”

Bell looked up at once, her eyes wide. “Oh, no, love. All the bairns are tucked up warm in their beds. Though Daisy had a bit of a spit when it came her turn. That lass is getting far too sassy. She wanted to wear my weddin’ dress to Molly Brockbucks birthday party. My weddin’ dress no less! As if her best yellow weren’t good enough.”

Hamfast grunted in understanding. Daisy was of an age where she liked to think she was all grown up but was still capable of acting like a five-year-old when she didn’t get things all her own way. He turned to the sink and Bell helped him out of his jacket.

“Thought you’d been savin’ that for her to wear on her weddin’ day,” he murmured as he rolled up his shirt sleeves and picked up the sliver of soap on the drainer, dipping his hands in the water and watching it turn cloudy with the muck. He began scouring his hands, working up a good lather with the soap. “Just say the word, Bell, and she’ll learn she’s not too grown for a good old fashioned spankin’ if she’s playin’ you up.”

Bell returned to the fire, uncovering a pan of coney stew and stirring it, before bending to recover the large heap of fabric on the floor and lay it lovingly upon her chair.

“Don’t fret. I’ve got her measure.”

Hamfast bent to scrub at his face, making sure to attack his ears and the back of his neck. “What’s troubling you then? It takes a lot to get my Bell down.”

Settling on one of the benches flanking the table, Bell stared at the pale cloth on her chair. “It’s a long time since I’ve looked on that dress and I fancied havin’ just a peep. Just to remember,” she replied, wistfully.

Hamfast turned back to her, drying his neck on the clean but rough towel, noting that it had been
warming before the fire for him. He smiled. “It was a grand day, wasn’t it? And you were a stunner. . . .
still are.” He came to sit beside her and Bell leaned into his shoulder as he wrapped a beefy arm
about her. “I bet you’d still be a beauty in all that pale green. Like a fresh spring mornin’ you
looked.”

Bell batted at his hand, where it was making far too free with her bodice laces. “I think I’d have to let
it out a bit, love,” she chuckled. “I’ve had too many bairns since then. And I don’t think anyone
could have ever called me a beauty.”

Hamfast continued to try to work his fingers inside Bells bodice. “Oh, you were always a nice
handful, lass and you will ever be a beauty in my eyes. ‘Tis proper for a hobbit to be well rounded.
And I can’t say as how I didn’t enjoy helpin’ ye fill out.”

Bell pushed him away in mock horror. “Ham Gamgee! Whatever would we say if one of the
children came in? Keep yer hands . . . and yer tongue . . . still.” The words were said with a smile but
there was a flatness to them that grated on her husband. Bell began to ladle stew into a large basin,
setting it on the table at his side. “Anyway . . . there’s nobody goin’ to wear that dress any more. Tis
ruined.” Her voice was level but Hamfast could see her hand shaking as she laid a plate of bread next
to the stew.

He grabbed her wrist lightly to stop her turning away and his voice was gruff with concern. “What
do you mean . . . ruined?”

Bell reached across and pulled the pile of fabric into her lap as she sat at his side once more holding
up what was, now that he looked at it more closely, a sleeve made of shimmering fabric. It was
difficult to see in the poor light but Ham knew that sunlight would show it to be the pale green of
frosted grass on an early spring morning. The firelight glimmered through it.

“I don’t remember it havin’ lace on the sleeve . . . although I do remember a lot o’ lace,” he added
with a wink.

“The lace was on the petticoat, love,” Bell chided. “And this aint lace.” She swallowed. “Tis moths.”

“Moths?” So this was what had been bothering her. Well, he couldn’t blame her. The material had
been bought in Michel Delving by Bell’s family, and it had been the talk of the Shire for a long time
after the wedding. “But I thought you had it all bundled up in paper and tucked away.” Hamfast
slipped his arm about his wife’s waist again and she melted into his shoulder, silent tears sliding
down her cheeks.

“Seems the paper got torn and that’s how they got in. Oh love . . . tis ruined. I don’t reckon there’s
enough decent material left to even make Daisy a bodice. I knew I was never goin’ to get into it
again but I thought I could at least alter it and pass it down to our lass. Seems it’s not to be.”

“I’m sorry, Bell love. Mayhap that dress was only meant to be seen once . . . on the comeliest lass in
the Shire.”

Hamfast hugged her close as he heard Bell’s soft answering snort. “Yer a soft old fool, but I love ye
for it.” She wiped her eyes on her apron and wriggled out of his grasp. “Come on and eat yer supper,
afore it gets cold.”

Shaking out the remnants of the dress she held it up critically in the firelight . . . the practical mother
once more, now that she had shed her tears. “There’s a piece here on the skirt that don’t look too
bad. Mayhap I could make a pillowslip from it.”
Hamfast chuckled. “The Gamgees with silk pillow-slips. We’d be the talk of the Shire.” He turned around on the bench and tucked into his stew while Bell folded the dress thoughtfully and laid it back upon her chair.

Maybe green silk was not quite proper for pillow-slips after all. She wouldn’t want folk to think that the Gamgees had ideas above their station.

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Bell handed Daisy the last of the cups to be dried and turned to the pantry, producing one of her grandma’s best plates, covered with a piece of muslin. Sam licked his lips as he saw two large pieces of his Ma’s birthday cake sitting proudly beneath the cloth. His mother bent to pinch his cheek.

“Ye can put yer eyes back in yer head, Samwise. That cake is for Mister Bilbo and young Master Frodo. You’ve had yer piece. In fact, as I recollect, ye’ve had two pieces.”

“Aye . . . but it was a grand birthday cake.” Sam’s eyes stayed firmly fixed upon the delicacy despite his mother’s warning . . . although he would never actually have dared to take a piece. It was Ma’s cake and her birthday present to them all. And Bell Gamgee’s cakes were never mathoms.

Bell took off her apron, laying it on the table with the plate and then smoothing back the odd brown curl that had strayed out of her carefully applied combs.

“It was, wasn’t it? And all the better for having my helper to mix it for me.”

Sam sat straighter on the bench and Daisy snorted. “He only creamed the powdered sugar and butter. Takes more than that to back a cake,” came her haughty comment.

Before her younger brother could step in to defend himself his mother saved him the effort. “A task taken on willin’ is better than a task done because twas ordered and makes for lighter bakin’ my lass. Mayhap if ye put a little more love into yer cakes they’d come out a might less sad.”

Sam resisted the temptation to stick his tongue out at his sister but Daisy sniffed anyway. She continued putting away the clean crockery, however, and Sam rested his small chin upon his hands on the table, still staring at the wedges of cake shrouded beneath their fine muslin canopy. Recognising his mood his Da seated himself on the bench at the other side of the table. “Out with it, lad. Somethin’s been gnawin’ at you all through the party.”

Sam’s hazel eyes met those deep, earth brown eyes of his Da. “I still don’t know why Master Frodo and Mr Bilbo couldn’t be invited to Ma’s party. The whole of Bagshot Row was here.”

The Gaffer took the small hand of his youngest son in his, seeing already the ingrained dirt that came from working with trowel and plant, the calluses on palms from hours of turning earth for the autumn vegetable planting.

“It wouldn’t be proper havin’ a gentlehobbit mixing social with us common folk.”

Sam shook his head in confusion. “But Mr Bilbo and Master Frodo are often poppin’ over for a chat and I’ve had second breakfast up at Bag End once or twice.”

Hamfast stole a sidelong look at his wife as she reappeared from their bedroom, with two small parcels wrapped in brown paper and yellow ribbon that she set on the table with the cake.
Ham’s face was sad but firm set. “There’s a world of difference between sharin’ a cup of tea and a slice o’ bread and butter with friends and introducin’ those high livin’ friends to the rest of your family and expectin’ everyone to get on. Highborn folks like Mr Bilbo and the Young Master don’t get free and easy with the likes of their servants. It’s not proper.”

Sam grimaced. There was that phrase that all the grown ups kept using so freely. “Proper.” He glanced up at his Da. “Who makes up their mind as to what’s proper and what’s not?”

His question drew a short silence and then his Da gave another well-used answer. “Hobbits decide . . . and they decide by what’s always been proper afore. It’s tradition. Tradition allows a chap to know exactly where he is in the grand plan and where he’s going. And that’s what’s kept the Shire going all these years. Things just are . . . as they always were and they always will be.”

A tear trickled down Sam’s cheek as he picked at a bit of icing that had smeared upon his sleeve. His Ma came to stand behind him and kiss his ear. “Well. We couldn’t invite them to the party but we can take a bit of the party to them. Come on Sam. Ye can carry the cake.”

Sam lifted the cake with all the care he would have given a bowl full of his best agate marbles. At a glare from her mother, Daisy opened the door to allow them egress, her fingers still stroking the long pale green silk sash that had been her mother’s present to her. It would look very fine indeed about the waist of her best yellow dress at Molly’s party next week. She closed the door indolently behind them as the two made their way up the hill in golden evening light.

Bell paused to comb her fingers through Sam’s wayward hair before knocking lightly upon the bright green door of Bag End. It was a delighted Frodo who admitted them to the grandly appointed hallway.

“Happy Birthday, Mistress Gamgee. And many more of them.” The Young Master smiled. It seemed that the dark hall was washed with the warm sunshine of those eyes and then the spell was broken as Frodo turned to his uncle, just entering from the study.

“Happy Birthday, Bell. I’ll not ask which one it is this year, for I know ladies are apt to get cagey about such things after a certain age.” He winked and turned towards the parlour, waving them through. “Come in and sit down while Frodo makes some tea, for if my eyes do not deceive me there is cake beneath that cover. And if it’s cake made by the famous Bell Gamgee it needs eating quickly, before it floats away.”

“Get on with ye!” Bell chided, although Sam noticed that she walked a little taller at the compliment. “I’m sorry ye couldn’t come to the family party but I didn’t think it right that ye should be forgotten. I hope as how I’m not bein’ too forward in sayin’ this, but ye and the Young Master have become like family to me and mine, even if we was brought up different. And I hope ye don’t take no offence in that.”

Bilbo only smiled as Frodo re-appeared with a tray, on which could be seen all the accoutrements for tea, along with a knife to cut the cake, and four plates to put it on. “I take no offence, Bell. In fact, I take it as an honour . . . as I am sure Frodo does.”

Frodo’s grin widened. “I can’t think of a family that I’d rather be adopted into.”

Bilbo splashed a few drops of tea into one of the saucers but quickly recovered himself, as Frodo turned two giant pieces of cake into four reasonably sized pieces and laid them before everyone. For several minutes all conversation ceased as they got on with the important job of eating and drinking.

With a satisfied sigh, Bilbo leaned back in his chair and took a good swallow of his tea. “I was right,
Bell. That truly was a cake worthy of an elven baker.”

“It certainly was, Mistress Gamgee. Thank you very much for thinking of us.”

Bell blushed. Had the compliment been offered in her own kitchen she would have accepted it willingly enough but sitting in this grand room, with a carpet beneath her toes, she felt a bit embarrassed. Mister Baggins was, after all, a wealthy and much travelled gentlehobbit who had doubtless tasted many a fine cake in his day.

“It weren’t as grand as ye’re probably used to but I’m not much for fancy cookin’. A good plain sponge cake with a bit of butter-cream and raspberry jam is all I’m up to. But I thank ye for the compliment.”

She reached into the pocket of her best frock and brought out two small parcels, which she set upon the table before her hosts. Although they were only wrapped in brown paper, Bell had managed to find some ribbon in her sewing box so each was neatly tied with a yellow bow.

“What’s this? Birthday presents for us? Bell, you shouldn’t have,” Bilbo exclaimed, although he picked up the little package and began to untie the bow. From out the paper fell a large pale green silk handkerchief, one corner neatly embroidered with “BB”. Frodo’s package revealed a similar handkerchief, embroidered with “FB”. Both Baggins smiled broadly.

“Thank you, Mistress Gamgee. This will look very well in the breast pocket of my green suit,” Frodo assured her, fingering the delicate fabric.

Bilbo bent to examine his, well pleased with the fine needlework. There was something familiar about it though. Bell watched as his brow furrowed in concentration, trying to drag a memory to the fore. Bilbo Baggins was noted for his elegant waistcoats and he could spot an expensive fabric from quite a distance. This was a good silk and must have cost Bell a pretty penny. Suddenly, his face cleared.

“Why this is the same fabric your wedding dress was made of. I remember it well.”

Ever willing to help and praise his Ma’s cleverness, Sam cleared up the mystery. “That’s because it’s made from Ma’s dress, Sir. She was keepin’ it but the moths got at it and she’s used the bits to make all sorts of pretty presents.”

Frodo watched as Bell Gamgee’s normally affable face stiffened. She was proud of having been able to make use of the undamaged bits of fabric, but she was not particularly happy about such gentlehobbits knowing that their fine silk handkerchiefs were made from one of her old dresses.

Sensing the atmosphere at once, Sam shuffled in his chair and began to make a careful study of his fingers. The youngster was not quite sure what he had said wrong, but he was painfully aware that he had caused his mother some distress and he wished that the floor would open up and swallow him whole. Frodo glanced at him in sympathy.

“If that is the case, then this gift is to be doubly precious,” announced Bilbo, before the silence grew too solid. “Every time I see this I will be reminded of how grand you looked that day.”

Frodo’s quiet voice followed swift on his uncle’s. “And I am honoured that you would think to give me a piece of such a treasured possession.”

The air cleared at once and Bell smiled in relief. “I was hopin’ ye’d like the material, Sirs. Ye’ve both been good to me and mine and I wanted to let ye know how much I appreciate that.”
“The feeling is mutual,” Bilbo replied, folding the handkerchief carefully and handing back the yellow ribbon. Bell made to refuse but Bilbo put it in her palm and Frodo followed suit. “A present from us to Daisy. They’ll look well in those pretty brown curls.”

Bell pushed them into her pocket. “I’ll see she gets them, and the message. Now we must be away. My Marigold needs bathin’ afore I try and put her to bed. Ye should see the mess she got herself into with that cake.”

She rose and Bilbo escorted her to the door, Sam following meekly and silently on her heels. The usual pleasantries were exchanged and then Sam and Bell were walking back down the hill. Before they were out of sight of Bag End Sam was crying silently and once into the lane, a concerned Bell drew him to the grass verge and sat down.

“What ever is the matter, Sam, love?” His mother pulled a hanky out of her pocket and began to wipe at his face.

“I’m sorry, Ma,” the little voice wailed. “I didn’t think afore I spoke. Da’s always tellin’ me to do that and I forgot.”

Bell gathered her little lad into her lap and tucked his head beneath her chin. “Oh, Sam love. Ye didn’t say nothin’ wrong. Ye told the truth and ye should never be ashamed of that. If anyone should be sorry tis me. Pride has its place but too much of it can be a bad thing and I let it get the better of me.” As she spoke she rocked him gently, kissing his curls until the sobs finally subsided. Bell tilted his face up and was not surprised to see sleepy hazel eyes.

“I’m sorry I hurt ye, lad. Come on. Let’s get home. We’ve both had a long and busy day.” She set her youngest son on his feet and stood, making sure to take his hand as they walked back to the smial.

Things were quiet when they entered the kitchen for it was, indeed, late and even the older children were abed. It may have been a birthday celebration today but tomorrow would be another workday and even Marigold had been put to bed by Daisy. If Hamfast noticed that his son had been crying, a quick shake of the head from his wife told him to keep silent about it, and Bell set too warming some milk for Sam while the lad put on his nightshirt.

When he was settled at the table with a mug, Bell disappeared for a moment. Returning, she laid a small square of pale green silk before her son and Sam glanced up in surprise. He lowered his mug and wiped his palms upon his shirt before touching the fine thing. Open, it revealed itself to be another handkerchief, but this time with “SG” embroidered in one corner.

“I was goin’ to keep it until ye were older but I think ye know how to look after it.”

Tears trickled down Sam’s face again, but he was smiling as he used his sleeve to dry his eyes. Then he folded his precious handkerchief carefully on Ma’s spotless kitchen table.
Frodo came to an abrupt halt at the closed door to the Gamgee’s smial. Closed? On a hot summer’s day? He knocked timidly, wondering if something could be amiss, and was somewhat relieved when he heard Bell’s cheery, “Come in, whoever ye be.” On opening the door however he took an involuntary step back, hit by a wave of warm, damp air, redolent with yeast.

“Come in, Young Master and shut the door if ye please. I’m sorry I couldn’t come to the door but I’m all over flour.” Bell waved her plump arms at him with a broad smile. She was indeed, all over flour. In fact it seemed to Frodo that everything was all over flour.

Silky white powder coated the large kitchen table and dusted the floor about and on Bell’s feet, turning her foothair grey. Broad splashes of it adorned her apron and arms and she even had a dab on the end of her nose. When Frodo breathed in he noticed that it hung in the air, making his nose itch and catching in his throat.

His awe must have registered on his face for Mistress Gamgee chuckled. “Now ye know why Mister Bilbo don’t bake bread in the summer. I’ve nearly got yer order done. Just a couple of loaves finishin’ in the oven.”

“Thank you, Mistress Gamgee.” Frodo dabbed at his upper lip surreptitiously, trying to wipe away the perspiration that had suddenly sprung out there and holding his arms a little away from his body. It didn’t help. He could feel damp patches developing under his armpits already. He could see that Bell herself was not immune to the temperature, her bodice completely soaked beneath its covering apron and tendrils of hair plastered to her brow.

Bell obviously noticed his small action and took pity on him. “Ye can come back a bit later if ye want. ‘Tis not a day to be sittin’ in a hot kitchen. Them loaves will be another quarter hour or so.”

Frodo considered the golden sun streaming through the room’s round windows. He had been sitting in the garden, reading, when Bilbo had sent him off to the Gamgee’s for their bread. As he suspected his uncle knew he would, Frodo had jumped at the chance to visit the family. Bag End was his home now and felt it. And Bilbo was dear. But the bustling Gamgee smial reminded him of Brandy Hall and Bell, herself, of his own Mama so he never turned down a chance to call.

His gaze returned to the table where, on a collection of mismatched wire trays, assorted breads steamed gently through their golden tops. Frodo swallowed a mouthful of saliva and dragged his eyes away from the display.

“I can wait. I was reading and by the time I’ve gone to my book and settled back into the story it will be time to come back anyway.”

Bell followed his gaze and swallowed a smile as she hoisted a lump of sticky dough out of the large stoneware basin and thumped it down on a circle of flour on the table, sending up a cloud of dust that made Frodo pinch his nose to stop a sneeze.

“Ye’d best sit down, then. But if ye want to keep that fancy weskit clean ye’d best sit at yonder end.” She motioned to the end farthest from her immediate work area and, perhaps not entirely coincidentally, far away from the cooling bread.

Frodo complied, pushing his shirtsleeves up a little further as he climbed over the bench and settled down. The sight and smell of all that fresh bread was a torture to his tweenage stomach and he hoped
Bell could not hear it rumbling from way over there. From the twinkle in her green eyes however, he suspected she could.

For a few minutes there was silence in the room, apart from the slide of the dough as Bell kneaded and turned it about on her table. With each pull and knuckled tuck Frodo could feel the table shake beneath his elbows and he placed his chin in his hands, mesmerised by the soothing rhythm of it.

When the dough was no longer sticky but round and elastic, a smooth ball, Bell gathered it up in both hands and dropped it into another basin. Then she snagged a muslin cloth from a waiting pile and covered it, before setting it aside to rise. When she returned she had another bowl with her and paused to sprinkle a generous layer of floor before upturning the basin and dumping the huge lump of dough out onto the table.

Another dusting of flour on top and she began her kneading again, completely absorbed in her work and pausing only to sprinkle a little more flour. Pull, tuck and turn, pull, tuck and turn, pull, tuck and turn.

Frodo settled deeper into his elbows, smiling gently. He and Bell had settled into an easy relationship that didn’t demand that she entertain the young master of the hill. And Frodo had made himself a welcome addition to her motherly circle.

Bell dropped the dough back into its bowl and glanced up once more, as though suddenly remembering that she had a guest. “I’m sorry ’tis so warm in here. But a stray drought can kill the yeast and flatten the bread.” She called out to the darkened entrance to the rest of the smial. “Daisy.”

From somewhere in the depths of the hill Frodo noticed for the first time the muffled sounds of flapping and suspected that the eldest Gamgee lass was making beds. The sounds continued and Frodo held his breath. Daisy would not be pleased at any interruption, particularly from her mother. Interruptions from mother usually meant another task in the offing. But Bell was mistress here.

“Daisy Gamgee. I know ye can hear me . . . Daisy!”

Frodo shrank at her last call; glad that the only person he had ever heard Bell use that sharp tone with was Daisy.

Daisy appeared, her hair mussed and hands planted defiantly on hips. “I’ve not finished the beds yet, Ma,” she got in quickly, before she took in Frodo’s presence with a flick of her eyes, and the tween found he didn’t like the sudden gleam there.

“Them beds should have been long done, girl. But ye can finish them in a bit. We’ve company. Go fetch a cup of cold water from the crock in the pantry.”

Daisy sniffed and made to flounce her skirts but a warning glare from her mother stopped the action mid flick and it turned into a smoothing motion. She grabbed up one of the second best cups from the top shelf of the dresser and headed off through an arched door. Frodo swallowed, and this time it had nothing to do with the smell of cooling bread. Daisy had a way of getting her own back and the younger lad sat up straight, bracing himself.

Daisy sashayed back into the kitchen, the dewed cup of her mother’s china held firmly in both hands. She approached the table opposite Frodo with a small but wicked smile on her face and leaned forward to place the cup before him. Frodo’s cornflower eyes widened.

It was high summer and the Gamgees had not been expecting company. With the warm work of making the beds, Daisy had loosened the lacings on her bodice and Frodo suspected her visit to the
pantry had “accidentally” loosened them further.

Bell’s table was wide, had to be so to accommodate such a large brood, and it necessitated Daisy bending very low as she leaned across it, cup in one outstretched hand and eyes locked on Frodo’s face. Frodo would have returned the gaze but he found his eyes locked somewhere totally different as he found himself on the receiving end of his first good look down a lasses’ bodice. He could feel a blush creeping up his neck and shifted uncomfortably upon the bench. Daisy remained still, confident in her command over him until . . .

“Daisy Gamgee! Get ye outside and feed them pigs!” Bell’s voice was not loud but the warning note in it was very clear.

Daisy startled upright but soon regained her composure. “But Mam! I ain’t finished the beds yet. Why am I always the one that ends up swillin’ the pigs?” Daisy whined. “Why don’t Sam do it? He’s youngest.”

Bell grabbed up her ball of dough and thumped it down into the waiting basin, taking up a long and sharp knife to slice off a smaller lump. To Frodo’s eyes she seemed to do so with unnecessary gusto. “Aye. ‘Tis not a nice job, is it?”

Frodo took a hurried swig of the cold water, sighing in relief as he felt the liquid slide down his body and settle in his stomach, from where it sent out cooling tendrils to other parts.

“‘Tis an easy enough job and gives a body time to consider other things. So happen while yer doin’ it ye’ll have time to think on the proper manners for a young lass before a lad and in particular, a gentlehobbit.” She glanced up from kneading the smaller ball of dough. “And ye could fasten that bodice up while yer about it. The pigs’l not be impressed.”

To her credit, Daisy did blush as she grabbed up the slop bucket and stomped from the smial, even taking care to close the door quietly behind her.

Bell gusted out a puff of air as her eldest daughter left and Frodo concentrated hard on the cold water . . . concentrated very firmly on “cold”. Thus it was that he did not notice anything else for some time until a small plate was slid before him, on which sat a breakfast roll, opened and steaming, with a large dollop of butter melting slowly into it.

He looked up into Bell’s knowing eyes and she smiled. “Food. ‘Tis a wondrous thing for taking the mind off other things.” And with those gentle words she turned back to her kneading.
The summer of 1391 was hot and humid in the Shire. By harvest time the crops were dry and just waiting to be cut. In Hobbiton Farley Brownlock and Tom Cotton set up shop in the Ivy Bush and all the local residents signed up with one or the other to help gather the harvest.

“Now then, Hamfast. Can I count on ye for my fields this year as usual?” Tom Cotton poised his pencil.

“That you can, Tom. My Bell, Daisy and May will help with the sheaves and Sam and Mari will go to gleanin’. Ham made his mark on Tom’s list.

“How many years is it now that ye’ve been helpin’ with the harvest?” Tom asked as he made marks in the appropriate columns for the rest of Ham’s family.

“Well, Bell used to help when she were a bairn but my family’s been cuttin’ your wheat since me and Bell set up home on Bagshot Row. That would be near twenty-eight year since.” Hamfast Gamgee may not be one for writing but there was nothing wrong with his numbers.

“And I hope as how ye’ll be helpin’ fer another twenty-eight.” Tom handed over six tokens which would entitle each member of the family to luncheon and drinks for each day worked in the fields.

Ham pocketed the tokens and grinned. “As long as we’re fit for it you can count on me and mine.” With that he made way for the next in line.

-0-

“Hello love. Did ye get signed up fer the harvest?” Bell Gamgee leaned in to kiss her husband then bustled off to get a kettle off the hob. “Ye’ll be wantin’ a cup of tea.” It should have been a question but Bell knew what her husband’s answer would be so it came out as a statement.

Ham hung his cap on a peg by the door and crossed to settle into his chair, moving it a little away from the warmth of the hob on this summer’s eve. “Aye. I’ve signed us all up. May can keep an eye on Sam and Mari and show them how to glean proper.”

Bell gathered up the tea things, handing over a plate with a heel of bread, some cheese and a couple of pickled onions. “Has Tom said what day they plan to start? Only Buttercup Rumble says there’s no sign of rain.”

Ham chuckled around of mouthful of bread and cheese. “You can rely on Butter’s arthritis to predict any rain. Tom’s thinkin’ of startin’ day after next. That’ll give folks time to get themselves sorted at home.”

Bell handed him his big mug, full of thick, dark tea. “Aye. I’d best get started bakin’ bread and such tomorrow. There’ll be no time once we start in the fields.”

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“Ham! Ham, love. Wake up!”

Bell’s voice broke through his dreams, that and her persistent shaking of his shoulders. “What is it, Bell lass?” He blinked and sat up as the urgency of her tone registered. That’s when he became aware of the frightened voices of the children, almost drowned out by the sound of wind and rain.
“The wind’s blown in Sam’s bedroom window and I think there’s somethin’ wrong in the back yard.” Bell was tugging at the laces of her bodice and Ham noticed that she had not paused to take off her nightgown, but thrown bodice and skirt over the top of it. She thrust Ham’s breeches at him as he clambered out of bed.

“Is the lad hurt?” he asked as he tried to walk whilst pulling them on and nearly fell.

“Sam’s alright and Daisy and May are helpin’ to sweep the glass.” They left their bedroom together and Bell pushed him toward the back door. “Ye see what’s goin’ on out back. I thought I heard someone cry out and there were a crash. Arty or Harry may be hurt.”

Hamfast looked back as Daisy appeared with an old wooden tray. “Will this be alright to cover the window, Ma?”

Giving one final push to Hamfast’s shoulders Bell bustled off to help her daughter. “It'll do, lass. Did ye bring the hammer and nails?”

Daisy’s answer was lost in the howl of the wind as Hamfast stepped out of the back door of number three Bagshot Row. He was instantly wet through to the skin as the wind flung rain at him. For a moment, he considered going back for his cap. The knowledge that it would be blown off before he took another step and the desperate cries of Clover Mugwort changed his mind.

“Help. Oh please, somebody help!” At a hundred years old Clover was still hale but her thin voice was almost lost in the wild roaring of the storm.

Ham lifted an arm in front of his face to try and keep the driving rain from his eyes and took a couple of steps into the wide back yard shared by the three properties of Bagshot Row. “Where are you, Clover?”

“Ham! Over here. By the workshop. Quick! He’s held fast!”

Hamfast had to lean into the wind to make any progress and almost fell when there was a sudden change of direction in the gale. The unexpected change did have the advantage of blowing the rain away from his face so that he could now establish that Clover was on her knees in the mud before her son’s workshop.

It was clear that one of the big double doors had been ripped from its hinges and now lay in the mud but at first it was not clear to Hamfast who she was referring to. Then he noticed that she was scrabbling beneath the edge of the fallen door, where a hand lay still in a puddle of dark water.

Ham ran the rest of the distance, thumping to his own knees at her side. He had to put his lips to her ear to make himself heard over the tumult, which seemed to have increased in ferocity even during those few steps. “What happened?”

As Clover shouted her reply he began scrabbling about for a plank, anything to help him lever up the huge door. “The bangin’ of the door woke us up so Harry came out to see to it. But there was a strong gust that blew it clean off its hinges.” Tears were indistinguishable in the rain but Hamfast could hear them in Clover’s voice. “It happened so fast and took Harry with it. I can’t lift it on my own. Oh, please help him!”

Finally finding a stray plank Hamfast squeezed her shoulder before levering himself to his feet against the onslaught of the elements that seemed determined to keep him on his knees. “If I get this under the door to lift it do you think you can pull him free?”

Birdlike as she was Clover took a firm grip on her son’s wrist. “Aye.”
Even as she did so a second beefy set of arms reached in, digging another plank beneath the door next to Hamfast’s. “I reckon ye’ll need a hand with this.” Hamfast nodded thanks to Arty Sedgebury then both pushed down hard on their respective levers.

It became a four-way tug of war between Clover, Hamfast, Arty and the wind. The wind had the final say, sneaking beneath the raised door and snatching it up so suddenly that Hamfast feared it would go sailing off through the air to attack some other poor soul. In the end it only flipped the door to land it with a loud splashing thud several feet away.

The sound was soon followed by the loud wailing of Clover Mugwart as her son’s broken body was revealed at last. Hamfast leaned down to listen at Harry’s chest but it was clear that there was no hope. The heavy door had hit the Shire’s best carpenter with such force that his rib cage and skull had been smashed beyond any recovery. Had he survived the initial impact he would not have done so for long.

Arty caught Hamfast’s eye and his thought was clear. “Tis a blessin’ in its way.”

“Stay with him while I take Clover to sit with Bell. I’ll come back to help you move him,” Ham yelled as he wrestled Clover to her feet, curving a strong arm about her bowed shoulders to stumble with her to Number Three.

-0-

The storm which had blown in with such swift violence from the south, abated as quickly as it had arrived. Dawn broke with an eerie silence. Even the birds seemed subdued.

All about Hobbiton folk were boarding up windows, chopping up downed trees and rounding up stray animals. The residents of Bagshot Row were more subdued than most. Harry Mugworts’ body lay on the bench in his workshop and Bell Gamgee helped his mother to clean and dress him for burial, then sew him into his winding sheet.

Hamfast was dishing out fried eggs to his children when she returned. While she hung up her cloak he poured a cup of tea and handed it over with a peck on the cheek. Bell thanked him with a grim smile, taking a moment to look over her brood before she settled in her chair by the fire.

Clover Mugwort had gently refused any offer to stay with the Gamgees for a few days and would not hear of Bell abandoning her own family. Bell was both surprised and proud of Daisy for offering to stay with Widow Mugwort at least until the funeral. The tween had her faults but she was soft at heart.

The voices about the Gamgee table were quiet and May was helping a blissfully ignorant little Marigold with her food. Bell noted that the small cut on Sam’s hand had stopped bleeding. Her little lad was safe and, within a few weeks, she had no doubt that the scar would be unnoticeable among others from his work in the gardens with his father.

Hamfast offered Bell a plate containing a bacon sandwich. “Just to put you on.” He placed his own breakfast on the table and settled on the bench closest to her. “I’ve asked Birky Bracegirdle to start diggin’ the grave and he’ll come round to let us know when it’s done.”

Bell set aside her sandwich untasted, preferring instead to drink her tea. “Ye should go up and check on Bag End after breakfast. There’s no tellin’ what damage has been done, exposed as tis at the top of the hill.”

Hamfast shook his head. “I’ve already checked. Tis all tight and tidy. Just a few branches tore loose
from the apple tree. Twas one of them as came through Sam’s window. There’ll be no decent crop from it this year. The garden’s all of a mess too. I’ll take Sam with me and we’ll save what vegetables we can afore we start on our own plot.”

“Me and May will sort out our plot. You just deal with Mister Bilbo’s garden,” Bell offered.

“Then you’ll need some food in you my lass,” Hamfast announced pointedly as he indicated Bell’s still untouched sandwich. “I reckon the salad stuff will be fit only for pigs but as long as the tops haven’t been tore clean off, the root vegetables will survive. Gather up anythin’ else that’s edible and what we can’t eat we’ll spread amongst other families. There’ll be plenty of folk, especially down by the river, who will have nothin’. I’ll do the same with Mr Bilbo’s stuff.”

Bell acknowledged the sense of her husband’s injunction and took a bite of her sandwich. “I wonder if Tookborough caught it as bad as we did.”

“I hope not. The smials down by the Water haven’t flooded this time but from what I hear it was a close-run thing. Most have had their gardens washed away. I’ll start handin’ out food there first. I don’t reckon Mr Bilbo will object. Even if he started home this mornin’ he wouldn’t be back in time to make use of it.”

Bell shook her head. “I still don’t understand where the storm blew up from. Buttercup usually gives warnin’ but when I spoke to her this mornin’ she said she’d felt nothin’.”

“I wondered how Buttercup had fared. I didn’t have time to call in on my way to Birky’s.”

“She arrived at Clover’s with some bread as I was leavin’. There’s no damage to her smial, just a fall of soot, and Rowley Proudfoot’s goin’ to see to that while Butter sits with Clover fer the mornin’.”

Hamfast took a moment as he chewed his bacon. Windows could be replaced and all his bairns were safe and well. His eyes fell upon the small heap of tokens in the middle of the table and his heart was filled with foreboding. “I wonder what this storm has done to the wheat.”

Harry was buried late that afternoon and most of Hobbiton turned out to say their goodbyes. Harry was renowned throughout the Shire and even beyond for the quality of his carving, but in Hobbiton he was known best for his generosity. He would put as much love into the construction of a solid kitchen table for the poorest smial as he would into the creation of the most intricately carved box for a wealthy client. Many a tear was shed that afternoon.
Making Do

1391 became known as the year of the Great Storm. The crops, standing so tall and golden just hours before were now flattened, the wind having swirled them into fantastical patterns on the ground. Had they just been attacked by wind folk would have rolled up their sleeves and gleaned what they could. It would have been a poor harvest but they would have something. However, the wind had brought with it driving rain that soaked the ears and within hours, mildew set in.

Within days, once the mess was dry enough, fields were lit and laundresses all across the Shire complained about the sooty smuts marking their nice white linens. This was one of the least of their worries, however. The storm that had blown in from the south had not burned itself out until it hit the sea, so the ruin was widespread. The Master of Buckland and the Thain got together to pool what grain reserves there were, and managed to buy in some from outside the Shire, but the storm had blown through other lands before reaching them so there was little to be had. What there was commanded a high price.

For the first time in living memory there was no Harvest Reel celebration and hobbits all across the Shire prepared to tighten their belts. As always it was the poor who suffered most for a larger part of their diet was bread, and the Gamgee household were no exception to this.

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There was a knock at the door and May jumped up from the table to answer it. Bell allowed herself a smile. Two more opposite temperaments in two lasses could not be found than in Daisy and May Gamgee. Daisy kept her soft heart well hidden beneath a sometimes-surly disposition. Bell suspected she was fearful of hurt to a heart that was, despite outward appearance, probably too soft. May was bright and sunny, wearing her heart on her sleeve for all to see and willing to pick herself back up when life knocked her down.

“Hello May. Is your mother at home?”

Bell recognised Mister Bilbo’s voice at once and handed over the soup ladle to Daisy before joining over from May at the door. “Good day to ye, Mister Bilbo. Can I do aught for ye?”

Bilbo felt some concern as a much-reduced Bell Gamgee smiled out at him. Behind her all but Hamfast were seated at the table before what looked to be bowls of nettle soup. Bilbo held back a shudder for he was not at all fond of nettle soup and he suspected that several about the table were of the same persuasion. Still, many of the poorer folk were reduced to eating it this year and he wondered what they would consume once winter set in and all the nettles disappeared. He pasted on a smile and held out the basket he had been carrying over his arm.

“Good day, Bell. I am sorry to interrupt your luncheon but Frodo and I wondered if you could make use of these.” He flicked back the cover to reveal half of a chicken and mushroom pie, half a dozen sausages, some bread cakes and half a loaf. (He was always careful to avoid offering a whole item for that would be too obvious.) “I’m very much afraid that I overestimated the size of Frodo’s stomach again and bought far too much food for the two of us. There’s not enough of anything to feed all your brood but I thought perhaps the youngsters could benefit.” He tucked the cover back over this bounty.

Bell had to clear her throat before replying and was very much aware that all conversation at the table behind her had ceased. Mister Bilbo had been doing this regularly enough of late for her to know that it was quite deliberate. But the amounts he offered were small enough to ensure that it did
“Thank ye kindly, Mister Bilbo. I’m sure we can make good use of it.” She handed the basket off to May, who disappeared to the pantry, returning shortly and passing it back to their benefactor with the bob of a curtsy.

“I’m glad you could help us out. I do so hate to waste good food. Feel free to let me know if there’s anything we can do to help in return.”

-May-

May sat at one end of the table, chopping potato, while her Ma sat at the other, fishing the bones out of some chicken broth. The two were alone this afternoon, Daisy having gone to market, taking Marigold with her, while Sam had gone with his Da to work in the garden of the Sackville-Baggins.

“Make sure ye chop them taters nice and small, lass. They’ll help to thicken the soup. And when yer done ye can peel the carrots.” Bell winced as May used both hands to work her knife through a particularly large potato. “And watch yerself with that knife. I’d have liked more meat in this stew but I don’t want it to be yer fingers.”

May grinned. “I’ll be careful, Ma.” She began to slice the potato. “Ma . . . have you ever had a yen to see what’s outside Hobbiton?”

Bell picked out a piece of gristle. “Can’t say’s I have. I once went to Michel Delvin’ with my Ma and Da but that was afore I were married. Why do ye ask?”

May chipped the slices and then began to dice the chips. “I know things is hard this year. If Mr Bilbo hadn’t given us that chicken carcass we’d have no meat at all in the stew and I know that the coppers Daisy makes, working for Widow Rumble is helpin’. I was just wonderin’ if it would help if I got some work too.”

Bell set down her sieve. “Yer already a help here, lass. Yer Da and me will look after ye. Don’t fret. Yer too young to be worritin’ about such things. We’ve had hard times afore and we’ve always come through.”

Although young, however, May had already learned much from her mother. “I know there’s not much I can do in Hobbiton but I was thinkin’ of Brandy Hall. I was listenin’ to Master Frodo talkin’ to Sam and it seems they have maids and cooks there.” She started chipping another set of slices. “Master Frodo says they start some of ‘em even younger than me. Besides, I think I’d like to see what’s outside Hobbiton.”

Using the action of taking up her sieve once more and poking around for the last little bones gave Bell’s mind time to process this information. “I hope y’aint been givin’ too much thought to Mr Bilbo’s tales. Adventures is all well and good fer the occasional Took but most hobbits don’t hold with travellin’,” Bell sniffed. “And sometimes tales grow in the tellin’, ’specially when there’s ale to go with ‘em.”

May considered this for a while as she pushed the small dish of diced potato down to her mother and began to peel carrots. “I don’t think I’d want to go on a real adventure, with wizards and dragons and the like. But I hear that the Brandywine River is so big that they have a ferry, and Brandy Hall is bigger than Great Smials. I think I’d like to see that.”

Bell tipped the contents of her sieve (now only scraps of meat) back into the broth and returned the pan to the hob. Checking the contents of a bag of onions she selected two, then reconsidered and put
one back before beginning to peel it. “I know Brandy Hall is still in the Shire but (and I wouldn’t say this in front of Master Frodo) tis down on the borders and folks down there can be a bit touched. They do say that they see Big Folk sometimes, and even Elves. Although what business elves would have in the Shire I don’t know.”

Sweeping the onion skins into a basin, May went to add them to the kitchen waste.

“No, lass.” Bell stopped her chopping as May turned about, filled basin still in hand.

“Why, Ma? There’s no pig to feed so I was goin’ to put these for compost.”

Bell shook her head. “Nothin’ goes on the compost heap if we can eat it. Them skins will make a good base for broth. Put a pan of water on to boil and set ‘em simmerin’.”

May frowned but complied with her Ma’s instructions. “But I thought the skins were too tough to eat.”

“They are, but ye can boil all the flavour out of them and use the water for stock when ye’ve strained it.” Nothing went to waste in the Gamgee kitchen nowadays. Bilbo found many an excuse to provide tidbits to all the residents of Bagshot Row but even so, clothes were gettin’ lose and belts were getting tightened.

“So, what do you think, Ma?” May watched her mother add diced onion to the chicken broth and passed over her carrot to be thrown in.

Bell was a little distracted, as she often was this autumn. She was considering whether the stew would be sufficient served without a slice of bread, for that would leave bread for the morrow’s luncheon. “What do I think of what, May love?”

May sighed. “About me goin’ to work at Brandy Hall or Great Smials. Do you think Mister Bilbo could write a letter for me?”

Bell put her stew pan on the hob. “I don’t know, lass. Yer still a mite young to be leavin’ home. I’ll speak to yer Da after supper.”

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Bilbo had just settled into his study when the front doorbell jangled and he waited, relieved when he heard the slap of Frodo’s feet on the hall tiles as he went to answer. He was about to pick up his quill when he heard Hamfast Gamgee’s voice. “Evenin’ Master Frodo. Me and the Missus was wonderin’ if Mister Bilbo was free for a chat.”

Bilbo did not wait for Frodo’s reply, instead stepping out of his study to greet his neighbours, for it was most unusual for both to visit, especially at this late hour. “Hello Ham, Bell. Please come into the parlour. Frodo, would you make us some tea?”

Although they followed Bilbo into the parlour and perched gingerly upon the settee, Hamfast waved away the offer. “That’s alright, Master Frodo. We don’t want to put you to no trouble.”

“Nonsense. It’s no trouble at all,” Bilbo announced as he settled in his arm chair and Frodo trotted off down the hall to the kitchen. “Now what brings you to my door at this hour of the evening?”

Usually not one to be backward at coming forward, nonetheless, Bell looked to her husband to speak first. Ham cleared his throat. “We was wonderin’ sir . . . and I hope you don’t think us too forward . . . but you was sayin’ the other day . . .” His voice petered out and Bell finally took over.
“Ye said as how if there were aught ye could do to help we was to ask.” She paused.

“I did, Bell, and I meant it. Out with it. How can I help?”

It was Hamfast who continued. “Well, you know we had to butcher the sow last week. It weren’t fair to keep her ‘cause we didn’t have nothin’ spare to feed her and Bill Bracegirdle gave us a fair price.”

Bilbo doubted very much that Bill had paid a fair price but he kept that thought to himself. The laws of supply and demand did not work in everyone’s favour and poorer folk like the Gamgees were suffering most.

Bell picked up where her husband left off. “We was wonderin’ . . . we was workin’ it out and we could cope if we had just one less mouth to feed. And with ye havin’ family in Tookborough and Buckland we was wonderin’ if they needed any folk to help with cleanin’ and cookin’. Our May is a hard worker an’ she says she’s a yen to see the world outside Hobbiton.” Bell sniffed. “Although where she gets such ideas from I don’t know.”

Frodo chose that moment to return with a tray and Bilbo drew up a table. Bell’s eyes widened when she saw that besides the tea pot there was also a plate containing shortbread.

Bilbo took charge of the teapot. “I don’t doubt that she is. I have not heard of any maids required at Brandy Hall but I know Great Smials can always make use of another pair of willing hands. I would be happy to send a letter to Eglantine Took if you wish.”

Frodo handed out cups and offered the shortbread but the Gamgees refused all but the tea.

“That’s very good of ye, Mister Bilbo. If May’s got it in her head to leave Hobbiton at least I know she’ll be looked after there,” said Bell with some relief. That relief was only partly a result of Bilbo’s offer. She had not been altogether happy about the prospect of one of her brood going ‘over the river’ to Buckland on the borders of the Shire.

Hamfast’s gaze kept returning to the shortbread and Frodo suddenly realised that they would probably not have flour to spare for such treats themselves. He began to feel uncomfortable, suddenly realising that Ham and Bell would not consider accepting such extravagance for themselves, when they had youngsters going hungry at home.

Bilbo was very much aware of the dilemma, however. “That’s settled, then. I was going to do some letter writing this evening so it will be no great hardship to include one to Eglantine. Now, I wonder if you would accept a little gift from us for your youngsters. I have made far too much shortbread again so you would be doing me a favour if you took half a dozen pieces home with you.”

Hamfast’s lips thinned but Bell laid a gentle hand upon his knee. “That’s very kind of ye, Mister Bilbo. Just four will do, though. Me and Ham is used to doin’ without,” she replied with a smile.

“But we could spare six,” Frodo insisted, then shutting his mouth quickly when he saw Bilbo’s warning glance.

This time it was Hamfast who replied stiffly, “Just four. I thank you kindly for the thought but I don’t hold with charity when tis not needed. I reckon Daisy and the young uns would like a treat, though.”

Bilbo nodded. “I quite understand, Ham. Frodo, would you go and wrap four pieces for the children?”

As Frodo left for the kitchen he heard Bilbo saying, “Now, when do you think you would be able to spare May?”
Yuletide Blessings

Amid all the hardship of 1391 and 1392 there was one bright ray of sunshine in Hobbiton. Bilbo and Frodo Baggins decided that they would host a Yule Feast. It was usual for each family to share gifts and food within their own smials but Bilbo Baggins knew that it would be a sparse affair for most this year.

So it was that on a cold and windy evening the week before Yule, the coming feast was the main topic of conversation in the Ivy Leaf Tavern.

“I don’t hold with changin’ things,” Birky Bracegirdle asserted as he took a sip of his cider. It was the same mug he had purchased two hours ago for, in common with most of the patrons, there were few coins to spare for cider this year. And yet folk needed something to bring them together, so Borden Brewer would rather sell one half to each patron than have no patrons at all.

“I’m not a one for change myself but there’s to be free food and ale. Borden there says Mr Baggins has paid him for the ale already,” Cal Brockside noted. “I can only speak for mine but my missus were right worrited about providin’ our Yule Sup this year.”

Ted Sandiman drew on his pipe and sent a cloud of fragrant smoke upward. It joined the blue haze that always hung beneath the ceiling of the tap room. If Borden noticed that the smoke did not hang as thickly this winter he made no comment. Indeed, there were a few matrons who were rather pleased not to have to launder their husband’s shirts quite so often. “Well, I aint sayin’ ‘No’, to a free supper.”

“Didn’t think you would,” muttered Cal, earning himself a glower from Ted. Of all present, Ted was most able to afford to provide his own Yule Supper.

“Master Frodo says as how they always have a Yule Feast away down in Buckland,” Hamfast interjected.

“And they say elves live in trees but that don’t mean it’s right fer hobbits,” Birky pronounced firmly.

There was a long silence, in which all either took a sip of cider or drew on their pipes. Ted was the first to speak up again. “I hear Mad Baggins has paid Tom Cotton fer the use of his barn.” He frowned. “Might as well put it to some use fer it aint holdin’ no wheat.”

“Oh, he hasn’t paid,” Ham corrected. “He offered, mind you, but Tom wouldn’t take no money.”

Ted snorted. “Then he’s as touched as Baggins. He could have asked a pretty penny fer the use.”

Several sets of eyes rolled ceiling-ward but it was Hamfast who said, “Not everyone is lookin’ to line their pockets at the expense of others.”

Ted had sense enough not to reply to that for he had been charging over the odds for milling since the storm. His argument was that if he was asked to mill less grain he had to charge more if he was to feed his own family. It was an argument many could have made but most had more altruistic natures.

“Well, I think tis a neighbourly gesture and me an’ mine is goin’ to the feast.” Hamfast knocked out his spent pipe on the table edge. “Seems to me that in some folks eyes Mister Bilbo can’t win. If he don’t spend money he’s tight fisted and if he do, he’s showin’ off.”

Ted Sandiman snorted. “He’s mad as a box o’ frogs either way.”
The very next day Tom Carter made his way up the hill to Bag End, his wagon piled high with boxes and sacks. Frodo Baggins met him at the gate and helped him unload the entire contents into Bag End’s expansive hallway. Bilbo sent him on his way with two silver pennies for his efforts (twice the going rate). He also pressed into his hands a bag containing two pounds of flour, with the injunction to hand it over to Tulip Carter to bake yule cakes for their faunts. This almost reduced Tom to tears.

Once the door was closed Bilbo stood in the middle of his hallway, surrounded by their delivery, and performed a little jig. “Frodo, my lad, this will be a Yuletide to remember.”

Frodo grinned at his uncle’s cavorting. “And now it will be remembered for a good reason.”

His words brought Bilbo to a halt and he turned about slowly to survey their bounty. “I don’t know how the elves managed it. Some of these vegetables should not have survived the journey from Rivendell in this weather.”

Frodo lifted the cover from a shallow box and gasped. “Bilbo, there are oranges in this box! Oranges! Where did Lord Elrond manage to find oranges in mid-winter and why haven’t they rotted?”

Bilbo shook his head, his grin returning. “I’m blessed if I know, but I asked for his help and he provided.” He bent to open a small sack, marked with the elvish runes for ‘wheat flour’. Inside was a white powder so fine that it felt like cool silk in his palm. “I don’t think we’ll have any trouble persuading Olin Baker to use this for his bread.”

“Nor Mistress Gamgee, if you’re still going to ask her to bake some pies.” Frodo opened a larger box. “There are plenty of apples in this one.”

“Of course I shall ask Bell to bake some of her prize winning apple pies. And I shall be asking Rosemary Cornberry to bake some sponge cakes. Is there any jam in that box to your left?”

Frodo lifted the lid on a solidly constructed wooden box. Rummaging amongst the packing straw he discovered jars of pickles and jam, bottles of flavoured oils and tubs of deep yellow butter. “There’s strawberry and raspberry jam and even a big jar of orange marmalade.” Frodo grinned, for Lord Elrond obviously knew that Bilbo was fond of toast and marmalade for first breakfast. It was no surprise, therefore, when his uncle sent him off to put the marmalade in Bag End’s capacious pantry.

When he returned, Bilbo was standing with pencil and paper, listing the foodstuffs. “Give me a hand here, Frodo. Once we’ve listed them and know what we have we will need to divide them up amongst those who have agreed to bake for the feast.”

Eager to see what other treasures may be stowed within the boxes and sacks, Frodo began to open them, calling out the contents to his uncle for listing. They even discovered sweet, fresh cob nuts, their sack stamped with the clustered oak leaf of King Thranduil’s realm.

On the first day of the new year Hobbiton celebrated the return of light. Nobody paid heed to the months of hardship to come before the next harvest and, for one day, they chose to live in celebration of Now. There was music and dancing and everyone, from the oldest gammer to the youngest bairn in arms, had a full belly. Many a toast was raised to Mister Bilbo Baggins, although that Gentlehobbit pretended not to hear them. Even the Gamgees, who on the morrow would be waving off their daughter, chose to see this as an opportunity to celebrate together one last time.
Next morning, when many a Hobbiton resident was still sleeping off an excess of ale, there was a knock at the door of Bag End. It was Bilbo who opened it to find a sombre May Gamgee on the step.

“You said as how I should come say, goodbye, afore I left.”

Bilbo smiled and beckoned her in, taking a moment to glance down the hill to see Tom Carter’s wagon outside Number Three. No doubt Bell was offering him a cup of tea. “Indeed I did, Miss May. Come into the kitchen. May I offer you a cup of tea? Frodo and I were just starting first breakfast.”

May wiped her feet on the mat before following Bilbo down the polished hallway. “I thank you for the offer, sir, but Tom Carter is wantin’ to be away. Widow Rumble says there’s rain comin’. She stepped into Bag End’s well-appointed kitchen and took a moment to look about her, for she supposed she must get used to such grand rooms if she was to work in Great Smials.

Bag End’s kitchen was actually no bigger than that of Number Three. It had the same large table in the centre, with benches either side and a large cooking range in the middle of one wall. There the similarity ended, for in her family home the kitchen served as parlour too and here fancy china gleamed upon the painted and finely carved dresser.

Master Frodo was lifting the kettle as she entered and he grinned. “Morning, May. All packed?”

His sunny smile was infectious it seemed, for May found her own face responding. “Yes, sir. I am. Not that I’ve much to take. The Thain’s lady said as how she would give me a uniform when I get there.”

Mister Baggins lifted two parcels from the table and held them out to her. “And that’s what made us invite you here this morning. These are for you, from Frodo and me.”

May’s eyes widened. “For me?” She unconsciously wiped her hands on her apron before reaching out to accept them. “But, tis past the time for Yule giftin’.”

Frodo poured water into the teapot. “Oh, this isn’t a Yule gift. This is a New Beginnings gift.”

May’s brows drew down. “There ain’t no such thing, beggin’ your pardon, Master Frodo.”

Bilbo chuckled. “Well, there is now. You will be given a uniform but you won’t want to be wearing it on your days off.” He winked. “Even parlour maids go to parties on occasion.” He took back the parcels when she made no move to open them, and set them back on the table. “Come on, now. Open them up.”

Once more, May wiped her hands before parting the brown paper, her wide brown eyes beginning to shimmer as she revealed a length of fine white linen. She slid a palm beneath one layer, and a tear slid down her cheek as she saw her own flesh through the fabric. “I ain’t never seen a linen so fine,” she whispered.

Frodo beamed. “That’s my gift. It’s came all the way from Rivendell. It was woven by elves.”

May flinched as though scalded, and she swallowed before she could meet his blue gaze. “Tis too fine for me. I thank you for the thought sir, but I wouldn’t dare cut it.”

It was Bilbo who replied, however. “Nonsense, young lady. Your mother tells me you’ve a neat
hand with a needle and I cannot think of a lass who would look prettier in it. Now, open mine.”

With an almost dreamlike air, May set aside Frodo’s gift and opened the other package, which proved to be more fabric. This one was soft fine wool in a warm gold the colour of autumn leaves. Bilbo nodded approvingly. “I knew that colour would go well with your hair.”

More tears rolled down May’s cheeks and she had to fish about in her skirt pocket for a hanky. She folded the fabric away, reverentially. “Tis beautiful, Mister Baggins. I don’t hardly know what to say. You’ve been so good to me, gettin’ me this position and all. And now this.”

Bilbo helped her repackage the cloths. “It was the least I could do. I know I speak for Frodo as well when I say that your parents have given us more than we can say. I suspect that, had you a choice, you would have preferred to stay at home, but you have made a great sacrifice and we wanted to honour you.” He had to pause to clear his throat. “You are a brave lass, May Gamgee.”

On a sudden, May jumped forward to give Bilbo a strong hug. For a moment he froze, then his arms came around her. “I have no doubt that you will do well, but if you ever feel that you cannot cope, you come back to us. We’ll find another way through.”

May stepped back and dabbed at her eyes again. “Thank you, sir.”

Bilbo swiped at his own eyes and turned her toward the door. “Come on, now. Tom Carter will be wondering where you have go to.”

Frodo picked up her packages and followed them to the door. As he handed them over May reached up to plant a chaste kiss upon his cheek. “Thank you, too, Master Frodo.”

Before either Baggins could say another word she fled down the path, their gifts clutched close to her bosom.
Frodo looked up from the pages of his book. Daffodils nodded in a gentle breeze, their butter faces lifted to the fresh spring sunshine. He glanced aside to where Sam was copying out a letter to his older sister, May. Frodo had helped him to draft it on a slate first and now the youngster was using his new pencil to transfer it to paper.

The two were sprawled on a rug, spread upon Bag End’s green roof. The huge oak above them was not yet in full leaf so they lay in dappled shade. Frodo had provided his student with a wooden board to work on and the youngster was locked in concentration, tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth.

“Master Frodo, how do you spell that word again?” He pointed to what appeared to Frodo to be a white smudge on the slate.

“Let me read the rest.” He accepted the slate and tried to make sense of the sentence. “I think it’s, ‘Ma. That’s ‘M’, with the two mountain tops and ‘A’ for apple.”

Sam grinned. “That’s it!” He bent over the board again and Frodo returned to his book, trying to force his brain to dive back into the complex paths of Sindarin past participles. It was some time before he surfaced once more, to find Sam watching him.

“Sorry, Master Frodo. I didn’t mean to disturb you, but I wondered if you’d just check I’ve got this right.”

Frodo smiled, setting aside his book to reach out a hand to accept Sam’s work. “It’s alright, Sam. I can finish this any time.” He accepted the sheet of paper with its carefully lined writing.

“Dear May,

I hope this letter finds you well. We are all well here. Ma, Da, Daisy and Mari send their love and Master Frodo asks to be remembered to you. It is Master Frodo that has helped me write this letter to you.

Tom Carter says he spoke to Halfred last week and he is well too. We have not heard from Hamson but Ma says we will hear if anything is wrong.

I hope you like your work and folks are being nice to you. Master Frodo says they have a person in Great Smiials called a scribe who will read this to you and send a letter back to me if you want. I hope to hear from you soon.

Yours sincerely

Sam Gamgee.”

Frodo handed it back with a bright smile. “That’s lovely. Although maybe next time you should just sign your name as, ‘Sam’. You only really need to sign your full name if you are writing a business letter.”

Sam frowned. “Thank you, but should I write the letter again, then?”

“No Sam. I am quite certain that May will be more than happy to receive your letter, however you sign it,” Frodo hastened to assure him as he handed it back. “Shall I write out the address on your slate so that you can copy it onto the envelope?”
Sam took a cloth to wipe his slate clean. “If you don’t mind, Master Frodo, can I have a go myself? If you say it to me I’ll spell it on my slate and you can check it, like you did with the letter.”

“Of course. Ready?”

Sam poised his chalk above the slate. “Right you are, sir.”

Frodo sat up to watch. “Miss May Gamgee, care of Mistress Eglantine Took, Great Smials, Tuckborough, Tookland, West Farthing, The Shire.” By the time Sam reached ‘West Farthing’ he was running out of room on his slate. Hobbits were very precise about addressing correspondence correctly, being quite fond of knowing their place in the grand order of things. When he had finished Sam handed over the slate and Frodo corrected the spelling of Tuckborough.

Sam frowned. “Why is Tuckborough spelled different to Tookland?”

Frodo grinned. “It happens sometimes. Over time spellings change but not always in the same way or at the same time. Bilbo would know best whether Tuckborough came first, or Tookland. It is possible that in a few more generations, particularly if more hobbits learn to write, Tuckborough will eventually change to Tookborough.”

Sam’s frown did not lift. “So, words change because more folk spell them wrong?”

Frodo chuckled. “I think that sums it up well. Now, come along and address your envelope so that you can run down to the post office with it before they close for the day.”

-Frodo set down his basket of lettuce and radishes when he heard Sam’s call.

“Master Frodo! Master Frodo, sir. May’s sent me a letter.” The little lad was grinning broadly as he sprinted up the hill, leaping over lines of vegetable tops in complete disregard for the niceties of lane and garden gate. Frodo had to catch him, for fear he would be bowled over if Sam did not manage to stop in time.

For a moment Sam rummaged in his breeches pocket, finally tugging free a folded envelope and thrusting it into his neighbour’s hand. “There’s a bit in it for you an’ Mister Bilbo.”

Frodo glanced down at the envelope. The writing was much too neat for May to have addressed it herself and he suspected that the scribe of Great Smials had penned it for her. He offered it back to Sam. “What message does she send?”

Sam only blinked, unused to the etiquette of letter exchange, and Frodo had to explain. “It is not considered polite to read another’s letters unless specifically invited. They may contain personal information or thoughts that are not appropriate for sharing.”

Sam considered for a moment. “That’s alright. Aint nothin’ personal in it. You can read it, sir.”

Frodo led the way to the little bench by Bag End’s front gate and motioned for Sam to sit with him. The letter inside the envelope was not long and his suspicion about the writer was confirmed when he read the signature at the bottom. Frodo went back to the top, aware as he read that the scrivener had tidied up some of May’s grammar.

“My Dear Little Sam,

I am so happy to hear that all are well back home. Ma is right about Hamson. He is probably too
busy to send a letter but, why not write to him yourself?

Everyone here is nice. You should see the big room I share with just two other lasses. I even have my own bed and a big box to put my things in. It has a lock and Mistress Eglantine has given me my own key for it. I wish I could have a box like it at home to stop Daisy borrowing my stuff. I have been given a uniform and it is so pretty. I have two summer dresses, two winter ones and four pinafores.

The other two lasses in my room are Primrose Bracegirdle and Bluebell Proudfoot. They are parlour maids too and they are showing me what needs doing. They are very kind if I get things wrong.

Please tell Mister Bilbo that I have made up the cloth he gave me into a pretty dress for best. Please also tell Master Frodo’s that I have used his lovely cloth too. (Bluebell says I should not tell a young gentlehobbit what clothes I made from the white cloth, as it would not be proper.)

I am going to learn my letters, Sam! Mistress Eglantine has asked Master Noter to teach any who are interested and of course I said, ‘yes’. Maybe soon I will be able to write my own letters.

I miss you and everyone in Hobbiton.

Yours sincerely

mAy gaMgy

(As dictated to Orman Noter.)

Frodo handed back the letter, hoping his face did not show the blush he felt upon reading Bluebell’s injunction. The fine linen he had gifted to May was suited only to the most personal of garments and he had felt a little embarrassed at the time of gifting, but Bilbo had insisted that May would need shifts and the like. He pointed out that, as he had already provided the dress fabric, Frodo would have to be the one who gave the linen. His cheek tingled in remembrance of the kiss May had given him as she left.

“Tis a fine letter, Master Frodo, and that’s a fact.” Sam slipped it back into its envelope and folded it carefully to return it to his pocket.

Frodo brushed away memory and smiled. “It’s a very fine letter. If you need help in writing your reply please don’t be afraid to ask.”

Sam frowned. “But what shall I write, sir? I’ve told her that we’re all well. What else would she want to know?”

“Well, think about what May has told you in her reply. She spoke of her room and the lasses she has met. It’s usual to write of the things we do or the things that happen around us. Imagine May is sitting next to you and tell her about your days, just as you used to do at the kitchen table in the evenings.”

Sam digested this advice for a while. “But nothin’ much happens in Hobbiton and she knows all the folk here. There ain’t nobody new to tell her of.”

Frodo grinned. “Then maybe you can pass on some personal greetings to her from family and friends. She may have made new friends but I expect she still misses her old ones.”

“Dear May,
Ma and Da says they hope you are minding your manners and they are happy to know you are well.

Daisy says did you take her blue comb, because she cannot find it. She says if you did, she will tell Ma on you. I think she has just lost it and is cross that you have a box that you can lock and she does not.

Mari does not say much of anything but I gave her a bit of paper and a pencil and she has done you a picture. I do not know what it is supposed to be. Maybe you can make it out.

Master Frodo and Mister Bilbo was happy to hear that you had used the cloth and send their best regards. Mister Bilbo also said to tell you that if you need anything else you should let him know.

Yours sincerely

Sam”

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“Dearest Sam,

Thank you for your letter and please give my love to all at home, even Daisy.

Tell Daisy that I have not got her comb. I think she lent it to Honeysuckle Chub for the Yule Feast and she had best request its return before it disappears forever. Marigold’s drawing is very sweet. I do not know what it is supposed to be either but just tell her I love it and have pinned it to the wall above my bed. Mistress Elglantine allows us to do that.

Primrose and Bluebell showed me how to set out the knives and forks and other things in the Thain’s dining room the other day. There are lots of dining rooms here but the Thain’s is the grandest. The walls are all wood panels like Bag End’s hall and the table will seat twenty people. I have never seen so much cutlery (that’s knives, forks and spoons). Every person gets nearly four knives and almost as many forks and they all have to be set out in a line at each side of their plates. They have to be in a special order too. I keep getting that wrong but Prim. says not to worry as it took her ages to learn.

I hope to hear from you soon,

May Gamgee

(As dictated to Orman Noter.)”

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“Dear May,

I hope his letter finds you well. We have all had colds here. Most of Hobbiton has had it and some have taken right poorly, but we are alright. The only ones who have not got it so far are Mari, Master Frodo and Mr Bilbo. Mr Bilbo does not ever seem to get poorly.

Daisy has got her comb back from Honeysuckle. I said she may want to say sorry for thinking you had taken it but she just sniffed, and Ma sent her out to clean the privy.

Why would anyone want so many knives and forks for one meal? Even if there’s more than one course you can always lick them clean between. Rich folks have some funny ideas to my mind, but do not go telling Ma that I said so. I am not supposed to say things like that about my betters.

I hope you do not get the cold.
“Dear Sam

I am writin’ this in deb. I have the cold. But mistress Eglintin is very kind. Give my love to Ma and Da and all.

May”

“Dear May,

Did you write that letter on your own? I am happy you are learning. I was going to tell you that you spelled some of the words wrong but Master Frodo says that I should not make you feel bad when you are still learning.

He has asked me to send you this old book of his. It is a dictionary and you use it to look up the spelling of words. I have never understood that, becos you need to know how to spell the word to look up how to spell it. It is good of him to send it, though, and he is going to pay the post for it.

I hope you are soon feeling better.

Sam”

Frodo watched Sam pulling weeds from between the carrot tops. “Good morning, Sam.”

Sam jumped up, wiping his hands on his breeches, and Frodo could almost hear Bell Gamgee’s sigh. “Mornin’ Sir. Da’s gone down into Hobbiton this mornin’. Is there somethin’ you’re wantin’?”

Frodo took a sip of his tea. “No, Sam. I just fancied a breath of fresh air.” He cleared his throat. “I think I may be coming down with that confounded cold everyone else has had.”

Sam’s young features registered concern at once. “Should I run for the doctor?”

Frodo managed a grin. “There’s not a lot he can do for a cold. I’ll be alright. When I’ve had this tea I shall take a nap.” He fished in his pocket and used a bright red hanky to wipe his nose. “Have you heard from May recently?”

“Not since she wrote she was in bed with a cold. That was a couple of weeks ago now.”

“Maybe she has been too busy to write.”

“I think that’s it, Sir. Or maybe she’s still poorly. Some folks have taken this cold right bad. Are you sure you don’t need the doctor?”

Frodo managed another smile. “I shall be better in no time.” He headed back to the door, deciding that he really would like a nap now. “Send my regards to May if she does write.”

Sam knelt among the carrots again. “I will, Sir.”
“Here you are, love.”

Bell rolled over to find Hamfast sitting on the edge of their bed, mug of tea in hand. She blinked, then grinned sleepily as she pushed herself up and jammed a pillow at her back. “What brought this on? What ye been up to?”

Hamfast rolled his eyes as he handed over the mug. “I had to be up early this mornin’. Mr Bilbo has asked me to run an errand with him and as tis washday I thought you’d like to start with a good strong up of tea.”

Bell made to throw aside the covers. “Ham! Ye should have told me. I need to get up to make yer breakfast. The range will need tendin’ and where’s Mari?”

Ham stopped her by the simple expedient of giving her a smacking kiss. “You sit there and drink that. Daisy and young Sam’s got all in hand at the wash house, includin’ Marigold, and I made first breakfast for us all.”

Bell’s eyes widened as she considered the meagre contents of their larder. “What did ye have?”

“Don’t you fret. We had bread and drippin’ and a cup of tea. Mr Bilbo says he’ll buy us both second breakfast at the Pony’s Rest on the way. We won’t be back til supper time tomorrow.” Ham grinned, knowing that would help stretch his family’s food supplies . . . or at least ensure that their bairns got an extra mouthful for the next couple of days.

Ham climbed onto the bed at her side and Bell leaned in to his shoulder, sipping her tea. “When did Mr Bilbo ask ye to go with him? Ye didn’t say nothin’ last night.”

“He came out to speak to me this mornin’, while I was fetchin’ water to the wash house. Says he’s got someone to see out Needlehole way in the north and don’t think it wise to walk all that way alone. Master Frodo is still gettin’ over that cold or he’d take him.”

“Poor lad. Clover took over some linctus fer his cough yesterday. She says he looked like he was improvin’.”

“Oh, Mr Bilbo says the lad is up and about but he don’t think tis wise to take him all that way so soon.” Ham dropped his voice. “Although what business Mr Bilbo would have in Needlehole I don’t know. He’s no family nor business out there as far as I recollect.”

Bell frowned. “I don’t mind him askin’ ye fer the favour. Goodness knows but he’s done enough fer us this year. But ye were due to go work at the Sackville-Baggins today. They don’t pay much but we could do with the coin.”

Ham squeezed her so hard that Bell almost spilled her tea. “That’s just it, lass. He says, as he’s takin’ me away from my other job, he’ll pay me by the hour at his usual rate! And you know that’s better than Mistress Lobelia pays. He also said, seein’ as how I’d be on duty all day and all night as it were, he’d pay me for all that time. I’ll earn more in these two days than I’d earn in a week from Mistress Lobelia!”

Bell looked up at her husband, as though trying to gauge whether he was joking, but Ham was just grinning down at her. “Hamfast Gamgee, did I tell ye lately that I love ye?”
Ham looked thoughtful for a moment. “Not for ages. I think it were as long ago as last night.”

Bell’s gaze dropped to his lap and she stretched up to whisper, “How long have we got afore ye have to go to Bag End?”

Ham’s eyes widened and he lifted the mug from his wife’s hand to set it on the floor by their bedside. “I reckon I’ve got another hour. Plenty of time to show me how much ye love me.”

Bell batted her eyelashes. “Ye’d best go set the latch on the door, then.”

Bushy eyebrows waggled. “Already did.”

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Bell avoided her husband’s roaming hands, chuckling as she pushed him down the path to the gate, where Bilbo Baggins leaned on his walking staff, face wreathed in a knowing grin.

“I’ll bring him back to you in a couple of days, Bell. I promise.”

“Covered in muck I’ve no doubt,” she replied, but her eyes twinkled. She watched them turn away and stroll down the lane, returning their wave before closing the door. “Well now. Let’s see what sort of a mess Daisy and Sam have got into,” she murmured as she crossed the empty kitchen to the back door.

As soon as she stepped into Bagshot Lane’s shared back yard she could smell laundry soap and was gratified to see her youngest son trotting into the laundry house door with his arms full of logs. She followed him into a steamy world.

In a far corner the huge copper steamed gently over a merry blaze that was fed by Sam. Daisy had her back to her mother, pouncing and twisting the dolly stick in its large, galvanised barrel.

On the floor around her were several more huge tubs. Some contained whites that had been left to soak overnight. Others held clean water or clothes waiting to have the soap rinsed from them. It seemed Daisy had been working for an hour or more and her dripping hair and water marked clothing stood testimony to her diligence. Bell surveyed the tubs as she rolled up her sleeves.

“Sam, lad. Have ye collected the linens from Bag End?”

Sam leaped up, his eyes wide. “I forgot!” He made to race out but Bell snagged his collar.

“Well, don’t forget Clover Mugwort’s linens, too. Tis the least we can do if she’s willin’ to look after Marigold.” She let go and bit back a smile as Sam shot off up the hill like an arrow from a bow.

Daisy didn’t bother to hide her amusement at her younger brother being caught in error, but her face straightened when her mother chided, “And ye should have checked that afore ye started, lass.”

Bell reached down to check a sheet from one of the tubs sitting on a long bench to Daisy’s right. “Have these been dollied?”

Daisy paused to straighten her back and tuck a strand of damp hair behind her ear. “Yes, Ma. That’s the first load, the ones that needed boilin’ first.”

Bell snagged the sheet, watching water sluice from it as she lifted it to shoulder height and then lowered it back to lean on it, before repeating the process. The clean cold water began to turn cloudy as soap was forced out by her actions. With a grunt, Bell lifted the rinsed whites into another tub, filled with blue tinged water and for several minutes both she and Daisy worked in silence.
So intent were they upon their work that when somebody spoke from the doorway Bell jumped.
“Good morning Mistress Gamgee, Miss Daisy.”

Bell spun about to find Frodo Baggins smiling at her over an armful of sheets and towels.
“Goodness, but ye scared the livin’ daylight out of me, Master Frodo.” She stepped forward to collect the bundle from him, dropping it into an empty tub to Daisy’s left. When she turned back Frodo was still standing in the doorway, taking in the scene in the little lime-washed space.

“Would you like some help? I feel at a bit of a loose end with Bilbo away.”

“Bless you, sir. The laundry house ain’t no place for a gentlehobbit like yerself. We’ll manage.” Bell studied the young master. His nose was dry but still red and his voice sounded a little nasal but Frodo’s eyes were clear and there was no sign of fever in his cheeks.

He stepped aside as Sam returned, linens piled so high in his little arms that he could barely see over the top of them and Frodo helped him load them into the tub with Bag End’s linens. Sam blew his hair out of his eyes. “I got ‘em all, Ma. And Mistress Clover says Mari’s settled down to sleep and we’re all to come to Number Two for elevenses later.” There was no time for second breakfast on laundry day. In truth, over the past year there was precious little food to spare for a second breakfast in most smials.

“That’s good of her, but we’d best take a drop of milk and some bread with us.”

“Are you sure I can’t help?” Frodo asked, surveying the piles of linen. “I know you struggle without May and, with Mistress Mugwort looking after Marigold it looks as though you could do with another pair of hands. How is Marigold, by the way?”

“She’s over the worst of the cold. Thank ye fer askin’.”

When Bell still looked sceptical Frodo grinned. “All Brandy Hall’s youngsters were expected to help out in the laundry at some point.” He hooked a thumb over his shoulder to where the mangle had been dragged out into the yard. “I can turn a mangle as well as anyone at least.”

Bell didn’t need to consider for much longer. With May at Great Smials and Clover Mugwort looking after a miserable little, cold-ridden Marigold they were two pairs of hands short, and Sam was yet too small to be of help with the heavy work. She fixed Frodo with her sternest gaze. “Don’t ye go tellin’ Mister Bilbo about this. It may be done down Buckland way but in Hobbiton t’aint proper fer a gentlehobbit to help with laundry.” Then her voice softened. “But I would be grateful if ye don’t mind helpin’ me to fold and mangle.”

Frodo’s face lit up and he rolled up his sleeves before reaching into the tub to fish about for the other end of the sheet that Bell bent to pull out. Bell found herself impressed when he followed her without instruction, touching his ends to Bell’s and helping her to wring before walking out together to the mangle.

By the time elevenses came around Frodo had switched jobs several times, turning to the rinsing, collecting buckets of water, and taking over from Daisy at the dolly tub for a while. Even Daisy was secretly impressed at his willingness. Skinny he may be but he was no weakling, despite having to pause for a couple of coughing fits. Frodo discovered that the steamy air and exercise of the wash house actually seemed to ease his chest and he did not need to resort to Mistress Mugwort’s kindly meant but revolting cough medicine.

Clover Mugwort had done laundry often enough to know that on a hot day like this there was
nothing better than sitting in the sun to eat, especially after being locked in the damp heat of a laundry house for hours, so she had spread out a cloth on the grass atop Number Two, Bagshot Row.

Bell slipped indoors to check on her youngest but Marigold was curled up, asleep on the spare bed in Clover’s kitchen, so she simply kissed the little lass’ brow before creeping out to join the others.

Clover handed Bell a cup of tea. “She’s slept most the mornin’. I think the fever’s goin’. I reckon she’ll be a lot better on the morrow.”

Bell accepted it gratefully. “Twas good of ye to look after her today, Clove. She’s too young to be left alone fer long and this cold took her hard.”

Clover waved away the thanks. “She’s as good as gold. And tis nice to have another body about the place again.” She glanced across the yard to where her son’s workshop stood silent. Only last month she had asked Mister Bilbo if he would consider letting it out to someone else. She didn’t like the silence and would rather know it was being used. She had sold Harry’s tools and lumber to Tom Buckleby just before Yule but Mister Bilbo said he would not let out the workshop again until Clover was ready. Mister Bilbo was good like that.

There was an uneasy silence in which Bell watched Sam trying to eat a slice of bread and honey without getting himself too sticky. Honey and butter had been Master Frodo’s contribution to elevenses. She chuckled. “Ye’d best wash yer hands and face afore ye tackle any more laundry, lad, or it’ll be dirtier comin’ out the house than it was goin’ in.”

Sam grinned broadly before licking his fingers. They did not sit for too long and, having helped Clover clear away, they returned to their work, for they were but half way through the mountain of whites and Bell had yet to tackle the delicate coloured clothes. These could not be boiled nor, in the case of finer fabrics, pounded in the dolly tub, so it was Bell who took on that particular responsibility while Frodo stepped in to continue helping Daisy with the whites.

“Do you want me to spell you with that, Master Frodo?” Daisy asked when she saw Frodo pause to stretch. He had been working the Dolly Tub for some time and she knew that it could be taxing on the arms, even more so to arms unused to the activity.

Frodo firmed his lips and set too once more, with a will. “No. I’m fine.” Lift, drop, twist. Lift, drop, twist. Frodo got a better grip on the cross handle, under-arm, trying hard to ignore the blisters he could feel beginning to form in his palms. Hot water, strong soap and unaccustomed activity was a lethal combination for skin. He had not lied when saying he used to help in the laundry at Brandy Hall, but that was a couple of years ago and muscle and skin had forgotten.

Bell reached across from her own tub to lay a gentle hand upon his arm. “Not so hard, lad. Yer just supposed to be forcin’ the soapy water through it . . . not beatin’ it to a pulp.” She prevented Daisy’s potential snigger with a well-timed glare.

“Sorry, Mistress Gamgee,” Frodo murmured as he softened his action.

“Tis alright. We all got to learn and maybe they do it different away down in Buckland,” Bell replied as she went back to her gentle agitation of one of Daisy’s print skirts.

Frodo had to smile. ‘Away down in Buckland’ was one of Bell Gamgee’s favourite sayings and conveyed a wealth of meaning. In Bell’s mind Buckland was a strange place; a buffer zone between the Shire proper and the world of the Big Folk. As such, it was liable to strange influences and the hobbits living there were open to ‘corruption’ by outsiders. Who knew what strange things they got
up to in Buckland?

Of course, having lived there for many years, Frodo knew that Buckland folk could be even more set in their ways than those deeper within the Shire’s borders. It was almost as though Brandybucks felt they had to keep even more hobbit traditions, precisely to prevent the ‘corruption’ that Bell so feared.

Sam helped his older sister rinse and wring another sheet, then Bell helped her fold it for the mangle that Sam turned for them.

By lunch time the huge shared yard of Bagshot Row was festooned with damp linen. Lines had been strung from trees to post and back again and sheets and clothing filled every inch. Strong summer sun dried and performed its own bleaching on linen spread upon hedges and the grass of smial roofs. It almost seemed to little Sam that snow had fallen and he had to resist the temptation to leave a trail of footprints across all that whiteness.

The exhausted laundry crew were not finished, however. There were buckets to be emptied, tubs to be rinsed and hung against the wall, the copper to be drained, its fire dowsed, a puddled floor to be mopped, the heavy mangle to be dragged back indoors and benches to be scrubbed. It was well past noon before Clover Mugwort ushered them into the Gamgee kitchen to eat. There, a much brighter Marigold sat, playing on her cushion by the fire, and Clover had set the table for all to eat.

Frodo donated a large pork pie and there were salad vegetables from the Gamgee garden, all washed down with milk for the youngsters and tea for the grown-ups. Daisy and Frodo were both proud to be included in those offered tea, although neither would have said so aloud.

Bell gathered Marigold into her lap, bending to check the child’s fever with a gentle kiss of her lips to brow, before wiping the lass’ little red nose. Marigold snuggled into her mother’s bosom at once whilst, of course, keeping an eye upon the food being placed upon her own little plate.

“Well, Master Frodo, I don’t know how we would have managed without ye, today.” Bell lifted her cup in salute to the tween sitting opposite.

Frodo’s face lit in a smile that would have had the laundry bone dry with its sunny brilliance. “I’m glad to have been of some help. Please don’t be afraid to ask if you need me again.”

“Thank ye, Young Master. Though I don’t think yer family would be over pleased with ye doin’ such work. Rinsin’ out yer own smalls and shirts is one thing but gentlehobbits don’t usually help with beddin’ and such.” Bell offered Marigold a piece of bread and butter after first wiping her faunt’s dribbling nose again.

Frodo only shrugged and Bell hid a smile as she studied the tween. He had long since abandoned his weskit and, like the rest of them, his fine shirt was damp from water and perspiration, clinging to him like a second skin. Bell noted that he had a good set of shoulders on him at least, but no matter how much he ate he never seemed to fill out around the middle as a hobbit should. Thankfully, there was little sign in those sparkling blue eyes of a return of the cold that had laid him so low for nearly two weeks. She bent to kiss her daughter’s crown.

That sickness had swept through the Shire in the past three months, made more virulent by the fact that many folk were still living on short commons until this year’s harvest came in. One or two older gaffers and gammers had succumbed and Hobbiton had endured its fair share of funerals but, with fresh vegetables ripening in the gardens and wheat beginning to pale in the fields, the worst of the epidemic and the famine seemed over.

An hour later Frodo made his way back up the hill to Bag End, a little pot of ointment in his pocket.
“Fer the blisters,” Bell had whispered as she pressed it into his hand at the door to Number Three. He smiled. This morning the day had threatened to spread before him endlessly, with no Bilbo to share it. Instead he had found companionship and exercise, purpose and pride in a job well done.

He rolled his shoulders. What he needed now was a good wash and some clean, dry clothes. The irony of that was not lost on him.
Frodo sauntered down the hill to Number Three. Even this late in the summer there were plenty of wild flowers flanking the little lane that ran along the front of Bagshot Row. Cow parsley offered up large plates of lacy white blossoms, as tall as Frodo’s waist, growing out of the pale lilac spikes of a clump of apple-mint; the latter having escaped from the Gamgee’s garden by means of a hole in the hedge. Frodo bent to crush a leaf, inhaling deeply of the fresh clean fragrance before opening the garden gate to Number Three.

As was usually the case on warm days, the door to the smial stood open so Frodo could hear the murmur of voices as he came up the path. Bell Gamgee was issuing instructions in her usual calm, no-nonsense way.

“Ye sit here Sam, lad. Then ye can put the shirt on the table. It’ll slide off yer lap elsewise. Daisy, I couldn’t find any matching wool for yer Da’s jumper so ye’ll have to use that green. There’s no help for it, tis goin’ to show so make sure yer stitches is neat.”

Frodo paused to wink at little Marigold who was sitting on the step, propping the door open, with a huge bowl of peapods at her side and a colander of shelled peas in her lap. She smiled back shyly as Frodo tapped politely on the open door.

“Good day to you Mistress Gamgee.”

As his eyes grew accustomed to the relative gloom of indoors Bell turned to him with a wide grin.

“Hello Master Frodo. Come in. I’ve got everythin’ ready for ye. Did Mister Bilbo see ye leavin’?”

Frodo stepped into the Gamgee kitchen, relishing the mixed smells of clean laundry, fresh bread and wood fires. Despite the warm weather the fire in the range was lit, for irons and water must be heated regardless of the sunshine. He grinned in return. “He did but I told him I was bringing some of my old shirts for you to make dusters.”

“Clever,” the mistress of the household replied as she waved Frodo to a seat at the table opposite young Sam. They sat closest to the door, to take full advantage of the sunlight.

Frodo took a moment to survey the room. Little Sam was threading a sewing needle with white cotton thread, his eyes crossed and tongue peeping out from the corner of his mouth. Before him on the table was what appeared to be a nightshirt.

At the other end of the table Bell was obviously in the middle of her ironing. A folded blanket was spread on the table and at its side was a basin of water and a pile of neatly ironed shirts. A still overflowing basket of un-ironed linens sat on the floor and Frodo did not like to think about how many hours of work it would take to clear it. Two heavy black smoothing irons sat heating atop of the range.

Daisy Gamgee sat in her mother’s chair, pointedly ignoring him. Frodo hid a smile. She was probably pleased to have been granted this privileged seat and at the same time she must have been quite uncomfortable, so close to the fire on such a warm day. He wondered how long she would tolerate it before common sense took over from pride.

When he noticed Bell hovering expectantly Frodo emptied the contents of his bag. Out fell Bilbo’s fine paisley patterned waistcoat and another smaller paper bag. Bell lifted the garment to examine it more closely. “Aye. Tis a pretty one. I remember him wearing it often. Pity about the missing buttons.” Indeed, where there should have been six buttons there was only one and even that was hanging by a thread. Bell tutted. “How ever did he manage to lose all these?”
Frodo giggled. “I think he was trying to escape a meeting with the Sackville Baggins’. He said something about getting caught up in a hawthorn bush.”

Bell shook her head. “If he’d said summat at the time I would have sent out Sam to collect them. Tis an awful waste of good brass buttons.”

“Well, I got these. They’re not brass but I thought they were rather nice.” Frodo opened the small paper bag and tipped out seven beautifully carved wooden buttons.

Bell scooped one up, laying it atop the fabric. “I wouldn’t have thought o’ wood to go with such a grand cloth but, bein’ dark an’ all, these look very well.” She smiled. “Ye’ve got yer uncles’ good eye for clothes I’m thinkin’.”

Frodo’s blue eyes glittered with pride at such praise. “I took the waistcoat with me to the market as you suggested. Tom Buckleby helped me choose the right size for the buttonholes.” Even as he spoke Bell was experimenting, slipping the new button through a buttonhole and nodding her approval.

She placed waistcoat and button back on the table and collected her sewing basket from the floor by the side of her daughter’s chair. Pausing for a moment to examine Daisy’s work she smiled. “Well done, lass. That’s very neat. Ye’ve a good hand with needle and thread when ye set yer mind to it.” Frodo swore he saw Daisy grow two inches.

Bell returned to the table, clambering over the bench to sit at Frodo’s side as she rummaged in her basket. “I still can’t believe they didn’t teach ye how to sew on a button away over the water.”

Frodo had to swallow a smile. Bell always made it sound as though Buckland was a million miles away over the sea. “There were lots of aunties who liked to do that sort of thing so it was not something I had to learn. And, if I’m honest, I was more interested in exploring the countryside or the library.”

Having found a close match of thread for the brown buttons and her pin cushion Bell opened a little felt needle book. “Well I never. I’ve heard of libry’s but I aint never seen one. All them books must be quite a sight.”

Even Sam had set down his threaded needle and was staring, wide eyed, at the casual mention of such a place. “Do they have books about elves?” he asked in an awed whisper.

“I don’t think so, Sam. They are mainly family histories or general histories of the Shire.” When Frodo saw his little friend’s face drop he added, “But there were some on gardening and a few lovely children’s story books, with coloured pictures.”

Sam’s face grew wistful as he took up his needle once more. “I wish I could see ‘em.”

“You just get that button sewn back on yer cuff, Sam Gamgee. If wishes were money ye’d be rich enough to buy yer own library. Ye just be grateful Mr Bilbo and Master Frodo is teaching ye to read.” Her kindly tone ensured that the censure was not as harsh as it could have been.

Sam bent his head to tie a knot in the end of his thread and Frodo determined to let the youngster have a look at one or two of his own books next time he came to Bag End for a lesson. They were a bit battered to be sure but they were childhood memories of his mother and he had kept them for that reason alone. He was sure Sam would be careful of them.

He was drawn back to the present by Bell’s hand in front of his nose, holding a fine steel sewing needle. “Well. Let’s start with threading the needle, shall we. Ye don’t need me to tell ye how. I’ve
snipped off a piece o’ thread that should be long enough to sew on one button.”

Frodo accepted needle in one hand and thread in the other, holding them up to the light coming through the open door to accomplish this tricky task. Bell watched patiently. “When yer sewin’ never cut a piece o’ thread too long ’cause every time ye pull it through the cloth it gets rougher and that’s when it starts to knot or snap,” she imparted sagely.

Like most hobbits not encumbered by the natural clumsiness of extreme youth or age, Frodo had nimble fingers and good eyesight so the needle was threaded quickly enough. Which isn’t to say that the tween didn’t feel some pride in doing so.

“This first time I’ll show ye how to knot the end. Now, some folks don’t hold with knots, sayin’ as they come undone too easy and then the work unravels. But if ye do a couple o’ little stitches first too that shouldn’t be a worry and it makes things easier.” As she spoke Frodo watched her draw both ends of the thread together. Then she licked her index finger and pinched the ends of the thread between thumb and finger. Frodo blinked as she deftly wrapped the thread three times about her finger and then rolled it off, catching it below the nail of her middle finger and tugging the thread tight, resulting in a neat, round knot.

Bell handed back the threaded needle and Frodo saw Sam grinning at him from across the table. Doubtless the youngster knew that Frodo would never be able to remember that action. Frodo decided to postpone that problem for the moment for beside him, Bell was already addressing the next step.

“Ye’re lucky here ’cause ye can see where the old buttons was. Ye won’t have to measure ‘em. Can ye just see them little bits o’ thread? ’Tis a good job the cloth didn’t tear or we’d have to patch and that never looks neat nor is as strong.”

Frodo decided he was rather pleased that luck was on his side. Sewing on a button was one thing but putting a patch on one of Bilbo’s best waistcoats was definitely pushing said luck. He was even more pleased when Bell announced that his luck still held.

“And the lining aint fixed at the hem. That means we can hide the stitches,” she announced with a smile as she lifted the lining up to expose the inside of the garment and handed it back to her pupil. “Now, I want ye to make two little stitches first, one atop the other. See the size o’ the gap between the two holes on the button? That’s how long they should be.” With those words Bell turned about to attend to Daisy, who had just let loose a mild expletive.

Frodo took a deep breath and applied needle to fabric, but when he tried to come back up again the garment began to slide away from him across the table. Suddenly a small foot kicked him firmly in the shins and he looked across at Sam in alarm. The youngster pointedly held up the cuff of his nightshirt in one hand and his needle in the other. Then he made his stitch, using his spare hand to steady the cloth. Following suit, Frodo offered him a silently mouthed, “Thank you.”

By the time Bell turned back, having untangled her daughter’s thread, Frodo had made the two requested stitches and Bell patted him on the arm in approval. “Well done, lad. That’s a good beginnin’.” She fished about in her sewing basket, finally producing a thin wooden bodkin. “I’ve learned when folks start to sewin’ they pull the stitches too tight and that’s no good with a button. It’s got to be loose to push it through the hole, so when I teach my bairns I use this. Turn the work over so ye work from the front now and bring yer needle up.” When Frodo complied, she smiled. “That’s it. Yer goin’ to be easy to teach.”

Frodo would have been proud of the praise if he had believed it. This was all getting very complicated and he was wishing he had just written his uncle a poem as this year’s birthday present.
With the fabric in one hand and a needle in the other, Frodo was not altogether sure how he was going to be able to manage a bodkin and a button as well.

Bell held out a button. “Hold this in place with yer thumb, just on the edge.” One look at Frodo’s alarmed face and she relented, taking the garment and needle from him. “Like this.” She gathered the fabric up in her palm popped the button on the right spot and held it in place on the edge with her thumb nail. It looked so easy when she did it, Frodo thought. “Alright now. Ye put yer hand over mine and we’ll swap. Don’t look so worried. Ye’ll get the hang o’ it.”

With a bit of fumbling on Frodo’s part they managed to transfer and once his hand was in place it did actually feel quite secure. Frodo even managed a shaky smile. He did notice that Sam had set down his own work and was now watching with some interest. Bell noticed too.

“Samwise Gamgee, I don’t see no new button on that cuff yet. Ye get on with yer own job.”

“Yes, Ma.” The youngster gathered up cuff and needle, catching up his own button and holding it in place in a way that only drew a splinter of envy from the older Frodo.

“Now, Master Frodo. T’is easier from here, I promise. Push the needle up through one of the holes in the button, down through the other and back through the cloth. But remember what I told ye and don’t pull it too tight.”

This much Frodo managed to do and was surprised when Bell then slipped the slender bodkin between button and fabric and through the stitch just formed. “There now. Ye can pull yer stitch tight and the bodkin will still give ye a bit o’ slack. Yer biggest problem now is findin’ the hole in the button again and I’m afraid ye’ll just have to fish a bit for it. After one or two stitches yer hand sort of gets to know where tis.”

A little sceptical of his hand’s ability to know anything Frodo tried nonetheless. By the third stitch he discovered that Bell was right and for the next three he had no trouble.

Bell grinned. “I said ye’d get it. Stop now. Six stitches is enough. Ye’ll not get more through them holes. Take the needle down through the hole but not into the cloth.”

Frodo complied with a bit of fumbling, hoping against hope that the next instruction would be, ‘Now cut the thread.’ Sadly, it was not.

Bell slipped the bodkin out. “Now wrap the thread around ‘neath the button four times. It’ll wrap the stitches and make it stronger. That thread’s goin’ to take a lot o’ wear over time. When ye’ve done that push the needle through to the back of the cloth.”

Frodo had to consider for a moment before he realised that he could now let go of the button. His mind was so filled with instructions on this new craft that it seemed to have stopped functioning temporarily. Once he did let go, however, wrapping the thread was easy and he soon had the needle back on the inside of the waistcoat. He glanced up to see that Sam was snipping off the thread at the inside of his cuff and the youngster grinned.

“Now just do two little stitches. Keep ‘em where they’ll be hidden by the button on the front. Then ye can cut off the thread.”

Frodo followed instructions and finally lowered the waistcoat with a sigh of relief. He decided he really did prefer Quenya translation to sewing.

Bell lifted the waistcoat and examined the newly attached button. “Well done. That’s a neat job for a first go.”
Frodo was aware of a soft sniff from Daisy behind him. No doubt she would have done a much neater job and in half the time. But when Frodo looked again at his work he decided it didn’t look too bad at all. In fact, it was quite passable. He smiled. But his face dropped when Bell spoke again.

“Now ye’ve just another five to put on the front and the spare is stitched on the inside o’ the side seam.”

Bell must have seen his expression for she patted his arm. “If ye want to stay and do ‘em here, in case ye get stuck, yer welcome. We’ve some cold cider in the pantry and I think there’s an apple pie goin’ spare.”

Frodo did not need to consider for too long. Hide in his room and potentially get himself in a knot or sit here, with help on hand and the offer of food and drink? “Thank you, Mistress Gamgee. I’d love to stay.”

-Frodo arrived to first breakfast with a big grin and a carefully wrapped parcel. “Happy Birthday, Bilbo.” He held out his beribboned package.

Bilbo beamed in response and pointed to a small box on the table by Frodo’s plate. “And a Happy Birthday to you, lad.”

Frodo sat to open the box. Inside was a beautiful silk cravat. “Oh Bilbo, how lovely. Thank you so much.”

“It’s time you started dressing as more of a gentlehobbit.”

Frodo grinned as he bent to examine the fine stitching on the hem and Bilbo tugged at the satin ribbon on his own gift. The brown paper fell open to reveal his old waistcoat and for a moment he was perplexed. Then he noted the fine new buttons and grinned. “Well, now. It looks like Tom’s Buckleby has been busy.” He held it up against himself.

Frodo’s smile widened and he could not hold back any longer. “Bell Gamgee showed me how to do it but I sewed on all the buttons myself.”

Bilbo’s bushy eyebrows rose. “Then I had best take better care of them this time. Thank you, Frodo. I’m touched.” He slipped the waistcoat on, fastening the buttons before giving a twirl, arms wide. “So, what shall we have for breakfast? How about your favourite? Bacon and mushrooms?”
Grey Wizard

Autumn seemed to have leapt out of summer, full blown and bitter again this year. Fortunately, it waited until after the harvest this time, much to the relief of everyone. Frodo listened to wind ripping the last leaves from the apple tree and moaning in the chimney, glad to be sitting with a good book by a warm fire on this blustery eve.

He was alone in the parlour, Bilbo having taken himself to the study for his weekly letter writing. Aunt Dora had sent one of her regular missives and Bilbo always complained that he needed silence and concentration, to ensure that his replies stayed within the bounds required of polite society. Frodo grinned. Aunt Dora’s latest injunction was that Frodo should not be allowed to read too much, as it was well known that all the Baggins family had weak eyes. Dora had obviously not taken into consideration the fact that most of the current crop of Baggins’ were considerably older than Frodo. He was roused from his thoughts by a loud and persistent knocking at the door.

“Now, who in the world would be out in this weather at this time of night?” He set aside the book and hurried out into the hall, in time to see Bilbo stick his head out of the study doorway. “I’ll get it, Uncle.” Frodo had a firm grip on the handle but still he stumbled back, landing on his bottom as the front door swung open with alarming force. His jaw dropped as he beheld the image revealed by lamplight.

It was a huge grey mountain. No. It was a person, dressed all in grey . . . long grey robes, grey scarf, grey beard, grey pointed hat. A very big person. A distant part of Frodo’s mind connected elderly gent, grey beard and pointy hat to equal wizard whilst the rest of his mind, including that part which controlled his voice, ran for the hills.

“Gandalf! My old friend. How lovely to see you.” It was Bilbo’s voice and it’s familiar tones restored enough of Frodo’s sanity to enable the youngster to gather his limbs and clamber to his feet. He performed a hasty bow, noting as he did so that the newcomer was dripping rainwater on the antique rug.

The wizard leaned heavily on a large gnarled staff and cleared his throat before replying. “Hello Bilbo. I wonder if I could impose upon your hospitality for a little longer than expected?”

Bilbo trotted forward, his face wreathed in smiles of welcome. “Of course you can. Your room is all ready. Just as well we prepared it early. With this weather I wasn’t expecting you until tomorrow or even the next day.”

Frodo had been studying the big person throughout his uncle’s welcome and he noted that Gandalf was swaying a little. His gaze surveyed this person from legend from head to foot once more and blue eyes widened as he realised that it was not just rain water that was staining Bag End’s hall rug. “Bilbo . . . he’s bleeding!”

Weary eyes fell upon the youngster as though noting him for the first time. “Sorry to be a nuisance. A slight accident. My cart went into the ditch. Silly horse took fright at a fallen tree.”

Bilbo seemed to grow ten inches before Frodo’s eyes. “Right. Frodo, go and rouse the Gamgees and Sedgebury’s down the row to see to the horse and cart. Then tell Bell Gamgee that I could do with her nursing skills up here.” He pushed Frodo out of the door, before ushering the wizard inside.

For a moment Frodo could only stand upon the doorstep in his shirtsleeves, buffeted by wind and rain. Then he took a deep breath and sprinted down the hill to number three. He was more than a
little thankful to see the glow of a candle through the window, showing that the household had not yet gone to bed but his hand refused to rap politely, instead hammering loudly and every bit as urgently as Gandalf had just done at Bag End.

The yellow door was thrown open to reveal Hamfast’s angry face. “Here now. What’s the need for all this racket when decent folks is preparin’ for bed?” Behind him the rest of the family gathered about the long kitchen table. Their faces showed a mixture of surprise, annoyance and curiosity. Peering into the darkness beyond the doorway Hamfast Gamgee took in the breathless young master of Bag End, hair dripping into his eyes and shirt plastered to his chest, and his expression morphed to concern. “What ever is to do, Master Frodo?”

Frodo gulped in a deep breath. “Sorry to disturb you Master Gamgee. I know it’s late, but I believe a horse and cart belonging to our guest have gone into the ditch down the lane. There’s also a tree down and Uncle Bilbo asks if you and Arty Sedgeburry could go and see to it?”

Hamfast asked no questions, only turned to grab his jacket and cap from a peg by the door. “Consider it done, sir. I’ll go get Arty. Leave it to us.”

Bell Gamgee wound a scarf about her husband’s neck. “Is yer guest alright?” she asked.

Frodo shook his head as Hamfast pushed past him and ran down the hill. “No. He’s bleeding and Bilbo wonders if you could come and help?”

Bell grabbed her heavy winter cloak, throwing it about her shoulders as she turned back into the room. “Daisy, lass . . . yer in charge till we get back. Make sure Mari and Sam get to bed.” She did not wait for a reply before slamming the door and wrapping her arm and cloak about Frodo’s shoulders. “Walk with me, lad. Ye must be fair froze.”

Indeed, now that his tasks were almost fulfilled Frodo was beginning to tremble a bit with the cold so he was grateful for the warmth of Bell’s ample body at his side and the thick cloak protecting them both from the worst of the wind and rain. On top of the hill as it was, Bag End got the worst of the weather and both were breathless by the time they stood in the warmth and quite of the panelled hallway.

Bell unfastened her cloak and Frodo took it from her. “I’ll hang this in the kitchen to dry.”

“Thank ye. Where’s yer guest?” Bell took a moment to shake out her skirts and smooth her hair.

Frodo looked at the line of large wet bootprints disappearing down the hall and glanced aside at Bell, who was frowning as she too noted that they were boot prints and not those of bare feet. “Bilbo will have put him in the big bedroom. I’d better show you in.” He set down her cloak and led the way to Bag End’s special bedroom.

When Frodo had first arrived at Bag End he had discovered the big bedroom when exploring. In truth, the room itself was not much bigger than others in the smial, it’s height being most notable. Indeed Bell Gamgee had been heard to complain that the height was a nuisance when it came to dusting off the cobwebs. The main reason it was called the big bedroom was because of the size of the bed. It was wider and twice the length of a normal bed and had taken a lot of effort to dress yesterday.

Frodo tapped lightly before popping his head around the door. “Is it alright for Mistress Gamgee to come in?”

How he had done it Frodo would never know but Bilbo had managed to divest the huge wizard of
his wet clothing, which now lay in a sopping heap by the hearth, pointy hat atop the pile. Bilbo looked up from where he was tucking in the blankets and quilts. “Yes lad. He’s decent.”

Frodo held open the door for Bell to enter.

Bell stood upon the threshold, eyes wide and mouth open. Bell Gamgee had never come close to the borders of the Shire in all her years so this was the first big person she had ever seen. Oh, she’d heard of them. She’d even imagined what they may look like from the size of the bed in this room, but knowing they existed and actually seeing one was quite a different matter. Frodo could only sympathise. Having been raised in Buckland he had seen many large folk on the borders but only from a distance.

He smiled at the lady, still holding the door for her. “It’s alright, Mistress Gamgee. This is Gandalf. He has visited the Shire before. You may have heard of him,” he coaxed quietly. “He went with Bilbo on his big adventure and he used to visit Tookborough when the Old Took was alive.”

“Thank goodness you’re here, Bell.” Bilbo came forward to usher her to the bedside. “I can wash a cut but I think this needs stitching.” It was his matter-of-fact voice that seemed to pull Bell from her shock and she stepped up to the bedside willingly.

“I am sorry to be such a trouble,” Gandalf offered in a soft, gruff voice. “I should have been paying more attention. The tree came down in front of my horse and I was not fast enough to stop him panicking. We both ended up in the ditch, although I think I came off the worst.”

“The Gaffer and Arty Sedgeburry have gone to see to your horse and cart. They’ll bring them back to the barn at the bottom of the road. Don’t worry,” Frodo offered.

“Well, there’s a lot of blood, to be sure. Have ye a medicine box or needle and thread? And Master Frodo had best gather up them clothes. They’ll need a good wash.” Bell frowned as she took in the young master’s appearance again. “And ye’d best find some dry clothes for yerself while yer at it, Master Frodo. I don’t want to end up physickin’ both of ye. Put Mr Gandalf’s clothes in a bucket of cold water. Not hot, mind you, or that blood stain will set.”

Bilbo winked at his nephew and Frodo gathered up the huge pile of wet clothing and departed for the normality of the kitchen. There he dumped all but the hat into a bucket before adding wood to the range and checking the water level in the boiler. No doubt Bell would be sending for warm water soon.

Bell lifted Bilbo’s hastily contrived dressing to examine the arm beneath. A long and ragged rip was revealed and Bell tutted. “It needs a good cleanin’ afore we do anythin’. It’s still bleedin’ freely but that can be good to wash out anythin’ inside the wound.”

As she replaced the cloth Frodo returned, bearing a large tray, and Bell nodded approval as she noted a ewer of steaming water, basin, rags and the physick box. Frodo had even taken a moment to throw on a dry shirt and breeches, although his hair was still dripping onto his shoulders. “Thank ye kindly, Master Frodo. Can I impose on ye to light a fire in the grate?”

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“Of course.” Frodo pulled a tinder box from his pocket and set about putting flame to the kindling already laid, following up with the judicious use of a pair of bellows. As he worked he glanced over his shoulder to where Bell Gamgee was warming to her task.

He had heard of Gandalf the wizard, of course. Bilbo had been regaling him with tales from his adventure for years. And when Gandalf had stepped out of legend and into Bag End’s hallway Frodo had found the sight more than a little frightening. But now, seeing the grey haired old man,
lying naked and trembling in the big bed he found that he wasn’t nearly as scared. He even began to
wonder if all Bilbo’s stories of the wizard’s exploits were actually true. Goodness knows, Bilbo
Baggins never let a little thing like the truth get in the way of telling a good story.

“Now sir, are ye hurtin’ anywhere else?” Bell made good use of the footstool Bilbo brought to the
bedside, accepting his hand to help her to step up so she could reach better.

Gandalf shook his head. “Only some bruises. I am certain nothing is broken. I was winded more than
anything.”

“No doubt,” Bell commented. “I don’t hold with travellin’ in carts. We was given two strong feet for
a reason.” This elicited a thin smile from the traveller.

“Should I send for Doctor Brockleby?” Bilbo asked as Bell poured warm water into a basin and
added a cleansing herb.

The lady shook her head. “He’s away down t’other side of Hobbiton, tendin’ Flora Fennelly. It’s her
first confinement and they think tis twins. He’ll be gone hours yet.” She began to cleanse the long
and ragged cut and Frodo noted Gandalf’s jaw working, as though he were grinding his teeth. Frodo
could only pity the old man, having experienced the stinging effects of that particular herb on several
cuts and scrapes over the years.

“I’m sorry, Mister Gandalf, sir. I know it stings a mite but it’s got to be cleaned afore I can stitch it.
We don’t want to be closing in the muck or it’ll fester.” Bell held the old man’s arm in a firm grip but
Frodo suspected that if he wanted to, the big man could have easily broken free.

Gandalf managed another weak smile. “It’s alright, Mistress Gamgee. I’ve endured worse and
you’ve a gentle touch.”

“Well, now . . . er . . . thank ye,” Bell stammered, apparently still a little overwhelmed by the wizard.
She laid a clean dressing over the wound for a moment while she threaded a rather large and wicked
looking needle with green silk. As soon as Bell began to apply the needle to Gandalf’s flesh Frodo
swallowed firmly and decided it was time he went to heat some broth for their guest.

It was almost half an hour later when he judged it safe to return with the tray, and arrived in time to
see Bell tying off a neat bandage. Gandalf the Grey was living up to his description, Frodo noted.
His face was almost as grey as his long beard.

When Bell spotted Frodo she smiled broadly. “Perfect, young Master. A nice drop o’ hot broth is just
what Mr Gandalf needs.”

Frodo thought “Mr Gandalf” did not look too sure about that statement, his face taking on a slightly
greenish cast. He lowered the legs and set the tray across their guest’s knees however.

“Perhaps later?” Gandalf asked hopefully.

But the formidable hobbittess was not to be put off. “Now would be better. Ye’ve had a nasty shock
for a gentleman your age and ye need somethin’ warm inside. Ye’ll feel better for it,” she
pronounced firmly as she offered a spoon.

To Frodo’s surprise, rather than threatening to turn her into a toad for her impertinence, the wizard
meekly accepted the utensil and began to spoon up the broth without further demure.

A knock at the door sent Frodo scurrying from the room to greet Ham Gamgee. He shepherded
Bell’s husband to a chair in front of the now blazing kitchen range and poured him a mug of broth
before asking, “How did it go? Did you find somewhere big enough to stable the horse?”

Ham nodded. “I did, Master Frodo. And it weren’t an easy job, I can tell ye. There were only just room to fit him in the stable with Arty’s cow. We had to just cover the cart wi’ a tarpaulin and weight it down wi’ rope and stones. I hope it’ll hold ‘til this wind dies down.”

“Thank you, Mister Gamgee. I hope you did not have too much trouble brushing down the horse?” Frodo offered a plate of fruit scones and Ham took two.

“Well. I wouldn’t want to do it again. We had to stand on a milkin’ stool and a box but we did the best we could. He’s well-mannered at least and we’ve left him with a bucket o’ water and another of oats. There’s hay in the manger if he’s still hungry.” Hamfast sniffed. “Goodness knows how much an animal that size eats.”

“I’m sure Bilbo will recompense Mr Sedgebury for the feed and lodgings in the morning. Did Arty go straight home?” Frodo took a scone for himself. All this excitement had made him hungry.

“He did. Buttercup weren’t too pleased about him goin’ out so late on a night like this but it couldn’t be helped. You can’t leave a poor animal out in this rain. Them smials along the river is like to flood again if it goes on like this.”

Bilbo and Bell stepped into the kitchen at that moment. “Do you think they could?” Bilbo asked as he set down the tray. “It seems only a few months since we had to bail them out last time.”

“In truth, I think this’ll blow itself out in a couple of hours. It depends on how bad they had it upstream and it’ll be sunrise afore we know that. Best leave ’em to sleep.”

Bell bent to examine Gandalf’s robes, which Frodo had left soaking in cold water, as instructed. “I think the blood is comin’ out o’ these. Tis washday tomorrow, if the weather breaks, so Ham and me will take these with us. I can do ‘em with our stuff. They’ll need tendin’ with needle and thread anyhow.”

Frodo offered her and Bilbo mugs of broth and they settled into chairs around the table.

“You don’t have to do that, Bell. I’m sure Frodo and I can manage,” Bilbo replied.

Bell grinned. “Beggin’ yer pardon, Mister Bilbo, but I’ve seen yer sewin’ an’ I’m thinkin’ Mr Gandalf would prefer mine. And Master Frodo, here, ain’t much further on than sewin’ a button.”

“I think you’re right,” Bilbo chuckled. “If it’s alright with you, I’ll let you do the repairs. I will gladly recompense you for your efforts.”

Bell smiled at her husband. “Bless you, sir. But I’ve got so much washin’ and repairs with our brood that one more set of clothes won’t make no difference.”

“Talkin’ of our brood, I think we’d best be gettin’ back to ‘em, Bell, lass. You know how Mari plays up when Daisy tries to put her to bed.” Hamfast grabbed his cap and placed his empty mug in the sink and Bell let Frodo help her into her now dry cloak. As she allowed herself to be walked down the hall she gave Bilbo instructions.

“Don’t you go lettin’ that Mr Gandalf out of his bed afore tomorrow eve, and then only to sit by the fire for a bit. If he tries to go too far just ye remind him I’ve got all his clothes. Hobbiton is too respectable a place for folks to go stridin’ around in their nothin’s.” She winked. “I’ll bring ‘em back teatime.”
Bilbo held the door open for Bell and Hamfast. As soon as they stepped outside Hamfast took his wife’s arm to steady her against the gusting wind but still she turned to shout one last word over her shoulder. “If he takes to fever send for me.”

“I will, Bell. And thank you both. Please let Arty know that I’ll be popping around tomorrow morning to pay him for the lodging of Gandalf’s horse.”

Hamfast tugged at the peak of his cap before turning himself and Bell for the warmth of number three, Bagshot Row.

Bilbo watched for some moments as his neighbours struggled against the wind and rain before closing Bag End’s strong door on the wild elements. “Brrrrrrrr. It’s a raw night, Frodo lad. Let’s have a nice hot cup of tea and another scone before we go to bed.”
Gandalf the Quilted

Frodo yawned, stretched, and then blinked as his ears registered two voices coming from the kitchen down the hall. Had he just heard his uncle he would probably have rolled over and claimed another hour’s sleep. Bilbo Baggins was a long-time bachelor and appeared to have grown so used to his own company over the years that he had taken to holding conversations with himself. It was a habit that worried Frodo when first he came to live at Bag End but now he recognised it as his uncle simply thinking aloud, rather than living up to the epithet of Mad Baggins.

But the voice replying to Bilbo this morning did not belong to Bilbo. The creaking of the apple tree outside Frodo’s window brought memory of last night’s visitor. The other voice, deep and gruff, was Gandalf the wizard. There was a wizard residing in Bag End! Frodo threw back the covers, donned his dressing gown, collected his water jug and hurried to the kitchen.

“Well, of course I had intended to arrive tomorrow but there were so many people in Bree that one could find not a moment’s peace. So I cut short my visit to the Prancing Pony and set out early. And well it was that I did. The Brandywine had risen almost to the level of the bridge when I crossed and the Bounders were too busy helping the Brandybuck clan to sandbank the lower smials to be overly inquisitive about me.” Gandalf paused to draw deeply on his pipe.

“Many of the Bounders tend to treat the title as an honorific rather than a duty, I’m afraid. Ham Bolger must be ninety, if he’s a day. If he ever thought to challenge anyone they could probably just step around him.” Bilbo poured hot water into the teapot.

“Good morning.” Frodo paused in the kitchen doorway, awed again by the person of Gandalf the Grey.

“Ahh. You’re awake at last. The boiler is full if you want some wash water.” Bilbo smiled at his nephew as he stirred the pot. “If you care to wait a while I’m just making some tea. You can join us for first breakfast. I’ve warmed the last of those scones from yesterday.”

“That would be nice . . . if Mister Gandalf doesn’t mind. I don’t want to interrupt anything.” Despite his words Frodo set his empty jug on the table and pulled up a chair before Gandalf could send him away.

“Oh, you’re not interrupting. We were only chatting over a pipe. And plain ‘Gandalf’ will do. I have always considered that Mister sounded a bit too prosaic for a wizard. One is expected to at least appear to be a little out of the ordinary.” Gandalf winked at Bilbo, who had pulled up his own chair and now chuckled as he began to pour tea into two mugs and a battered tankard.

“Gandalf, you could not pull off ‘prosaic’ if you tried for a year. Especially dressed like that,” Bilbo replied with raised brows.

For the first time Frodo noted that the elderly wizard was draped in two patchwork quilts from the big bed. He appeared to have wrapped one about his body, just beneath his surprisingly muscular arms and then draped another over his shoulders like a cloak. The effect was anything but prosaic and more than a little comical.

Gandalf accepted the tankard, his bushy eyebrows rising in mock affront. “I thought I looked rather dashing.”

Frodo hid a grin, stirring honey and milk into his own mug as Bilbo replied, “Just so long as you
weren’t considering actually doing any dashing. I’m not sure that outfit will stay put with any sudden moves. You wouldn’t want to go shocking the good folk of Hobbiton.”

Gandalf took a large swallow of his tea before selecting a couple of scones and appropriating the butter dish. “If Bell Gamgee is a sample of the rest of the folk in Hobbiton I suspect I would shock few.” He flexed his injured arm a little gingerly but easily enough. “A formidable lady.”

Frodo stepped in to protect she whom he had come to consider a favourite aunt. “Mistress Gamgee is very kind when you get to know her. She’s just not one for what she calls, ‘airs and graces’.”

“Then we should rub along well enough, for neither am I.” Gandalf popped an entire buttered scone into his mouth and chewed appreciatively, even as he narrowed his keen eyes at Frodo.

The youngster squirmed a little, rather wishing that he had not drawn attention to himself and discovering that he was unable to meet that gaze for too long. It was as though the wizard had climbed into his mind and was rummaging around in all the dark corners. Not a comfortable feeling at all. He decided to try a distraction. “What brings you to the Shire this time?”

Gandalf smiled and Frodo noted his eyes twinkling. “Isn’t a visit to my favourite burglar reason enough?”

Bilbo snorted. “I’m no dragon to be flattered. You told me you were passing through.” His eyes narrowed. “But you never mentioned where you were passing through to.”

Gandalf swallowed another scone and washed it down with a good mouthful of tea. Frodo refilled his tankard. “I am on my way to Mithlond, actually.”

“The Grey Havens? You’re not thinking of leaving our shores I hope. I shall miss Gandalf’s fireworks… as well as his good company,” Bilbo commented in mild surprise.

“No, no. I shall not be leaving Middle Earth for a while, yet.” Frodo squirmed a little, finding himself the subject of another of the wizard’s deep glances but Gandalf continued. “I deliver a supply of fireworks to them every few years.”

“Now, whatever would elves want with fireworks?” Bilbo mused. “Not that they aren’t rather entertaining,” he added hastily.

“They’re useful for ships to signal for help. Even elven ships can founder in bad weather.”

Frodo could not hold back his surprise. “But elves are so wise and clever!”

“Indeed but, clever as they are, they are not all powerful. Even elves make mistakes.” Gandalf frowned and knocked the ashes of his pipe into a conveniently placed ashtray. Frodo stood to fetch the tobacco jar for him.

“You should have noticed that, Frodo lad. I’ve told you enough of their tales over the years.” Bilbo shook his grey curls. “Sometimes great wisdom only seems to produce even greater mistakes.” He nodded to Gandalf. “Present company excepted of course.”

Now it was Gandalf’s turn to snort. “And I am not a dragon either, Bilbo Baggins. I have made many mistakes and will, doubtless, make many more.”

Frodo filled his water jug from the boiler. “I’m going for my wash, Uncle. Then I shall help you with second breakfast.” Frodo was learning all manner of interesting things this morning, and if he made the fastest ablutions since he was a faunt Bilbo made no comment.
The storm seemed to have cleared the air and they were blessed with one of autumn’s rare warm and sunny days. It took some time for everything to dry out but by mid-afternoon the occupants of Bag End were all sitting beneath the oak tree atop the hill, their tea spread upon a blanket.

They had been playing, “spot the hobbit” for a couple of hours. The name of the game had been coined by Gandalf and he was winning. The sight of a very large ‘man’, draped casually in two brightly coloured patchwork quilts and sprawled upon the lawn, was something not seen by many hobbits before. Indeed, it would be fair to say that it had never been seen by any hobbit before. Consequently, many came to gawp.

Now, hobbits are very good at remaining unobserved when they wish but once Gandalf, as Bilbo put it, ‘Got his eye in’, he became very good at spotting the occasional head poking above a hedge or peering around a tree. Of course, Frodo and Bilbo, being hobbits themselves, were well aware of any tricks employed. So for a while the game had run neck and neck. Now Frodo suspected that the wizard had been holding back for in the last half hour he had run far ahead in points.

Frodo was about to announce that he had just spotted Ted Sandyman when there was a loud, “Ouch” and Ted leapt up, red faced, and ran off. Bilbo chuckled. “Gandalf, you are supposed to just point them out, not get them to point themselves out.”

The wizard’s bushy brows rose in mock innocence, an expression he seemed to employ rather too frequently. “Can I help it if he was sitting beneath a particularly large and ripe apple? You are surely not suggesting that I had a hand in its fall?”

Bilbo did not deign to reply, taking a bite of his ham sandwich instead.

Everyone looked up as Bell and Sam Gamgee came toiling over the brow of the hill, a large wicker basket carried between them. “Well, now. That’s what all the comin’s and goin’s are about,” she announced. “Ye’ll be the talk of the Ivy Bush this evenin’.”

When Frodo would have jumped up to help her Bell waved him back. Once the basket was set down it was easy to see that it contained Gandalf’s clothes, folded carefully and, Frodo suspected, cleaner than they had been for many a year.

“And wouldn’t that be unusual? Hello Bell. Why don’t you and Sam sit down. There’s plenty for all if Sam wouldn’t mind running down to the kitchen for extra cups and plates,” announced Bilbo with a smile. “We refilled the teapot only minutes ago.”

Bell surveyed the repast and, obviously having decided it was at least as good as any she could provide, sat upon a corner of the rug, arranging her ample skirts. Her little son only stood, wide eyed, completely lost in the vision of the wizard. Bell tapped his arm gently. “Off ye go, lad. You know where Mr Bilbo keeps his crocks. And don’t ye go breakin’ ‘em.” Sam ran off down the slope toward the kitchen door as fast as his little legs would carry him.

“Afternoon to ye, Mr Gandalf.” Once settled Bell graced Gandalf with an assessing look. “I thought I told ye to keep to yer bed for the day. Yer colour’s better at least. How’s the arm?”

Gandalf grinned widely. “As good as new, thank you Mistress Gamgee. You have a healing touch. Oh, and just ‘Gandalf’ will do.”

Bell’s cheeks flushed. “I only did what was needed. Them stitches should stay in about a week, then ye’ll need to find someone to cut ‘em out. Although who ye’ll find out in the wild I don’t know. And
if yer to be Gandalf I reckon ye can call me Bell.”

“If I set out this evening I should reach The Haven’s by then. I’m sure Cirdan or one of his folk will take care of the stitches for me.”

Sam returned with cups and plates as Bell sniffed. “Well, I don’t know this Cirdan fellow but ye just make sure he has clean hands.”

Bilbo sputtered and Frodo had to slap him on the back. Gandalf only nodded his head to the lady. “I shall be very certain to check.” He lifted his tankard of tea in salute. Bilbo kept a small selection of larger crocks especially for his guest. They were mismatched to be sure but at least it ensured that Gandalf got more than two swallows from his cup.

Frodo poured two more cups of tea, noting that it was the second-best china, and added extra milk to Sam’s. Bilbo had been trying for years to convince Bell Gamgee that she was welcome to use the best china but she would have none of it, insisting that it was not for the likes of her and she’d be afraid of breakages.

Bell selected a ham sandwich for herself and a large piece of pie for her son. Politeness would have suggested a smaller piece but feeding a growing lad could be an expensive matter and no hobbit matron turned down the opportunity to fill her child at another’s table if there was an offer. “Doctor Brockleby’s home, by the way, if ye want him to take a look at that arm afore ye go.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary Bell and I expect he’ll be needing some sleep. How is Mistress Fennelly, by the way?” Bilbo asked after a sip of his tea.

“twas twins, as expected. Two bonnie lasses. Bert’s as pleased as punch I hear. No doubt he’ll be wettin’ the bairn’s heads in the Ivy Bush tonight. At least that’s what most of the folk in Hobbiton are hopin’. There’ll be a few thick heads in the mornin’, I’ll be bound.”

Bilbo chuckled. “I have no doubt. Do they have names yet?”

Bell sniffed. “Aye. Flora let Bert choose. And she’s so smitten with that husband of hers that she let it stand.”

When she did not elaborate Frodo coaxed, “But what are their names?”

Bell pursed her lips. “Daffy and Dilly. I ask ye, what kind of names are they? Two lasses sharin’ one flower . . . it don’t seem right to me.”

The males just shrugged, unwilling to comment on Bell’s firmly held belief that daffodilly was not a flower to be split between two people. Bilbo broke the sudden silence. “Can we not tempt you to stay a little longer, Old Friend?”

Gandalf shook his head. “Sadly, no. Not on this occasion. I must be at The Havens within the week as there are two ships ready to sail even now. They only await the supplies I carry.” He reached aside to examine the contents of the basket, pulling out one of his robes. “Well! Bell, you have surpassed yourself. These clothes could be brand new. Not only have you removed the stains but you have re-stitched the hems and seams. How can I ever repay you for such kindness?”

“t’will not say ‘twere an easy job. I don’t think them clothes have seen needle an’ thread for many a year. It took me an’ Daisy hours an’ there’s a couple of patches I’m not happy with. The material’s old and I’m not sure how long they’ll hold. I’ll hope you forgive me if they don’t.”

Gandalf raised a hand to forestall further apology. “Dear Lady, you have done a marvellous job.
Please also convey my thanks to your good daughter.”

“I will an’ thank ye.”

Frodo held back a grin. If only Daisy Gamgee’s temperament was as neat as her stitches.

“Frodo, lad, when you’ve finished tea, would you nip down to Arty Sedgebury with some money and ask if he can have the cart ready at sundown?” Bilbo fished in his pocket for some coins and flipped them to his nephew who caught them easily. “That should cover food and board for the horse and a little extra for any who helped last night. He’ll probably need help this evening too. Tell him I’ll pay any extra when I see him in the Ivy Bush later.”

“I’ll pop down again before sunset to help him with the tack,” Frodo commented as he pocketed the money.

Sam spoke up for the first time. “Your cart’s in the field at the bottom o’ the hill, Mr Gandalf, sir. I’ve been standin’ guard all mornin’. Someone said as how you could have fireworks in there an’ then everyone wanted to take a peep.”

“Half the village has been in that field this mornin’. Some o’ the bigger lads weren’t payin’ much attention to Sam. But don’t you go worryin’ none, sir,” Bell added. “My Ham’s taken over now. He’s got the afternoon free, so later he can help Arty with the horse as well.”

“It seems I am greatly indebted to the Gamgee family.” With those words Gandalf took Sam’s hand and dropped into it a huge, multi coloured marble. Where he had produced it from none of them wished to speculate. Gandalf was a wizard, after all. Little Sam’s eyes grew as round as saucers and he wiped a hand on his shirt before picking up the beautiful thing and holding it to the light. The coloured swirl within seemed to move in the sunlight. He blinked when his mother nudged his ribs with a gentle elbow. “Thank ye, Sir. I aint never seen one as pretty,” he offered hastily before slipping it deep into his pocket. Frodo suspected that was one marble that would never be entered into a game.

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That evening, in the Ivy Bush, the birth of twins was almost overshadowed by talk of the visit by Gandalf the Grey. Bert Fennelly was not too disappointed however.

Everyone in Hobbiton had turned out to see the wizard depart and Gandalf the Grey had made a point of congratulating Bert, even going so far as to bless the babes’ with long life and good health. Not that proud Bert had expected his lusty lasses to have aught else, for they were already running their mama ragged with their demand for milk.

But what really made him preen was when Gandalf reached the edge of the village. There he paused to wave and, in the gathering dusk, a line of sparks shot heavenward, exploding into a shimmering bunch of bright yellow daffodils. When the image finally faded cart and wizard were gone.
“Mornin’ Master Frodo. Tis a grand mornin’.” Hamfast Gamgee touched his forehead in greeting as he climbed to his feet in the middle of Bag End’s vegetable plot. Young Sam Gamgee jumped up too, grinning as he saw Frodo roll his eyes.

“It had the makings of a good one, Master Gamgee, until I burned the toast.” He lifted his mug in rueful salute. “I have been banished from the kitchen this morning.” As he spoke, Bag End’s kitchen door was thrown open and the unmistakeable odour of burnt toast wafted toward them.

Hamfast wrinkled his nose and knelt down, making a small furrow for Sam to drop in some seeds. “Aye. Mister Bilbo was never in his best temper afore second breakfast.”

Sam concentrated upon not sewing the seeds too close together. “I thought you and Mister Bilbo was goin’ to Great Smials today.”

Hamfast frowned. “And, if you’ll excuse me sayin’ so, Young Master, your uncle seems a mite put out by just the loss of a couple of slices of bread.”

Frodo took a sip of his tea. “I’m afraid my mishap has made us late and that’s another reason for my banishment. We were going to have first breakfast here and second breakfast at the Ivy Bush. But by the time we reach the Ivy now they’ll have finished serving breakfasts.”

Now Hamfast chuckled. “So now you’ve missed first breakfast completely and will have to take second breakfast at home afore you can set out. I can see why Mister Bilbo would be a bit upset.”

Sam straightened, his features puzzled. “Da, if they didn’t have first breakfast, on account of the burnt toast, won’t that make second breakfast, first breakfast?”

“Never you mind, lad. Get on with coverin’ them beetroot seeds afore the birds get ‘em. Yon robin’s a cheeky chap and would steel ‘em from your hand if you let him.” Hamfast nodded to where said bird was sitting boldly upon the handle of their spade at the end of the row, his black beady eyes fixed upon Sam’s every move.

At that moment Bilbo appeared at the kitchen door, hands upon hips. “Frodo! Come in and set the table or it will be lunch time before we leave.”

With a twinkling grin at the two Gamgees, Frodo spun about and jogged back across the garden. “Coming, Bilbo.”

Sam watched. “Do you think Mister Bilbo will be cross for long?” He had grown rather fond of Master Frodo.

“No lad,” his father replied. “Mr Bilbo’s temper is like a spring storm. Wild for a bit but soon blown over. Young Master Frodo didn’t sound too concerned to me. Don’t you worry. By the time they’re on the road they’ll be full of the joys of spring again.”

Hamfast was right. Once Bilbo actually had some breakfast inside him, whether it be first or second, his humour improved somewhat and the pair were striding down the lane before elevenses.

Frodo waved to Bell Gamgee, who was washing the front windows of number three Bagshot Row, but Bilbo hurried them on. “Come along, lad. If we make it a brisk walk we can have elevenses at the Ivy Bush.”
“Bilbo, we've only just finished breakfast. You surely aren't hungry again already.”

“Of course not. But by the time we reach the Ivy we shall have worked up a thirst and it would be rude to have a half and not have a bacon sandwich to go with it, now would it not?”

Frodo giggled. It was said that tweens were bottomless pits when it came to food but Bilbo could give many a tween a run for his money. Bilbo once ascribed his great appetite to the fact that rations had been short for at least part of his journey with the dwarves, so he made sure to get plenty of food nowadays, “To make up for it, you know.” Frodo was always amazed that his uncle's expanding waistline never seemed to slow him down and it was not long before they were striding across the bridge and into the village.

“Well now, if it aint the grand master of Bag End. Where are you off to in such a hurry, Mister Baggins?” Ted Sandyman was sitting outside his mill, smoking a pipe and gnawing on a cheese sandwich. Frodo rather got the impression, from his tone, that 'Mister' was not Ted's first choice of title. The miller was often known to refer to Bilbo as 'Mad Baggins'. Whether he was aware of the appellation or not Bilbo only smiled brightly and replied, “None of your business, Mister Sandyman.” He made great emphasis of the 'Mister' and, in a quiet aside to his nephew added, “Any speed beyond 'stop' would be considered a hurry by Ted. I don't think he has walked any farther than Bywater in his entire life.”

Once over the bridge they came into the village square, where the market was in full flow. Most of the traders were local but sometimes a small group of dwarves would appear, selling children's toys and cheap jewellery. Occasionally traders came from other villages in the Shire, bringing cheese or honey. Today Frodo noted that all the traders were local.

The Ivy Bush was doing its usual brisk market day trade but Bilbo and Frodo found seats in a small corner and ordered Bilbo's yearned for beer and bacon sandwiches. It was known throughout the three farthings that Borden Brewer served a grand bacon butty, the bread soft, warmed in the oven and dripping with butter. Half an hour later Bilbo wiped butter from his chin and sat back with a satisfied sigh. “Well, Frodo, shall we go on?”

Frodo grinned as he licked the last of the beer from his lips. “I think we'd better if we are to make Bywater for lunch.” He patted his waistline. “Although whether I will have room for it after that sandwich is another matter.”

Bilbo stood, lifting his walking staff and shrugging his pack onto his back. “Nonsense, lad. We will soon walk that off. Come on.” Frodo barely had time to hoist his own pack and staff before they were out of the door and back into the market day crowds.

“Well, now. Bilbo Baggins. I've not seen ye for many a week.”

Bilbo rolled his eyes at this further delay but turned with a wide grin when he recognised the voice. “Hello, Pansy! I've been out and about as often as usual and it is good to see you about too. How is your sister these days?” He leaned upon his staff as the flow of market customers parted around them as though they were rocks in a stream.

The old hobbitess' wrinkles arranged themselves into a bright smile and, despite her hunched back and gnarled fingers, her green eyes twinkled. “She's right enough, although that nephew of mine is still not settled.”

Frodo mumbled an apology to an annoyed gaffer, who tried to steer a barrow around them, but Bilbo and Pansy seemed totally oblivious to the obstruction they were causing in the middle of the thoroughfare. Bilbo continued good-naturedly, “That maid should get her father to tie the lad up and
sit him down in front of the Mayer. I'm sure Penley Whitfoot will marry them fast enough and the whole of Hobbiton will attend, just to make certain the deed is done at last."

Pansy gave a loud cackle. “He could have a worse task for his first term.” She glanced aside at Frodo and nodded toward their packs. “And where are the pair of you off to? Not going off to chase more dragons I hope.”

Bilbo shook his head. “Indeed not. My dragon hunting days are over. Frodo and I are on our way to Tuckborough. We’ve not seen little Peregrin since a few days after he was born and that’s almost three years ago.”

“Well, ye’d best get on, then. Or ye’ll not arrive afore dark.” Pansy nudged Frodo, knowingly. “Although, knowin’ yer uncle, by the time ye’ve stopped along the way for lunch and high tea ye’ll probably still not arrive until the stars are out.”

Frodo grinned, despite being jostled from behind by a rather large lady with a heavily laden basket filled with, from the smell of it, fish. “You may be right.”

Pansy turned away, only pausing to call back, “Ye’d best get a move on, lads. Butter Rumble says it's goin' to rain later. I hope ye packed a cloak.” She was swallowed by the crowd before Bilbo could reply.

“Did you pack a cloak, Bilbo?” Frodo asked with some alarm, knowing that he certainly had not.

Bilbo shook his head, with a confident, “We'll be well on our way before the rain arrives. And it's only water, when all is said and done. It won't do you any harm.”

Frodo was not convinced. Buttercup Rumble's arthritis was the best predictor of rain that Hobbiton had. If she said it was going to rain it usually did. He scanned the cloudless sky with some trepidation as they made their way out of the market and down the road to Bywater. But off to the left the pool mirrored a bright blue sky and after a while Frodo pushed Widow Rumble's prediction to the back of his mind.

Lunch was taken at the Green Dragon in Bywater barely two hours later. Bilbo ordered a meat pie with vegetables but Frodo settled for bread, cheese and pickles and watched in bemused silence as Bilbo cleaned his plate.

“Are you sure you don't want anything else, lad. There are no more decent eateries until we reach Tookbank and that's near on five miles away. The Frog and Bucket doesn't serve food.”

Frodo grinned. “I have eaten plenty, Bilbo. I promise not to keel over from starvation before we get to Great Smials.”

Bilbo only collected his walking staff. “Very well. But don't say I didn't warn you.”

Soon they were strolling down the Bywater road and in the distance Frodo could see the dark line of hawthorn that marked the edges of the Great East Road. When they reached the junction it took all of Frodo’s persuasive powers to prevent Bilbo stepping into the Frog and Bucket for a swift half. Instead they turned left onto a broad, flat road, kept in good repair by order of the Mayor and bordered upon both sides by ditches and sharp hawthorn hedges. Already, those thick hedges showed a pale green haze of spring buds. They made good time, although the hard metal of the road was not as comfortable under foot as the grassy lanes of Hobbiton. As they stepped out Bilbo taught his nephew an old walking song so the time passed pleasantly, with few others on the road. It was with some surprise, therefore that Frodo
glanced up to see that the sky had turned from blue to a pale pearl white which was rapidly darkening to grey.

“How much further is it to the Stock turn off, Bilbo?”

“Just on that bend ahead. Why?”

Frodo pointed upward with his staff. “I think Widow Rumble was right, after all. It looks like we're in for some rain.”

Bilbo pursed his lips. “We'd best get a move on, then.”

They picked up the pace but after turning left at the junction they had only walked for a few minutes more before the first fat drops of rain began to fall.

“Oh, bother,” Bilbo announced.

Frodo smiled mischievously. “It's only water, remember?”

“It's not the rain that bothers me. It's the mud it will create.” Bilbo grimaced, hunching his shoulders against the downpour. Frodo followed without further comment. If there was one thing guaranteed to anger Bilbo it was having his carefully selected outfit ruined and, having annoyed his uncle once today, Frodo was sensible enough to hold his tongue.

The rain dropped from deluge to downpour only half an hour later but the two travellers hardly noticed for, by then, they were already soaked to the skin. Bilbo scowled down at his feet, where the grey colour of his foot-hair was lost beneath a layer of dark mud. Indeed, his feet, ankles and calves were covered in the sticky stuff to the point where he began to wonder whether they would ever be clean again. He could not remember having been this filthy since his travels with Thorin and company. And it was just too bad that he should be arriving thus at one of the grandest establishments in the Shire.

Suddenly, Bilbo heard a yelp, followed by a loud splash and he spun about. There, spread-eagled upon his back, was Frodo, in the centre of a large puddle that Bilbo had only just managed to skirt without incident some moments earlier. It seemed Frodo had not been so lucky. For a moment Bilbo thought that the lad was having trouble catching his breath and that was no wonder, having landed hard upon his pack. Then he realised that his nephew's strange convulsions were actually caused by laughter.

Bilbo sighed and reached down to help the lad at least make it to a sitting position. But the mud was slippery and Frodo was laughing so hard that he was making very little effort to help himself. It was almost inevitable, therefore, that Bilbo should also lose his footing and land on his bottom at Frodo's side in the huge puddle. This only made Frodo laugh even louder and for a stunned few moments Bilbo could only splutter in indignation. Then imagination provided his mind with a picture of the two of them, head to toe in mud and sitting in the middle of the road like a couple of mischievous faunts. Soon he was joining his laughter to Frodo's guffaws, so helpless that they had to lean upon each other.

Two hours later, in almost full dark, two muddy and soaked travellers battered upon the huge round door of Great Smials.

There was a great deal of muttering to be heard through the stout barrier before it swung open on well oiled hinges to reveal the sparkling, tiled floor of the Thain's entrance hall. The ancient servant's eyes widened when he saw the state of the two visitors and he pointed immediately to a large tray of clean water set by the door. “Who shall I say is calling, sirs?” he asked in a voice that seemed to form
around some large invisible plum in his mouth.

Bilbo took a perverse delight in letting his muddy pack land with a loud splat upon the clean floor. “Please tell Master Palladin that Bilbo and Frodo Baggins have arrived. I believe we are expected.”

“Please wait here, sirs,” the servant instructed in a tone that almost begged them not to spread any more mud upon his nice clean floors.

Frodo waited politely while Bilbo dabbled his feet in the basin and by the time he had attended to his own, Paladin arrived. “Good grief! What have you been rolling in? You look like a couple of drowned rats. Did you not bring cloaks?” he demanded as he saw for himself the state of his guests.

Bilbo had to bite back a chuckle. “We set out in a bit of a hurry.”

“My fault. I had a bit of a mishap with first breakfast,” Frodo explained as he blew rain drops off the end of his nose.

Knowing better than to ask for a more detailed explanation until his guests were dry, Paladin led them to one of the many guest suites, heedless of the line of muddy footprints they left in their wake. There was only so much mud one could wash off in a basin of cold water after all. “I'll send some lads with baths for you and tell Eglantine to hold supper until you're ready,” he announced as he left. “Join us in the family parlour when you're ready.”

It was clear that the hobbit who had answered the door had leapt into action before his master's instructions had been relayed for, within minutes, the promised bath's arrived and the two visitors peeled off their wet and muddy clothes with some relief. They were removed to be cleaned and fresh ones promised, there being sufficient residents in Great Smials to be able to provide temporary clothing. Bilbo was soon sitting, wrapped in a blanket, before a very welcoming fire.

Frodo stepped from behind the dressing screen, towel draped low about his hips while he dried his hair with another. At that precise moment there was a light knock and the door opened to admit no other than May Gamgee, her arms piled with an assortment of garments. Frodo dodged back behind the screen but not before a bright blush flashed in May's cheeks.

The stunned silence was broken by Bilbo's soft chuckle. “Hello, May, lass. Just pop the clothes down over there while Frodo makes himself respectable.”

From the safety of the screen Frodo glared at Bilbo, even as he threw a blanket about himself, knowing that his own cheeks were as pink as May's. He cleared his throat as he re-appeared. “Hello, May. It's good to see you.”

May bobbed a little curtsy. “It's good to see you, too, Master Frodo.”

Bilbo swallowed another chuckle as both youngsters blushed even brighter at the unintentional innuendo.

May set down the clothes and all but bolted for the door, pausing only long enough to call over her shoulder, her accent thick with embarrassment, ‘The Master and Mistress is waitin' for ye in the family dinin' room when yer ready, sirs.”

Bilbo gave up the battle and let out a loud guffaw as he stood to examine the clothing and Frodo's glare dissolved easily enough with the prospect of a good meal. All hobbits set a good table but Eglantine Took's dinners were not to be missed.

Half an hour later Bilbo and Frodo stepped into the noisy dining room. With three pre-tween girls in
the family it could only be so, particularly with a two year old Peregrin protesting loudly about being seated in his high chair. His wails could be heard all the way down the hall and a frustrated Paladin was trying to bend his little son in the middle with no success at all. Peregrin was holding himself ramrod straight, his little face a bright beetroot red that did not sit well with his golden curls.

Bilbo winced. Long used to the peace and quiet of Bag End, he found visiting his relations in Tuckborough or Buckland a little stressful, until he sampled the food, that is. After all, what hobbit did not enjoy a meal that he had not have to prepare for himself?

Having finished seating the girls, Eglantine held out her arms for her son and Paladin relinquished the lad with some relief. Peregrin ceased his wailing at once and Paladin gave a frustrated huff as his son submitted meekly to being placed in the chair he had taken such a dislike to but minutes before.

Spotting their guests, Paladin tugged his waistcoat straight, and advanced with a smile. “Hello again, Bilbo, Frodo. You're looking a bit more the thing.”

Bilbo looked down a little ruefully at his brown trousers, yellow jacket, blue waistcoat and red paisley cravat. “Not my usual style but they are at least clean and dry.”

Frodo grinned, having had to resort to blue trousers, pink shirt and green waistcoat himself. The waistcoat he had left open for it strained across his chest and only just reached his waist.

Paladin led Bilbo to a place at his right and directed Frodo to a seat between Pearl and Pimpernel. Pimpernel grinned a greeting and Pearl nodded aloofly, in the way only an almost tween lass was capable of. Frodo squirmed a little uncomfortably, wishing he had been seated closer to Bilbo and Paladin. He was feeling a little outnumbered by the female side of the family, with little Peregrin too young to assist him at this point.

Eglantine frowned at her eldest as she rang the bell and Pearl dropped her gaze to her plate. The door opened to admit a string of maids, laden with platters and dishes. It was usual for family to serve themselves so the dishes were placed in the centre of the table. Soon they were being passed from hand to hand and the conversation began to flow as good food began to loosen tongues.

As the main course was being cleared and the deserts arrived Frodo looked up to find a pair of hazel eyes staring intently. He smiled and little Peregrin grinned broadly. “Hello Pippin.”

Pippin offered him a piece of soggy, slavered-on bread and Frodo shook his head. “That's alright, Pip. I'm going to have some pudding soon. You finish that and then you can have some too.”

Eglantine smiled at her guest, even as she steered her youngest's hand back toward his mouth and used her napkin to wipe drool and other less identifiable substances from Pippin's little pointed chin. “Your cousin, Frodo, doesn't want your half chewed bread,” she assured him with a smile.

Pippin was a generous little soul, however, so once he had taken a nibble he held it out again with a shouted, “Fow!”

Frodo chuckled and that was all the encouragement the faunt needed. He gave a bright little giggle that had the whole table grinning in response. “I think he's taken a shine to you, Frodo,” Paladin commented. “You don't fancy a job entertaining him tomorrow do you?”

His question was met with a vigorous shake of Frodo's dark head and a hasty, “I think he would soon tire of my company.”

“Nonsense lad. You've a good way with youngsters. Little Sam Gamgee has been following you about like a shadow ever since you moved into Bag End.” Bilbo helped himself to some plum duff
and Paladin passed the custard jug.

“Sam is a little older than Pippin. I don't think Pip would be very interested in learning to read at his age.”

Eglantine placed a little bowl of cooled custard on her son's tray and concentrated upon keeping his fingers out of the dish as she spooned some for him. “He can't read yet, that's true. But he does like to listen to stories before bed.”

Frodo selected some rice pudding. “If he wants exciting tales Bilbo is our storyteller.”

“Oh, I don't think Pippin would be much interested in dragons and trolls,” Bilbo replied airily.

Eglantine frowned. “And I hardly think those are the sort of tales to be filling his head with just before sleep.”

Bilbo widened his eyes in what was only partially feigned affront.

“His favourite tale is one about a duck and a frog. It's from one of our old story books,” Pimpernel offered around a mouthful of plum duff and custard.

“Don't speak with your mouth full, Pimpernel.” Eglantine was a stickler for table manners and Frodo hurriedly removed his elbow from the table.

The conversation changed direction and Frodo forgot all about Pippin's love of stories until Eglantine gathered up her faunt. “Come along, Frodo. Time you learned how to deal with bairns. You'll have some of your own one day so you may as well learn now.”

Frodo shot a pleading look to Bilbo but the older hobbit only waved him off with a twinkling grin. “Off you go, lad.” No doubt he was relieved not to have been set the task himself.

Pearl and Pimpernel sniggered and Pervinca looked from one to the other in confusion, blissfully unaware of the undercurrents of adult conversation.
“Oh, Pip!” Frodo jumped back as Pippin smacked his hands gleefully in the bath water, showering mother and cousin alike in soapy suds. Eglantine laughed as Frodo used a towel to wipe his face and clothing. “It's alright for you, Aunt. I've only just got dry from earlier,” Frodo complained with a wry grin.

“Don't worry, lad. We've got plenty of spare clothes and towels. A little water never did anyone any harm.”

“That's what Bilbo said about the rain and look where that got us.”

Eglantine reached down to lift her squirming son from the water and Pippin's face began to crumple. “Oh no you don't,” she asserted as she buried him in a thick, thirsty towel. “Now where's my little Pip?” She tweaked a corner aside to reveal his giggling face and declared, “There he is!” This was obviously a regular bath time game for Pippin crowed with laughter as his mama covered him again. “Where is he?”

Pippin grabbed the towel, dropping it himself with an impish grin. “There he is!” Eglantine declared as she began to dry his hair. It took several minutes to pad his lower regions and wrangle him into his nightgown and then, to Frodo's dismay, Eglantine thrust her son at him. “Fow!” Pippin crowed with delight, clinging to him like a limpet, grabbing a handful of Frodo's curls and trying to stuff them into his mouth.

Frodo winced, disentangling tiny fingers. “Come on, Pip. Time for bed.”

“Tory!” Pippin announced indignantly and Eglantine steared Frodo to a rocking chair set beside the high sided cot and handed him a small and colourful book that had obviously seen better days. He settled in the deeply cushioned chair and sat Pippin in his lap.

“Once upon a time there was a little green frog who lived in a farmer's pond . . . ”

Half an hour later Eglantine turned back the brightly coloured bedding as Frodo whispered, “And the frog and the duck lived happily ever after.”

Peregrin was fast asleep and Frodo bent to kiss blond curls, inhaling the sweet fragrance of lavender and faunt. Eglantine lifted her son from his cousin's arms, noting the softness in bright blue eyes with a knowing smile. Frodo watched as she tucked in her bairn and then she turned to him with a nod. “You'll do, lad. Give it a few more years and you'll be best friends, I've no doubt.”

Frodo followed her from the room as Pervinca entered to seek her own bed. The two youngest girls shared the nursery with Pippin, Pearl only recently having been deemed old enough to have a room of her own. Pervinca reached up to give her mama a hug and received a kiss in return. Frodo was surprised when the lass hugged him too and he bent to kiss her cheek. It was a long time since he had experienced such family interaction and he cleared his throat as he felt tears prickle behind his eyes.

As spring weather is wont to do, after the rain of the previous day, the next morning dawned bright and sunny.

Bilbo sighed with pleasure as he smoothed the fine wool of his own waistcoat, newly returned from the laundry. He felt much more comfortable in his own carefully co-ordinated wardrobe. Frodo had
to acknowledge that he too felt better in his green suit. At least he could fasten the waistcoat, although he noted that the sleeves of his shirt were a little shorter than was usual for Shire fashion. He was still growing and it was perhaps time to pay a visit to one of his aunts in Brandy Hall to have some new ones made.

Like Brandy Hall, breakfasts in Great Smials were an informal affair taken in the largest dining hall, which could seat all its residents at once if required. At breakfast time, however, visitors and family drifted in and out over the period of an hour, helping themselves from the many warming dishes set on a long board to one side of the hall.

Ferumbras having taken breakfast in his own rooms at his usual horrendously early hour, Paladin was presiding over the hall as he finished his own repast. Sitting at top-table with the farm steward, Pal beckoned them to places at his other side. As soon as they were seated May Gamgee appeared to fill their cups with tea. Traditionally, coffee was never served at breakfast in Great Smials. She smiled prettily at Bilbo, gaze dropping as she served Frodo.

Bilbo began to add milk and honey to his cup. “Good morning, May. How are you settling in here?”

May glanced at the Master's son, who smiled and nodded. “Very well, sir. I'm learnin' a lot and everyone's very friendly,” she replied with a smile of her own.

Paladin nodded. “May is a hard worker and seems to get on well with the other lasses.”

“I'm pleased to hear that. Your mother asked me to pass on your family's regards.” Bilbo stirred his tea.

“Thank you, sir. I hope I'm not too forward if I ask you to give her my love when you return? I'm afraid I haven't had time to write of late, what with the spring plantin’.”

Bilbo's eyes widened as he sought the girl's scrubbed hands. “Surely they have not had you tending the fields!”

Paladin snorted. “Don't be a goose, Bilbo. What do you take me for? Eglantine would have my hide if I asked the smial staff to work in the fields. This isn't Hobbiton. Extra folk and family come from round about to help with the planting and they have to be fed and found beds. That means the indoor staff have their hands full. But May here is pulling her weight well enough.”

May blushed at the compliment, bobbing a little curtsy before bustling off to answer a call for more tea from another table.

Frodo buttered some toast. “When does the planting end? I think it's just finished around Hobbiton.”

Paladin nodded. “Aye, we're almost done here. In fact we would have almost had it yesterday, but for the heavens opening. I reckon two more days will do it. Then things will calm down a bit.”

Frodo kept one eye on May as she flitted about the large room. She had filled out again in the past year, in more places than her waistline, and her freckles did not contrast so sharply with her complexion now that her cheeks had regained their roses. The sandy curls that she had so often been teased about were now tamed into glossy ringlets that bounced pertly as she moved. Perhaps it was being away from home and having to fend for herself, but she seemed more mature. Even her way of speaking had changed, losing some of the contractions of her country roots.

In his turn, Bilbo kept one eye on his nephew. He suspected that Frodo would probably end up
settling down with someone of more fire, but there was no denying that May Gamgee was growing into a comely lass. Seventeen was a bit young to be thinking about courting but Berli's brood had always been mature for their years and May was no exception.

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“Good morning Aunt Eglantine.” Frodo finally tracked down his aunt in the nursery.

“Fow!” Pippin, who was sporting an alarmingly bright pink jumper, was sitting in the centre of a large, thick rug, surrounded by a the detritus of his morning's play. When he clambered onto unsteady feet and began to stumble his way to Frodo, Eglantine wisely swept everything out of his way.

Incredibly flattered by his little cousin's display of affection, Frodo dropped to his knees and held out his arms. Three more steps and he was claspng a wriggling Pippin, who placed an incredibly sloppy but loving kiss on his older cousin's cheek. “Hello, Pip.” Frodo grinned as he settled the faunt upon the rug at his side and used his sleeve to wipe slobber from his cheek.

Eglantine dropped her head to hide a smile.

There was a chuckle from behind. “We were wondering when you would turn up.” Frodo turned to discover a grey haired matron sitting in a rocking chair, a large pile of knitting in her lap. “I knew once they'd met proper he wouldn't be able to stay away. Our Pippin draws people like flies to honey.”

Eglantine Took beamed. “I don't think you've met before. Frodo Baggins, this is Margery. Margery has been in charge of the Great Smials nursery since Pal was a faunt. Margery, this is Bilbo's nephew. Drogo and Primula's son.”

Margery's brown eyes narrowed and she fixed him with a gimlet gaze, pursing her lips. “It's good to see you've taken no harm from yesterday's adventures.” She sniffed as she started another row on her project. “Never understood this fascination Brandybucks have for water. It only ever leads to trouble. Your father learned that the hard way.”

Frodo felt anger rise. Ever since his parent's drowning he had been hearing similar comments and still they had the ability to make him see red.

Eglantine cleared her throat hurriedly but before she or Frodo could say anything Pippin, who had been watching his older cousin creating a tower with his building bricks, knocked over the edifice with a loud, delighted squeal. Frodo's ire melted into a giggle. “You little terror. I suppose I shall have to build that all over again,” he asserted with mock dismay.

Pippin gave a wide grin and held out a brick. “Fow, fix.”

Eglantine laughed. “Now you've done it, Frodo. He'll have you building towers all day.”

Frodo began to pile the bricks that Pippin solemnly handed him one by one. “I don't mind.”

“How are you liking Hobbiton,” Eglantine asked as she began to collect up some of the other toys scattered about them. “I expect it feels very different to Brandy Hall. Do you miss all your friends?”

Pippin crowed loudly as he toppled the bricks and Frodo patiently began to pile them again. “I do miss Fredegar and Merry but Bilbo has promised that we shall visit regularly.” He paused before adding, “I suppose it's the same for May Gamgee. Uncle Paladin says she's settling in well but I suppose, coming from a large family, that she misses her brother and sisters.”
Eglantine handed Frodo a stray brick that had rolled under the rocking chair. “I knew she had a large family in Hobbiton but I’m afraid I haven’t had much time to talk to the girl. She seems to have made friends with her room mates, Primrose and Bluebell.” She smiled as Pippin knocked over Frodo’s carefully constructed tower once more and helped corral the bricks. “I wonder if she’d like to visit home for a few days once the planting is done. I’m certain we could spare her and she can take her first year’s wages home to her parents.”

“I’m sure she’d like to see her mother again and I know Bell misses her terribly.”

“Tom Carter is due the day after tomorrow. She could ride back to Hobbiton with him. I don’t like the idea of a girl walking the Great East Road alone and I’ll give him a couple of coppers for his trouble.”

Margery interjected dryly from her corner. “Mayhap Masters Bilbo and Frodo could do with the ride as well. That way, if it rains, they’ll not get so muddy.”

Frodo grinned and rolled his eyes. “I’m told mud is good for the complexion.”

Margery was never at a loss for words, however. “Then you two must have the prettiest backsides in the Shire.”

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Two days later Tom Carter was feeling very cheerful. Carting packages did not bring in much money but passengers paid more and, if they were of the right sort, provided good company too. Bilbo and Frodo Baggins now, they were definitely the right sort. Before the cart wheels had left the courtyard the gents were singing one of Mister Bilbo’s compositions, and young May Gamgee was joining in by the second chorus. Most hobbits can carry a tune but Master Frodo had a particularly fine voice and Bilbo persuaded him to sing a solo. If the lad noticed May Gamgee’s admiring gaze he said nothing but Tom and Bilbo shared a smile.

At the Frog and Bucket they stopped off to stretch their legs and tend to nature’s call. Whilst food was not a speciality of the house, the establishment was renowned for it’s cider so, of course, Bilbo insisted that they all sit down for a half. As Bilbo offered to pay for all, Tom decided it would be rude to refuse. May was a little young for cider but Bilbo only winked when she pointed that out. “One half will do you no harm.” Frodo proved himself to be the perfect gentlehobbit, holding May’s chair for her, and Bilbo suspected that her blush had very little to do with the warming effect of a mug of cider on a brisk spring day.

When they climbed back onto the cart Bilbo moved up to sit with Tom and the two lit their pipes. That left Frodo and May amongst the parcels at the back. Even as he made small talk with Tom, Bilbo kept one ear tuned to the conversation behind him. For several minutes there was silence. Then two voices spoke at once.

“Are you looking forward to getting home, Master Frodo? Are you looking forward to seeing your Ma again?”

That was followed by a chorus of embarrassed laughter. “I love visiting relatives but I’ve grown to enjoy the peace and quiet of Bag End. It was difficult at first, being used to all the noise and bustle of Brandy Hall, but now I love having space and time to myself, and Uncle Bilbo is very good company.”
Bilbo felt a warm glow within his chest, for he had always worried that life at Bag End, with a crochety old bachelor, would not suit the youngster.

“I can't imagine rattling around in that big smial. I like havin' family around me. It was bad enough when Hal and Ham left home and mayhap Daisy won't be far behind.” May rummaged in a basket at her side and offered Frodo an apple.

Frodo was a tween so he accepted readily. “I hope you don't mind that Sam showed me your letters. Are you really happy at Great Smials or are you putting a good face on it? Because I'm certain Bilbo can arrange for you to come home if you want to and the Thain won't mind.”

May passed a couple of apples up to Bilbo and Tom and selected one for herself. “Oh, no. I love workin' there. I've made lots of new friends and they're gettin' to be like family. I don't see the Thain much but Master Paladin and Mistress Eglantine are nice and I'm learnin' so much.”

Bilbo smiled to hear May's country accent creeping back, the closer they got to Hobbiton.

“Ferumbras is not one for standing on ceremony and Eglantine and Paladin are good people. They treat everyone like family. Great Smials is at least a little less formal than Brandy Hall. Much as I love Rorimac, he can be a bit of a stickler for rules.”

“Hah!” A blackbird started out of the hawthorn, with a scolding chatter of alarm, at Bilbo's exclamation. “The Master of Buckland is a stickler at applying the rules to everyone else. Not so much to himself.”

Frodo joined the general laughter. “He says there has to be some advantage to being the Master.”

By now they had reached Bywater and there was some discussion about whether to stop at the Green Dragon for some food, but home was beckoning to May and the Baggins. Tom would be happy enough lunching at the Ivy Bush in Hobbiton for he had no post to deliver in Bywater that day and several pieces for Hobbiton.

Tom had to navigate his pony and cart carefully through the market and, with a chorus of thanks to their driver, May, Frodo and Bilbo set cheerful feet onto the lane, over the bridge and up the hill toward home.
The sound of giggling, interspersed with a rhythmic thud, thud, could have been cause for concern at any other time but Bell knew it was only two of her youngest, beating rugs in the back garden. It was spring and spring was the time for cleaning.

“Everythin’ in its time and a time for everythin’,” as Da Hobson would say. Bell had set Sam and Marigold to cleaning the rugs. She and Hamfast had draped them over the empty washing line and then handed out the paddles. It seemed that Sam and Marigold were making a game of it.

Bell dumped some candle holders in the sink to wash and looked up to see how they were getting on. She smiled to see her two bairns dashing round and around the kitchen hearth rug and Bell's bedroom rug, beating as they went. It was fortunate that they had chosen one rug each or Bell could have been dealing with bruises and cracked heads, but all her children were sensible about such things . . . even Daisy most of the time.

Daisy would be washing the kitchen window later for it, like the tater patch, was now covered in a film of grey dust. No doubt Ham would have something to say about his taters when he came home. Still, the widow Rumble was forecasting rain overnight, which should wash the leaves clean. That reminded Bell that she must take some willow bark ointment down the hill later. If Buttercup Rumble was forecasting rain her arthritis must be acting up.

Daisy entered the big kitchen that served as the family room, a shallow basket filled with more candle holders. “Thank ye, lass. Set that down over here then I need ye to go out to the wash house, fill the copper and set a fire ‘neath it. When yer brother and sister have finished out there they'll need a bath and we'll need to wash their clothes too.”

Daisy leaned over her mother's shoulder to look out of the window. In typical tween manner, she rolled her eyes at the sight of two little dusty grey figures rolling in a giggling heap on the grass. “Why does one cleanin' job always lead to another?” she asked with a grimace.

Bell chuckled. “’Tis the way of it. And when ye get to the end of all the jobs ye just start again at the beginnin’.”

Daisy sighed but collected some kindling in her apron, from the basket on the hearth, and headed for the garden door.

“And ye'd best make sure there's enough hot water for ye to have a bath too. Ye'll need to beat the top of the rugs where yer brother can't reach.” Bell grinned as Daisy stomped out, knowing that her daughter was of an age to be “proper mortified” if a lad saw her head to toe in muck. Bell was a firm believer that tweens needed taking down a peg every now and then and today was as good a day as any.

She took up an old knife and began to scrape wax off a candle holder and was just setting the last one in the sink, about to pour a kettle of water over them, when there was a knock at the front door. Wiping her hands on her apron she went to open it, breaking into a surprised smile when she found Bilbo and Frodo Baggins on her doorstep.

“Bless me, sirs. I thought ye weren't due home 'til the Morrow. I would have gone up with some shoppin' if I'd known. But come away in. I'm sure I can spare some milk and bread or send Sam down to market for ye.”
“Thank you, Bell. I'd appreciate a drop of milk but Frodo can go down to the market later for the rest. That's not the only reason we called, however.” He and Frodo stepped aside to reveal a slight figure that had been standing unseen behind them.

“Hello Ma.”

“May, lass!” Bell opened her arms and May ran into her mother's astonished but welcoming embrace. “Ye never wrote to tell me ye was comin’.”

Frodo giggled, his bright blue eyes sparkling with mischief. “Eglantine suggested that May travel home with us to visit her family for a few days. There was plenty of room in the cart so here she is.”

Bell let her daughter go for long enough to wave everyone into the kitchen. “Come in, sirs. I clean forgot my manners. Sit yerselves down and I'll make tea. Ye must be parched after bein’ on the road so long.”

Bilbo unfastened his jacket. “We stopped off at the Frog and Bucket halfway but I certainly would not refuse a cup of tea.”

Frodo joined his uncle at the scrubbed kitchen table while May hung her cloak on the pegs by the door. Bell was already pouring water into the large brown teapot when she glanced up, her eyes widening as she saw her daughter fully for the first time. “Well, would you look at my lass! She's all grown up. A proper little gentlehobbit. Just look at that frock.”

May beamed and Frodo had to agree that May looked much more mature than her eighteen years. When May had gone to work at Great Smials in Tuckborough she was a little wisp of a girl in her sister's cut down dress, with wide eyes, freckles, and a riot of misbehaved sandy curls. The May that stood before them now had grown a good six inches. The curls were tamed into glossy ringlets and she wore the pretty summer print dress of Great Smial's maids, protected by a fine, lawn pinafore.

“All the maids wear this,” May assured her mother, but she smiled proudly as she held out her full skirts and performed a pirouette that set her curls dancing.

Bell put the lid on the teapot. “Well, ye'd best put it away so it don't get spoiled while yer home. I won't have ye goin’ back with a ruined frock.” All the same, she reached out admiringly to touch the fine weave of the pretty dress. “Do they really dress all the maids in this? It seems too fine.”

May giggled. “Yes Ma. They really do. And in winter we have nice warm wool ones with red flannel petticoats.” She blushed as she remembered that they had male gentlehobbits to tea. “Beggin' your pardon, sirs.”

Bilbo waved her apologies aside. “Don't worry, May. It will take more than the mention of a flannel petticoat to embarrass this old hobbit.”

Frodo ducked his head, however, and Bell noticed a becoming blush touch his cheeks. She ignored it as she set out her best cups and saucers and May fetched the milk jug from the cool slab in the pantry.

“T’was good of ye to bring May, all the same. Did ye come with Tom Carter?” Bell asked as she poured thick dark tea into everyone's cups.

Bilbo added liberal helpings of milk and honey to his. “We did. He's taken the cart down to the stables and will stay at the Ivy Bush overnight. Tomorrow he collects the post and will be off to Frogmorton and Buckland. Eglantine has made arrangements for May to ride back with him to Tuckborough next Mersday.”
May slipped into place at her ma's side. "I've got a whole five days to visit," she announced brightly.

"That's very kind of the lady I must say. I hope as how ye've earned it," Bell added. "It was good of ye to ask if my May could be put into service at Great Smials, Mr Bilbo. It looks to have suited her at the least."

Bilbo fished about in his jacket pocket, finally producing a small drawstring bag and placing it on the table with a soft, "chink". "Mistress Eglantine is more than pleased with May and she asked me to give you this. It's May's first year's wages."

"Wages? I weren't expectin' no wages. Me and Ham was just pleased that May would have food and clothin' and a roof over her head." Both Bell and May leaned forward as Bell reverently released the drawstring and tipped the contents onto the table. "Oh my!" Twelve shiny silver pennies glinted up at them. Neither made to touch them, as though unable to believe that such bounty was real.

Finally, May whispered, "What are you goin' to do with all that, Ma?"

Bell blinked, sweeping the coins back into the bag and tying it off tightly before dropping it in her apron pocket. "That's for yer da to decide."

Frodo hoped that at least some of it would find its way into May's pocket. It was she who had earned it after all.

Bilbo hid a grimace as he took a last swallow of Bell's thick tea. "Well. It's time Frodo and I were off, if Frodo is to get down to the market before everyone packs up for the day."

Bell selected a smaller jug and decanted a little milk into it. "Here's yer milk. There should be enough for a few cups of tea until ye can get more. If there's none to be had at market Arty Sedgeburry will be doin' the evenin' milkin' of Clara soon. I'm sure he'll have a drop to spare ye. Clara's milkin' well now the grass is greenin' up."

"Thank you, Bell. I shall return the favour once Frodo returns from market." Both gentlehobbits were beaten to the door by May, who dropped a very proper curtsy as she opened it.

Bilbo grinned and was about to exit when the kitchen door banged open at the other end of the room and a strange grey apparition stepped into the smial.

It seemed Daisy had done as her mother requested and finished the job of beating the rugs, for she carried both of them in her arms. The rugs were beauties, painstakingly knotted from rags Bell had collected for many years. They were vibrantly colourful. The same could not be said of Daisy Gamgee. Beating carpets was sweaty work, which meant that the clouds of dust clung to all exposed skin and coated hair and clothes.

When she saw Bilbo and Frodo, Daisy's mouth fell open. With a squeak of alarm, she dropped the rugs, turned and fled.

Frodo slapped his free hand over his mouth to stifle a laugh and concentrated upon not spilling the milk. Bilbo didn't bother with such niceties and chuckled. "I take it you're spring cleaning, Bell."

Bell grinned. "Aye. Daisy was just finishin' the carpets."

Bilbo gave the still shaking Frodo a gentle shove out of the front door. "It looks rather more as though the carpets finished Daisy."

Bell's smile widened. There was a time to bring tweens down a notch or two, and Daisy could not
have timed it better had she tried.
“May!” May turned to see Frodo Baggins slamming the gate to Bag End in his haste. She stepped back from the cart, where Tom waited patiently. Bell Gamgee, who was waiting to wave off her daughter, watched with some curiosity as her young neighbour sprinted down the lane, brown paper parcel in hand. Her lips thinned as she noted her daughter's cheeks pink and her eyes begin to sparkle. In Bell's eyes her lass was doomed to disappointment if she was setting her cap at Master Frodo. The Baggins family were way beyond the reach of folks like the Gamgee's. Bell was a firm believer in maintaining the status quo . . . as, indeed, were most hobbits. It was always good to know where you stood in life and in Bell's eyes the Gamgees stood several steps below the Baggins.

Frodo arrived, only a little out of breath, and held out his parcel to May. “I know you have been learning to write and thought you would like this.”

May accepted the package with some surprise, pushing aside the paper to reveal a small book, a pen and a little bottle of ink. Frodo's face was almost as pink as May's as he shuffled his feet a little and murmured, “I thought you would like to write a journal, so that you don't forget things and can tell your parents what you've been doing the next time you visit.”

“A journal? Goodness, Master Frodo. I don't think any of my friends will have a journal. Thank you.” May re-wrapped the package with due reverence and handed it up to Tom Carter, who sat, reins in hand. Like Bell, he was watching with some interest.

Now both youngsters stood silent for some moments, clearly at a loss as to what to say. Bell decided to help things along in the proper direction. “Go along, May, lass. Tom can't wait all day. He's got packages to deliver in Bywater and the day's gettin' on.”

May blinked and turned to put her foot on the wheel hub, then thought better of things and turned back, intending to give Frodo a peck on the cheek. Frodo chose that particular moment to turn to Bell, however, and the light kiss landed fair and square on his surprised lips. Both youngsters jumped apart as though stung, their blushes deepening, then May clambered up onto the seat beside Tom with a muttered, “Bye, Ma.”

Bell watched with a sinking feeling as a slow smile crept across Frodo's face. “Can I write to you?” he called as Tom flicked the reins and the cart pulled away down the lane. May turned to call back, “Yes, please. I'll write back.” She smiled broadly as she returned his wave and Bell shook her head slowly as she watched her daughter disappear down the lane. Mayhap distance would cool things down, the mother hoped.

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“Ma, you've got a letter,” Sam called as he entered the kitchen of Number Three. “I met the post master comin' up the hill and said as how I'd save him the walk. I've already taken the one addressed to Master Frodo up to Bag End. It's in our May's writin'.”

Bell set down the cup she had been washing and wiped her hands on her apron. “Now, why would yer sister be writin' to me so soon? Ye'd best read it to me, lad.”

Sam sat down at the table, wiping his hands on his weskit before opening the carefully folded and sealed missive. He regularly received notes from his sister but he loved being asked to do the
important task of reading out a letter addressed to his Ma. His face beamed as he read aloud.

“Dear Ma,
I hope you are well. I am very well. Mistress Eglantine says I can come home for the Thrimidge feast. It only feels like yesterday that I was home and now I can visit again. She says I can stay for a week. So I will come with Tom Carter on the eight and will be leefing on the fifteen.
Yours sincerely
May”

Bell grinned. “It will be good to have her back. I'd best tell Daisy to clear a space in the cupboard for her clothes. Did ye say there was a letter for Master Frodo too?”

Sam refolded the note and handed it over to his Ma, who tucked it carefully into her apron pocket.
“Yes, Ma. Him and May have been writin' regular. Mister Chubb often gives the letters to me to carry up the hill.”

Bell sniffed. “It don't feel right getting' Bert to come all this way to Bag End just to deliver a letter from my May. And Bert is too old to be climbin' the hill.”

Sam looked confused. “It's not that far, Ma. And when I'm in the garden I can see Mister Chubb as he crosses the bridge. I can run down and fetch the letters if you like.”

Bell only turned back to her washing of the pots. “Daisy! Daisy. Have ye changed the sheets on yer bed today?”

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“She's here, Ma!” Sam burst through the door, with little Marigold giggling at his side. Behind them, Bell could see May and Daisy, arm in arm, coming down the garden path. Bell slid the kettle onto the hob and wiped her hands as the girls tripped, laughing, into the kitchen. As soon as she saw her mother, May ran into her arms. “Hello Ma.”

Bell enveloped her then leaned back to examine her more critically. “Have ye grown?”

May laughed, “No, Ma. It's only been a few weeks since I was here last.”

Bell pursed her lips. “Ye look taller. Still, makes no difference. Yer still my little lass.” And she enfolded her daughter in another hug.

Daisy hoisted a huge carpet bag onto the table with a loud thud and Bell frowned. “Not on my clean kitchen table if you please. Take yer sister's bag into yer room.”

When Daisy rolled her eyes and would have complied May rushed to stop her. “No. Wait a minute. Mistress Eglantine sent some presents.”

Bell frowned. “Presents from the mistress of Great Smials? Whatever did she do that for? I hope she don't think we're paupers.”

May laughed as she opened the bag. “No, Ma. She just said as how she wanted to give somethin' to the festival day. If I stayed there for Thrimidge Day she'd be feedin' me so she said she didn't see why I should miss out. I see the Prancin' Pole's already up in the Party Field.” As she spoke she began to unwrap several packages that she laid out upon the table. When she had finished May pointed to each in turn.

“There's some powdered sugar, butter, a Thrimidge cake, cheese, tea … the best tea, Ma … chocolate and some pipe weed for Da.”
The Gamgee family only stood and stared for a moment. The Thrimidge cake was encased in thick hard white icing and Bell's practiced nose could detect a liberal waft of brandy from within. The chocolate was grated for cooking or making drinks and the pipeweed was none other than Longbottom Leaf. Bell finally found her voice and her common sense as she smiled at her daughter. Pride was all well and good but sometimes gifts were just that, gifts. “Well now, that's very nice of Mistress Eglantine and please tell her, thank ye. Mayhap, when ye go back, I'll send ye with a cake as our Thrimidge present to her.”

The youngsters about the table let out a sigh of relief, imagining toast dripping in butter, posh Thrimidge cake with sweet tea, cups of hot chocolate or, even better, Ma's finest chocolate cake. Daisy was calculating how many cakes could be made with the butter and sugar even as she ferried them to the pantry.

Marigold reached out a grubby finger to touch the icing and Bell tapped it away. “Oh, no ye don't, lass. That's for Thrimidge and that's three days away. Daisy, come and put this in the pantry afore it gets mucky finger marks all over it.”

May giggled. “Now, Mari, that reminds me. I've got something for you.” She rummaged in her bag, finally producing two pretty green satin ribbons. “I expect they'll drop in the mud within five minutes of putting them in your hair but I thought you'd like them.”

Marigold's eyes widened and she wiped her hands on her already grubby pinafore before accepting them and holding them out to her Ma for approval. Bell smiled fondly. “That's sweet of ye lass. We'll keep 'em for best and she can wear them on Thrimidge.”

As Daisy returned she, like Sam, hovered a little expectantly and May did not disappoint. Two more little gifts were produced . . . a bright blue satin sash for Daisy and two pencils for Sam.

Bell tutted. “Yer a bonnie lass, May Gamgee, but ye shouldn't be spendin' yer hard earned money on us. When yer Da gave ye back half yer pay, him and me hoped ye'd spend it on somethin' nice fer yerself. We've got all we need.”

May only laughed. “Ma, I get food and board for free, and my uniform. I don't need to spend a lot on myself. I got some cloth for a couple of dresses and bits, and that's all I needed. I got these in Michel Delving when the Mistress took all us lasses in for the day last month.”

Sam's mouth dropped open in awe. Michel Delving was the nearest thing the Shire had to a town, boasting a whole street of shops. “You've been to Michel Delving? Is it big? Did you see the Mayor?”

May laughed again. “I don't know what the Mayor looks like so I don't know whether I saw him or not. It's not that big, either, but there was a big drapers shop. You would love it, Ma. Lots of beautiful cloth. Very posh. I think it was called Berttisl's or some such.” She winked at her younger brother. “It was a long name, anyway, and written in posh letters so I couldn't quite read it. I didn't like to ask for fear of lookin' stupid in front of the Mistress.”

At that moment the kettle lid began to rattle and Bell turned to lift it from the heat. “Ye'd best get yer things put away, May. Tea will be ready in a minute. Ye've just time to wash yer hands and face.”

The next morning dawned bright and clear and was everything a late spring morning should be. When Bilbo and Frodo arrived at Number Three the kitchen was a hive of activity. It was Hamfast Gamgee who opened the door and waved them in to the chaos. “Come in, sirs. I think the missus is almost ready. They're just packing the last of the baskets. I see you've brought your own.”
Bilbo nodded to the hamper held between himself and Frodo. “We have, indeed. We thought you wouldn’t object to a little extra.”

Frodo’s eyes went straight to where May was folding a linen cloth and placing it in one of several wicker baskets on the table and, following the direction of his gaze, Bilbo noted a flush of pink touch May’s cheeks. Frodo at least had the presence of mind to contribute to the conversation. “It was very good of you and Mistress Gamgee to invite us to join you for the Gathering.”

“A picnic is no fun with only two and you’ve always been good to me and mine,” Ham answered, readily before adding, “In any case, I can use an extra set of hands cuttin’ the Yule log.”

“And food always seems to go further when there’s plenty to share it,” Bell contributed as she wrapped a shawl about her shoulders. High summer was still a way off and everyone had brought an extra layer against the cooler late spring breezes.

Only five minutes later everyone was trooping down the lane. They would be collecting the Hawthorn blossom from Farmer Brownlock’s hedgerows so at the end of the lane they turned right and away from Hobbiton. May contrived to walk alongside Bilbo and Frodo. “Do you usually gather the Hawthorn on your own then, sirs?”

Bilbo jumped in before Frodo had time to reply. “Oh, no. I don't usually bother, if I'm honest.”

Frodo chuckled. “You mean, you usually forget. I've no doubt you've always had your head in a book.”

His uncle grinned. “You may be right. But I've always thought that Thrimidge is a celebration for the young. All that dancing and such . . .”

May laughed prettily. “Oh, I've seen you dance at the Yule Fire, Mister Baggins. I reckon you could show some of the tweens a lesson or two.”

Frodo hid a grin, slipping May a sly wink as Bilbo preened a little. “Well, one tries to stay fit,” his uncle replied as he tweaked his cravat.

For some minutes they walked on in silence, content to listen to the light banter going on around them. It seemed that although the choice for Thrimidge Queen had been narrowed there was still some debate upon the King. Frodo had been alarmed last week when he heard that he was being considered for the role, mainly because he knew Daisy Gamgee was the front runner for Queen. Indeed, Daisy had taken great delight in advising him of that fact. The final vote would take place tomorrow, with Thrimidge Day only one day after that. Frodo tried to turn his mind to something else.

“Have you heard from Hal and Ham recently?” he asked May.

“I haven’t had any letters but Ma says she had a note from Hal sayin’ they’re both well. I think Hal had it from Ham by way of the landlord in the Pig and Whistle in Oakbottom and then by Tom Carter.”

Bilbo shook his head at the convoluted process that would have been so much simpler if folk would only bother to learn to read and write. “Are you still enjoying working in Tookborough?” he asked.

“Oh yes, sir. Mistress Eglantine took a few of us girls into Michel Delving last month, by way of a treat. They have proper shops there and everything.”

Bilbo held open the five bar gate for her. “We do have a couple of shops in Hobbiton, if you
remember,” he pointed out with a wry grin.

May sniffed with all the disdain of a young person who has just tasted the heady sweetness of city living. “Only a baker and a butcher. Michel Delving has a drapers, a candlemakers and even a tailor and a dressmaker.” May looked down at her pretty spring dress. “Can you imagine having someone make your clothes for you?”

Her comment was met with a chuckle by the older hobbit, who was in the process of arranging a visit to his tailor. Frodo jumped to May's defence however. “I don't think you need the services of a dressmaker. You're obviously very skilled with a needle and thread. Your dress is beautiful.” He blushed and May ducked her head, but Bilbo noticed a smile touch the lass' lips. The older hobbit decided that the next few days could prove to be interesting. He rather enjoyed watching each new generation perform the courtship dance from the safety of his long bachelorhood.

In true hobbit fashion the picnic was set out before cutting of the hawthorn or the Yule commenced and, of course, some of the sandwiches had to be sampled. So it was mid morning before the party divided into smaller groups, armed with pruning knives and empty baskets. It was a good year for hawthorn blossom and many folk suggested that this was a good sign for a plentiful harvest to come. Of course, there were those who considered that more blossom would result in more berries and more berries signalled a harsh winter to come. Such was the nature of country sayings.

Frodo and May moved a little farther up the field and, when Frodo spotted a gap in the hawthorn, he suggested they cut blossom from the other side of the hedge, as that had not been picked over yet. May selected the branches and Frodo cut, handing them over to May, who stacked them neatly in their basket.

“I enjoyed reading your letters. Your writing improves with each one,” Frodo offered.

“It's getting easier to write but I still have trouble reading stuff when folk use fancy writing,” May replied ruefully. “Why can't everyone write the same? I can read yours and Sam's but some folks write so flowery . . .”

Frodo chuckled as he cut the next white, blossom-laden branch. May had dropped to her knees to adjust the basket's load and a little flurry of flowers landed in her hair, making her giggle. Frodo dropped to one knee before May to help pick the tiny blossom out of her ringlets.

Leaning forward Frodo was aware of the light chamomile-apple fragrance of her, mingled with the heady sweetness of the hawthorn blossom, and the silky softness of her curls between his fingers. Two sets of hands slowed as their fingers touched in May's ringlets and she lifted liquid brown eyes to meet the shining blue of his. For a long moment Frodo was held captive then his gaze dropped lower, to her pale pink lips, and curiosity took him. He wondered if they would feel as plump and soft as they looked. Gently, he used a hand upon her cheek to tilt her head, just a little, and leaned in. Her lips were soft and moist, tasting of honey and mint and he closed his eyes to better savour the experience.

“Master Frodo, Master Frodo .. . Ma says if you don't come quick there'll be no food left and Da's askin' for your help in felling the tree for the Yule logs!”

Frodo and May started apart to find young Sam standing a few yards away. Frodo held out a hand to help May to her feet and lifted the basket in his other. Sam carried on a stream of chatter as he led the way back to the picnic cloths and the rest of the party. “Ma couldn't find you and she sent me to look for you, but it's taken me ages, because I didn't think to look behind the hedge until I heard May laughing, and then I couldn't find a gap . . .”
Frodo climbed down the ladder, nodding thanks to Bartimus Brockbank, who was holding it steady for him. Both stood back to admire their handiwork.

A ring of poles had been set in place in the centre of the Party Field and Frodo had been one of those tasked with threading the swags of hawthorn blossom between them. The ladies of Hobbiton had been working hard all morning, twining blossom with ivy to make the heavy swags and the younger lads had been given the task of setting them in place.

“Have you heard about the King and Queen?” asked Bartimus. His sister was one of those short listed for the role of Queen. Ruby had been doing some pretty intense campaigning for the title and, bearing in mind that the King and Queen were supposed to represent the land's fertility, Frodo secretly held the view that she would be well suited to the role. He had certainly cast his vote for her. In truth, he would have voted for anyone but Daisy Gamgee.

“Have the votes been counted, then?” he asked as his stomach turned queezy somersaults.

“Aye. Our Ruby's at home, primping even now. I expect Ma will bring her down a peg in a few days but last I saw she was tryin' to talk Ma into cuttin' three inches off the bottom of her skirt.” Ruby was not what anyone would call a great beauty but she was very popular with the lads, for reasons that brought a winsome smile to Frodo's lips.

“So, who's the King, then?” Frodo asked, trying to decide whether he was upset or relieved that it was obviously not him.

Bartimus snorted. “Orton Sandiman, would you believe?”

Related to Ted Sandiman, Hobbiton's miller, Orton had inherited the family's sour temperament. Sadly, as the the only miller for miles around, when Ted put his weight behind the voting it was almost a foregone conclusion that Orton would be crowned. “I'm sorry,” Frodo offered in heartfelt condolence.

“Aye. Daisy Gamgee is fair spittin' that she didn't get the crown but I don't think there's a lass for miles about who has a fancy for Orton. Even our Ruby.” Bartimus grinned. “It'll make my job easier at least.”

Bartimus was big, in all directions, and made an excellent bodyguard for his wayward sister. He had once nearly caught Frodo in the bushes with Ruby at a Harvest Reel and, although they had not come face to face upon that occasion, Bartimus had later made it very clear that he knew exactly what could have happened. He also made it very clear what would have happened to Frodo if what could have happened, had. Since then he and Frodo had become friends. So it was without fear that Frodo replied, “I'd still keep an eye on her if I were you.”

Bartimus gave a rumbling chuckle. “Oh, I will.”

Just then a shout went up and a crowd of tweens and youngsters ran into the field. At their centre ran Delbin Chubb, holding aloft a wreath of hawthorn blossom and ivy. When he reached the beribboned Prancing Pole he dropped the wreath about his neck and began to shin upward to the chant of, “Climb, climb, climb, climb ...”

As Delbin clambered upward Frodo was reminded of a dwarven-made toy Bilbo had given him when a faunt. The stick had a strange little hairy creature that Bilbo told him was called a monkey, and when you pulled a string it ascended the stick. Not that Delbin could have been compared to the monkey in anything but climbing skill . . . well . . . not much.
Delbin's arrival at the apex was greeted with a loud cheer and much clapping and, now playing to the crowd, Delbin waved the wreath enthusiastically before dropping it neatly over the top of the pole and tying it in place. Frodo wondered if it were a reflection of his impending maturity that he was concerned Delbin would fall, and was relieved when his young neighbour was safely back on the ground. Frodo and Bartimus fell in with the other youngsters, however, as they left the field, joining in the general back slapping being awarded to Delbin.

Half an hour later Frodo and Bartimus sat on a bench outside the Ivy Bush, nursing two halves of cider.

“Daisy tells me May is home for a few days,” Bartimus observed with a twinkle.

“Yes,” Frodo replied non-committally.

Bartimus grinned as he took a good swallow of his drink. “They say she's growin' into a bonnie lass. I expect there'll be lots of lads hopin' she asks them for a dance tomorrow. Maybe I'll join 'em.”

“Better not,” Frodo mumbled into his mug.

Bartimus chuckled. “Don't fret. As usual, I'll be too busy keepin' an eye on our Ruby. I don't expect she'll get up to much mischief with Orton but I know she's got an eye on a few other lads. Your May is safe from me. Anyway, I'm hopin' for a prance about the pole with Daisy.”

After his initial shock that anyone would actually volunteer to dance with Daisy Gamgee Frodo tried on his most innocent expression. “She's not my May. She can dance with whoever she wants to.”

Bartimus' guffaw let Frodo know that he was not fooled in the slightest. “You surely don't think nobody knows you're sweet on each other? Little Sam Gamgee's been tellin' anyone who'll listen, how you two have been writin' to each other. He's right proud of the fact that his big sister can write and I don't have to read to be able to add two and two.”

“Does all Hobbiton know, then?”

Bartimus made a point of considering for several moments before replying with a grin, “Pretty much. And as Tom Carter gets to carry the letters I expect the rest of the Shire does too.”

Frodo groaned, dropping his head into his hands.
Chapter Summary

Hamfast Gamgee bares all and his daughters have a spat.

Thrimidge was another clear, bright, late spring day that perched hopefully upon the cusp of summer. As was the custom, anyone not involved in last minute preparations, went down to the local farms to watch all the cattle being driven between two large bonfires. Frodo had not encountered this tradition in Buckland and Bilbo had to explain that the custom was supposed to impart protection on the herds. Watching some of the cows roll their eyes Frodo was not so sure that anyone had stopped to explain this to the poor beasts, but the event seemed to go off well enough.

Unlike other feast days, Thrimidge did not have a market fair. Everyone was expected to join in the festivities and nobody worked, so by lunch time the Party Field was packed with picnic cloths and when Bilbo and Frodo arrived they at first thought they would have difficulty finding a space.

“Over here, Mister Bilbo, sir!” Little Sam Gamgee ran up to them, waving toward a small group off to one side. When they followed they discovered all the occupants of the hill seated together. Even the usually introvert Arty Sedgeburry had put in an appearance.

“Greetings of the day to you all,” Bilbo offered with a wide smile. “I'm afraid we may not be able to join you. I don't think I have ever seen the field so full. Perhaps Frodo and I can find somewhere farther away from the Pole.”

“Oh, that's alright, sir. Me and the lasses have saved you a place,” Sam announced proudly as his sisters stood and whisked away the cloth they had been sitting upon.

Bilbo's smile was in danger of splitting his face in two. “How clever of you. Thank you. Come along, Frodo. Let us join our neighbours and set out our luncheon.”

It took only minutes for Bilbo and Frodo to arrange their spread and if Sam and Marigold looked on enviously at the finger sandwiches, pies, buns, flans, cakes, scones, cold meats and salads Bilbo only winked and said nothing. And if May Gamgee switched places with her younger sister so that she was seated closer to Frodo, Bell also said nothing.

“Ham, love. Stand still. I can't tie these on when yer jiggin' about. Ye've been practicin' yer steps for weeks. In fact I watched ye so often I reckon I could do 'em myself,” Bell pronounced with a chuckle as she tried to tie the shield of bells about her husband's muscular calves. Ham Gamgee was one of Hobbiton's team of Thrimidge Prancers and was dressed today in white shirt and breeches, trimmed with brightly coloured ribbons. When Bell had finished Ham whisked up his hawthorn blossom trimmed hat and held out his arms. “Well, lass. Will I do?”

Bell snorted. “If ye don't bend down to much, aye. I think I need to let out those breeches a bit afore next year.”

Ham looked down at his belly, which was taxing the quality of Bell's button sewing abilities a little alarmingly. “You let 'em out last year and the year afore. I don't think there's any more left to let.”

Bell sighed. “Then I'd best get some cloth to make ye another pair for next year. For today ye'll just
have to suck it in and ye can trot home to change when ye've finished yer prancin'.” At the jingle of several sets of bells she thrust a ribbon trimmed stick at him. “Here. Ye'd best get off and join the others. They're linin' up over yonder.”

Before he turned to join the line Ham pointed to Frodo with a grin. “Ye'd best pay attention Master Frodo. I think Cob Chubb is thinkin' of asking you to join before next year's Prance. Don't think your dancin' skills at the Harvest Reel haven't gone unnoticed.” With those words he trotted off toward the other assembled dancers.

Frodo's eyes widened and May Gamgee giggled to see it. “Don't worry, Frodo. The steps aren't hard and they only dance once a year.” Bell noted the dropping of Master Frodo's honorific with pursed lips. She and May needed to have a serious talk, and soon. In her eyes May was setting her cap at someone way above her station in life and was heading for heartache. First love was always the hardest, she observed.

Someone struck up a drum and the two lines of Prancers were off. Frodo did pay attention, watching several of Hobbiton's finest form their figures, tap sticks or wave kerchiefs, jump and prance, all the while the bells on their calves tinging in perfect synchrony with the drum. All around them folk cheered when they formed a particularly intricate figure or leapt especially high, and the applause was ecstatic by the time they bowed to each other at the end.

When a rather sweaty Ham returned Bell offered him a cup of lemonade that he downed in one go. “Phew! I'm gettin' too old for this, Bell, lass.”

Bell refilled his cup. “I've been tellin' ye that for the past three years. Yer goin' to have to give it up or stop eatin'. Go home and change. And ye'd best have a wash while yer at it. I don't fancy sittin' next to yer sweaty body all afternoon.” All about them, heads dipped down to hide grins for Bell Gamgee did not mince her words.

Ham took it all in good part, however, throwing back his head to laugh before bending down to give her a loud, smack of a kiss full on her lips. Unfortunately, the sound of the kiss was accompanied by the sound of Ham's breeches finally giving up the battle, and that was too much for the assembled company, who began to laugh uproariously as the gaping hole in the back seem revealed to all the world, Hamfast Gamgee's under garments.

The sound of a fiddle tuning up signalled dancing of another type and Daisy Gamgee suddenly leapt to her feet and reached out a hand to Frodo. It was the custom at Thrimidge for the lasses to invite the lads to dance. “Come prance with me, Master Frodo.”

Too polite to refuse Frodo only had time to cast a rueful smile to the astonished May before he was being tugged away to the Prancing Pole. There the lads and lasses formed two concentric circles, each grabbing a ribbon. As the music struck up each circle began to move in opposite directions, weaving in and out as the figures were called. With each step the ribbons shortened, and they drew closer and closer to the pole until bodies began to brush against each other. A final twist was called and each lad found himself bound close to a lass.

There was much blushing and giggling as the crowd shouted, good naturedly, “Kiss the lasses! Kiss the lads!”

The calling had been done to perfection so that each person was now with their original partner and Daisy Gamgee arched a knowing brow at Frodo, who would have squirmed had his body not been plastered so close against hers. Daisy had no such compunction, however, noting that to her side the hawthorn crowned Ruby Brockbank was trying to avoid Ortis' slobbery kiss. Daisy took a deep breath, which had the effect of mashing her soft breasts into Frodo's suddenly cringing chest.
The crowd were still calling, and out of the corner of his eyes he could see several couples already obliging. Frodo realised that to not comply was to draw unwanted attention, not to mention possibly humiliating Daisy, who was already smarting from having been pipped to the post for Thrimidge Queen. As part of the Shire gentry, Frodo was wise enough to know that he would be in demand for the dancing and by asking him for the first prance Daisy had scored a coup. He leaned in to place a soft kiss upon her pursed lips, surprised when he drew back, to see a shimmer of tears in her eyes. Just before the music started, to guide them all apart again, she leaned in to whisper, “Thank you, Master Frodo.”

As he followed the figures to unwind the ribbons Frodo considered that moment and filed it away for later examination. He knew that many of the local lads were as wary as he of Daisy Gamgee's sharp tongue and flirtatious ways, but perhaps she was not as harsh as she outwardly appeared. When the music stopped he offered his arm to escort her back to their party, bowing low and giving his hand to lower her courteously to the ground.

He could feel the icy chill emanating from May as he retook his place at Bilbo’s side. As, it seemed, could everyone else for conversation was suddenly muted. From her place across from May, Daisy gave a haughty toss of her head and pointedly stared down her younger sister. Frodo pondered on how May could give off such a chill and yet have such fire blazing in her eyes, and he drew in a sharp breath as she reached across to fill her sister's cup, instead pouring lemonade all over Daisy's skirt.

May put a hand to her mouth in mock horror as Daisy shrieked and leapt to her feet to try and brush off the sticky liquid. Bell Gamgee looked from one daughter to the other, her lips thinning. Grabbing May's arm and hoisting her to her feet she led both girls from the field. The last thing Frodo heard was Bell's firm, “Right, my lasses, tis long past time ye and me had a talk.”

Bilbo patted Frodo on the back, offering a rueful smile and a pork pie. “I've never understood why they're considered to be the gentler sex. I suspect the Dark Lord would have been defeated much sooner had he been set against an army of ladies.”

Frodo accepted the pie. Thrimudge was not exactly going to the plan he had formulated so carefully in his head when he lying, staring at his bedroom ceiling last night.

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Hamfast was coming out of Number Three as Bell and the girls arrived. Blinking in surprise he held the door open for them. “Hello Daisy. Did you spill yer lemonade?”

Daisy stomped past him, sparing only a moment to shoot an evil look at her sister over her shoulder as she replied, tersely, “No.”

Ham would have upbraided his daughter for such insolence to her father, but Bell only shook her head. “Ye'd best go see to the youngsters. I'll sort out this one.” She leaned in to place a peck on his cheek. “I'll explain later.”

Giving her a quick squeeze her husband left, closing the door behind him. This was obviously women's business and he'd long since learned to stay out of it.

Daisy and May were standing in the kitchen, staring daggers at each other across the width of the kitchen table. Bell sighed. “Daisy, go change yer dress then bring it out here and put it in a bucket of cold water to soak.” When Daisy looked as though she would argue Bell only narrowed her eyes. “Now, Daisy. I'll speak to ye after I've had words with yer sister.”

Daisy flounced off and Bell gave her attention to May, who was looking unrepentant. Her mother
decided it was time to change that. “Well? What was that about? As if I didn't know.”

May was not about to let go of her anger. “Daisy knew I was goin' to ask Frodo for the first prance. She'd no right to go and do that.” Bell folded arms across her matronly bosom. “For goodness sake, lass. It were a dance. Nothin’ more. Ye've got the whole day to dance with Master Frodo and any other lad that takes yer fancy.”

“I'm sure Master Frodo is mine!” May blinked in alarm as though surprised that the words had slipped out.

Bell nodded. “Aye. This is part my fault. I knew the way the wind was blowin' but I hoped it would blow out with time. May, lass, Master Frodo is a sweet lad but he's not for the likes of us.” When May only looked mutinous Bell continued. “He's polite and he treats every lass, high born or low, like a lady. Now that can turn a lass’ head if she's not careful, thinkin' she means somethin' to him. But he's a gentlehobbit and when he weds it needs to be to a lass that can stand up in high company.”

May's shoulders dropped. “But I know how to set a table for posh folks and I'm learnin' to read and write,” she pointed out with a little less conviction.

Bell wanted to wrap her up in her arms, knowing how harsh this was going to be, and wishing she could spare her daughter the pain. “I know, lass. But it takes more than that. Master Frodo is very book learned and he needs a life mate who can match him. Couples don't spend all the rest of their days kissin' an' canoodlin'. They talk sometimes. What would ye talk about? I know ye like to write but are ye fond of history, dwarves, elves and the like?”

From the size of their family, Bell secretly wondered if Dandy and Flora Bracegirdle did anything but canoodling but that was another pairing and another matter. Of course, Bell had seen many a good marriage between two opposing characters, grow and thrive. Whilst May could be relied upon to run a good home and raise children, Bell had other reasons for worrying whether any lass of the Shire would be able to keep Frodo Baggins happy over time.

Often, through the years, Bell had seen a far-away look in Bilbo Baggin’s eyes when he looked to the east, and recently Bell had surprised the same expression in Frodo’s eyes once or twice. It was a gaze that said he was thinking of places far beyond the safe boundaries of the Shire. Who was to say that, one day, he too would not run off after dwarves or elves? Bell had no doubt that Frodo was enough of a gentlehobbit not to run off and leave his wife and bairns unsupported, but he may just grow to resent them, and Bell was determined that such would not happen to her daughter.

May settled onto one of the benches flanking the table. “I suppose your right. I hadn't thought about that.”

Bell came to sit at her side. “No lass. I didn't think ye had. Yer young yet and the right lad for ye will come along one day. Don't ye fret. Dance with Master Frodo if ye've a mind to, but dance with other lads too. There's lots of 'em out there and yer a fine catch yerself.” She tucked a strand of her daughter's hair behind her ear.

May leaned in and Bell wrapped an arm about her. May made one last complaint, however. “Daisy was still bad to do what she did.”

Her mother sighed. “Ye know as well as me that yer sister is all bluster on the outside and soft as butter on the inside. She had her heart set on bein' Thrimidge Queen this year. She may not show it, but she was proper hurt when Ruby got the crown. Did ye happen to notice who was standing next to yer sister round that pole?”
Light dawned in May's eyes. “Ruby and Ortis.”

Bell was pleased that her daughter was seeing sense at last. “Exactly. She knew that Ruby, along with half the lasses in Hobbiton, wanted Frodo Baggins to be King. I expect Ortis was low on Ruby's list of hoped for partners.”

“Poor Ruby. And poor Daisy.” May raised watery eyes to her mother. “I was so wrapped up in my wants that I'd forgotten about Daisy.”

Bell gave her a quick squeeze. “Well don't be too sorry for yer sister. I've yet to talk to her. But I think she'd appreciate ye sayin' sorry about the dress. It was her best, after all.”

May gave a nod and fished in her pocket for a hanky to blow her nose. “I'll go speak to her now.”

She was stayed once more by her mother however. “Ye go back to the party, lass. Daisy needs to cool down a mite. Ye can say sorry later. I need a word with her first.” When May didn't move Bell stood. “Come on lass. Off ye go. Ye don't want to miss any more prances. I expect Master Frodo at least is wonderin' where ye are.”

May leaned in to kiss her mother's cheek before leaving and Bell let out an explosive sigh, before squaring her shoulders to go and beard the lioness in her den. As she expected, Daisy was sobbing into her pillow, her best dress in a screwed-up puddle on the floor. Bell collected the dress, pausing to assess the damage before sitting upon the edge of the bed. She knew that her eldest daughter’s tears were about much more than a spoiled skirt.

“Come on, lass. That's enough of that. Tis not the end of the world.” When Daisy sat up her mother held out a clean hanky. “Wipe yer eyes and blow yer nose. Snot and tears is not a good look on any lass.”

Daisy complied but she frowned at her mother. “I hope you gave May a good tellin' off. She's ruined my frock and made me look a proper fool in front of Mister Baggins.”

Bell's eyes widened. “Mister Baggins is it? Are ye sure it's not young Master Baggins yer meanin'?”

Daisy had the good grace not to deny that. “Well, she's still spoilt my frock.”

“And why do ye think she did that?” Bell asked.

Daisy studied the soggy hanky in her hands. “I'm sure I don't know.”

“Oh, I'm sure ye do. Didn't yer sister tell ye she was goin' to ask Master Frodo for the first prance?”

Daisy was not going to capitulate easily. “She may have mentioned it. I wasn't payin' attention. She's always talkin' about Master Frodo. It's all, 'Master Frodo says this' and 'Master Frodo says that'. I've given up listenin'.”

“And there's the rub. Ye weren't listenin' to her because ye were thinkin' about yer own wants and she weren't listenin' to ye because she was thinkin' about her wants.” When Daisy looked up in surprise Bell continued. “Ye wanted to be Queen and she wanted Master Frodo. I know yer disappointed and ye saw a way to get back at Ruby, but ye hurt yer sister in the doin' of it. I'm not sayin' what she did was right either, but are ye so surprised that she wanted to hurt ye back?”

Daisy met her mother's gaze at last. “No Ma. Is May awful hurt? Is she still in the kitchen? I'd best go say, 'sorry'.”
Bell nodded. “There's my good lass. No, she's gone to ask Master Frodo for the next prance, and if ye've a mind to prance with Bartimus Brockbank ye'd best wash yer face, change yer frock and follow her.”

A little of Daisy's old fire returned, to her mother's delight. “Why would I want to dance with that lass' big oaf of a brother?”

Bell chuckled as she bent to kiss her eldest on the brow. “Because ye've been makin' calf eyes at him fer the past three month. Don't ye deny it. I'm yer mother and tis my job to notice these things.”

Daisy grinned. “Mayhap I have. But I'll not let him know that.”

Bell swept from the room, Daisy's damp frock in hand. “Then how will ye ask him for a prance?” She left her daughter to consider that one.

They were calling for the next group of prancers when Frodo saw May returning. She had lost her pinched look and she smiled widely at him as she held out a hand. “Will you prance with me, Master Frodo?”

Frodo scrambled to his feet with a broad smile of his own. “I'd be honoured to, Miss May.”

When they kissed sweetly at the pole Frodo felt that something had changed, although he could not put his finger upon what it could be.

He never got to steal another kiss and May’s letters grew less frequent. As time went on, the daily events of life crowded out his feelings for May Gamgee and, for her part, May found new friends in Tuckborough.

Bell’s relief was mixed with some sadness for, under other circumstances, she would have loved to see Bag End filled with the bairns of May and Frodo Baggins, but she wondered if Frodo would ever resolve the burgeoning wonder-lust in his heart. Would Hobbiton awake one day to find that he and Bilbo had disappeared over the river on some dangerous adventure? If he did follow his uncle would he return, and would he be the same when he did?
Bilbo, Bell and the Bentwhistle Bargain

“Mr Bilbo! Mr Bilbo! There's dwarves, sir! Dwarves!”

Bilbo swore roundly as his quill splayed, spattering a great blue lake right in the middle of the piece of elvish translation that he had been copying so meticulously for the past hour. He took a second to throw a sheet of blotting paper onto it before looking up and trying to fix a pleasant smile on his face. It was a fine summer afternoon so the window to his study stood open to let in the lavender laden air. Frodo popped his head around the door, grinning as he saw young Sam Gamgee hopping from foot to foot in the garden beyond the casement.

Bilbo set down his now ruined quill. “Of course there are dwarves, Samwise Gamgee. It is Mid Year's Day tomorrow. They've come for the Lithe market fair, as they come every year.”

Sam slowed his jig. “But I was only little last time they came. Do they really come every year?”

Despite his ruined manuscript Bilbo grinned and, leaning against the door jamb, Frodo tried to hide his own amusement by taking another bite of his slice of toast. Sam was but a faunt and he found that he envied him, his childish excitement.

A large figure loomed behind little Sam. “Aye, they do, Sam lad. And if you don't give me a hand lifting the taters we'll have none to sell at market tomorrow. And that won't please your Ma 'cause she's wantin' some new cloth to make shirts.” Hamfast Gamgee touched his forehead in greeting to Mister Bilbo. “I'm sorry he disturbed you, sir. He was off afore I could stop him.” He shooed Sam before him, back to Number three's vegetable plot.

Bilbo shook his head, tentatively lifting a corner of the blotting paper, and sighing as the full extent of the disaster was revealed. “I shall have to start this all over again.” He examined the shattered point of his quill. “I don't suppose you have any spare goose quills? This was my last and it's beyond sharpening.”

Frodo nodded. “I think I have a spare. Maybe that's something we need to add to tomorrow's market list.”

“Market? I usually get my quills from Clover Mugwort.”

“She had to kill her goose last month, Bilbo. Remember? It got caught up in a fence and broke its wing. We'll have to buy them from now on.”

“Did she not keep any of the feathers?” Bilbo asked with some exasperation.

“She sold the down and finer ones to Mistress Chubb, who needed some to finish stuffing a pillow. And I'm afraid she took all the quills to market.” Frodo raised his brows. “Mistress Mugwart did ask you at the time whether you would like a few but you said you had enough.”

“I don't remember that,” Bilbo replied a little sourly.

Long used to his uncle's quixotic moods Frodo only smiled. “To be fair, I think you were deep in a translation at the time.”

Bilbo sniffed. “That would account for it.”

Frodo giggled as he left to fetch his uncle the spare quill while Bilbo pulled out a fresh sheet of paper
and began to prick out the lines.

Mid Year's Day dawned bright and clear and, looking down the hill whilst drinking his second cup of tea, Frodo watched wagons being emptied and awnings raised on the party field. Nobody knew when the field had gained its appellation, but Bilbo said that the folk of Hobbiton had used it to hold parties and fairs since before even he was born. Sheep were grazed on it for most of the year, ensuring that the grass remained cropped short but the flock was now returned to Farmer Cotton’s land and Frodo had joined all the other youngsters in raking clean the grass a few days earlier.

Frodo’s gaze was drawn back repeatedly to two brightly painted covered wagons set a little apart from the rest. He was not the only one. Hobbits throughout the field were watching with interest, some covertly, some of the younger ones less so. A tall dwarf jumped down from the tailgate of the larger wagon and someone began throwing items to him from inside. Frodo marvelled as the blue hatted figure caught everything nimbly, whatever its shape or size.

All around the wagon hobbits stilled, as fascinated as Frodo, as the heap in his arms grew taller and taller, until it was clearly impossible for the bearer to see over the top of it. Staggering a little, the dwarf took half a dozen steps and then lowered the heap to the grass, losing not one single item. Straightening and finding himself the centre of attention, he swept off his hat and gave a low bow, before plonking it back on his dark head with a wide grin. His assembled audience clapped and laughed, before turning back to their own work.

“Show off,” Bilbo muttered good naturedly from behind Frodo. He held two mugs, swapping Frodo’s empty one for one of the freshly filled ones in his hands. “I suspect that’s Donnet. He’s always been a brash one. Young dwarves tend to be a bit showy in my experience.”

Frodo absorbed that piece of information silently. He had lived in Hobbiton for a few years now but had always celebrated Lithe with family at Tookborough or Buckland, so this was his first experience of this travelling group of traders. In his opinion this tall person, with his almost black hair and beard, would stand out in any hobbit company, regardless of how un-brashly he behaved.

“What the same dwarves come every year? I've only ever seen them from a distance, on the road from Buckland.” Frodo sipped his tea, judging it to have stood a little too long in the pot.

“Mostly. The main group remains the same, although occasionally a youngster travels with them, for the experience.”

“Are they the same dwarves you travelled with?”

Bilbo’s face clouded for a moment. “Some of those are no longer with us. Of the others, most are now leaders of their people and have no time for trading trips. No. This group travels from the Lonely Mountain, through Rivendell or Rohan, on to Bree and then to the Shire, sometimes even as far as the Grey Havens on the coast. They have been making the trip, twice yearly, for as long as I can remember.”

“Even before your adventure?” Frodo tried not to grimace as he took another sip of his thick tea.

“Bless you, yes! Dwarves have been trading with hobbits since before we settled in the Shire. You could say that they moved west with us, for Master Elrond tells me that hobbits originally came from the other side of the Misty Mountains too.” Bilbo took a large swallow from his own cup and shuddered. “This tea is stewed. Let's go inside and have second breakfast. Then we can brew a fresh pot.”
By noon the party field was thronged with folk. Some had come by pony and cart, some dragged hand carts behind them and others had resorted to bringing wheelbarrows to carry their purchases home. In one corner the owner of the Ivy Bush had set up trestle tables under an awning and was dispensing ale. A hog had been roasting over the firepit next to him for several hours and there was now a queue of folk waiting to purchase a slice . . . or two. Other hobbits had taken this arrangement as a signal that this was the picnic area and so several families and groups had spread blankets and cloths upon the sweet grass for luncheon.

Living as close as they did, Bilbo and Frodo could have eaten at home but Bell and Hamfast Gamgee had sent their usual invitation to join their family, after first begin' their pardon at takin' such a liberty an' all. And Bilbo had made his usual reply that they were taking no liberty at all and he and Frodo would be pleased to accept. Deciding that they would enjoy some convivial company on this Midsummer's day, Frodo and Bilbo had packed an enormous picnic basket and were now searching the merry throng for their hosts.

Bilbo looked down at a little tug on his coat tails. Marigold Gamgee gave a gap-toothed grin from beneath her ginger mop and lisped, “Ma's thith way.” Bilbo smiled down at her. “Lead the way, little Miss Marigold,” he instructed with a small bow. Marigold's shy smile widened as she slipped a slightly sticky hand in his and began to tug toward an area by the hedge. There the Gamgee household were arranged at their ease around a huge red and white chequered tablecloth. Not that there was much cloth visible for Bell had been cooking and preparing for days. As the occupants of Bag End drew near the family made to rise but Bilbo waved them down at once.

“We don't stand on ceremony today. My goodness, Bell, but have been busy. But just in case, we brought some more to add to the feast. I hope you won't be offended.” He and Frodo lowered their basket and began to remove their offerings.

Bell only bent to kiss little Marigold's curls as she settled at her mother's side. “Bless ye, sir. With two growing bairns to fill I'll welcome any food ye bring. Although ye needn't have bothered. We would have managed.”

“It's no bother.” Sam and Marigold's eyes grew wide and everyone began to lick their lips as Frodo made room on the cloth for Bilbo to set out their contribution to the Lithe feast.

Knowing that sugar was an expensive commodity and salad vegetables easy enough for the Gamgees to provide, Bilbo and Frodo had set too, making deserts. To the salads, pies, sandwiches, crusty bread, cheese, and fruit scones that Bell had brought the Baggins' added a strawberry flan, complete with a bowl of whipped cream, a sponge cake, oozing cream and raspberry jam, a moist carrot cake, decorated with tiny marzipan carrots and layered with buttercream. Last of all came a huge bowl of trifle, with it's carefully constructed layers of fruit, sponge cake, jelly, custard, and cream. This had taken Frodo the best part of yesterday to create, with the whipped cream added just this morning. He had even thought to pack several small bowls and spoons to dispense it into.

Bell grinned. “Well now, aint that just the perfect finish to the meal. Everyone help yerselves to whatever ye fancy. There's plenty for all.” When Sam's hand began to creep toward a marzipan carrot she tapped it firmly however. “Let’s start with some sandwiches and salad,” she suggested pointedly. Sam soon forgot any resentment as his Ma piled a plate for him, with egg sandwiches, tomatoes, pork pie and spring onions while Da poured lemonade for everyone.

While Bell filled a smaller plate for Marigold, Frodo began selecting for his own. “Did you sell all your potatoes, Master Gamgee?” he asked as he helped himself to some cold, minted potatoes from a bowl.
“I did that, Young Master, and some beetroot and broad beans too. Made a pretty penny,” Hamfast beamed proudly.

“What with the coin we got saved and that from the taters, I'll be able to get cloth for new shirts for my Ham and little Sam, with some left over to make an apron for Daisy if I cut it right,” Bell added around a mouthful of pie.

Frodo frowned. “Where is Daisy?” He had seen little of Daisy Gamgee since Thrimidge. Not that he found that any great matter of distress, but it was only polite to ask. Daisy, the Gamgee's eldest lass, had been tormenting him ever since he arrived in Hobbiton. He was under no illusion that she had designs upon his hand in marriage. She just liked practising her wiles upon him.

Hamfast grinned. “She's been helpin' out at the widow Goodbody's three days a week. Pansy don't cope so well, with her arthritis, and now the lads and our May are away from home, Bell can manage without her a bit more. I told Pansy Goodbody that we don't need payin' but she insisted on givin' her a couple of coppers a week and Daisy's been savin' for some cloth for a new party frock.” Then he added in a mutter, “What's wrong with the old one I don’t know.”

His wife rolled her eyes. “It’s got a lemonade stain on it, remember?”

Ham winked at Frodo, who ducked his head before asking, “But where is she today?”

“She's yonder, with the Bracegirdles, down by the dance square. They invited her for the day and some of the Bracegirdle lads and lasses are about the same age as our Daisy. No doubt they're makin' a lot of noise and silly gigglin’,” Hamfast replied with a chuckle. “And if anyone were to ask me, they're welcome to make as much noise and gigglin' as they like, as long as they keep it over yonder side of the field.”

Bilbo raised his cup in mock salute to Hamfast and Bell cuffed her husband's arm playfully.

“You've not bought your cloth yet, then, Bell?” Bilbo asked as he helped himself to another sandwich.

“I've not had time. Although there's a trader come all the way from Michel Delving with some nice quality stuff.” She pointed with the slender green stem of a spring onion. “Next to them dwarves.”

Bilbo followed her direction. The dwarves were easily discovered for they had set up stalls outside their fancy covered wagons, stretching brightly coloured awnings to protect their wares. Next to them was a smaller open wagon, loaded with bolts of bright cloth. Bilbo even spotted the sheen of fine silk. A sign painted along the side of the wagon declared, “Hardeband Bentwhistle, Purveyor of Fine Fabrics To The Discerning Gentlehobbit, Michel Delving, The Shire.”

“Isn't he the one who tailors your clothes, Bilbo?” Frodo asked. Bilbo had been threatening to take Frodo to his tailor for some time now and they had an appointment with Master Bentwhistle next week. The tween had recently undergone a growth spurt and all his clothes were coming up a little too short for comfort. They’d let down the braces as far as possible, but Bilbo had spotted Frodo wince upon occasion when bending to sit.

“My tailor is Bressingbard Bentwhistle. Hardeband is Bressingbard's brother. He does carry a nice line in fine patterned waistcoat silk. Elvish stuff, some of it.” He studied Frodo’s now rather skimpy waistcoat. “I think we'll have a stroll over there after luncheon. You could do with a new suit for the Harvest Reel in a few months. If there's anything suitable we can pay for it and have Hardeband pass it on to his brother for our visit next week.”
Frodo grimaced. “Are you sure we could not just arrange a visit to Brandy Hall so that Aunt Buttercup could make one for me? She always managed quite well in the past.”

“Nonsense!” Bilbo pronounced firmly. “You are now a young gentlehobbit, needing to be fitted by a proper tailor, and Bressingbard Bentwhistle is the best in the Shire.”

Bell sent Frodo a commiseratory half smile. The step from lad to young master was not always an easy one, especially as heir to Bilbo Baggins. Bilbo liked his fine clothes, always had, but Frodo still wanted to climb trees and tickle trout in the stream. His uncle sometimes forgot how great a difference there was in their ages. Still, Bell had to concede that with Frodo's slender figure, any tailoring tricks that could be found to make him look like a properly rounded hobbit would be welcome.

“Ma, can I have some of Mr Frodo's trifle now? I've eaten some sandwiches,” Sam asked plaintively.

“Good day to you Mister Baggins. It has been some months since you last graced my establishment.” Hardeband Bentwhistle was a small, very rotund hobbit of middle years, wearing a full, tailored suit of deep green velvet, a fine gold silk waistcoat and a pale green, intricately tied cravat. The result of all this finery on a warm summer day was that he was perspiring profusely, using one hand to raise a large gold silk handkerchief to his brow, and the other to push a pair of gold wire rimmed spectacles up the not inconsequential slope of his nose.

“Hello, Hardeband. How is your lady wife nowadays?” Bilbo, fine damask waistcoat flapping open and his cravat long since tucked into his pocket, looked and sounded as cool as a cucumber.

Hardeband smiled ingratiatingly. “Nettle is very well indeed, although she does not care to travel to these events.”

Bilbo noticed a gleam in Hardeband's eye. It was well known that Nettle Bentwhistle tended to live up to her name and as a consequence, Hardeband did as much traveling as he could. Bilbo played along with the game however by stating, “I am sorry to hear that. You must miss her. Please give your good lady my regards when you return home.”

“I will, indeed. Now what can I do for you today, sir? I have some very nice elven silk that would make fine pocket handkerchiefs.”

Hardeband impressed Frodo by managing to arrest the slide of his glasses with the finger of one hand whilst, at the same time, mopping his brow with the other. The lad wondered if that was akin to patting your stomach and rubbing your head . . . or was that the other way around?

“Let me introduce my nephew, Frodo. He and I have appointments with your brother next week and I was thinking that we could perhaps choose our fabrics now, as you are here.”

Hardeband assessed Frodo from down the long slope of his nose, taking in the breeches that only just covered the lad’s knees, the waistcoat that was straining at the buttons and the ink spattered cuffs of the slightly grey shirt.

“Indeed. What sort of material were you considering? I have a nice serviceable wool and hemp mix here.” Obviously deciding that this must be some poor relation, he directed Bilbo's gaze to a roll of dark grey stuff that was little better than that used to make potato sacks. Even Bell Gamgee, standing to one side examining some pretty floral dress fabric, turned up her nose at it.

Frodo was relieved to see his uncle wave it aside. “Oh, no, no. That won’t do. As my heir Frodo is
expected to keep up a certain standard of appearance you understand. No. We shall be ordering at least two suits, a new winter cloak, three or four waistcoats, a couple of pairs of additional breeches and half a dozen shirts.” He pointed to a large roll of fine, wine coloured tweed. “How about that for one suit?”

Hardeband’s bushy brows had been climbing higher and higher as Bilbo enumerated Frodo’s requirements and he beamed as Bilbo pointed to one of the most expensive worsted wool suitings in his collection, only recently arrived from Rohan. Frodo suspected, had he the spare hands to do so, Master Bentwhistle would have been rubbing them with glee.

“You have a good eye, Mister Baggins. That is a fine cloth that will make up very well. It will also suit the young masters colouring. May I suggest a waistcoat of this brown velvet, with perhaps even a touch of the same fabric on the jacket collar?” He signaled to a pimply lad, barely into his tweens, who immediately placed the two rolls of fabric side by side to demonstrate their compatibility. Hardeband Bentwhistle had his failings but even Frodo had to admit that the red-brown velvet was a perfect foil for the warm wine of the wool, not just in colour but also in texture.

Bilbo turned to his nephew. “Well, Frodo? That would be very serviceable for the Harvest Reel, don't you think?”

Frodo blushed as the eyes of Hardeband, Bilbo, Bell, the assistant and several onlookers all turned to him. He tried to hide his ink stained cuffs behind his back. “Erm . . . yes. I'm sure it would, although perhaps it would be a bit expensive for Hobbiton?” he suggested.

“Nonsense, lad!” Bilbo scoffed. “A gentlehobbit always dresses well, wherever he may be. You never know what's around the corner.”

Frodo had to concede that, if anyone would know what may be around the corner, it was Bilbo Baggins but he settled for, “Then I'm sure it will be very nice.”

Bilbo shook his head before moving on to select several other fabrics to fulfill Frodo's sartorial obligations as the heir to Bag End. He decided that it would save a great deal of time if he simply made the decisions for Frodo on this occasion, or it would take all afternoon and Bilbo had a great deal more eating to do before nightfall.

Finally, they moved to the lighter fabrics and chose some white and some pale beige to make Frodo's shirts. Bell Gamgee had been waiting patiently to be served all this time and Frodo felt rather guilty. Hardeband pointedly ignored her, in favour of the larger sale, but now he found himself selecting the very same bolt of fabric that Bell was examining. Hardeband brushed her hand aside dismissively, so that his apprentice could cut the required length for Frodo's shirts and the young gentlehobbit cringed at such poor manners.

Until that moment Bilbo had been so wrapped up in his own selection that he had not even noticed Bell. Now he stiffened and scowled at Hardeband as Bell narrowed her eyes and stepped back.

“Were you wanting some of this too, Mistress Gamgee?” Bilbo asked pointedly, indicating that she should precede him. “I do apologise for monopolising Mister Bentwistle all this time.”

Now Bell straightened. “'Tis no bother, Mr Bilbo. I can wait. I was only wantin' some of this white to make a couple of shirts.” She sniffed. “If tis a fair price of course.”

Hardeband bristled and covered it by moving swiftly to stop his glasses escaping the end of his nose. “I always charge a fair price, madam. Of course, my wares are a cut above the usual stuffs one finds in these local markets and that is reflected in the price, but they wear so much better and I always feel that justifies the cost in the long run.”
Frodo noted silently that the cost would also probably preclude Bell Gamgee from being able to afford the fine white shirting, and he glanced aside in time to see her eyes drop to the small purse in her hand. No doubt she was already doing some rapid mental calculations.

Bilbo noticed too however, and offered a smile to Hardeband so sweet that it made Frodo's teeth wince, even as he lifted the bolt of fabric and handed it over to the apprentice. “I should like to purchase this. What price for the entire bolt. I am certain that we can come to some arrangement for such a large purchase.”

“Oh yes, indeed, sir. For the whole bolt I would be willing to make a substantial discount.” He named a figure that made Frodo gasp but Bilbo only nodded.

“Excellent. Deliver it to your brother, Hardeband. Tell him we will need two shirts for me and two for Frodo. I shall bring the rest home after our fittings and Mistress Gamgee can have the larger part of the bolt.” Here Bilbo's smile widened even further. “She and I will negotiate a fair price. If Mistress Gamgee has no objections to waiting for the fabric that is?” He turned to bow to Bell, who's eyes were now dancing with amusement at Hardeband's discomfort. Both she and Hardeband realised that Bell Gamgee would now be getting her fabric at a much lower price than Master Bentwistle would have charged her.

“None at all, Mister Bilbo, and I thank ye kindly.” Frodo stifled a giggle as Bell dropped Bilbo a very proper courtesy.

“No, thank you for your patience, Bell dear.” Bilbo bowed again, and Frodo developed a sudden cough as his uncle gallantly offered his arm to Bell. Mistress Gamgee stuck her nose in the air and strolled off with Bilbo in a sashay that set her full skirts swaying in a way that would have done credit to her tweenage daughter, Daisy. As they departed Bilbo called back over his shoulder, “Send me the bill when you're ready, Hardeband, there's a good chap.”
Driving Deals With Dwarves

As it happened, the next stall was that set up by the dwarves and Frodo wondered if Donnett had been listening to their conversation with Hardeband Bentwistle, for he doffed his hat and made a sweeping bow to both Bell and Bilbo. “Good day to you, gentlehobbits. Donnett at your service,” he offered with a broad and welcoming grin.

Bilbo released Bell to make a formal bow in return. “Bilbo Baggins at yours and your family's. We met last year but let me introduce my companions, Mistress Bell Gamgee, a neighbour, and Frodo Baggins, my nephew.”

Bell bobbed in greeting and Frodo made his best bow, feeling much more comfortable in the presence of this unpretentious fellow than he had before Master Bentwistle.

The black bearded dwarf's grin grew even wider. Jamming his hat back upon his head, Donnett turned to call over his shoulder into one of the covered carts. “Hoy, Bot! No need to go looking. Bilbo Baggins is here.”

“Well, of course he's here. We're in Hobbiton aren't we? I'm nipping up to Bag End this afternoon,” came the somewhat annoyed reply, followed by a long white beard and a large round face peering from between the curtains of the wagon entrance.

“No. I mean he's here,” Bot replied with a wave in Bilbo's direction.

“Oh. Well, why didn't you say so?” Bot jumped down from the cart and Frodo would have sworn that the ground trembled as he landed. He was followed by several more, who all stood in a line and bowed low to Bilbo. A chorus of, “At your service,” was followed by Bilbo's repeated, “At yours and your family's.”

Then came the introductions. Bot stepped forward to name his companions to Bell and Frodo. “I am Bot, the leader of this company. Let me introduce you to Gribble, Tibble, Kwilim and Dwilim. Donnett, you've already met.”

Bot seemed to be the oldest of the group, his white beard dressed with gold beads and so long that he tucked it into his wide belt. Gribble and Tibble appeared slightly younger, although it was difficult to tell beneath their bushy red beards. Tibble had on a large white apron and, from the stains upon it, was apparently the cook for their party. Kwilim and Dwilim had brown hair and arresting green eyes which declared them to be related in some way.

All were dressed in expensive looking tooled leather jerkins and fine linen shirts, but Frodo noted the gleam of mail beneath when they moved, and their huge boots were more than serviceable. The parting of the cart's curtains also provided a glimpse of an alarming assortment of axes and knives and Kwilim grinned and twitched them closed again when he saw Frodo's eyes widen.

“Now that we are introduced you must all promise to come along to Bag End later for supper,” announced Bilbo.

To his consternation, instead of replying straight away the dwarves formed a huddle, whispering among themselves for some time until Bot stepped forward. “We thank you very kindly for your most excellent offer, but I am not altogether sure that we would all fit in a hobbit hole. I understand that they can be quite . . . compact.”

Bell looked scandalised but Bilbo only chuckled. “Nonsense my dear fellow. Bag End is quite
spacious and at one time entertained fourteen of your fellow dwarves.”

Frodo stepped forward to add, “And a wizard.”

Bot removed his hat and scratched his balding head. “What am I thinking? Of course. How could I have forgotten?” He turned to his companions and received a chorus of nods. “We would be honoured, Mister Baggins.”

“That's settled, then. Frodo and I will see you for supper. Will seven o'clock be too early?”

“That will be perfect,” Bot replied. “It gives us time to clear away the goods and make ourselves presentable.”

“Good, good. Well, good day to you, sirs.” Bilbo turned to leave but Frodo tugged at his sleeve.

“Uncle, they have quills.”

“What? Oh yes. Perfect.” Bilbo selected a couple of rather grand snowy white feathers and examined the tips.

“Is it pens yer wantin?” Gribble asked with a burr, his eyes acquiring an assessing gleam.

“Yes. We are down to our last couple and it is most vexing,” Bilbo replied. “How much would you like for these?”

“Before ye buy them let me see if I can interest ye in these.” He opened a small narrow wooden box to reveal something that made Bilbo's eyes widen.

“Oh my! Elven writing pens. You even have the spare nibs!” He wiped a hand on his waistcoat before reaching in to lift a fine, intricately carved wooden rod a hand-span long, with a beautiful silver ferrule at one end, into which he now pushed the delicate silver nib that Gribble passed to him. He held it up for Frodo's inspection. “I have not seen one of these since I was in Rivendell. The nibs last much longer than a quill and write so smoothly. They’re even better than the ones Tom Buckleby makes.”

Frodo leaned in to examine the fine floral carving that wound about the rod. Harry Mugwort could not have produced better and he had been the best woodworker in the Shire. “It is beautiful, Bilbo. But will we be able to get replacement nibs if we need them?”

Gribble's eyes gleamed brighter at the prospect of repeat trade. “Absolutely, laddie. In fact, once we know that ye may need them we will ensure that we carry them on all future visits to the Shire,” he replied expansively. “But just one more moment, Mr Baggins. I see that ye are a gentlehobbit of discerning tastes, so I will show ye something very special.” He ducked beneath the table and much rummaging and clinking was heard before he re-appeared with another little box. This one was made of some fine white stone that was carved in deep relief with a design of entwining leaves and roses. With great ceremony he slowly lifted the hinged lid.

Nestled securely within padded green velvet was another fine pen, only this one was not made of wood. Glistening in the sunlight it appeared to be made of some clear crystal, carved into a fine twisting spiral, the tip ending with an eye to which was attached a delicate gold silk tassel. The ferrule was gold and so were the three nibs secured within their own little holder inside the lid. Bell Gamgee leaned in to inspect it, awe sounding clear in her little gasp. “Tis a thing of beauty. I can't imagine a body darin' to use it. It looks like it would blow away on yer next breath,” she declared softly.
Even Bilbo and Frodo were silent for a moment, then Bilbo reached out to run a finger along its length. “This surely came from Dale.”

Gribble smirked knowingly but it was Bot who replied. “No indeed. This was made by the elves, Master Baggins. From the hidden valley of Rivendell and the house of Lord Elrond himself. We were going to see if we could sell it in Mithlond but if ye take a fancy to it . . .” He blinked. “That reminds me . . . I have a package for ye. A gift from that verra lord.”

Kwilim vaulted back into the cart, reappearing in seconds with a large, cloth wrapped bundle that he threw to Bot. Frodo noted that it must be heavy for Bot flexed his knees as he caught it surely. Bilbo untied a fine blue satin ribbon that secured it, handing it absentely to Bell, who ran appreciative fingers along its length before beginning to wrap it about her fingers in a neat roll. The fine figured green velvet fell open to reveal a neat stack of creamy paper and Bilbo beamed in delight.

“How very thoughtful of Master Elrond. He must know how difficult it sometimes is to get paper in the Shire,” Frodo noted with a smile.

Bilbo scoffed. “Yes, well, it would help if there were more demand for it. People here really do not read and write enough.”

Bell was not about to let that slide. “Readin' an' writin' is a wealthy hobbit's pastime, Mr Bilbo. Not that I don't thank ye for teachin' my Sam, but if he's got nothin' to read what's the point?”

Frodo was surprised but Bilbo only smiled indulgently at the good lady. “I confess that books are expensive, but isn’t it good to hear from May occasionally? If you could read and write you wouldn’t have to rely upon Sam and you could write to your sons, instead of having to wait for a message via Tom Carter.”

Bell was silent, and Frodo suspected that she was considering his uncle’s words. With three of her children now scattered throughout the farthings, letters would be a comfort indeed. At least she got word from May, but Frodo determined to help Sam compose some letters to her sons during their next writing lesson. Sam’s brothers may not be able to read them but there was always someone in each community that could relate the contents.

Bot held out the package of paper and Frodo stepped in to accept it for his uncle. Bilbo smiled his thanks. “Thank you, lad. Just nip up to Bag End with it, would you? Pop it on the table by my writing desk.”

Frodo complied at once and Bilbo handed over to Bell the fine fabric it had been wrapped in. “Why don’t you have this and the ribbon, Bell. I'm sure you will make better use of it than I.”

Bell accepted both with a wide smile and, having folded the fabric carefully, then stood stroking the fine stuff, her eyes distant as she considered what to make with it. Perhaps a new weskit for Ham or a couple of pretty cushions.

As soon as Frodo was out of sight Bilbo returned his attention to Bot. “How much for the pen?”

Bot pursed his lips and stroked a hand down the length of his luxuriant beard. “One silver penny.”

Bilbo’s eyes widened. “Preposterous. I could buy a decent pony for that.”

All the dwarves leaned close to listen and Bot’s bushy eyebrows rose. “But could you write with it? I could sell this easily enough to Lord Cirdan's folk on the coast.”

Bilbo had grown used to the ways of dwarves, however. “But carrying it that distance is a risky
business. It's a delicate thing and the roads are not as safe as they once were. Better three farthings in your pocket now than a pile of broken bits in a few days time."

“Three farthings is not what I was hoping for.” Bot waited while Bilbo considered further.

“If you throw in one of the wooden pens as well, you can have your silver penny. That's my last offer.”

The dwarves formed another huddle in which there were some heated but whispered exchanges. Finally, Bot turned back, holding out his hand. “Done.”

Bilbo pumped his huge fist. “Perfect. Now I shall have a new pen and the other I shall set aside for Frodo’s birthday present.”

Bell wondered which would go to Frodo. The lad was still a tween, although more careful and sweet natured than some. Even so, a crystal pen would be a little fancy for him, in her opinion. Then again, Bilbo Baggins was known for his extravagance. He’d be just as likely to gift it to her little Sam, upon a whim.

Now Bilbo grinned as Gribble held out his hand for the coin, testing it between his canines before disappearing it into his pocket. Kwilim began to wrap both purchases in strong brown paper and string but when he made to hand the parcels over Bilbo waved them away. “I've no room in my pockets at present. Why not bring them along to supper?”

“Right you are, Mr Baggins.” Gribble turned to Bell Gamgee and the gleam returned to his eyes when he saw her gently stroke a little polished stone threaded upon a fine silver chain. “As a friend of Mr Baggins I may be able to do a good deal on that for ye, Mistress.”

Bell snatched back her hand as though scolded then sniffed. “Tis a mite too rich for the likes of me, even with a deal. My Ham needs new shirts more than I need that.” She moved on to a box of brightly coloured ribbons. “How much fer a ribbon?” she asked as she fingered the fine weave.

“There's over a yard in each so, as yer a friend o' Mr Baggins, five for a farthing.” Gribble tried for an innocent expression and failed.

Bell snorted, sure of her ground when it came to ribbons. “I'll give ye a farthin' for ten,” she announced, hands on ample hips.

Gribble knew the game well. “Seven for a farthing. Ye'll not find better this side o' the Misty Mountains and portage this far does nay come cheap.” He folded his arms.

“They're pretty, I'll grant ye, but I could buy material to dress my Mari with that much. I'm only wantin' to trim Daisy's frock.” She frowned, folding her own arms. “Eight for a farthin. Take it or leave it as ye wish.”

The two protagonists eyed each other good-naturedly over the box of ribbons as Bilbo looked on with some amusement. Gribble pursed his lips and held his ground until Bot nudged him with an elbow. “Ye drive a hard bargain, Mistress.” Gribble held out his hand and Bells eyes shone as bright as the copper farthing she dropped in his meaty fist.

Bilbo left his neighbour to her selection but drew Bot aside for a quiet word.

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“There you are, Ham,” Bilbo announced brightly as he claimed a space on the grass by the side of
the Gamgee's replenished picnic cloth.

Hamfast grinned. “I reckon I weren't that difficult to find. Someone's got to watch the faunts and food an' I'm not one for shoppin'. Is my Bell still at it?”

Bilbo popped a bright red radish in his mouth. “I left her selecting ribbons for Daisy's new dress.”

Hamfast shook his head, offering Bilbo a cup of cider as he noted his eyes watering. “Them radishes are a mite stronger than usual. I got the seeds from a fella down Hardbottle way last year. I told my Bell to get summat for herself, but she always puts the bairns first.”

The cup was half empty before Bilbo could continue. “She was admiring a little pendent brought by the dwarves, but she settled upon the ribbons instead.”

“A pendent you say? I wonder how much they're wantin' for it. I've some coin set aside for my birthday and I wanted to get her somethin' special this year. She's been missin' May.” Hamfast smiled as his youngest held out a napkin and Bilbo accepted it to mop his brow and dab at his still watering eyes.

Bilbo selected a sandwich, lifting a corner to peep at the contents to check for any more radishes, before taking a bite. He swallowed politely before replying. “Would you like me to accompany you to discuss the price? I have some experience haggling with dwarves and would be happy to place myself at your disposal.”

Hamfast cut a chicken sandwich into fingers before placing it on little Marigold's plate, whilst the avidly listening Sam pealed a hardboiled egg. After a moment's consideration Hamfast shook his head. “I can't see 'em drivin' a harder bargain than Ted Sandyman.”

Bilbo grinned. “You have a point. Would you like me to watch the faunts while you go across? I think Bell was considering going to check upon Daisy. If she returns here I shall keep her occupied.”

“Thank you, Mr Bilbo, sir. I'll be back in a jiffy.” Hamfast jumped to his feet and wove his way through the crowds.

Bilbo chuckled and gave the returning Frodo a wink. “A jiffy? I doubt that if I know Gribble.”

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That evening, while the party was still in full swing down in the field, a line of dwarves made their way quietly up the lane to Bag End. Bell Gamgee was the only person who noted them, as she stood at the kitchen window wiping Marigold's face and hands. Her heart caught, and she murmured to her youngest, “I hope as how Mr Bilbo ain't goin' to go travellin' again. He's got young Master Frodo to look to nowadays.”

Marigold beamed a gap-toothed smile and Bell gathered her up. “Come along my little lass. Time ye was in bed. Ye've had a long day.”

Taking a last gulp of his milk and stifling a yawn, Sam followed his Ma and younger sister from the room.

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Both Baggins' looked up at a loud knock upon Bag End's round front door. “That will be our guests. Go and turn the sausages Frodo, while I let them in.”
Frodo hurried off and Bilbo straightened his waistcoat and threw open the door with a, “Welcome, welcome! Please come in gentle sirs.”

The dwarves, led by Bot, wiped their huge boots on the doormat and stepped into Bag End's wide hallway. At least it usually seemed wide, but crowded with six dwarves it did not seem quite so spacious. Each carried a parcel and Bilbo waved them to a large, flat topped, chest, above which was a line of pegs. “Please, put your packages down over there and hang up your hats.”

Bot glanced about the hall and then surreptitiously handed over two smaller packages to Bilbo. “These are the purchases you made.”

Bilbo accepted them with a nod and tucked them away in a corner, behind a large potted plant. “Come into the dining room. Supper is almost ready. We're just waiting for the sausages.”

“They're here, Uncle.” Frodo arrived with a huge platter, piled high with Bill Bracegirdle's best herbed sausages. Gribble rubbed his hands, several of the company inhaled appreciatively, and everyone hurried to follow Frodo and the sausages into the dining room.

It was two hours before Bilbo heard anything beyond, “Pass the sausages,” or “Any more beer?” or, “Excellent mashed potato”. Then, having helped with the washing up . . . for what good guest would not . . . they all adjourned to the parlour. There they settled down and lit their pipes, listening to the fading festivities down the hill.

As he opened the window Bilbo saw several revelers staggering arm in arm up the lane, and noted that there would be many a thick head tomorrow morning. He had taken his role as guardian quite seriously today and was relieved, when he turned back into the room, to find Frodo's clear bright eyes watching. “Shall I ask Master Gamgee to take his wheelbarrow down to the field? Some of them may need help up the hill.”

Bilbo shook his head. “No. It's a warm dry night. It will do them no harm to sleep in the field and may even teach some the cost of over indulgence. Hamfast works hard all year and deserves a good night's sleep in his bed.”

Gribble's teeth flashed in the candlelight. “Aye, and he's got a braw lass to warm it for him. Ouch!”

Bot kicked his companion's foot soundly and Frodo smothered a giggle when Bilbo flashed him a warning glance. “Bell Gamgee was considered quite a catch in her day and she's raised her brood well. Hamfast is blessed and he knows it.” Bilbo settled into his chair by the hearth, with Frodo on the hassock at his side. “How does your lady wife fare, Bot?”

“Gild is doing well, thank you. We're grandparents now and she’s doting on the little lad. He's already walking and she found him playing with his Da's hammer and chisel just before I left. The lad's a born tunneler,” Bot replied proudly.

“Congratulations! I know children are very precious to dwarves . . . not that they're any less so in the Shire . . . but I understand that your people tend toward smaller families.” Bilbo drew deep on his pipe and blew out a large, fragrant, smoke ring.

Were the candle light brighter Bilbo had no doubt that Bot would be blushing. “Yes, well. Even after all these years not everyone has returned to Erebor. We've plenty of halls yet to fill and Dain Ironfoot has issued an invitation for any dwarf who would like to move. We've a lot of rebuilding still to do.”

“Even torn by Smaug as they were, I remember your halls were quite beautiful,” Bilbo offered wistfully. “I wish I could see them now that they are being restored.”
Frodo dropped his head and Bilbo laid a hand upon his shoulder. “But not until I see this young lad come of age at the least. He is family and I have few enough of them. Frodo here is my heir and I mean to teach him everything I know before I even consider taking to the road again.”

Lifting his head with a smile, Frodo laid a hand over his uncle’s. “And I promise to be a good pupil.”

“I’ll settle for a good nephew, lad, and you only need to continue to be yourself to achieve that. But here, now . . . This conversation is becoming quite maudlin. Did I see a fiddle among the packages our visitors brought with them? How about some music, Bot? I think I may even remember the words to one or two dwarven songs . . .”

So it was that half an hour later the last stragglers up the hill above Hobbiton heard the merry music of pipe, drum and fiddle, accompanied by the bright voices of Frodo and Bilbo Baggins, dancing on the pipeweeds scented air that floated from Bag End’s open parlour window.
Chapter 28 – CLOTHES MAKETH THE GENTLEHOBBIT

“So, when do you go to Michel Delvin’?” Bartimus asked as he added another split log to the heap in Frodo’s arms. He grinned when Frodo grunted under the extra weight.

“This only for the cooking range you know. We're not stocking up for Yule,” his companion grumbled. “And it's next week, if you must know.”

Bartimus skipped ahead to open the back door then helped stack the wood in the basket by the hearth. His grin widened. “Looking forward to it, are we?”

“Ha, ha.” The words were pronounced with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

“I'm sure I don't know why you're in such a stew over it,” Bartimus offered as he followed Frodo to the sink to wash their hands. “Tis simple enough . . . once you've taken off all your clothes. You just have to stand in the middle of the shop and get measured.”

“It's the, 'all your clothes,' bit that worries me. Will I really have to take off absolutely everything, do you think?” Frodo asked with quite genuine concern.

Bartimus had never been to a tailor himself but he'd heard stories and, whether he believed them or not, they were good fodder for teasing his friend. He pretended to consider for a moment as he dried his hands. “I expect so. I suppose tis the only way to get a good fit.”

Frodo accepted the towel and began to dry his own hands. “But in the middle of the shop, Barti? What if a lady comes in?”

His companion shrugged. “I don't suppose many ladies go to tailors, Frodo.” They both turned as Bilbo entered the kitchen.

“Hello Bartimus, lad. Thank you for helping with the firewood.”

Frodo snorted. “He didn't actually do that much.”

“I helped load you up. You carried much more that way than you would have done alone,” Bartimus declared with a much put-upon expression.

“Yes. And my shoulders and arms will be reminding me of that fact for days to come,” Frodo replied with a chuckle.

Bilbo only shook his head as he helped himself to a biscuit from the plate on the kitchen table and headed back into the hall. With a mischievous grin he called back over his shoulder, “You're a strapping lad, Frodo. You've nothing to be ashamed of in front of the ladies.”

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Frodo helped himself to another mouthful of mashed potato and, having satisfied his immediate hunger, took a moment to study the tap room of the Pony and Pickle. Even as one of the better establishments in the Shire, it still carried the pervasive smell of all public houses that served food . . . beer, boiled cabbage and pipeweed. The 'P and P', as it was called locally, had originally been dug into a conveniently placed chalk bank close to the Great East Road. Over the years, however, it had
expanded so that now only the stables were dug into the slope, and the tap and guest rooms were contained in a long single story wooden building set in front of the bank.

This meant that they were sitting in a long, low ceilinged room with a bar across one wall and large stone fireplaces at either end. Frodo was much relieved to find, upon entering earlier, that neither fire was lit... the landlord’s only concession to summer. The rafters were almost hidden by a pale haze of pipeweed, for it was cooler indoors on this scorching summer day, and most of the patrons had retreated to the relative gloom of the tap room. Raff Greenbank had made one other concession to the weather by throwing open all the windows, which Frodo considered a blessing for he could already feel damp patches developing beneath his arms. He made a mental note to wash and change his shirt before setting out for the tailor’s shop, even as another part of his mind wondered whether it would be necessary if he was expected to strip off anyway.

Across the table his uncle Bilbo was attacking a steak and kidney pie with some gusto. For all that it was high summer the patrons of the inn were a conservative lot and salad would never grace the menu of the Pony and Pickle, so Bilbo and Frodo were tucking into steak and kidney pie, mashed potato and gravy, peas and carrots.

“What will we have far to walk to the tailor?” Frodo asked with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

Bilbo chewed and swallowed before replying. “Not far. I’d say it’s about ten minutes from here. Just around the corner on the High Street.” He did not seem to sense Frodo’s trepidation, helping himself to some more peas.

Frodo took a sip of his cider and set down his knife and fork. He had been dreading this day ever since Bilbo had announced the appointment a month ago. He had never been to a proper tailor before and friends had been teasing him with images of being stripped naked and measured in very intimate places. He suspected that the tales were exaggerated but had been unable to convince himself completely, and Bilbo seemed to take a perverse delight in neither confirming nor denying the stories.

Bilbo set his cutlery upon his empty plate and dabbed his lips with a napkin. “That pie was every bit as good as I remember. Peony Greenbank has a light touch with her pastry that would rival Bell Gamgee.”

Frodo could not resist a smile. “I hope you’ve never told Mistress Gamgee that.”

Bilbo shuddered. “Goodness, no! She does our laundry and I wouldn’t want to risk her hand slipping with the starch when ironing my smalls.”

Frodo shifted uncomfortably on his stool. Of course, that could be more to do with the fact that a recent growth spurt had resulted in his breeches becoming a little snug in the inseam, the main reason for their visit to Michel Delving. “What time is our appointment?”

Bilbo studied him with a smile. “It’s in an hour. Why don’t we go and have a quick wash, and change into fresh linens? By the time we’ve done that and strolled around there, it will be time.”

Bilbo’s estimate was a little generous for within half an hour Frodo re-entered the tap room, to find his uncle waiting for him. The lad pasted on a smile and paused to take a surreptitious sniff at his armpits before joining Bilbo, who was standing at the open door while his eyes accustomed themselves to the bright sunshine outside. The older hobbit clapped Frodo on the shoulder and chuckled. “Don’t fret so. Bressingbard Bentwhistle is a capital chap. His father, Bergess, was my tailor before him.”
Michel Delving was the main town of the Shire and, as such, boasted a whole street of shops, said street being called, of course, The High Street. Folks in the Shire did not generally go in much for fancy street names. Although the original residences of the town had been dug into a group of low chalk hills, the population soon outgrew them and there were now many small low houses with turf or thatched roofs and round windows and doors.

The Bentwhistle family had lived in Michel Delving for generations, however, and their establishments were set next door to each other within a hillside. Their properties were unusual in being two storied, by the simple expedient of digging two layers into the hill. The lower level held their shops and storage areas and the families lived on the upper.

The door to one of the shops stood open to allow the free circulation of air, and a board above the two large round windows proclaimed the owner to be, “Bressingbard Bentwhistle, Outfitter to the Discerning Gentlehobbit”. Frodo followed his uncle into the dim interior and was greeted with the smell of warm wool and lavender. It took a few moments for Frodo’s eyes to adjust after the brilliance of outside, but the interior slowly came into focus.

The shop was quite small compared to the drapers next door, with shelves containing just a few bolts of fabric along the back wall and a large, immaculately polished counter along another. Several large pattern books graced a shelf above the counter and curtains completely covered the remaining wall, beyond which was heard a murmur of good natured voices. Bilbo rang a small brass hand bell that sat upon the corner of the counter.

The curtains parted instantly and a rather dapper hobbit with a broad smile and twinkling green eyes appeared. His smile widened, and he stepped up to pump Bilbo’s hand. “Bilbo! It’s good to see you again. How long has it been?”

Two brothers of more opposite temperament than Bressingbard and Hardeband Bentwhistle, Frodo could not imagine. Hardeband’s haughty attitude was thrown into sharp relief by this hobbit’s bright disposition, and the knot of tension that had been sitting in Frodo’s chest for weeks began to loosen.

Now those shining eyes shifted to Frodo as he offered his hand. “And this must be your new heir. It’s good to meet you at last, Master Frodo.”

Frodo shook Bressingbard’s warm, dry hand, hoping that the other did not notice the perspiration in his. “Just, Frodo will do, sir. And it is good to meet you, too.”

“Then you shall call me, Bressingbard.” He stood back to study Frodo from head to toe. “Hardi. has given me the fabrics and your order. My brother has his faults, but I have to give him credit for choosing the right colours for you.”

Frodo swallowed as he tried to choose the polite reply. “He was quite . . . helpful.”

Bressingbard gave a laugh that seemed to start somewhere in his feet and climb up his ample torso to shake him like an aspen in a high wind. “Hah! My brother is a pain in the backside. But he’s my brother so I love him, despite it.”

Frodo found his merry giggle at last.

“I take it he’s delivered the fabrics, then?” Bilbo asked with a broad grin.

“He has. If you’d like to come through to the fitting room, I’ll just take young Frodo’s measurements and we can decide on the style.” As Bressingbard spoke he ushered Frodo through the curtains into a small room, with another door at the back. “Will you be wanting just the one waistcoat this time for
yourself, Bilbo? Hardi only brought me a length of waistcoat silk for you, and a full bolt of shirt linen for some reason.”

Bilbo settled down upon a small upright chair in the corner of the room while Bressingbard helped a suddenly reluctant Frodo remove his jacket. The tailor tutted as he saw the state of Frodo’s shirt sleeves. “I can see that some of that linen will be put to good use.”

Bilbo chuckled. “Yes. Frodo needs a couple of good shirts from that bolt and some smallclothes, but I’ll be taking the rest away with me if you don’t mind. I promised it to a neighbour.”

Bressingbard drew out a large, hardback book, opened it to a fresh page and began to write Frodo’s name at the top. “I hope you haggled well with my brother. It’s not often he gets to sell a whole bolt of linen. Once I’ve taken Frodo’s measurements I can calculate the yardage for his shirts and get Arlo to cut it.” He draped a measuring tape about his neck and led Frodo to the centre of the small room, where he began to circumnavigate the lad.

Frodo tried not to fidget but failed when it came to holding back a blush, for he was not used to such close scrutiny. Bressingbard seemed not to notice as he commented aloud. “Right shoulder slightly higher than left, but a bit of padding will fix that. It’s a common problem. Good posture otherwise.” He ran a business-like hand across Frodo’s shoulder blades. “Good straight back and a neat waist.” He grinned. “Not had time to thicken out properly yet. Give it another twenty years or so.” Bressingbard slapped his own ample but beautifully waist-coated girth. “Now, young hobbit. Have you been measured for a suit before?”

Frodo shook his head and Bressingbard chuckled. “I thought so. No doubt you’ve heard all sorts of embarrassing tales. None of them are true. You will not be required to remove any more clothing than you have now, and I have nothing more than a professional interest in your anatomy.”

Frodo blew out a large breath and behind him Bilbo winked at the tailor.

Bressingbard nodded. “I thought so. Some people seem to take a perverse delight in frightening new clients and, if you don’t mind the observation, you were standing there as taut as a fishing line with a ten pound trout.”

“Aunt Buttercup has always made my clothes in the past,” Frodo observed.

Bressingbard examined the inside of Frodo’s discarded jacket. “And a good job she’s made of the stitching I must say, but she hasn’t the knack for fitting I think, and this collar does not lie well.” He set the jacket aside and drew off his measuring tape.

“You will feel the difference when you have a properly fitted suit. Now, stand straight but comfortably, if you please.”

Frodo was surprised as the tailor began his measurements. Aunt Buttercup used to simply measure around his chest and the length of his arm but Bressingbard took what felt like dozens of measurements . . . around the chest, from centre back to shoulder, from centre back, across the shoulder and down to the wrist, from shoulder to elbow, around the neck, from nape to waist, nape to hip, under-arm to wrist, around the armhole, and the circumference of upper arm and wrist. Each measurement was entered neatly in the book and with each Frodo began to relax a little more.

Bressingbard ruled a line across the page and turned back. “Now I need to measure for your breeches.” If he noted a certain tension creep back into Frodo’s form, he made no comment. “We’ll start with the waist and hip. Please raise your hands to chest level, elbows out.”
Frodo complied and was somewhat reassured when Bressingbard stood to the side to take the measurements.

“Now, if you could just set your feet slightly apart?”

Doing as requested, Frodo was a little nervous when the tailor ran his measuring tape from waist front to waist back, between Frodo’s legs. But Bressingbard’s actions were so impersonal and deft that he began to relax again.

“How long would you like the legs, young sir? I know that Bilbo likes his to finish six inches above the floor, but it is the fashion at present to have the hem fall just below the knee. I think, with your slender shape, you would look well in the new length. You’ve a shapely calf that would take the shorter length.”

Frodo glanced back at Bilbo and the older hobbit just waved aside the unspoken question. “The choice is yours lad, but you’re only young once.”

Frodo’s eyes sparkled to match his grin. “Then I’d like the shorter length, please.”

Bressingbard measured from crotch to floor, outside waist to floor, crotch to knee, then made the relevant notations in his book. “That’s all the measurements for now. I have enough to cut and make the first fitting. One last question regarding the breeches. To which side do you usually dress.”

Frodo blinked. “I’m sorry?”

Bilbo chuckled. “He means, when you put it away do you lay it to the left or the right leg?”

Frodo suddenly found himself blushing furiously and was so discombobulated that he had to glance down to confirm. “Left.”

Bressingbard made a note. “One can usually tell but it’s always best to ask so that things can be properly accommodated.”

He ruled another line and then motioned Frodo to a seat. “That’s the boring stuff done. Now we get to the interesting bit.” He pulled out a huge book and placed it upon the work table before his customer and Bilbo drew his own chair closer.

The book turned out to be filled with drawings of jackets. Some came only to the waist and others almost to the knee. Some had two lines of buttons and others only one; those buttons arranged in two’s, three’s, fours and even fives. Some had turned back cuffs to reveal fancy shirt sleeves and others were trimmed with buttons or braid. Some had wide lapels and others narrow. There were even some with no lapels. Each new page required a decision and after over an hour Frodo was beginning to lose interest. Fortunately, Bilbo stepped in when his nephew’s eyes began to glaze over.

After another hour of discussion Frodo finally escaped from the small, stuffy room, to the fresh air of the shop doorway. The young hobbit took in a deep breath, wincing when he felt a stitch pop in the under-arm seem of his shirt. If all the activity of this afternoon resulted in more comfortable clothes, Frodo decided it was worth any indignity.

As though he had been reading his thoughts Bilbo spoke. “Now, that was relatively painless, wasn’t it?”

Frodo obliged him with a rueful smile. “Not nearly as bad as I was expecting.”

Bilbo grinned, slapping him on the shoulder and then leading the way back to the inn. “There’s a
valuable lesson there, Frodo my lad. Don’t go worrying too much about the adventures of tomorrow. Things are invariably never as black as you imagine they will be.”

Frodo followed. It was all very well for Bilbo to say that when he had already been on such a great adventure. Frodo assumed that his own adventures were yet to come.

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“Here you are, Marigold. I’ve brought you a new dolly.” Frodo held out the new toy and the youngest Gamgee accepted it with a wide grin.

“Thank you, Master Frodo.” She gathered the rag doll close and Bell Gamgee bent to examine it, frowning a little.

“Yer Aunt Petunia been sendin’ presents again? She still thinks yer a lass, then?” she asked with a chuckle.

“I’m afraid so. You should have seen the stuffed toy she sent me last month. Bilbo says it’s supposed to be an oliphaunt but I’m still not sure.”

Bell frowned. “Why has it got three eyes?”

Frodo joined her in examining the doll over Marigold’s shoulder. “I think the two blue buttons are eyes and the pink is a nose.”

“Ah. That would make that red woollen blob a mouth then.”

“I think so, but with Aunt Petunia it’s not always wise to assume.”

Bell tilted her head, perhaps hoping that a different perspective would make all clear. “She looks like she’s stickin’ her tongue out.”

“She does a bit. We could give her the benefit of the doubt and say she has a rather full bottom lip.”

Marigold was blithely ignoring this conversation, concentrating instead upon undressing her new doll and beaming with delight when she discovered that it was wearing not only a skirt but two petticoats, a pair of breeches and three pairs of knickers. When Bell raised a brow at Frodo in question he shrugged.

“Standard mode of dress for Aunt Petunia. I have known her to wear two or three dresses at once.”

They looked up as Daisy Gamgee appeared in the doorway to the bedrooms. She was wearing a rather fetching blue dress, it’s hem as yet unfinished. “Hello, Master Frodo.” She swished her full skirts. “What do you think?”

He cleared his throat, for, although Daisy Gamgee was now courting Bartimus Brockbank, she still made him feel uncomfortable. “Is that your new dress? It’s very pretty.”

“Tis the latest fashion, May says.” She deliberately tweaked the bright yellow bow at the juncture of her breasts, knowing the action would draw his eye.

Her mother had seen all this before however. “Are yer feet clean, my girl?” She bent to examine the soles that Daisy offered up, one by one, for inspection. “Up ye get then.”

Daisy stepped from bench to table-top in a flurry of petticoats that afforded Frodo an eye-level view of her shapely knees. He bent his gaze at once to the book that Sam was just opening.
Bell set her pin cushion on the table with an apologetic tilt of her head to their neighbour. “Right, lass. Where do ye want this hem turnin’? And before ye say anythin’, I’ll not turn it above the knee.”

Daisy grinned. “Tis the fashion to show an inch of petticoat, Ma. I bet all the lasses in Michel Delvin’ are doing it, aren’t they Master Frodo?”

Two sets of female eyes fell upon Frodo and he wished the floor would open up and swallow him. “Erm . . . I’m afraid I didn’t notice. We didn’t have far to walk from inn to tailors,” he lied. In truth, he remembered seeing many a pretty inch of flounced petticoat, but he wasn’t about to put himself on the wrong side of Bell Gamgee.

Bell sniffed and Daisy scowled at him, so Frodo dropped his head to the book once more, noting with some relief that Sam seemed to be having difficulty with a word. “Break it into bits, Sam.” He covered part of the word with his finger and Sam tried.”

“Ad . . . vent . . . oo . . . ree.”

“Nearly. Remember what I told you about the letter U changing its sound when there is only one letter between it and a following E, and that an E at the end of a word is usually silent?”

Sam studied for a moment then his eyes lit up in delight as he called out, “Adventure! It’s adventure. Like Mister Bilbo had.”

Frodo cringed when he heard Bell sniff again. Fortunately, she was concentrating too firmly upon providing Daisy’s new dress with a level hem, to express her strong opinion on adventuring in more detail.

“How did yer visit to the tailor go, Master Frodo?” Bell asked as she folded up and pinned the fabric.

Frodo noted that she left exposed the requested inch of lace petticoat but that the over-all length was still below the knee. “It went well, I think. I must go back for the first fitting of the suits in two weeks. My shirts should be finished by then too.”

“And very nice they’ll look, I’ve no doubt. I expect you’ll be glad to have a shirt cuff that comes down to yer wrist again,” Bell noted with a smile. “I’ve started work on my Ham’s new shirt with the material you and Mr Bilbo brought back. Tis lovely stuff.”

Frodo eyed his current shirt sleeves, which he had been forced to roll up because the cuffs were frayed and finished half way up his forearm anyway. “It will be nice, I confess.”

“Stand still, lass. If ye keep swingin’ yer skirt like that I’ll not vouch for the line of this hem. Did ye go to the privy afore ye put the dress on ‘cause yer jiggin’ about as if yer bustin’ to go.”

Daisy huffed. “Ma! I just like the way it moves is all. I aint never had a skirt with so much cloth in it.”

“Well, ye can thank yer sister, May, for that. That coin yer Da and me gave you, came from her. It paid for the extra yard and she says yer to look on it as her birthday present to ye.” She tapped Daisy’s foot when the lass began to fidget again. “So, don’t ye go spoilin’ the present by swishin’ and swashin’ while I’m tryin’ to turn the hem.”

Sam looked up. “Master Frodo, how do you spell ‘swashin’?’”

Bell tutted. “Never you mind, Samwise Gamgee. Get on with yer book learnin’. Ye’ve got enough words in that book without havin’ to learn another.” Frodo found himself on the receiving end of one
of Bell Gamgee’s glares. “And I hope young Master Frodo here ain’t puttin’ any ideas in yer head about adventurin’ . . . with or without a funny U and a quiet E . . . whatever they are.”

Frodo chuckled. “I promise I’m not, Mistress Gamgee.”

Sam ducked his head to read the next line. Adventuring sounded fun to him, especially if it involved meeting elves.

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It was nearly two months later and after two more visits to Michel Delving that Frodo finally got his new suits. Hearing the cart stop at the bottom of the lane, Bell Gamgee looked up from her weeding in time to see Bilbo and Frodo Baggins step down, juggling several parcels in their arms. Bell called back through the open kitchen door. “Sam! Go and help Mister Baggins with his packages.”

Sam ran out at once, popping the last of a slice of toast into his mouth as he ran, full tilt, down the lane. Bilbo gratefully relinquished some of his parcels to the youngster and was all smiles as he and Frodo reached Number Three’s garden gate.

Bell straightened, wiping her hands upon her apron as she appraised Frodo.

Rather proud of his new outfit, Frodo held out his arms to the side and performed a slow turn. When he was facing front again he asked, with a grin, “What do you think?”

Bell leaned in to examine the top stitching on a lapel then stepped back with a smile. “‘Tis beautiful stitchin’ and a neat fit.” Her smile widened, “Forgive me for sayin’ so, but ye were beginnin’ to look like ye’d just come up from Harbottle. Now ye look like a proper Gentlehobbit.”

Bilbo grinned proudly at his nephew. “Bres always does excellent work. What do you think of the shirt? It’s the latest style.”

Frodo obliged by popping the buttons on his fine velvet waistcoat to reveal that the shirt buttons only came half way down the front, from neck to mid chest, before they met the bottom of an inset panel. The shirt was obviously intended to be slipped on over the head.

Once more, Bell leaned closer. “The latest, ye say? I remember my great grandda wearing a shirt ye had to pull over yer head like that.” She sniffed. “These new-fangled fashions are only old ones come round again as far as I can see.”

Frodo tried not to let his disappointment show as he rebuttoned his waistcoat, but Bilbo stepped in to his defence. “After all, there are only so many things one can do to change a garment.” He gave Frodo a broad wink before continuing, “And I seem to remember a young Bell Goodchild arguing with her mother over the new-fangled style of the lacings on her wedding dress.”

Bell grinned. “I wanted cross lacin’ and Ma wanted herringbone. I’d forgot all about that.” She gave Frodo another appraisal. “Ye’ll do, lad. And that shirt do sit well with the weskit. The lasses will be fightin’ to be seen with ye at this year’s Harvest Reel.”

Frodo’s grin returned. “Thank you, Mistress Gamgee. At least I’ll be in no danger of splitting my breeches this year.”

The tale of Hamfast Gamee bursting his breeches at the Thrimidge celebration had spread far and wide in the Shire, growing in the telling. Ham took the laughter in good part but Bell had jumped in to defend her sewing skills, when someone told a version that suggested that the garment had completely disintegrated, leaving Ham stark naked in the middle of the crowded party field.
Now she rolled twinkling eyes. “Aye. One person, showin’ off his smalls to the world, is enough for the folk of Hobbiton.”
Coming Home

Bell Gamgee leaned in to wipe steam from her kitchen window and frowned at the flat opaque grey sky, framed in the naked branches of the plum tree. “I hope as how that snow folks are talkin’ of don’t get here afore Yule.”

She turned back to the range to lift the lid on a large pan, releasing the rich aroma of Yule Pudding. Daisy paused in her potato peeling to inhale appreciatively as her mother added more water. “When I’ve finished these I’ll take Sam up the hill with me to light the fires. Did Mr Bilbo say what time he was expecting to get home?”

Bell joined her at the table, taking up a small knife to begin scraping carrots. “I’m blessed if I know. He was ever a one for goin’ his own way. Him and Master Frodo was supposed to be comin’ back from Buckland with Tom Carter, but Tom called while you was feedin’ the pigs to say Mr Bilbo had changed his mind and him and Master Frodo was walkin’ back. Somethin’ about stretchin’ their legs.”

Daisy's sniff sounded so like her mother's that Bell glanced up in surprise. “I don't see why rich folk think it's such fun to walk. If I could afford the fare I'd take a cart everywhere.”

If Bell Gamgee agreed with her daughter she did not do so aloud. She considered it important to keep her tweenage daughter's feet very firmly on the ground. “There's nothin' wrong with walkin’. Tis good for a body. But mayhap tis not so good an idea at this time of year.” She glanced at the window again, it's glass already steamed up again, as the temperature outside continued to drop. “Leave the last of those taters, lass. I'll finish 'em. Ye call Sam and get yerself up to Bag End to light them fires. Mister Baggins and Master Frodo will be froze through when they get home at this rate.”

Daisy set aside her work and turned to wash her hands at the sink before calling through to the bedrooms for her younger brother.

Sam appeared at once, cloak over his arm and his brow lined with worry. “If the snow comes will there be a Yule Fire?”

His mother smiled fondly as she bent to draw the cloak about his narrow shoulders and fasten the ties beneath his chin. “T'will take more than a few flakes of snow to do that, lad. I saw Arty Sedgebury, Bartimus and one or two others spreading an old oil cloth over it earlier and Arty's kept some dry kindlin', just in case. Don't you worry.” She turned back to her daughter, who was fastening her own cloak. “That reminds me. Mister Bilbo said their Yule Log was in his shed. Don't forget to bring it in and set it by his hearth for later.”

“I won't forget, Ma.” With those words Daisy shepherded her young brother out of the door and up the lane to Bag End.

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Frodo Baggins was trying to decide whether it was more important to use his hands to hug his cloak closed against the freezing wind that had picked up over the past hour, or whether it would be better to slip them into his pockets. He finally settled for holding his cloak. The warmth of their hefty breakfast at the Beak and Whistle had long since worn off and, not for the first time, he was regretting going along with his uncle's decision to walk back to Hobbiton.

This was their second day on the road and they had passed very few other idiots upon it. Most were sensibly shut up in their homes by a roaring fire. Frodo blinked as a snowflake landed on the tip of
his nose. It was followed swiftly by another on his foothair and then several more. He pushed back
his hood and looked up at a sky now pregnant with snow and groaned. “This goes from bad to
worse.”

“Oh, buck up, lad. It never snows for long in the Shire. You know that. And it probably won't even
settle.” Bilbo’s broad grin and overly bright demeanour did not fool his nephew one iota. Adventurer
or not, Bilbo Baggins was as fond of his hearth and feather bed as the next hobbit. Frodo only pulled
up his hood again and trudged on in his wake.

Within half an hour the light dry flurries had turned to fat wet clumps and soon it was deep enough to
cover their toes. Frodo and Bilbo walked side by side now, heads down and leaning into the wind. It
was fortunate that the Great East Road was a kings highway and kept in good repair. High hawthorn
hedges ensured that they could not go astray but they kept to the centre, for there were ditches to
either side, which were now filling with drifts. The only sounds were that of their own breathing and
the moan of wind through the hawthorn’s bare branches.

Frodo tried to still the chattering of his teeth for long enough to ask, “How much farther is it to the
Bywater turn off?”

Bilbo paused to peer about them. “We passed the Three Farthing Stone about an hour ago so it
shouldn’t be far now. Don't worry. We'll not miss it.” He took Frodo’s elbow and the two leaned
closer to share what warmth they had.

It was only moments later that Bilbo pointed to their right, where a gap in the hawthorn indicated
their turning. Frodo sighed with relief for the snow was swirling so thickly that he harboured a secret
worry that they really had missed it.

Now, the Great East Road was well maintained, for it was used by more than just the folk of the
Shire. Dwarves used it as a trade route and even the odd lone big person had been seen upon
occasion, although the Bounders stopped most at the Brandywine crossings or the White Downs.
Still, there was a tradition that it should be kept in good repair, in case the King returned to inspect it.
Most folk in the Shire had neither seen nor wanted to see a king, but they were a people who
respected tradition.

The lesser roads did not earn the same attention, however, and it had been a particularly wet autumn,
necessitating this years’ Harvest Reel being held in Tom Cotton's spare barn. The turning to Bywater
was quite sharp and cart wheels had gouged deep ruts in the soft surface of the road. These had filled
with muddy water, which had frozen overnight and were now hidden beneath a smooth blanket of
white. Bilbo wished they had their walking staves, which could have been used to test the ground
before them, but their decision to walk home had been made after their arrival in Buckland. Bilbo
sighed quietly as he visualised their staves, standing neatly in the umbrella stand of Bag End's
hallway. Well, there was nothing for it. Wishing did not result in having, so he stepped gingerly into
the road junction.

Perhaps if he had been less tentative, he would have put his foot down more firmly and gone through
the surface film of ice on one of the deeper puddles. But age brought some caution and his foot
landed lightly and then simply slid away beneath him. Bilbo tried to keep his other foot in place but
he was in danger of splitting more than his breeches if he did not move it. Frodo's grab was too late
and Bilbo landed hard in the snow, with a loud yelp.

“Bilbo! Are you alright?” Frodo threw himself on his knees at his uncle's side, running hands up and
down his torso to seek out any damage.

Bilbo batted his hands away. “Leave me be! Let me get my breath.”
Establishing that Bilbo was not so badly hurt that he had lost his usual irascible nature, Frodo stilled.

“You seem to have breath enough,” he commented with a wry grin as he held out a hand. Bilbo humphed as he accepted and sat up, but when Frodo would have pulled him to his feet Bilbo winced, waiving him off as he looked up apologetically. “I think I may have twisted my ankle.”

Frodo hunkered down again. “Which one?”

“Right.”

Frodo checked that his uncle's foot was pointing in the usual direction before carefully lifting his lower leg. “Can you wiggle your toes?” Bilbo obliged. “Probably not broken then. Let me know when this hurts.” The Terror of Brandy Hall had endured enough examinations like this to know the drill and he gently began moving the foot this way and that. Bilbo gasped when Frodo manipulated it inward. Setting it down, Frodo surveyed their surroundings.

Snow was falling so heavily now that there were few surroundings to be surveyed. It was Bilbo who spoke first. “If you can find me a walking stick I can probably hobble along.” When Frodo only looked sceptical he continued, “Well, we can't stay here, lad. Nobody is going to be out and about in this unless they have to be and I don't think you could carry me.”

Frodo recovered his sense of humour. “Certainly not after the breakfast you put away this morning.” He stood, crossing to the hedgerow, but rather wary of the ditch. “Hawthorn isn't the best of trees for strong straight limbs,” he commented. As he suspected, there were no likely candidates and Frodo resigned himself to the roll of human walking stick.

Taking a moment to tear a strip off the bottom of his cloak he hunkered down at Bilbo's side and began to strap up the offending ankle. “You'll just have to lean on me, Uncle. Once we get closer to Bywater we may find some help.” Five minutes later Bilbo was upright, with his arm about Frodo's shoulders.

For half an hour they hobbled along, Bilbo's silence telling Frodo more than he cared to know about the level of pain he was in. Gradually, they grew aware of the soft footfalls of a pony and the rumble of wheels. They turned in time to see Ted Sandyman steering his cart slowly down the lane. When the walkers did not step aside he was obliged to draw to a stop.

There was little to be seen of Ted's face above the muffler he had wound about his neck and mouth, but his sneering tone told them all they needed to know of the expression beneath. “Think you own the road, do you, Baggins? Some of us need to be getting home.”

“Hello Master Sandyman. We were heading home ourselves but Bilbo has twisted his ankle. I don't suppose you could give us a ride in the back of your cart?” Frodo tried his most ingratiating tone.

'Ingratiating' did not work on Ted, however. “My pony's having enough trouble just pulling the cart through this lot. I've no mind to add the weight of two fat hobbits.”

Bilbo's silence was worrying Frodo so he tried again. “You've no sacks on the back so surely it won't be too much for him. If you could take us as far as the mill, I'm sure we could manage from there.”

Bilbo had lived around Ted Sandiman for long enough to know that pleading or even reasoning would be of little use and went straight for the only thing that would be likely to change Ted's mind. “We would pay you for your trouble, of course.”

Ted, who had been in the process of telling his pony to walk on, pulled on the reins and the poor
beast snorted to a sudden stop. “How much?”

Bilbo fished in his jacket pocket, producing three silver pennies and some copper. Frodo managed to add two pennies to that. Tom Carter had been intending to charge them three pennies to bring both of them all the way from Buckland to their own front door, but Ted Sandiman was not Tom Carter. Bilbo held out his hand and Ted's eyes widened at the sight of the five silver pennies. He reached down to grab them before Bilbo had time to change his mind. “Hop in the back and be quick about it. I aint got all day. The Missus wants me home to lay the fire for Yule and all this snow has made me late.”

“Thank you.” Frodo helped his uncle into the cart and they settled side by side for warmth as Ted snapped the reins.

The only saving grace of the next two hours was that Bilbo did not have to walk. Ted ignored all attempts to socialise and Bilbo was in too much pain to care so Frodo was left to huddle close to his uncle and stare at the snow which was, thankfully, slowing as they neared Bywater. When they reached the mill Frodo tried to persuade Ted to take them on to Hobbiton, with the promise of more money, but he would have none of it.

“My missus will be wantin' me to help with the decoratin'. I aint goin' to keep her waitin' because two idiots couldn't take care of themselves. Off you get so I can get Tobin here into the stable.”

So Frodo helped his uncle down, taking an arm about his shoulders and helping Bilbo to hobble off up the lane. In truth, he was not altogether sure that Bilbo could go much further but he hoped they could at least make it to the Ivy Bush, where they may be able to hire a cart and driver to take them the rest of the way.

They had travelled only a few yards however, when Bilbo groaned. “P . . p . . . please, Frodo. I have to s . . stop. Just l . . . let me have a few minutes.”

Spying a fallen tree at the roadside, Frodo brushed off the snow as best he could and lowered Bilbo to sit upon it. He hunkered down to see his uncle's face within the depths of his hood and was concerned to see it pale and pinched. “Will you be alright if I leave you here, Bilbo? I can run on ahead to the Green Dragon and come back with help.”

To his credit, Bilbo tried to paste on a smile, although it more closely resembled a grimace. “You go on, lad. I'll do well enough here. The snow has almost stopped.”

Frodo ignored Bilbo's protests as he removed his own cloak and laid it as another layer over his uncle's shoulders. “I'll be warm enough if I run and my jacket is thick. You need the cloak more than I do.” He paused to pat Bilbo's shoulder and then trotted off into the white landscape.

-Daisy helped her Da off with his cloak and muffler. “Is it very deep?” she asked.

“Aye, lass. I've not seen snow this deep for three year or more. But 'tis often the way when you have a hot summer, and this one was a scorcher.”

Bell leaned in to peck his cheek and thrust a cup of hot, strong tea into his hands. “Did ye see aught of the Baggins' on yer way up the lane?”

Hamfast blinked in surprise. “Are they not home yet? I thought Tom Carter said he expected 'em to get here by lunch time.”
Bell filled a basin with warm water and laid a towel by the sink as Ham rolled up his shirt sleeves. “The fires have been lit since first thing so 'tis warm enough. I've had Sam keepin' an eye out through the window but he's not seen 'em go past. Truth told, I'm gettin' a bit worried.”

Ham splashed the soap from his face and hands and Bell held out a towel that had been warming above the range. “Aye. Tis a bit worritin, I'll grant you. Mayhap they decided to stay overnight at an inn when the snow came in.”

Bell rehung the towel to dry and turned to dish up some beef stew, while Daisy sliced bread and set it by her Da's plate. The rest of the family had eaten earlier but now they all sat down with cups of tea to join Ham as he ate his luncheon. Bell buttered a slice of bread, cutting it in half and sharing it between Sam and Marigold. Daisy frowned but said nothing, only recently having learned that being treated as an adult had it's down side.

“Mayhap, but Mister Bilbo was so sure he would be home to start the Yule flame.”

Sam washed down a swallow of bread with a big swig of milky tea. “Will there be no Yule if Mister Bilbo doesn't come home?” He eyed with dismay the draining board, where the chicken was dressed and waiting to be put in the oven tomorrow morning. Their kitchen was filled with the sharp, earthy smell of greenery hung about the hearth and the rich spices of the giant fruit pudding already steaming on the hob.

Bell reached aside to hug her son. “Don't you worrit about that, lad. If they're not back in time the Yule flame will start with us instead. Still, 'tis not like Mister Bilbo to leave us without word and this snow will make hard walkin'.” She frowned across at her husband. “You don't think they're in trouble, do ye?”

Daisy's eyes lit up. “Mayhap they've been attacked by wolves,” she offered almost gleefully. She was still of an age when wolves meant excitement, rather than potential death.

When Bell felt her son flinch she fixed her eldest daughter with a gaze that would have skewered an orc. “Don't be daft, lass. There've been no wolves this side of the Brandywine since before I were a lass.”

“What's a wolf?” Marigold asked.

“Just a big dog, love. They don't come in the Shire so don't you fret,” Ham assured his youngest, even as he frowned at Daisy.

“Sam, lad. Why don't ye take yer sister for a nap? Then ye can come back and help me with the ironin’.” Bell helped Marigold down from the table and accepted a kiss as Sam led his little sister back to the bedrooms.

It took a lot to worry Bell Gamgee and her husband knew it. He also knew that both Baggins were not as sensible as most hobbits. When they were not wasting their time reading books they were traipling all over the Shire for no particular reason that Hamfast could see. Visiting family upon occasion was one thing but walking to somewhere just to see what was there served no purpose that he could fathom.

“Would you like me to go down to Hobbiton to see if they're about?” he asked as he used a slice of bread to mop his plate. “If I don't see them there I'll try the Bywater road. The snow's probably only slowed 'em down but mayhap they'll appreciate the company the rest of the way and I can take a lantern. Tis the shortest day after all and with all this cloud it'll be dark earlier.”
Bell chewed her cheek for a moment, contemplating her husband out alone in this weather, and then Daisy spoke up. “I can go with you Da. If they've got into any bother an extra body wouldn't hurt and mayhap we can call for Barty on the way.”

Suspecting that the prospect of spending some time with Bartimus Brockbank was the main reason for her teenage daughter's sudden altruism, Bell nonetheless kept the thought to herself. “Thank ye, lass. Go put on Halfred's old breeches and a warm jacket under yer cloak. Ye'd best fetch yer Da a dry muffler and mittens too.”

“Oh, Ma! I look horrible in breeches,” Daisy pouted.

Bell sighed. “Bartimus won't notice 'neath yer cloak and ye'll be thankin' me if the wind brings more snow. There's nothin' worse than tryin' to walk with yards of wet skirt flappin' around yer legs.”

“But Ma . . .”

“Don't 'but' yer Ma, Daisy Gamgee. Go change while I set the lantern.” Hamfast rarely chided his children so when he did they heeded him.

Only ten minutes later Daisy and her father were walking down the hill. Daisy paused at Brocklebank smial long enough to add Bartimus to the party and they continued down into Hobbiton. Hoping that the Baggins' had taken a room at the Ivy Bush they checked there first, before moving on to Bywater. They found no news of the Baggins' at the Green Dragon in Bywater and, their concern growing, were about to move on just a little further, when Frodo Baggins burst through the door.

“Has anyone . . . got a . . . cart I can borrow?” he called between gasps. It was clear that he had run some distance and he began to cough as soon as the warm air of indoors hit his cold-seared lungs.

Hamfast pushed through the gathering crowd. “Master Frodo? What ever is the matter and where's Mister Bilbo?”

The obvious relief that washed over Frodo upon seeing his neighbour's face brought a glow to Hamfast's heart. “Master Gamgee! It's so good to see you but what are you doing so far from home on the eve of Yule?”

Hamfast allowed himself a lopsided grin. “My missus was worritin' and she would have nothin' but that I should go look for you. But you haven't said where Mister Bilbo is.”

“Bilbo twisted his ankle. Ted Sandyman gave us a ride as far as his mill but Bilbo couldn't walk any farther. I've left him on the side of the road and run straight here.”

The landlord stepped forward. “I don't have no pony but you're welcome to borrow my hand cart. Bartimus there can bring it back on the morrow or my lad can fetch it.”

“I'll do that,” Bartimus replied. “And thank you.”

“Come with me, then. My missus will let you have spare blankets and some warming bricks to keep Mister Baggins warm.”

“Where's your cloak, Master Frodo?” Hamfast asked as he led Frodo to the hearth and someone thrust a mug of hot cider into the lad's hands.

Frodo gulped gratefully before replying. “I gave it to Bilbo. He needed it more than I.”
Five minutes later the small party set off down the road. Bartimus pulled the cart and Daisy walked at his side. Frodo, wrapped in a blanket, led the way with Hamfast.

“I wish I could say I was surprised at Ted Sandyman leavin' you to fend for yourselves,” Hamfast muttered.

Frodo nodded. “Don't think too badly of him. I suppose it was our fault really. We should have known better than to walk any distance at this time of year, but it's been a while since we've had snow this deep. There he is!”

Bilbo was a sorry sight, hunched over on a log at the roadside. Even bundled in two cloaks his teeth were chattering and he could only manage to say, “T... t... thank y... y... you,” as Bartimus and Hamfast helped him into the handcart and swaddled him in half a dozen heavy blankets.

“Just you lie there, Mister Bilbo. Me and Bartimus will have you both home in no time.” Hamfast would not hear of Frodo helping and he and Bartimus took a handle each to pull the cart; no easy feat through three inches of snow.

By the time they reached Bagshot Row the afternoon was waning and Daisy was now walking ahead with the lantern. So it was that Sam, who was sitting by the window again, spotted them climbing the hill and Bell met them at the gate to Number Three.

“Mister Bilbo! What has happened?” she asked as she saw the blanket wrapped bundle in the handcart.

“He's alright, Bell lass. He's cold and he's turned his ankle, but he'll live.” Hamfast wrapped a meaty arm about his wife's girth as Frodo took his place at a handle of the cart.

“Daisy, you go inside and look to yer brother and sister. I'll go up the hill and see what I can do fer Mister Bilbo,” Bell instructed. Daisy paused only long enough to flash Bartimus a steamy glance before she headed indoors and Bell decided that she needed to have a word with Bartimus Brockbank some time soon. He was well used to dealing with his sister Ruby's shenanigans, but it would not hurt to remind him that Daisy was not yet of age.

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“There, now.” Bell Gamgee dropped a rug over Bilbo's knees and Frodo handed over a mug of tea.

Accepting the tea gratefully, Bilbo smiled at his helpers. “You have all been so good to me that I am already feeling much better.” He was sitting in an arm chair before the fire, in the informal sitting room he and Frodo used for everyday. Bell had re-bandaged his injured foot, propped it upon a footstool and helped him into one of his thickest winter jumpers. The shivering had ceased some time ago and this second cup of tea was doing a very good job of warming him from the inside.

“'tweren't nothin', Mr Bilbo. Just you rest there and Me and Ham will start off the Yule flame this year. Nobody will think badly of ye,” Bell assured him as she raked ashes from the grate and added another log to the blaze. “Yer own Yule log is set ready in the parlour and I made an extra puddin' for ye and Master Frodo. It only needs a while in the oven tomorrow to heat through. The rest of yer Yule dinner is in the pantry and if Master Frodo has any trouble with it he can pop down to Number Three and Daisy will come up to give a hand.”

Frodo was quick to jump in, before Bilbo was gracious enough to accept. Although he and Daisy had reached some accommodation since she started courting Bartimus, Frodo was not about to test it. “'It's alright. I'm sure I can manage the dinner by myself. Although I thank you for the offer, Mistress
Bilbo hid a smile behind his mug and Bell managed to dampen her own before turning to the youngster. “Well, just you make sure that pride don't get in the way of a good dinner,” she chided as she wiped her hands on her apron.

Bilbo settled himself more comfortably. “And there's no need to break the Yule tradition. Frodo can light our log and carry the flame down to Number Three. I shall be quite happy to sit here by the fire but there's no reason for him not to attend the bonfire.”

A new voice asserted, “There's no reason you can't come yourself, Mister Baggins.” Bartimus and Nedis Brocklebank stood in the doorway and between them sat a sturdy kitchen chair, trimmed with ivy and ribbons. They laughed when they saw Bilbo's eyes widen. “It wouldn't be the same without Bilbo Baggins. Me and my brothers can carry you down the hill and bring you back. Mayhap you won't be able to join the dance ring but at least you can watch and wish everyone a happy Yule.”

“The fire's going ahead then?” Frodo asked in surprise.

Hamfast Gamgee chuckled. “'twill take more than a few inches of snow to stop that and we'll all be warm enough once it's lit and the dancin' starts.” He winked. “Warmer still when the cider jug is passed around. We covered the fire as soon as the snow started so the wood will be dry enough.”

Bell Gamgee pursed her lips as she assessed Bilbo. It always amazed her how fit he was for his age and how quickly he recovered from the few illnesses he suffered.

Bilbo set down his cup and rubbed his hands with glee. “That sounds like a capital idea, Bartimus. If you and your brothers really don't mind I would love to attend.”

“Nothin' too it Mister Baggins. We'll have you down there in a jiffy and you just need to let us know when you're ready to come home.”

Frodo leaned down to hug his uncle. “I'll fetch your warmest cloak and some mittens.”

Bell Gamgee took Bilbo's empty mug to the kitchen, pausing to call over her shoulder, “Don't forget to fetch one for yerself lad. It's fair nitherin' out there now the sun's gone down. And ye'd best get back quick if yer goin' to set yer log in time to light the Yule flame too.”

“Bell and Ham, you'd best get back to your own smial to make ready. If Bartimus and Nedes will oblige I can hobble into the parlour to help Frodo deal with the log. The kindling bag is on the mantle.”

Hamfast moved to shepherd his wife to the door but she held back. “Daisy says she dressed the log for ye but are ye sure ye can manage?”

Bilbo waived them off. “Away with you both. I am certain that Daisy would cope at Number Three if she had to, but the Yule flame should be accepted by the head of the family.” When Bell would have hesitated again Hamfast tucked her arm in his. “Come on, lass. They'll manage.”

So it was that Bartimus and Nedes Brocklebank joined the Baggin's family for the lighting of their ivy dressed Yule log. A much muffled-up Bilbo was carried down the hill to pass the candle flame to a grinning Hamfast Gamgee at the gate to Number Three Bagshot Row, along with the traditional blessing . . .

“May you have hearth to comfort, fire to cook and candle to guide you home.”
As Hamfast had promised, the bonfire in Hobbiton's Party Field lit easily from the candle that young Frodo Baggins thrust deep into its' heart and soon everyone, even those too old or infirm to join the ring of dancers, were joining the age old chant of . . .

“Tis the time of endings.
Tis the time of beginnings.
Health, Hope and Happiness.
Light, Love and Laughter.
Prosperity and Peace to all!”
Bell started at the sound of a knock on her kitchen door, realising that she had almost nodded off in her chair whilst nursing a cup of tea. She recognised the knock so her surprise had faded by the time she opened the door, to look up at a bright faced Bartimus Brockbank. “Hello, lad. What can I do for ye? As if I couldn't guess.”

Bartimus' ready smile lit the room. “Hello Mistress Gamgee. I was wonderin' if Daisy was about. Tis a fine day and I was hopin' you'd let her walk out with me.”

Bell returned his smile but then fell into an apology. ‘I'm sorry, lad. She's gone down to Overhill to look after my sister and her family for a few days. Rosemary has a twisted her ankle so Daisy has gone to help with the faunts and taken Mari to visit her cousins.” She stepped back. “But come in for a spot of tea if ye will.”

Bartimus shuffled his feet. “I'll not bother you, Mistress. Da's only let me go for a couple of hours so if Daisy aint here I'll head back down the hill.”

“I'd rather ye had a cup of tea, lad.” Bell's pointed tone let Bartimus know that refusal was not an option, so he submitted somewhat reluctantly.

“Thank you, Mistress Gamgee. Mayhap it would be good to have somethin' to drink afore goin' back to work.”

There was a nod of approval and Bell waived him to her husband's chair by the range.

Summer was on the way but today the weather had snapped cold so a fire was welcome. Bartimus settled somewhat uncomfortably in the chair of the master of the smial, and accepted a mug of thick brown tea. His wariness increased as Bell took her chair opposite, to study him over the rim of her mug for several long and silent moments.

Bartimus tried avoid her assessing gaze, his own roaming the large kitchen in an attempt to find a safe topic of conversation whilst Bell decided to speak. He cleared his throat. ‘I see you've finished the spring cleanin'. Ruby is still tacklin' ours. I've left her yellin' at Nedes 'cause he aint beatin' the rug hard enough for her likin’.”

Bell smiled. “Tis a messy job, beatin’ carpets. Daisy hates it.” Her smile widened. “That's why I always make her do it. I don't mind the youngsters givin' a hand but when Daisy's got a smial of her own she won't be able to pass on the job to her younger brother.”

“Does Daisy know that's why she always gets the job?” Bartimus asked, seeing Bell in a new light when she confessed her strategy.

His question raised a laugh from Bell. “Of course she don't. I'll leave her to work it out and I'll thank ye not to tell her. There's some things folk need to learn the hard way.” When she saw Bartimus squirm a little she continued. “Ye've been walkin' out with Daisy for a while now and I've not seen ye with any other lasses of late. Is things gettin' serious between ye?”

Now Bartimus' eyes widened, like a deer caught suddenly in the lamplight of a suddenly opened door. “Er . . . well, I do like Daisy a lot. She says what she means and I appreciate that in a lass. But we've both got a few years afore we come of age, so I didn't think it right to speak up.” He took a big gulp of his tea, wincing at the heat.
“Aye. And I’d like it if ye’d not wed afore that.” Now her gaze narrowed and Bell added, pointedly, “But some folk are obliged to wed afore they’re of age, and I hope ye take my meanin’.”

Bartimus’ sudden pallor told Bell that he took her meaning very well and he had to clear his throat again before replying. “I do, Mistress Gamgee. I’ve been runnin’ around after our Ruby for long enough to know what some tweens get up to at Harvest Reel, and you’ve no need to fret on my intentions with your Daisy.”

Bell could not resist the urge to tease . . . just a little. “Is my Daisy not comely enough for ye, then?”

Bartimus’ face grew even whiter and he stumbled over his words in his rush to reply. “Nay, Mistress . . . I mean . . . Yes Mistress . . . I mean . . .” He finally paused to draw breath and Bell had to set down her cup as she held back her laughter. Bartimus finally gathered his wits. “Your Daisy is one of the bonniest lasses in Hobbiton. I’d say the Shire but I’ve not been any further than Frogmorton. I'll not dishonour her.”

“To be honest, tis not your intentions I worrit over. Daisy's got a wayward streak in her.” Bell allowed herself a small smile. “Mayhap she gets that from me. But I'm afraid she aint got the sense to go with it yet.”

When Bartimus looked to be about to defend the new love of his life again, Bell waived him down. “Now, I don't mean no offence to my daughter in that. She's got a bit of growin' up to do yet and common sense comes with time. So I'm goin' to rely on ye to be the grown-up in this. Yer both still young and, who knows, with time ye may find that yer not suited after all. T'would be a shame if ye discovered that, but had to wed anyways, because of a few minutes weakness. Kissin' and cannudlin' is one thing, but we don't want no unexpected bairns,” she announced firmly.

Bartimus straightened. “I promise you that I'll treat your Daisy like she was my own sister.”

There was a twinkle in Bell's eyes as she replied, “Aye, well, mayhap not too much like yer sister, lad. There'd be no fun for either of ye in that.”

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“Are you alright, love?” Ham's voice seemed to come from some great distance and Bell rolled over to bury deeper into the blankets.

“Bell? Tis mornin.”

Bell opened one wary eye and slammed it shut again when it was met with a startlingly bright light. It took a moment to realise that it was only sunlight streaming through their bedroom window. “Time is it?” she managed to murmur around a yawn.

“Tis seven o'clock. I gave Sam some toast and tea for first breakfast, 'cause you were hard and fast asleep. If you're still feelin' tired I can get second breakfast too, but I thought you would want wakin' afore we go,” her husband offered.

Bell threw back the covers determinedly. “No. Ye'll be late, and high and mighty Mistress Sackville-Baggins won’t take kindly to that.” She rolled out of bed, rummaging for her clothes and deciding that a wash could wait.

“If your sure, lass. I'll put some water on to boil for tea and cut the rinds off the bacon.”

Bell gave him a peck on the cheek. “You should have woke me sooner. With Daisy not here I need to rake the fire.” She stepped into skirt and blouse, deciding to abandon petticoat and bodice until
after breakfast.

“Don't fret. I did that and Sam's just gone out with the ashes.”

“I hope you let them cool.”

Hamfast snorted as he left their bedroom. “Don't be daft. Of course I did.”

Bell followed him only a minute later, moving straight to the kitchen range to begin frying bacon and eggs and fighting off a nagging headache that seemed to be causing her some mild nausea.

Sam played his part, setting the table and buttering some bread, while Hamfast made tea. Bell had to swallow back bile as Ham poured boiling water onto tea leaves and when he offered her a mug she set it high on the mantle above her.

Half an hour later she watched, with some relief, as Ham and Sam set off down the lane. Bell washed the pots, barely hanging on to what little she had eaten, when she came to empty the teapot. It was with some relief that she returned to bed, deciding that if she could just lie down for another hour her headache and nausea would subside.

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“Bell! Yoohoo. Are you home?” Despite her age, Clover Mugwort always managed to put a serious amount of volume into her voice. Doctor Brockleby put it down to Clover perhaps losing her hearing, but those who had known the elderly lady for a while, knew she had always spoken at some volume. Ted Sandiman had once stated that Clover had a voice that could earn her good money, if she ever decided to move to the coast, where she could loan herself out as a fog horn. Bell would never condone such a cruel statement under normal circumstances, but today was not normal, and she winced as Clover's calls assaulted her already pounding head.

Nonetheless, Bell bit her tongue and called out pleasantly, “I'm in here, Clover.” She levered herself up from the bed but when her stomach gave a slow roll she grabbed swiftly at the chamber pot, clutching it in her lap as she fought for dominance over her breakfast.

“Bell! Whatever is the matter? Shall I send Arty to fetch Hamfast?” Clover's face mirrored the concern in her voice, for finding the usually energetic Bell Gamgee grey faced and abed, in the middle of the morning, was a very unusual occurrence.

Bell perched on the edge of the mattress, sending a watery smile to the birdlike Clover. “Tis alright. Just a bit of sickness is all. Mayhap somethin' I ate.”

“You're too proud to allow spoiled food near your table, but mayhap you've got a cold comin'. I've not heard of anythin' goin' about, but I suppose there's always got to be a first person.” Bell suffered Clover to lay a hand on her brow. “There's no fever and, in truth, you feel a bit chilled. What you need is a nice hot sweet cup of tea.”

Mere mention of the beverage and Bell began retching, dropping her head over the chamber pot.

Clover frowned. “Not tea, then. A sip of cold water.” When she returned a moment later Bell had regained control of her rebellious stomach.

“Thank ye, Clover.” She swilled her mouth with the first sip, spitting it into the pot before draping it with a towel. Then she took a larger swallow, sighing with relief. “That's better. Tea tastes proper awful of late.”
Clover settled next to her, rubbing her back gently. “Does Ham know?”

“That I'm feelin' sick? No. I thought if I could just lie down for an hour it would pass.” She glanced aside in surprise when Clover chuckled.

“How far along do you think you are?” Clover congratulated herself on having the skill to surprise Bell Gamgee.

Still Bell did not get the drift of Clover's comments. “Along?”

“Bell Gamgee . . . I've watched you carry all your bairns. The first thing you always complain of is not bein' able to stomach tea.”

Bell's hand moved from chamber pot to waist and she looked down in growing alarm. “But I'm too old.”

Clover frowned. “Do you still have your courses?”

“They're not regular, but yes.” Bell swallowed as memory of past pregnancies drifted back . . . nausea at even the smell of tea, tiredness, headaches. Then she shook her head. “Tis not possible.”

A jab in her ribs from Clover's sharp elbow threatened the return of nausea. “Don't you try to fog me, lass. I've seen how Ham looks at you. You can't tell me you two don't still have a bit of slap and tickle now and then.”

Now Bell's surprise turned to affront. “Clover Mugwort! I aint tellin' ye what goes on behind closed doors and I'll thank ye not to go guessin'.”

Clover only cackled. “I was married once. Twas a long while ago but there's nothin' wrong with my memory . . . yet.”

Bell had to grin. “Well, we did go for a long walk a few weeks back . . . alone.”

Clover's cackle rose in volume. “I knew it. You are carryin', Bell Gamgee.”

Still Bell found it difficult to believe. “It don't feel like it did with the others.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don't know. When I was expectin' the others I just seemed to know, right from the off. This just don't feel the same.”

Clover picked up on Bell's disquiet. “Why don't you have a word with Aster Tunnelly? She'll know, right off. She's never wrong about bairns.”

“Mayhap I will.”

Hobbiton had very few cottages, being one of the older settlements of the Shire, but Aster Tunnelly lived in a tiny thatched cottage on the edge of the village. Her home was surrounded by an extensive herb garden and, hobbits being a fecund folk, there was generally a steady stream of ladies treading the midwife's garden path.

She washed her hands as Bell Gamgee shimmied into her drawers. “No doubt about it, lass. Yer carryin',” she announced baldly.
Bell thought she had become used to the idea but having Hobbiton's resident midwife confirm it seemed to drop the world on her shoulders. Aster poured a mug of chamomile tea and shepherded Bell to a chair by the kitchen hearth.

“Yer a bit past yer prime to be carryin' so ye'll have to take care.” When Bell just stared into the fire Aster continued. “Ye've alus been a busy one but ye need to tell Ham to look after ye.” Still Bell said nothing and Aster reached out to tap her smartly on the knee. When Bell looked up in surprise Aster tried again. “I know tis a shock at yer age but ye've had bairns afore.”

Bell frowned. “This one feels different.”

“Aye. When yer older they sits different. Don't know why but there 'tis. And they don't grab on so tight, so no heavy liftin' for ye. Yer Daisy does better when she's got other stuff to think on than lads, so get her to help ye. Watch her all ye want but let her do the hard work. It'll get her used to lookin' after a home, somethin' I've no doubt Bartimus Brockbank will be pleased about in time. Has Ham guessed?”

Bell drifted off into reverie again. “I aint told no-one yet.”

Aster humphed. “Drink yer tea. 'tis good for ye and not so hard on yer stomach as that brown sludge ye usually make.”

The gentle dig had the desired affect and Bell straightened indignantly. “My family never had cause to complain about my tea. Ma used to say good strong tea puts hair on yer chest.”

There was a chuckle before Aster commented, “I'm sure Daisy's pleased to hear that. Ye need to tell her. She's a bit wild of a time but she can keep her mouth shut when she's a mind to. And ye need to tell Ham at the least.”

Bell discovered that the chamomile tea did, indeed, sit more gently on her sensitive stomach. “We'd both assumed, with my courses slowin', that there wouldn't be any more bairns. We'd have been a mite more careful if we'd known.”

Aster hooted with laughter. “Don't matter how careful ye are, lass. Nature don't pay no heed to 'assumed'. I've seen it many a time. 'Tis like she wants one last fling afore winter sets in.”

“I wish ye'd told me that after Marigold,” Bell muttered a little crossly.

Aster only tutted. “If ye'd bothered to ask I'd have told ye, but ye were alus one to keep yer own council, Bell Gamgee. Still, that's water 'neath the bridge. Now ye need to look after yerself if yer to look after that bairn.”

“Will I carry to term, do ye think? I lost our first and it just about broke Ham.”

“I don't know, lass. Nobody can know and Nature sometimes ends things 'cause they aint goin' well for the bairn. 'tis hard on all if that happens, I'll not deny, but it's for the best. Ye just do all ye can to protect ye both and come see me if yer not sure of anythin'.”

Bell managed a weak smile. “I'll tell Ham tonight.”

“Good lass. Now, do ye want to know if the bairn's a lad or a lass? I've my dowser here.” Aster reached up to the mantle to collect a fine crystal hung on a long cotton thread.

Now Bell laughed. “Get on with ye! When I was carryin' Mari that thing swung too and fro like a clock pendulum and ye told me 'twoud be a lad. I'll let Nature keep her secrets this time.”
In her heart Bell acknowledged that the real reason was that she did not yet wish to risk investing too much love in this little life, and knowing the gender would make the bairn more real than she could cope with.
Goodnight

Ham drew on his pipe and Bell paused in her knitting to watch the way the glow lit his features. They had grown craggy with the years but within them she still saw the fresh-faced lad she had courted. Like her, he had widened around the middle, his hair showed greyer of late and he sometimes complained of aching joints in winter.

He noticed her gaze and smiled. “Now what's goin' through your mind, lass?”

Bell pushed her needle points through a ball of wool and set aside Ham's half-finished weskit. “What makes ye think there were ought goin' through it, 'cept when to switch needles?”

Hamfast chuckled. “I know that look, that's why. You've got summat lurkin behind your teeth. Spit it out.”

Bell's face grew serious and Ham leaned forward across the hearth, elbows on his knees and pipe forgotten. Bell drew in a deep breath. “Do ye remember what we was talking about the other eve?”

“Bell, love. We've sat here every eve since the day we was married. Not that we sat for long on that first night.” He winked. “You'll have to be a mite clearer, 'cause from that look in your eye I'm thinkin' tis not Arty Sedgeburry's cow you're referin' to.”

Bell glanced toward the doorway to the bedrooms and Ham frowned. “They're all asleep. You'll have to be a mite clearer, 'cause from that look in your eye I'm thinkin' tis not Arty Sedgeburry's cow you're referin' to.”

Bell announced baldly, her eyes locking onto Hamfast's earthen gaze as a drowning man holds fast to a log.

Ham's jaw dropped open, then his eyes began to twinkle and his lips curved into a smile. “But that's fine news.” Then he noticed that Bell was not looking so pleased. “What's the matter, lass?”

His wife's shoulders rose and fell in a shrug. “I don't know. Mayhap tis just that I didn't think we'd have another after Marigold. And there's the feedin' of another bairn to think on.”

Setting down his pipe, Ham crossed the hearth to perch upon the edge of the kitchen table, taking her work lined hands in his. “I know you had a hard time carryin' Mari and a harder one birthin' her, but you made it through.” He squeezed her hands. “I didn't think we'd have another either, else I'd have been more careful.”

A little of her usual resilience came through and Bell snorted. “It takes two to dance a jig, Hamfast Gamgee.”

Ham grinned. “There's my Bell.” Now he looked down into her hazel eyes. “This bairn may not have been expected but we'll cope, lass. You know I'll do what I can to help you durin' the carryin' and Daisy's of an age to get stuck in with the housework so you can rest. Then, when he or she arrives we'll have a grand party.”

Bell studied him a few moments before offering a tight smile. “Aye. Yer right. There's nought we can do now 'cept get on with it.” She rubbed her belly as she searched her husband's face then took another deep breath and nodded. “But lets keep it 'tween us a bit longer. There's no point getting the youngsters all excited yet.”
Ham frowned but leaned in to hug his wife. “Alright, lass. If that's what you want, twill be our secret for a bit longer.”

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Bell handed down the wrapped fish to Sam, who placed it carefully in the basket carried over his arm. Ham decided he would not need his son's help at the Sackville-Baggins this week. Bell felt a little guilty, knowing that the lad looked forward to playing with Marigold, but there was much to do about the smial. So far she had drafted him in to help Daisy make the beds each morning, then there were carrots and onions to pull, laundry to be brought in, floors swept and pots to be washed. Daisy knew of her condition and, for once, had stepped up to the mark but Bell did not wish to leave all the work to her.

This morning Bell had not been feeling particularly well. If she was honest she had not felt well for several days, although she could not put a finger on what precisely was wrong and put it down to the presage of morning sickness. Determined to ignore it she had giving Sam an impromptu cooking lesson, before taking him down the hill to market in Hobbiton. There she rewarded his efforts with a quarter of aniseed balls from the sweetie stall.

A sudden swell of nausea, accompanied by a flush of heat had Bell deciding it was time to turn for home. She eyed the steep hill then took a deep breath and pasted on a smile. “Well, that's everythin' on my list. Let's head back. I reckon Daisy will be waitin' lunch on us.”

“Hello, Mistress Gamgee, Sam.” Frodo Baggins smiled brightly at them, blue eyes twinkling. “If you're going home would you like some company on the way?” He held up his own basket, which was brimming with packets and parcels. “I've finished my own shopping.”

“That would be grand, Master Frodo.” Bell shepherded Sam before her and tried to ignore a growing pain in her belly, and the growing fear in her mind. “How's all in Bag End?” They started up the hill with Sam trotting ahead and Bell tried to concentrate upon Frodo's pleasant chatter as she gratefully accepted his proffered arm.

“I left Bilbo deep in some reading. A history of the Shire I think. I've been gone for an hour and I suspect when I return he won't even realise I've left the smial. You know how he gets. I've often known him forget to eat.”

Bell's scandalised expression brought a giggle to Frodo's lips.

“I don't hold with missin' meals,” she announced, firmly. “A body needs regular feedin' to keep it tickin' right.” At present, she did not feel particularly like eating herself, and she was very aware that something within her own body was definitely not ticking right. Suddenly a particularly sharp pain made her gasp.

Frodo's eyes widened in surprise as he dropped his basket to step in and support her, when Bell doubled up with a moan, clutching her waist. “Mistress Gamgee, Bell, what is it? Shall I send Sam for the doctor?”

When Sam would have run off Bell grabbed his arm. “No. Fetch Widow Tunnely.” They were gathering a concerned crowd and within minutes Farley Brownlock had brought up his hand cart and helped Frodo to load Bell into it, along with both household's shopping. No doubt Bell would have protested the indignity, had she been in any condition to do so. By the time Farley and Frodo arrived at number three Bagshot Row, Sam, Daisy and Aster Tunnely were waiting for them. Frodo and Farley helped Bell up the garden path, Frodo noting with alarm a large patch of blood on the back of her skirts. Hamfast Gamgee ran up just as they reached the door and, without a word,
swept his wife into his arms and carried her off into the depths of Number Three.

Frodo and Sam were left standing in the Gamgee kitchen, joined by a wide eyed little Marigold. Both little ones looked to be on the verge of tears, so Frodo set them the task of putting away all the shopping. A few minutes later Daisy bustled in from the bedrooms to fill a basin with hot water from the boiler.

“Would you like me to refill the boiler for you,” Frodo asked as she turned to leave.

“My thanks, Master Frodo. That would be good of ye.” She eyed the little ones, as though seeing them for the first time.

“Don't worry about these two. I'll refill the boiler and then take them with me up to Bag End. They can stay overnight if needed. You just look after your mother.” Frodo began to fill a jug from the pump at the sink.

Relief spread across Daisy's face. “That would be a real help. Thank you very much. When I've time I'll come up and let you know what's happenin’.” She hurried from the room with her basin of hot water and a towel snatched from the rail above the fire.

Marigold may not know precisely what was happening, but she knew something was very wrong and her face suddenly crumpled as tears began to roll down her cheeks. Sam was as perplexed as she but turned at once to hug his younger sister, even as his own eyes began to brim again.

Taking a moment to refill the boiler, Frodo added more wood to the fire before turning to deal with the two youngest Gamgees. He knelt before them and laid a hand upon each trembling shoulder.

“We're going to visit Mr Bilbo for a while. Why don't you collect your favourite toys and then we'll go and have some luncheon?” He drew out his hanky to dab at Marigold's tear-flushed cheeks.

It was Sam who fished his sisters' favourite doll from beneath the table and, to Frodo's surprise, collected his slate and chalk. Taking one child in each hand he led them up the hill to the relative calm of Bag End.

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“Are they sleeping now?” Bilbo asked when Frodo entered Bag End's parlour several hours later. He poured a cup of tea for his nephew.

Frodo collapsed into his arm chair with a loud sigh. “Yes. They're exhausted I think. I've set pillows around Marigold so that she doesn't fall out of bed, but she's so spent with crying that I doubt she'll move much.” He accepted the cup Bilbo held out. The tea was cooling but welcome, nonetheless.

“Did I hear Daisy's voice as I was putting them to bed?”

Bilbo took a sip of his own tea before nodding. “Yes.” He cleared his throat. “Seems Bell Gamgee was expecting.”

He waited while the younger Frodo made sense of that statement, relieved when the lad's face cleared, and he need make no further explanation.

“Oh. I did wonder when she asked for the midwife instead of the doctor.” Frodo had grown up in the warren that was Brandy Hall for long enough to have gained some understanding of the mechanics of reproduction. Among so many relatives there were usually several at varying stages of the process.

“Has she lost the babe?”

Bilbo grimaced as he set his unfinished cold tea on the tray and held out his hand for Frodo's cup. “Yes. Let's go and make a fresh pot. I think we both need it.”
Frodo followed his uncle into the kitchen, moving automatically to rinse cups and pot, refilling the milk jug while Bilbo placed a kettle on the hob. “Poor Mistress Gamgee. Will she be alright, do you think?”

Bilbo collected a couple of small plates and proceeded to cut some walnut cake, placing a slice on each. “Daisy says that Aster Tunnely thinks she’ll recover well physically. It seems Bell wasn't far along, so the only ones she had told were Daisy and Hamfast.” He paused to stare at the table top. “Daisy says her mother has been fretting about the babe from the first. It's funny how mothers seem to know about these things.” He drew a deep breath. “Hamfast asked if we'd be willing to keep the youngsters here overnight and I said we'd be happy to look after them as long as they needed. I know that you have a knack with faunts.”

Frodo smiled weakly as he spooned tea into the pot, aware that faunts were not his uncle's strong point. “I think it was Mistress Gamgee who told me that the only knack you need with faunts is love.” He scrubbed at his eyes, which were watering for some reason. “Does Master Gamgee want us to tell them what has happened?”

Bilbo added hot water to the pot and stirred before replacing the lid. “No. Hamfast is going to do that when he comes to collect them tomorrow. Although I suspect he'll spare them the details. They only need to know that their mother is poorly and they already know that.”

Frodo found that he was rather relieved to be spared that task. “I know that Master Gamgee is due at the Sackville-Baggins tomorrow. I'll pop down later and tell them not to expect him.” Frodo poured fresh tea for Bilbo and himself.

His uncle nodded. “I suspect that even Lobelia will be understanding upon this occasion.”

Lobelia was understanding, as was the rest of Hobbiton. Bell and Hamfast Gamgee came to realise just how well liked they were, when offers of help and gifts of food and drink began to make their way up the hill to Number Three. Large families were common in the Shire and most had known their own share of disappointment in the process.

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Some days later Frodo dropped a clean cloth over the plate of scones sitting on Bag End's kitchen table. “Where did you put that pie, Bilbo?”

“I have it here.” Frodo's uncle appeared in the doorway, a similarly covered dish in his hands.

Frodo bit his lip. “Are you sure Mistress Gamgee is well enough for visitors? Maybe we should just ask May to come up and collect these.”

Bilbo patted his nephew on the back a little awkwardly. “Don't worry, lad. Aster says the worst is over. Bell just needs to build up her strength.”

Frodo held the door for his uncle. Bilbo may have lived many more years than his nephew, but Frodo had the benefit of spending his younger years within the extended Brandybuck family. It was difficult to keep secrets within the cheek-by-jowl existence of Brandy Hall and Frodo had overheard enough to know that there would be more involved in Bell's healing than “building up her strength”. Nonetheless, he followed his uncle down the hill to Number Three.

It was May Gamgee who answered their knock and she bobbed a welcoming curtsey. “Good day to you Mister Baggins, Master Baggins.” May had returned home within just four days of her mother's collapse, much to her older sister's relief.
Bell's voice called softly from within. "Don't keep them on the doorstep, lass."

May exchanged a speaking glance with Frodo but opened the door wide so that they could enter.

The kitchen of Number Three was overly warm for the time of year and there was a subdued air that Frodo had never felt there before. Bell Gamgee sat in her rocking chair by the fire, a quilt tucked about her legs that she was trying to tug aside so that she could stand.

Bilbo set down the pie dish and waved her down at once. "No, no, Bell. You stay where you are. We won't be stopping for long. Frodo and I just wanted to pay our respects and bring a little something for your supper."

Daisy appeared in the doorway to the bedrooms and Frodo shuffled his feet nervously. "I'll just put these in the pantry for you," he announced, holding up the plate of scones and trying to make good his escape. Daisy collected the pie and followed him. If Bilbo noted the closing of the pantry door after them he decided to say nothing.

May moved a large black kettle onto the hob and went to rinse the huge brown teapot. "You'll want a cup of tea. I was just about to make a fresh pot."

Bilbo smiled brightly as he settled himself in Hamfast's chair at the other side of the hearth. "Thank you. I never say no to a cup of tea." He studied Bell for a moment.

The hobbit matron before him was a pale shadow of the normally robust and smiling Bell Gamgee. It was clear that she had lost weight and there were no roses in her cheeks. But it was not just a physical loss, he realised at last. The fires of life that usually burned so brightly in her hazel eyes had faded, and several more grey hairs threaded the brown on her head. It was as though, he mused, the departure of the little bairn within her had taken some of her life with it. He wondered, almost idly, if it would have been a lad or a lass.

"Now, Mr Bilbo, don't ye go all soft on me," Bell announced quietly when he was pensive for too long. Even her voice sounded thin, he noted.

Bilbo drew a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. "Soft? No Baggins has ever been described as soft," he asserted firmly.

It had the desired effect and Bell's lips curled into the shadow of a smile. "That's better," she announced with a veneer of brightness. "These things happen and I'll be right as ninepence in a few days. Ye'll see."

Bilbo pursed his lips, not fooled for a moment. "These things happen? Yes, they do and with more frequency than we would like to acknowledge. But that does not make them any less sad. You don't fool me, Bell Gamgee." He glanced aside to include May in his words. "You and all of your family have lost a bairn, and nobody will begrudge you a tear or two."

Bell swallowed, gaze dropping to her empty lap. "May, lass, I think I left some of Mr Bilbo's mendin' atop the chest in my bedroom. Go fetch it if ye will."

May glanced at Bilbo, who gave a slight nod. When she was gone Bell turned brimming eyes upon him. "Aster said it were too small yet to tell whether twas a lad or a lass so I don't know why I'm so teary."

"Oh, Bell. That doesn't matter. What matters is that it was a life growing inside you, someone to be loved and give love. You have a right to your sorrow."

Bell fished beneath her blanket and produced a hanky, which she used to good effect on her nose. Bilbo noticed that although she was dressed, Bell was not wearing her apron. He could not
remember ever having seen her without an apron and it was that, more than anything, that drove home to him how ill she had been. He waited until she tucked the hanky away before asking, “How is Hamfast doing?”

She smiled wistfully. “He’s gettin on with things but I know he’s hurtin. I think he’s tryin to hide in his work and I don’t blame him. He were so happy about this bairn, even though we weren’t really expectin’ another at our age. Some would say tis easier for the Da’s but I got my lasses about me and he’s only got little Sam. Tis not a talk a grown up can have with a faunt.”

Sensing her mother's distress little Marigold appeared from under the kitchen table, where she had been undressing her dolly, and clambered into her mother's lap. Bell gathered her close, kissing the crown of messy copper curls before beginning to rock. “Ham sits with me here on an evenin’ and I know he's full of words but he can't speak 'em. I can't remember a time when we aint been able to talk about our troubles.” She looked across at Bilbo over the top of her daughter’s head. “Will ye do me a favour, Bilbo?”

The dropping of his honorific let the master of Bag End know that this was not going to be an easy task, but he squared his shoulders and nodded. “You know I will, Bell.”

May returned at that moment, laying two of Bilbo's shirts on the table, pressed and folded. The lass moved silently to prepare tea and he was reminded once more that she was being trained as maid in a grand household . . . at least as grand as they came in the Shire.

Bell watched too and for a moment Bilbo thought that perhaps she had decided against her favour. Then she turned back to him. “Will ye take my Ham down to the Ivy Bush one evenin'? I think he'd like to share a half with the lads, as it were. He's been a rock to me but he's stickin' closer than is good for him. He needs to talk to someone and he's always respected ye.”

Bilbo nodded. “I'm not sure he'll talk about something like that with me, but he's calling around this afternoon to discuss the roses. I'll invite him then. It's been a few days since Frodo and I had an evening out so perhaps it will do us all good.” He accepted the cup and saucer May held out, noting it was one of Bell's best.

Inside the cool, dim pantry Frodo was pleased to note, from the groaning shelves, that the Baggins were not the only neighbours ensuring that Bell Gamgee and her family had plenty of good food to eat at this time. He turned, flinching when he found Daisy Gamgee close behind him in the confined space of the pantry, and had to lean aside so she could place Bilbo's pie on the shelf. He realised that he could not escape without squeezing past her and his mouth went dry, for Daisy Gamgee had been the bane of his life ever since his arrival at Bag End.

“Thank ye, Master Frodo.” There was no sign of the usual smirk . . . no coquettish sidelong glance.

Frodo cleared his throat. “It's nothing. Bilbo and I were baking this morning and it was easy enough to make a little extra. It's just some fruit scones and a chicken and mushroom pie . . . the least we could do.”

Daisy shook her head. “I wasn't thinkin' of the food. You got Ma home and you looked to Mari and Sam. That's worth more than any pie and I thank you.” Frodo was surprised to see tears welling in her eyes. “Ma could have died.” Her eyes widened, and she slapped a hand over her mouth as though to stop any further admissions. Now those tears slid down her face.

Frodo did not stop to think. He simply stepped forward and enfolded the lass in a hug. He, of all there, knew what it was like to lose a mother. Daisy laid her head upon his shoulder and wept silently for some time and he offered her his hanky when she finally stepped back.
“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that.” Daisy confessed as she dabbed at her eyes and then blew her nose, before offering a watery smile. “I'll wash this and make sure to get it back to you.”

Frodo offered a sympathetic smile of his own. “There's no hurry. I have plenty of hankies.” He glanced toward the door and grimaced. “I think we'd better return to the kitchen or they'll wonder what's going on in here.”

A spark of the old Daisy surfaced. “Tweens and trouble,” she intoned with a twinkle and Frodo had to smother a grin as he followed Daisy back into the kitchen.

Conversation stopped and Bell, Bilbo and May all looked up at their return. Frodo felt colour spread across his cheeks when he saw the questions in their eyes. It was Bilbo who spoke. “Did you get locked in?” he asked, with all the innocence of a dragon.

Frodo’s mind ran on desperately. “We had to make room for the dishes. The pantry is quite full.” He could see the scepticism in every face.

Daisy snorted. “Twas certainly full with we two in it.” She grinned, looking at Frodo from under arched brows and, he did not think it possible but he felt his blush deepen.

Bell's voice carried some of its old strength as she tackled her wayward tween. “Daisy Gamgee! Ye get out there and feed that sow!”

Daisy made not moue, gathering up the pail and flouncing through the back door, but Frodo caught a wink and her lips formed a silent, “Thank you.”

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Bell rocked gently. The rocker was her chair, made by Hamfast when she was expecting their first. Aster Tunnelly said there would be no more children now, so Bell loved that chair all the more. It was where she had nursed all her brood throughout the years of her marriage. Now she sat by the hearth, with Sam at her feet as the evening closed in. “Bed time once this ball is finished, Sam,” she warned, softly.

Her youngest lad nodded, on the edge of sleep as he watched his Ma's fingers spin hypnotically round and around, drawing the wool from the skein stretched between his hands to the ball in her own. His arms were aching, but he made no protest and there was something comfortable about sitting thus. Hamfast took Sam with him most days now, beginning to teach him the gardening trade, but since Bell's illness he always sent the lad home at teatime. The time between tea and bed was special to mother and son... just a wee bit longer for Sam to be a child and for Bell to hold onto him.

Ham would be coming home soon, and the kitchen was filled with the rich smell of mutton stew. The rest of the family had already eaten their share and the pot was set to one side to ensure the contents did not burn.

Two of her other children, May and Daisy, sat at the large, scrubbed kitchen table. Eglantine Took had sent May home for a visit as soon as word of her mother's illness reached Great Smials. Daisy was rolling her sister's hair in rags for her. Most hobbits had thick curly hair, but poor May's was what Mister Bilbo had once described as “over exuberant”. So, every time May washed it she tied it in rags to create tamer ringlets.

May and Daisy were born only four years apart but leaving home to go and work in Tookborough had forced May to grow up quickly. In Great Smials one more mouth to feed would go unnoticed among so many Tooks, but one less mouth to feed in the Gamgee household meant more food for the rest. Perhaps losing the bairn had been a good thing after all. Bell squashed that thought. They would have managed and May was thriving at Great Smials.
The young lass' figure was filling out and there were roses in her cheeks. She had a ready laugh, particularly when regaling her family with tales of the doings in Tookborough. Indeed, May's arrival only a few days after Bell's collapse had been a blessing, providing as it did a spare pair of hands and a lightening of the mood in the Gamgee household.

“Ma, can I have a drink of water?” Little Marigold Gamgee stood in the doorway leading to the bedrooms. Her faded nightgown was one of May's hand-me-downs and made her look even smaller.

Bell gave her youngest a stern gaze. “Ye should have been asleep hours ago.” Marigold knuckled her eyes and yawned before replying. “I was, but I woke up and now I'm thirsty.”

Bell thinned her lips to hide a smile. “Daisy, fetch yer sister a cup of water.” She fixed Marigold sternly once more before adding, “Then it's back to bed my lass. If ye sleep late tomorrow ye'll miss waving off yer sister.” Bell suspected it was May's imminent departure which was the cause of Marigold's insomnia. May had looked after her younger sister since Marigold could walk and at one time the two had been inseparable. Marigold had cried herself to sleep for several nights while Bell was ill and her mood only picked up again when May returned.

Daisy arrived with the cup of water and scooped Marigold into her lap at the table. Marigold snuggled in, sipping her water and watching sleepily as Daisy tied the last rags in May's hair.

Bell smiled fondly at the three sisters as both May and Daisy began to comb through Marigold's unruly copper locks. They all knew that, as May's had once been, the copper curls would be a knotted mess again by morning. Marigold's hair seemed to delight in curling itself into little clumps and any attempt to tame it was doomed to failure. Every morning Daisy and her mother tried and by lunch time on most days the ribbons had been lost and Marigold's hair looked as though she had been dragged through a hedge, backwards.

Bell had not been aware that she was reaching the end of the wool until it slipped through her fingers. She looked down at her hands in surprise, tucking in the end before adding the last ball to a pile in the basket at her side. “Time all my bairns were abed,” Bell announced as she stood, planting hands on hips and leaning back to stretch the kinks out of her spine.

Daisy stood too, balancing Marigold on her hip. The youngest Gamgee leaned her head on her sister's shoulder, sliding one thumb between rosebud lips. Used to this night time routine, Sam stretched up to receive his Ma's kiss. Smiling, she combed gentle fingers through his hair before cupping his cheek. “Off ye go now, my little lad. Sweet dreams. I'll come and tuck ye in, in a bit.”

“Yes, Ma.” Sam gave his Ma's waist a gentle hug before making for his room.

May and Daisy accepted their own kisses from Ma and Bell added a little tap on Marigold's button nose that made the faunt grin. “Into bed with ye all, and no natterin',” Bell warned. May and Daisy exchanged a glance but turned for their room meekly enough.

A few minutes later Bell made what she had come to call her 'rounds'. Sam was first. He was fast asleep already, sprawled on his tummy in the bed that was as yet too big for him. Bell straightened the quilt and remembered when her two oldest lads had shared this bed. They were apprenticed now, and Bell had not seen either of them for some time. One by one her brood were leaving the nest and Bell missed the noisy breakfast table, the arguments and laughter.

In the girls' room Marigold was also fast asleep and Bell straightened her blanket, pausing a moment to wrap a kiss curl about her finger. It didn't seem like five minutes since she sat in that rocking chair with little Mari suckling at her breast. Marigold would now be her last child and a part of her was
saddened to think that her womb would never again quicken with new life. At the same time, another part of her knew that her body was ageing and each successive child had been more difficult to bear. The recent miscarriage had not been a wholly unexpected shock, for Bell had felt something wrong from the start.

Turning to the larger bed she knew at once that Daisy and May were only feigning sleep. No doubt they were waiting to continue the whispered conversation their mother had interrupted upon entering the room. Bell smiled. May visited only a couple of times a year and it would do the lasses little harm to stay awake into the wee hours just this once. She bent to kiss each brow before creeping from the room. Sure enough, through the closed door, she heard their low voices and smiled as she turned back to the kitchen.

Bell glanced up at Mr Bilbo’s old mantle clock and lifted the lid on the stew to give it a stir. Hamfast would be returning soon, hungry for his supper and offering Hobbiton gossip in exchange. She held a spill to the fire and went to light the candle in the window.

It seemed life went on.
“Hello Sam. What are you doing?” Frodo hunkered down.

Sam was sitting on Bag End's kitchen step while his Da dug some potatoes for Bilbo. At his side was a basin of what looked to be river sand, two black smoothing irons, a cup of water and a couple of cloths. Sam held up one of the irons to reveal its plate, which was polished to a glassy smoothness. “Ma's set me to cleanin' her irons, so she can do the linens tomorrow. It goes toward earnin' my pocket money.” He offered a wide grin. “I get a whole farthin' every month, doin' jobs for Ma.”

The heir to wealthy Bilbo Baggins stored away that information. He and Bilbo would spend more than that on beer during one evening at the Ivy Bush. “I had no idea you had to clean irons.” Frodo ran a finger over some brown marks on the plate of the other iron, feeling a slight stickiness. “How can they get dirty when they're only used on clean laundry?”

Sam accepted the iron and dipped his cloth in water and then sand, before beginning to gently rub the iron sole-plate. “Ma says it's starch that does it and if we don't get rid of it, it leaves nasty brown marks on the clean clothes. But, Master Frodo, how come you don't know that?”

Frodo smiled ruefully. “When I lived at Brandy Hall we had a whole team of ladies who worked in the laundry.” His smile turned to a frown. “I don't know why Bilbo and I don't do our own ironing. Your Ma does most of it for us.”

Sam's mouth dropped open. “A team? How many is that, then?”

“I never counted, but the laundry room was huge, bigger than all of Bag End.”

Sam's mouth dropped further and he paused in his scouring. “How come? Folks must get awful dirty to get through that many linens.”

Frodo grinned. “Brandy Hall is very big, Sam and there are many families living in it. More than in the whole of Hobbiton, and possibly Bywater too, I think.”

Sam blinked, unable to wrap his imagination around such a place, then bent to his work once more. “Fancy that,” was all he could manage.

Standing, Frodo stretched. “Maybe one day you'll see Brandy Hall.”

Sam shook his head. “Tis a long way away and I'm not sure Ma would like me going over the river. She wouldn't let May go there, nor my brothers.”

Frodo giggled. “Ah yes.” He adopted his best Bell Gamgee imitation. “Aye, lad. Ye don't want to be going down there. They're queer folk down over the river.”

Despite himself Sam had to chuckle, for Frodo had caught her inflection near perfectly.

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“And don't be too long,” Bilbo admonished as Frodo slipped out of Bag End's kitchen door. Cutting through the garden he leaped the fence before picking his way carefully through Hamfast Gamgee's potato crop. By the time he reached the shared yard behind the properties of Bagshot Row, Marigold Gamgee had spotted him.
Sam and Marigold had been banished from the kitchen to play. Using a stick, Sam had scratched out a hop-square grid in the hard packed earth of the yard. Now Marigold flung down her stone and ran to their neighbour, shrieking with delight.

Frodo broke into a bright laugh and bent to scoop her up, swinging her in a circle as she giggled with glee. Then he tucked her into his hip and Marigold wrapped sturdy, sun bronzed legs about his waist, as she leaned in to give him a breathless and sloppy kiss.

Sam watched the antics from his place at the start of the grid, his small face wreathed in a grin. “Ma's ironin' so she sent us out to play,” he explained with a gesture to the markings on the ground.

“Frodo play,” Marigold demanded, firmly.

Her neighbour kissed her brow before setting her upon her feet. “I'm afraid I can't, Marigold dear. Bilbo wants me to help him prepare vegetables for supper and he's sent me on an errand to your mother.”

Marigold pouted, racing back to the grid and returning to thrust a small, round, flat stone into Frodo's hand. “Frodo play.” she asserted, with all the certainty of the very young that nothing could be more important than play.

Frodo looked down at an unbound halo of messy copper curls, bright round eyes more green than hazel and a dusting of freckles beneath the ever present smudges of dirt on her cheeks. He could do naught but relent. “Alright. Just one go, but I really can't stay for long or Bilbo will have my hide to bind a book.”

Marigold took his hand to drag him, not too reluctantly, to the beginning of the grid. There he stood, relieved to find that the game did not appear to be set out any differently to that which he had played as a faunt in Buckland. “Do I need to throw a six to start?” he asked Sam.

The youngster shook his head. “Us older lads and lasses do but I let Mari just start at the number one. She's not good at throwin' as far as the big numbers yet.”

Frodo hid a smile at Sam's reference to himself as an older lad, for Sam had only just turned fourteen, still a young age in the Shire, where one did not come of age until thirty-three. Still young enough to remember the importance of having just one more month on your companion, Frodo kept his thoughts to himself, and dropped the stone precisely on the square marked with a carefully inscribed number one. Hopping neatly over it, he continued to the top of the grid, skipping and hopping by two's and one's alternately, spun nimbly about and made his way back, collecting his stone at the last. Marigold clapped wildly at his skill, refusing to let him depart until he had thrown the two and the three. When she would have urged him to continue, however, Frodo shook his head. “I'm sorry little Marigold, but I really must go. I promise to come and play with you on another day.” When she would have pouted he scooped her up once more, twirling her wildly before setting her down next to her older brother, and making for Number Three's arched back door.

The door was open and, peering in to the relative dimness of the smial's interior, Frodo could see that the round front door was open too. Even with the cross breeze this caused, Bell Gamgee's kitchen was so warm that Frodo could feel perspiration spring out on his brow as soon as he crossed the threshold. Bell Gamgee was concentrating upon her task and for several moments Frodo did not announce his presence, as something bid him pause to watch.

Half of the huge kitchen table had been layered with old blankets. The other half was filled by two heaps of linens, one fresh from the line, the other pressed smooth. The kitchen range was stoked and
Frodo could see one smoothing iron sitting, plate down, on the hob. The other was on a metal trivet at Bell's side as she arranged one of Bilbo's best shirts on the blankets. There was a large basin at her side and Bell dipped her fingers in it, flicking cloudy, starched, water liberally over the fabric. Grabbing a pad made from old rags, she grasped the handle of the smoothing iron, pausing a moment to flick water on the sole-plate. Even from the doorway Frodo could hear the hiss and see droplets dancing across the hot metal, before they fizzled away. Bell began to apply the iron to cuffs and sleeves.

Suddenly, an image surfaced in Frodo's mind that he had not even known was there. Number Three's kitchen was overlaid by a smaller one and Bell by a younger lady, with glossy brown curls and dimpled cheeks. Primula Baggins had been taller than Bell, her waist much neater, for Frodo was her only child. Now she looked up, blue eyes twinkling and dimples flashing deeper. “Hello Master Frodo. What can I do for ye? Yer laundry aint finished yet.”

Frodo blinked and Bell Gamgee's homely features drew into focus as she flicked a quick glance his way before returning to her task. “I'm sorry, Mistress Gamgee. What did you say?”

Bell sniffed. “Aye, ye was away with the fairies there. Or was it elves? How long have ye been standin' anyway? Ye should have spoken up, lad. I said, what can I do for ye?” She went back to applying iron to shirt, with swift, sure movements.

If Bell seemed a little short tempered, Frodo put it down to the excessive heat in the room. Bell's salt and pepper hair was plastered to her head and large damp stains marked the under-arms of her blouse. Frodo noted that she had even loosened her bodice ties. No doubt she was rather uncomfortable, and Frodo felt a little guilty that she was so because she was dealing with Bag End's laundry.

When he did not reply immediately Bell set down her iron, taking in his expression at last. “Whatever is it, lad. Ye look like ye've seen a ghost.” She rounded the table to lead him to one of the benches at it's side. “There's naught wrong with Mister Bilbo, is there?”

Frodo hastened to put her mind at rest. “Oh no. Bilbo is as hale as ever. He sent me to pay for the laundry and to ask if you could spare some salt. We have completely run out and he wants to wash some cabbage.” He presented three copper farthings and Bell accepted them with a nod, dropping them into her capacious apron pocket.

Bell used her apron to mop her brow as she settled at his side on the bench. “I've plenty of salt and I'll pop some in a cup for ye. But what's made ye so pale, lad. Are ye sick?”

“No. No, I am well. I just . . . I saw you doing the laundry and I . . . I remembered another time.”

Bell waited patiently, knowing that the youngster would spit it out eventually. She did not have to wait for long.

“I was about Sam's age when my parents died. It was very sudden and I didn't cope with it well.” He swallowed as Bell took one of his hands gently in hers. “I'm afraid it hurt so much that I buried as many memories as I could.”

Bell wrapped a damp but comforting arm about his shoulders. “Aint nothin' to be ashamed of in that, lad. Ye were little more than a faunt and, as the only bairn I expect ye were closer than most. There's only so much pain a body can deal with and ye lost all.” Bell was as perceptive as ever. “Was it yer Ma ye was rememberin' then?” When she saw a tear trickle down Frodo's cheek she fished about in the laundry pile behind her and handed over one of his own crumpled but clean handkerchiefs.
Frodo swiped at his eyes and then blew his nose diligently. “I did not even know the memory was there. Mama was standing in the kitchen of our own little smial. She was ironing one of Papa's shirts, just as you are doing.”

Bell patted his hand. “Tis a good memory, lad. When I do the ironin' I'm doin' more than takin' out the creases ye know. Workin' in the home is a way of showin' love. All mothers know that. So ye're rememberin' a moment of love. Ye hold on to that.”

Frodo managed a watery smile. “But you're ironing Bilbo's shirt,” he pointed out.

Bell snorted, leaning back to chuckle. “And what's wrong with lovin' ye and Mister Bilbo? Mister Bilbo is as much an uncle to mine as he is to ye, if kindness is a measure. And ye're as much a son to me, if ye'll pardon me for takin' the liberty of sayin' so.”

“Oh Bell!” Bell braced herself as the youngster all but knocked her over, throwing himself into her arms. Then she enfolded him in an embrace that smelled of clean laundry and the indefinable fragrance of mother, dropping a soft kiss on his crown. They remained thus for a few minutes, then Bell released him, patting his cheek.

“Come on, lad. There's life to be lived. It was salt ye was wantin’.”

Frodo grinned as he made one final swipe at his tears with the hanky. “It was. At least this is one hanky that you won't have to iron today.”

Bell returned from her pantry, large tin in hand, from which she dispensed salt into a battered and handless cup. “It is. Although ye know I don't mind the ironin'.” She winked. “Not too much, anyways.”

Frodo accepted the proffered cup. “Thank you Mistress Gamgee. I shall return the cup and bring some salt tomorrow.”

Bell waved him away. “There's no hurry, lad. Ye get back to yer uncle or yer supper will be late. I'll send Daisy up with the laundry this evenin'.”

As Frodo was leaving Bell called, “And thank ye for playin' with Mari. She's come awful fond of ye this summer.”

Pausing at the door, Frodo turned. “I'm fond of her too. She's a sweet lass and I miss all my friends at Brandy Hall.” Then, with a wave to Sam and Marigold, he was out of the door and jogging back up the hill.

That evening, Frodo and Bilbo sat at the cluttered table of Bag End's kitchen. Bacon, cabbage and mashed potato had been eaten and they were filling up the corners by nibbling on thick slices of seed cake with their second cup of tea.

“Bilbo, why don't we do our own ironing?”

His uncle chuckled. “You mean, besides my not enjoying the task?”

Frodo grinned. “I watched Bell Gamgee earlier and I confess that it looks to be hot work. But I have seen you iron collars and cuffs upon occasion.”

“I like to spruce my shirts up a bit if it's been a while since I wore them. But there's a big difference between sprucing up a collar and standing ironing piles of linen. Besides, the Gamgees can use the money. The older lads used to bring in extra coin before they left home, but they don't earn enough
in their new jobs to be able to send any back and, even with May settled, Bell and Ham struggle sometimes.” Bilbo shrugged. “I have more money than I need so I share it, with a little here and a little there, throughout Hobbiton. Not charity, you understand. People around here are too proud to accept charity, but there is always some little job that needs doing.”

“Oh. I see.”

The two lapsed into companionable silence as Frodo considered Bilbo's words. Milk could be got from the market but Bilbo always tried to buy theirs from Arty Sedgeburry at Number One. Quite capable of doing his own clothing repairs, still Bilbo sent the occasional little sewing job to Clover Mugwort at Number Two, Bagshot Row. Frodo and Bilbo both liked their garden and would tackle a little pruning when it suited them, but Hamfast and Sam Gamgee did most of the digging, planting and weeding, whilst Bell and Daisy Gamgee did many of the big cleaning jobs at Bag End, along with the laundry.

When he considered further Frodo realised that tinder that he would have happily chopped himself was purchased instead from Ackley Grubb, and Bilbo, who could easily afford to maintain his own pony and trap, always paid to travel with Tom Carter, ostensibly for the company. Indeed there were dozens of little tasks that either Frodo or Bilbo could have managed, which were instead paid for, putting coin into the pockets of some of the poorest folk of Hobbiton and its environs.

As heir to Bilbo Baggins, Frodo made a mental note of all these little folk, determined now to ensure that, when he came into his inheritance he would continue to help all of the Gamgee's, Sedgebury's, Mugwort's, Carter's and Grubb's that he could.
Winter gales had not yet stripped the trees of their gold and copper patchwork of leaves, and ripe hawthorn berries glowed in garnet clusters on the hedgerows. Murmurations of starlings flowed in vast shifting clouds against the sunset, and long chevrons of ducks winged south across a sharp blue sky. Mornings arrived with frosted edges, and a chill wind from the west prickled nostrils and watered eyes. The Baggins birthday had come and gone, with its usual fanfare. Now was the time for stockpiling logs and checking shutters, before the first winter storms came knocking against tightly closed round doors.

Bilbo set aside the last of his morning correspondence and poured himself another cup of tea. “Do you want yours topping up, lad?” He waved the teapot in Frodo’s general direction.

Swallowing his last mouthful of toast Frodo shook his head. “If I have any more you will hear me sloshing all morning.”

His elder grinned. “It’s good to know you’ve had enough of something. It never fails to amaze me, the amount of food a tweenage hobbit can put aside.”

Used to Bilbo’s ribbing, Frodo giggled. “Most of the time, you eat more than I.”

Bilbo leaned back in his chair to pat his thickening waistline. “I am a gentlehobbit. One must look the part.”

Frodo only chuckled, as he began to gather the breakfast dishes. “Was there anything interesting in the mail?”

Bilbo sipped his tea. “Only the usual monthly letter from your Aunt Dora. She has instructed me to remind you to don an extra vest, now that winter is on the way. There now. I have done just that. Do with that instruction as you will.”

Pouring hot water into the sink, Frodo added the dirty pots. “I shall. I’m not even certain that I have enough vests to follow the instruction anyway.”

Turning in his seat, Bilbo reached across to the kitchen range, and fed Dora’s missive to the flames. He replied airily, “Oh, don’t let that stop you. I am sure Bell Gamgee or Clover Mugwort would be happy to make some more for you. Perhaps you could even persuade Daisy Gamgee,” he added with a wink.

“No thank you, Bilbo. I have sufficient. Will you be in your study today?”

Bilbo brought his cup to the sink and paused to look out of the kitchen window. “It’s a lovely day.”

“It is.” Frodo washed his uncle’s cup, then took up the tea towel to begin drying. “I thought I may go for a walk. We may not have many more days like this before the weather changes.”

Bilbo’s face lit up and his eyes took on a twinkle that folk had learned to be wary of. “You are quite right, lad. We should take advantage of the dry weather.”

Frodo paused in his drying. “We?”
“Well, of course, 'We'. The tides will be at their height and the wind is steady. Perfect sailing weather.”

“Sailing? Bilbo, you don't own a boat, and Bywater pond is barely big enough to launch a curricle.”

His uncle clapped Frodo on the back. “Bywater? No Baggins has ever clambered into such a flimsy thing as a curricle. Anyway, I was not anticipating sailing myself.” Bilbo shuddered. “No. I was thinking of the sea. You have not seen the sea, have you?”

Frodo’s gaze dropped for a moment. “Only in my dreams.”

“In dreams?” Bilbo gave his nephew an assessing gaze. “Frodo, you have a way of constantly surprising me.”

“Can we really go to the sea? Is it far away? Have you seen the sea?”

Bilbo frowned. “Well, I don't know the way myself. But at this time of year elves cross the borders of the Shire on their way to the havens. If we're lucky we can join them. I understand it's only about a week's journey to the coast from here, if we take ponies.”

“Will the weather hold for two weeks, do you think? It's getting a bit late in the year for such a long journey. And can we guarantee to even meet any elves? They surely don't travel every day. Will they even let us travel with them?”

“Goodness, what a worry-wart you have become, Frodo Baggins. Your grandmother was a Took. Where has all that adventurous spirit gone?”

The younger Baggins was not about to be accused of being a stick-in-the-mud. Besides, hadn't he always wanted an adventure, like his uncle? He squared his shoulders. “Alright. When do we go?”

“That's my lad! And if we don't meet any elves we will have had a few days out of doors at least. Perhaps we could chance going alone, at least to the Far Downs.”

Frodo's eyes widened. “As far as the Elf-towers? Have you seen them? Is the road safe for us to travel alone? It's beyond the Shire border and there may be big folk about.”

“What a barrel full of questions you have this morning, lad. If I were to answer them all it would be Yule before we set out. Go and pack your things, and then run down to the Ivy Bush and ask to hire three ponies.” Bilbo fished in his pocket, finally producing three silver pennies. “And don't let Borden Brewer charge you extra for the tack. He's a capital fellow but, if he thinks he can get away with it, he will try. Three pennies is quite sufficient for a fortnight's hire.”

When Frodo only stood, eyes still wide, Bilbo grabbed the tea towel from him and dumped the money into his now empty palm. “Well, go on, lad. I'll pack food and clear out the pantry. I'm sure folks on the row will be grateful for anything we can't take with us.”

Frodo needed no further prompting, slamming the front door in his haste, before sprinting down the lane.

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In the end, Bell Gamgee accepted all the Baggins' spare food, in exchange for a fresh baked loaf, and promising to distribute this largess amongst all three households on the row. By lunch time they were waving goodbye to Arty Sedgeburry, from whom they had purchased some milk, and were taking the road down to Bywater and, from thence, the Great East Road. If folk in Bywater assumed that
the Baggins' were heading off to visit their relations in Tuckborough, Bilbo did not enlighten them for, as he told Frodo with a wink, “We don't want every Bracegirdle and Chub sticking their noses into our business.”

Although it had been some years since Bilbo Baggins sat upon a pony, Frodo was more used to riding, for Brandy Hall kept many mounts. When they stopped to make camp for the night, in a dell by the side of the road, Frodo held back his laughter. Bilbo was supposedly seeing to the ponies, but he spent most of his time groaning as he hobbled and staggered, bow legged, about their little camp. In the end, Frodo took pity, suggesting that his uncle tend to the supper while he fed and watered their mounts.

Tending fire and brewing tea Bilbo could manage with ease. By the time his nephew had stretched out their canvas awning and unrolled their bedding, Bilbo had fried bacon, sausages and bread. Frodo had just time to wash his hands before all was ready.

“It's going to be another cold night,” the younger Baggins observed as he accepted his plate and a mug of tea.

“It is. Why is it that the stars always feel closer when one is camping out of doors?” Bilbo tilted his head to stare.

Above them, sharp pinpricks of light winked in and out. Some were solitary and sharp, others formed strange geometries, and still others clustered in a milky ribbon that trailed across the night sky. Bilbo was right. To Frodo they looked so close that he felt, were he just an inch or so taller and could stretch to his utmost, he would be able to touch one of those cold bright points. “Do elves really love them more than sunlight?” he asked.

Bilbo swallowed his bite of sausage. “They do. I suppose it was because that was the first thing they saw when they awoke, on the shores of Lake Cuivennion, all those ages ago. They made many hymns to them in Master Elrond's house.”

Frodo chewed on a piece of fried bread for a moment before asking, tentatively, “Will you ever go back there, do you think?”

“I'll not deny that I have considered it. It was the perfect place, if one enjoys eating or singing, or simply just sitting. And Master Elrond did invite me to return if I wished.” He glanced aside at his nephew, who appeared to have stopped eating. “But not for a long while I think. I have much to occupy me in the Shire for now.”

“Will you take me with you, when you go?”

Now it was Bilbo who stopped eating and he studied Frodo for a long time before replying. “Do you really want to leave all your friends and family, lad? There are corners of the Shire that you have hardly heard of, let alone explored.”

“But I don't think exploring them will be the same, without you.”

“Well now, that's very flattering. Thank you. But I am getting rather ancient, you know. Some exploring is better done with folk of your own age.”

Frodo laughed. “Bilbo! You're not old. Well, you are old but you do not act old. I bet you can still climb a tree every bit as fast as I.”

Frodo pondered on how many memories could be accumulated in a hundred years. Already there were days when even his twenty six year old mind felt over-stuffed. Perhaps that is why hobbits did not live as long as elves. With their bigger bodies it stood to reason that elves would have more space to store their memories.

Noting Frodo's silence Bilbo tapped his arm to draw his attention. “Don't worry, Frodo. I intend to see you properly settled and of age before I consider leaving. If you want to come with me then, nobody will be able to accuse me of carrying you off. If we left tomorrow I can just imagine your Uncle Saradoc's reaction.”

Frodo laughed at last. “He would probably explode, like one of Gandalf's fireworks.”

They sat together, chatting of this and that, late into the night, only retreating to their blankets when the moon was well along his path in the heavens. It was as cold as it's promise and both Baggins' awoke stiff and sore, but aches were soon worked off by striking their little camp and saddling the ponies. By the time they reached Michel Delving at midday, both were in good spirits, and they stopped at the Pony and Pickle for a luncheon of meat and potato pie with cabbage, washed down with a large mug of cider. Much fortified, they made excellent time and by evening they were well into the White downs. Once more, they camped in a clearing by the road and by lunch time of the following day they had reached the junction, where the Great East Road joined the road to Sam Ford.

“There they are, Frodo. The Tower Hills. And there are the towers.” Bilbo pointed north, north west and then south west.

Following his arm, Frodo gasped as he espied three spires, gleaming white in the sunlight. Even at this distance it was clear that they were excessively tall . . . taller than anything Frodo had ever imagined. “They're beautiful. I had not imagined anything so graceful.”

Bilbo nodded. “Elves certainly know how to create beauty. They call those hills the Emyn Berain. The towers were built by Gilgalad, the elven king I told you of. Master Elrond was his herald in the last great war.” He pointed again, to the one which stood taller and a little apart, to the left. “I don't know whether the other two have names but that one is called, Elostirion. It is not clear, from this distance, but that is the farthest west of the three. They say that at one time it was possible to see the elven lands to the West from its pinnacle.”

“Much as I would like to see that, I'm not certain I'd want to climb so high to do so,” Frodo confessed with a shudder.

Bilbo grinned. “You have a point. Not quite like climbing the oak tree atop Bag End, is it?”

“Have you been close to them?” Frodo asked.

Bilbo shook his head. “No lad. In truth, this is about as far west as I've ever been. Maybe this will be my chance to explore further.” He dismounted. “But not today. We shall camp here for the rest of the afternoon and tonight.”

“But shouldn't we be moving on?” Frodo scanned the sky, which was beginning to show a few wisps of high cloud. “The weather may not hold, this late in the year.”
“No, lad. If we are to meet elves this is the most likely place. They either travel from the lands to the south east, along the Sarn Road, or they travel from the east, along the Great Road. So this junction is the best spot to wait.”

“It is awfully exposed but at least that will make it difficult to miss them,” Frodo commented as he looked about them. They were at the southern most end of the Far Downs, which folded away into the distance on their right. Behind them there was the rich farmland of the West Farthing, with the rolling hills of the White Downs in the distance, on whose farther side was Michel Delving. With the harvest already gathered in, nothing moved in the vast landscape and the only trees were those dotted in the hedgerows of the farmland.

Already unpacking their cooking gear, Bilbo chuckled. “Trust me. If the elves decide to remain unseen we shall know nothing of their passing. But I have spoken with elves close to here before. So they may decide to slake their curiosity at seeing two hobbits upon the very edge of the Shire.” He glanced about them, finally spotting a small stream. “Talking of slaking, you'd better take the ponies to drink.” He tossed a water-skin to Frodo. “And you'd best refill this if you want a cup of tea.”

Later that evening they sat about a cheery fire and Bilbo told Frodo of the doings of the great elven king, Gilgalad. It was during a gap in his narrative, when Bilbo disappeared to take care of a call of nature, that one of the ponies began to stamp and whicker. Worried, Frodo went to investigate.

Rather than trust to hobbling, Frodo had stretched a rope between two low gorse bushes and tethered the ponies to it. They were close enough to the camp to be heard, but far enough to avoid any possibility of them taking fright from the unpredictable flicker of the fire. Now Frodo bent to select a stone, aware that some of the local farmers told tales of wolves roving the wild borders.

The possibility of big folk, so far from their lands to the south, had not even occurred to the lad, so when his legs were swept out from under him, Frodo could only stare up in shock at the huge figure, that was holding a long, slightly rusty, but wickedly sharp sword point to his throat. The lower half of the man's face was covered by a straggly and unkempt beard, that parted to reveal two rows of rotting teeth. “Best stay put, little shire rat. I'm feelin' generous tonight but if you gives any trouble it makes no never-mind to me to be slitting yer gut.”

“I got t'other un.” A wicked laugh issued from somewhere to Frodo's left. “Caught 'im with 'is breeches down, so to speak.”

Despite the sword, Frodo tried to struggle to his feet. “Bilbo?” He was stopped by the simple expedient of a heavy boot, planted firmly in the centre of his chest. His question was answered, however, when Bilbo landed with an, “Oof!” on the ground at his side. When Frodo struggled further, indeed putting himself in danger of being gutted, Bilbo managed to gasp out, “I'm alright lad. Just damaged my dignity.”

A second man leaned in to Bilbo's face to cackle, “I could change that, shorty. Just give me a reason.”

Even from a couple of feet away Frodo grimaced as the man's foul breath drifted his way, and he noticed Bilbo gag. Still, he was impressed when his uncle spoke up. “We have nothing worth stealing. We're just on a riding holiday.”

Frodo's captor threw his head back to laugh loudly, apparently finding this highly amusing. “Did you hear that, lads? A ridin' holiday! Aint we caught a posh pair?”

Another man appeared, as disreputable in his looks as the others. Frodo noted that he held the leading reins of all three ponies. “If they's that posh they'll have coin.”
The ruffian holding Frodo began to fish about in the pockets of his clothing, pausing to finger the fine silk of the waistcoat for a moment before moving on to his breeches. Fortunately, Frodo had brought little money with him, relying upon his uncle's generosity to provide their needs. Still, from the reaction, his captor considered the few copper coins a treasure. “Yer right, Col. Check yours. He looks like a proper gent.”

Col bent to rummage in Bilbo's clothing, but as soon as his hand came close to the waistcoat pocket, the older hobbit exploded into action, putting up such a fight that Frodo was fearful that Col would murder him, there and then. He could not understand what had got into his normally calm uncle, for Bilbo behaved as though he carried all the treasure of the Shire about his person.

Then, quite suddenly, Col stopped. Frodo watched in confusion as Col's leering face morphed into surprise, and then horror, as he straightened. When he was upright once more his body continued to lean back, and back and back, until he landed with a thud upon the ground. It was only then that Frodo saw the sharp, leaf shaped point of an arrow, protruding from Col's chest.

“'ere. What's goin' on?” was all Frodo's captor had time to shout before he too fell to one side, a finely feathered shaft protruding from the centre of his forehead.

The third ruffian dropped the reins and turned to run, but he too, fell. Frodo clambered up, quickly, casting about frantically to establish whether the newcomers were friend or foe. That was when a soft voice murmured from the darkness beyond the fire, “Peace, Little Masters. We come to help, not to harm.”

From the corner of his eye, Frodo saw Bilbo scrabble frantically in his waistcoat pocket, stopping with a sigh when he apparently found what he was searching for. He made a mental note to ask his uncle about it later, but for the moment there were more important matters to attend to. “Who are you and why won't you show yourself?” Frodo demanded, disappointed when he heard his voice tremble.

All about them a soft silver glow appeared, as moonlight shimmers from behind a cloud. The glow coalesced into several tall and slender figures as cloaks were thrown back. A silver haired male stepped forward. “We did not wish to startle you with our presence, but there, I believe our actions failed us.” He held out a hand to Bilbo and drew the hobbit easily to his feet.

Bilbo straightened his clothes before executing a deep bow. “I thank you for your timely action sir. Ni veren an le ngovaned.”

Frodo watched finely arched brows rise on a smooth forehead. “A happy meeting, indeed. You speak our tongue very well. But where are my manners?” He touched hand to heart, inclining his silver head. “I am Gillas of the house of Inglorian. My companions and I are returning from escorting some of our folk to Mithlond.”

Bilbo smiled. “I am Bilbo Baggins, of Hobbiton in the Shire and this is my nephew, Frodo Baggins. We were on a little riding expedition when these ruffians attacked. We are very fortunate that you were passing.”

Frodo executed his best bow and murmured a little uncertainly, “Le suilon.”

“Greetings to you, too. May we join you for supper? We have provisions and would offer you what protection we can for this night at least.”

“Oh yes. Please feel free. Our camp, such as it is, is yours.” Bilbo smiled widely.
At a flick of Gillas' finger the other elves advanced, setting down bows and sheathing gleaming swords. Frodo watched in fascination as they moved about the small camp silently, mending the fire, returning the ponies to their line, unpacking food and drink and spreading thick blankets. Others of their number removed the bodies of the unfortunate ruffians. Frodo did not follow to see what was done with them, but those elves were some time in returning. He liked to think that such high folk would give the men a decent burial.

Soon all were settled in a wide circle about the expanded fire. Bilbo and Frodo's rations were supplemented by finely roasted meats, delicately seasoned vegetables and bread so soft and light that Frodo dare not set it down, for fear it would float away. This was followed by sweet brambles and crisp apples, and washed down by draughts of cool, clear wine.

When all had eaten their fill, Gillas turned to Bilbo. “Tell me, Master Baggins, what brings you to the far borders of your homeland? The wilds are no place for folk who have not the means to defend themselves.”

Bilbo cleared his throat, obviously a little abashed. “I had thought that we would be safe this far west. Most of the big folk only touch our eastern borders, and Frodo and I wanted to see the elf towers.”

“And even, perhaps, the elf havens?” Frodo added, eagerly.

Gillas shook his head. “That is at least another three days journey from here and, as you have just learned, the roads are not as safe as once they were. You would be wise to turn back on the morrow for I cannot spare any of my party to accompany you further. Within two days we must meet others of our folk, by the fords of Sarn, so we dare not tarry long.”

Frodo's excitement was now over-ridden by disappointment. “I suppose we must turn back, then. I wish we had seen the towers more closely, though. They looked very beautiful, even from a distance.”

“They are indeed, although two at least have fallen into disrepair of late. They were built for King Elendil but his line has faded, and those who remain have no use now for towers so far north.”

Frodo was captivated by the fair faces about him. “Bilbo has been telling me of the elven king, Gilgalad. He says it was he who built the towers. I understand that Gilgalad fought and fell in a great battle, but who was he?”

To his surprise, it was not Gillas who replied, but another of their number, who took up a small harp and began to play. All about the fire, sweet voices arose in delicate harmonies. At first Frodo was disappointed for their words flowed to quickly for his comprehension, but then he found himself drifting upon the melody. Melody became image and image became story . . . story became dream.

When next Frodo opened his eyes he looked about him in confusion. It was daylight and the elves were gone. The fire was gone too. Indeed, the landscape was gone. All that remained was Bilbo, Frodo, and the ponies.

“Bilbo! Bilbo, wake up!”

“Wha? What is it lad? Is the smial on fire?” Bilbo rubbed bleary eyes, then blinked as he took in their surroundings.

“How did we get here, Bilbo?” Frodo pointed to a line of low hills, upon the horizon of which could clearly be seen smoke, from the chimneys of Michel Delving. His eyes widened. “Was it elvish
Bilbo stood, setting hands on hips and looking down the road to the west. “Magic? Perhaps. But I suspect it more likely that Gillas’ folk carried us while we slept. Very kind of them I must say, but I would have liked to talk a little longer.”

Frodo laughed. “You may have talked for longer, but I think I need to brush up on my Sindarin before I try that again.”

“Well, I can help you with that at least. Come on. Help me saddle the ponies. If we make good time we can have breakfast in Michel Delving.”

Gillas = Silver leaf
Ni veren an le ngovaned = I am happy to meet you
Le suilon = I greet you
“Yes, Master Frodo. I'm afraid you have the influenza.” Doctor Brockleby straightened and Bilbo leaned in to tuck the covers about his nephew's shoulders.

“How long will he be sick?” Bilbo asked, worriedly. He never suffered from such things nowadays, and paid little attention when illnesses washed through the rest of the population.

“How hard to say. When did you first start feeling unwell, young master?”

Frodo's voice was little more than a rasp. “Sore throat yesterday. Not dizzy until today.”

Brockleby nodded. “Did you go to market on Hevensday, by any chance?”

It was Bilbo who answered, to save his nephew's voice. “Yes. I sent him down for some pies and a chicken.”

“I suspected as much.” The doctor turned back to Frodo with a wry smile. “You're my sixth patient this morning, and you all attended market on Hevensday.”

Bilbo frowned. “Was it the pies, then?”

“The pies? Oh . . . no . . . not any of the foods. Influenza seems to be spread from person to person, by touch. One of the pie sellers had travelled in from Overhill, where they've nearly all had it of late.” Brockleby tightened his lips in disapproval. “Their healer should have known better, and told everyone to stay put. But there, I suppose pie sellers have to make a living to feed their families, just like the rest of us. This sickness started away out in Buckland they say. Brought in by a trader from Bree. Since then it's been working it's way West through the Farthings.”

“Tom Carter said there were several cases of influenza in the surrounding villages, but I didn't realise it was quite that bad. I suppose we should be glad it's nothing deadly,” Bilbo noted.

The doctor paused in fastening his cloak. “Young Frodo, here, should recover with a few days rest. If he develops a cough or becomes delirious, call me back. It's the elderly and the bairns that we have to worry about. I'm afraid their breathing can get so poor that they become overwhelmed by the sickness.” He frowned across at Bilbo, who was nearly twice the doctor's age. “You'd best take care of yourself, Mister Baggins. Make sure that you wash whenever you've been in this room.”

Bilbo waved his hand, dismissively. “Don't worry about me. I never get sick. My constitution has been that of an ox ever since my travels.”

Doctor Brockleby humphed. “Well, just be careful and try not to touch anyone else. Even if you don't suffer yourself you could pass it on to someone, just by having touched Frodo. Speaking of which, may I wash my hands before I leave?”

“Yes. Of course. Follow me.” Bilbo led Brockleby from the room, pausing to tell Frodo, “I'll be back in a few minutes, lad. Try and have a nap.”

Frodo found no difficulty in complying.

Later that afternoon Bilbo was disturbed from his reading by a knock at the door. He glanced across
at Frodo, who was no more than a lump beneath the covers. The lad did not move, so Bilbo tiptoed from the bedroom and down the hallway, before any further knocking awoke the lad. When he opened the door it was to find Bell Gamgee, covered tray in hands.

Her voice was soft as she handed over her offering. “I heard about Master Frodo. There’s nothin’ goes on in this row, but that Clover Mugwort don’t know about it. She stopped Doctor Brockleby as he was leavin’.” She tweaked aside the cover on the tray to reveal a bowl of chicken broth, a large jug of fresh milk and a jar of honey. “I’ll bring some soft bread rolls later. I’ve left Sam tendin’ the dough now. “How is the Master Frodo?”

Bilbo turned to set the tray atop a box in the hallway. “Forgive me for not inviting you in, but Doctor Brockleby has told me I should limit my contact with others, for fear of passing on the influenza.”

“That’s alright sir. Clover told us he’d said as much. How’s the lad copin’?”

“He’s been doing a lot of sleeping. It’s very good of you to bring this but you really shouldn’t be here Bell. You could catch the influenza simply by handing over that tray.”

Bell smiled ruefully. “My Ham was at market on Hevensday, too. We had some extra parsnips that we thought would bring in a couple of pennies. He came down with the sickness this mornin’.”

“Oh Bell, I’m so sorry. How are the youngsters? And what about you?”

“I’m a farmers daughter. We’re a hardy lot but if I catch it, I catch it. There’s nothin’ to be done about that. Daisy's went down to tend Pansy Goodbody yesterday. The old widow’s got it bad and her sister won’t go near.” Bell's sniff told Bilbo all he needed to know about her opinion of Caly Berrydown. “If you need anythiny in a hurry, come knock at my door. Sam and Mari seem healthy for the moment, so I'll send 'em up once a day to see yer alright.”

“Thank you. Bell Gamgee you are a treasure.”

Bell chuckled as she drew her shawl over her head against the cold. “I'm only doin' what most folk would.” With those words she turned for home.

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Of the next days, Frodo remembered little, other than that Bilbo was there whenever he awoke, plying him with light broths and warm milk, laced with honey. Much to Bilbo's relief, the feared delirium and cough did not materialise, and by next Hevensday the lad was sitting up in bed, pale and weary but otherwise feeling much better.

Frodo’s eyes widened appreciatively as a tray was deposited in his lap. It contained porridge, with cream and honey, a cup of milky tea, soft buttered bread (for his throat was still a little sore from all the coughing he had been doing over the past days), a soft boiled egg, and some apple, stewed with sultana's, cinnamon, and lots of brown sugar. “Dig in, lad. I had mine half an hour ago.”

“Thank you, Bilbo. It does feel good to be able to eat again.” Frodo dipped his spoon into the soft golden centre of the boiled egg. “What's been happening in Hobbiton? It feels like an age since I was out of doors.”

His uncle grinned as a stray gust of wind spattered the bedroom window with fat drops of rain, setting the fire hissing and sputtering as some came down the chimney. “I don't think you'd want to be out of doors in this weather,” he observed wryly.

“You may be right. But what of Hobbiton? I seem to remember Doctor Brockleby saying that others
had caught the influenza too.

Bilbo drew up a chair to the bedside. “They have indeed. Hamfast Gamgee got it at about the same time as you, although I understand he was up and about yesterday. Sam and Bell have not caught it yet, but little Marigold has it now. This sickness seems to be worst for the very old and the very young.”

Frodo set down his spoon. “Mistress Gamgee must be beside herself. Marigold always suffers with her chest when she gets a cold.”

Bilbo waved toward the tray. “Now, don't you stop eating. The best thing you can do to help is to get well. Bell has been sending young Sam, running back and forth with food for days now. Once you're able to fend for yourself we can return the favour. Half of Hobbiton has the sickness. Doctor Brockleby has insisted that they close the taverns and Hevensday market has been cancelled this week. I've even heard a rumour that he's been taken with the influenza himself.”

Frodo took up his spoon again, albeit reluctantly. “Then, as soon as I feel a bit stronger, I shall see what I can do to help. At least if I've had the sickness I won't be able to catch it again. I could be very useful.”

Bilbo's tone was firm as he wagged a finger at his nephew. “Not until you are fully recovered, Frodo Baggins! Doctor Brockleby warned me not to let you do too much too soon, or you could relapse.”

Frodo's blue gaze looked mutinous for a moment, but he said nothing, only returning to his breakfast. Bilbo suspected that the lad would be out of that bed and about Hobbiton, far sooner than Doctor Brockleby would like and, short of tying him down, there would be little that Bilbo could do about it.

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Frodo knocked at Number Three's yellow door, hunching his shoulders against a chill wind and drawing his cloak closer over the basin he carried. Fortunately, he did not have to wait for long before Sam Gamgee admitted him.

Hamfast Gamgee looked across from the sink, where he appeared to be washing the second breakfast pots. “Mornin' Master Frodo. Tis good to see you up and about at least. Feelin' better are you?”

“Yes. Thank you Master Gamgee. It's good to see you too. Bilbo and I thought you would like some chicken broth. I expect you don't much feel like cooking at present.” His gaze was drawn to the range, where Bell Gamgee sat in her rocking chair. Little Marigold Gamgee was visible only as a bundle of quilts in her mother's lap. “How is she?” Frodo asked, softly.

Bell offered a weak smile. “She's asleep at last, though I'm not sure if that's good or bad. She won't sleep nowhere but in my arms, bless her.”

“Do you need any food fetching or errands run?” Frodo handed over the basin to Hamfast, who set it upon the otherwise empty table. Frodo could remember few occasions when that table had not been hosting either food or one of Bell Gamgee's many household jobs.

“Thank you kindly, young master, but me and Sam will manage now.” Ham was about to turn away when he changed his mind. “There is one thing, if you will. I'm supposed to go tend Mistress Sackville-Baggins' garden today, but I don't want to leave home for too long at present. If you're up to the walk, maybe you could let them know?”

“Of course. Perhaps I can check in on Daisy for you at the same time. She's with Widow Goodbody,
“Isn't she?”

“Yes, sir. That would be a great kindness. We ain't heard from her for two days and we've been frettin' she may have got the flu herself.” Ham laid a large and capable hand upon his wife's shoulder.

“Consider it done.” Frodo pulled up his hood and Sam ran to open the door for him. “I hope Marigold is feeling better soon,” he added as Sam closed the door after him. Even as he said it, the sentiment felt inadequate.

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“Go away!” Lobelia Sackville-Baggins' voice was unmistakeable, despite issuing from behind a stout and firmly shut, possibly even barricaded, wooden door.

Frodo sighed. “It's Frodo, Aunt Lobelia. Won't you let me in? It's awfully cold out here.”

“Certainly not! You have the influenza. Doctor Brockleby told me. I'll not have you in my smial.”

“I'm better now, Aunt. Is anyone sick here? Do you need any help?”

“No. We're all well and we're going to stay that way. Go away!”

Frodo rolled his eyes. “Alright. I only came with a message from Master Gamgee. He says he will not be able to come and tend your garden today, because his youngest is very sick.”

“What!” The volume in Lobelia's voice actually made Frodo take an involuntary step backward. “How am I supposed to feed us if he doesn't come to dig the vegetables?”

Frodo was perplexed. “If you are all well, why can't Lotho or Otho dig them? It's not a big job and, in your own garden, you're not likely to encounter anyone else.”

Frodo recognised the bored tones of Otho Sackville-Baggins. “Frodo Baggins, that may be normal for young gentlehobbits in Buckland, but it is not appropriate in Hobbiton. How are we to keep the respect of our inferiors if we are seen doing such menial tasks?”

“Then, as my reputation is already sullied, perhaps I could dig some vegetables for you. Where do you store your tools?” Annoyed as he was, Frodo recognised that his relations would probably rather starve, than do their own gardening. He could not bear the thought of even his Aunt Lobelia starving.

There was a whispered conversation behind the door before Otho called out, “In the shed by the back door. You had best dig enough for several days.”

Selecting a shovel and a fork, Frodo set too with a will, lifting potatoes, turnips, carrots and parsnips. He placed them on the back doorstep, before cleaning his tools, as he had seen Hamfast Gamgee do a hundred times, and replacing them neatly in the shed. He would not have it said that he did a poor job, even a so-called menial one.

When he looked up he could see Lobelia, Lotho and Otho standing at the kitchen window. They all looked disgustingly healthy. If he expected thanks for his efforts he was to be disappointed. “You may leave now,” Lobelia sniffed. “I do not want you around when we unlock the door.”

Frodo stepped back before executing a sweeping bow. The implied insult was lost upon Lobelia, however, who shouted, “And do not forget to return in two days time. We will need more potatoes
by then.”

Frodo strolled down the path, making a mental note to return in three days. It would do the Sackville-Baggins good to tighten their belts for a day.

On his way back through Hobbiton Frodo had time to look about him. There were very few folk out and about, and those who were did not stop to pass the time of day. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry to get to where they needed to be, and to slam the door shut behind them. It was some surprise then, to see Daisy Gamgee sitting, huddled in a cloak and quilt, on the seat in Pansy Goodbody's front garden. “Hello Daisy. Your parents sent me to make sure you were still well.”

Daisy lifted red-rimmed eyes and swallowed hard before replying. “I'm well . . . but . . .”

Frodo's gaze was drawn to the open door of Pansy Goodbody's little smial. “Pansy?” He could not bring himself to ask the question that he knew he should.

Daisy shook her head as tears rolled down her cheeks. “She went durin' the night. I've been sittin' here wonderin' what to do. It don't seem right to just leave her. I helped Ma with a layin' out once, so I've done that for Pansy, as best I can. But I can't carry her all the way to the cemetery.”

“Of course not. You're probably worn out already. You go tell her sister. Caly will want to be at the funeral. Then nip up to Bag End and let Bilbo know. He once mentioned he was very fond of Pansy. I shall fetch Birky Bracegirdle.”

When Frodo would have hurried away Daisy stopped him. “Birky's sick too. I heard Bill Bracegirdle say so yesterday. So there's no-one to dig the grave.”

Frodo blinked. It seemed it was to be his day for digging. “Alright. You go and tell Caly, then explain matters to Bilbo, and tell him I shall need his help with the digging.”

“Diggin'? You're goin' to dig the grave yourself?”

“I don't see that we have any option. Poor Pansy can't stay there until Birky is well enough. I can borrow a cart and tools from him and, between us, Bilbo and I will probably manage. It won't be the neatest grave but I think Pansy will forgive us.”

Daisy closed the door to the little smial, with a whispered farewell to its occupant, before joining Frodo at the gate. “Thank you, Frodo.”

“It's my pleasure to help, Daisy. And don't forget to call in at Number Three when you're done. I think your family will be very pleased to see you.”

By the time Frodo had borrowed all the equipment needed and returned to Pansy's smial, Bilbo was waiting for him. It was clear that he had shed a few tears and Frodo lowered the cart handles to come and stand by his uncle. “I thought you would want to know, but if this will be too hard for you I can probably manage alone.”

Bilbo sniffed. “Nonsense, lad. You're only just recovered yourself. You can't be digging a grave all alone. Come on. I'll help you carry her out to the cart. It probably won't be a big task, Pansy was never a plump lass.”

Pansy's grave was half dug when Nedes and Bartimus Brockbank arrived, for Daisy had taken it upon herself to knock at their door on the way home. They took over from Bilbo and Frodo to finish the hole, then all four lowered the small bundle that was Pansy Goodbody into the ground. Most hobbit's did not bother with coffins so they were spared that problem at least, having heard from
Nedes that Carpenter Buckleby was also abed with influenza. Of Pansy's sister, Caly, there was no sign, and Frodo afforded her the assumption that the absence was because she, too, was ill. Nedes was smoothing the mounded earth, and a tearful Bilbo was carving Pansy's name into a piece of wood, when Flora and Bert Fennelly arrived.

Frodo's heart sank and he and Bartimus could only stand in silence as Bert walked toward them. A blank faced Flora stood at the gate, two year old Daffy upon her hip, and a small hemp shopping bag in her other hand. The little lass was asleep, head upon her Mama's shoulder and one little thumb tucked between rosebud lips. Her twin, Dilly, was in her father's arms. but she was not asleep, lest it be the final sleep that we all must take.

When Bert stood before him, his eyes beseeching, Frodo looked down. Dilly was wrapped tightly in her Mama's best shawl but her parents had been unable to cover her sweet, pale face. “We couldn't close her away,” Bert explained. All Frodo could see was little Marigold Gamgee, silent in her Mama's arms. It stirred up other pain, long pushed down, and Frodo glanced aside for Bilbo's aid, but Bilbo was lost in his own sadness as he knelt at Pansy's graveside.

It was Bartimus who came to his friend's rescue. “Where'd you like us to dig, Bert?”

“Yonder corner. Her Granny is over there. She'll not be lonely beside her.”

Frodo, Bartimus and Nedes, with Bert and Flora in tow, crossed to the southwest corner of Hobbiton's well tended graveyard. There, beside the marker for Perewinkle Fennelly, they dug a tiny grave. When it was done, the lads stood back to give Flora and Bert some privacy. Flora was crying silently, cradling her living daughter close, as she knelt beside the small hole in the ground. Bert lowered himself into the hole, barely big enough to contain him, and placed sweet little Dilly at his feet. Finally, he drew a fold of the shawl over her still face, and Bartimus leaned in to help him out of the hole.

When Nedes would have begun filling the grave Bert stopped him, taking the shovel to perform this last loving duty for his little lass. Flora handed the still sleeping Daffy into Frodo's care and, when the last shovel of dirt was in place, she smoothed the tiny mound with her bare hands, before reaching into the bag at her side to produce a handful of fat, dry, flower bulbs. These, she and Bert tucked into the soft earth. In spring there would be a beautiful display of daffodils in this corner. Bert also pulled from the bag, a rudely carved piece of wood, upon which he had painted his daughter's name, along with the dates of her birth and death. The dates were far too close together for the comfort of all the small burial party.

Daffy began to stir, fretfully, as they finished and Flora took her back at once, bending to kiss rich brown curls. “Tis alright, little lass. We're goin' home now. Ye need yer dinner.” Bert paused long enough to shake the lad's hands, then followed, head down, in his wife's wake.

Nedes began cleaning his shovel as all looked back, across the peaceful graveyard. It was still and empty, but for Bilbo, now climbing to his feet. The usually green yard was scattered with the brown hummocks of new graves, for it seemed several others had performed their own lonely ceremonies over recent days. The newly qualified grave diggers joined Bilbo at the gate.

Bilbo touched each lad's shoulder then linked arms with Frodo, to lead them across the Water and up the hill. Bartimus and Nedes took barrow and tools back to Birky Bracegirdle's shed on their way home, while Frodo and Bilbo climbed the unusually silent lane of Bagshot Row. With an unspoken accord they turned in at the gate of Number Three and knocked at the round yellow door, just as the first raindrops began to fall.

Once more it was Sam Gamgee who answered and, despite the unaccustomedly weary cast to his
young hazel eyes, he offered them a broad smile. “Come in, sirs.”

When they stepped in, letting Sam close the door after them, Frodo could instantly feel a difference in the air. Ham and Daisy were sitting at the table and Bilbo waved them down when they would have got to their feet. “No, no. Today is no time for ceremonies,” Bilbo assured them.

“Frodo, play?” The lad's eyes were drawn at once to the place he had been avoiding since entering. By the hearth Bell still rocked but, sitting upright, in her lap was a pale but grinning Marigold Gamgee.

Frodo had to swallow several times, and still he could not speak past the lump in his throat. Bilbo finally came to his rescue. “Hello Marigold.” He held out hands that were still covered in soil. “I'm afraid we are late for our luncheon and we really must wash our hands first. Perhaps Frodo can come and play with you tomorrow.”

Bell's eyes narrowed as she took in the unusually grubby state of these two gentlehobbits. “Mayhap that would be best. Mari is goin' to have a nap soon anyhow. Why don't ye pop over for elevenses tomorrow, and ye can tell how ye came to be all over muck.”

Bilbo glanced down to discover that his clothing looked as disreputable as his hands, and offered a weak smile as he steered his silent nephew out of the door. “Perhaps that's a tale for brighter times.”

Once back in their own cosy smial Bilbo filled jugs with hot water and both hobbits retired to wash and change. When Frodo returned to the kitchen, Bilbo was already making a light snack of bread, cheese and pickles. “I don't think I could eat anything, Uncle.”

“Nonsense, lad. You've done some hard work today, and you're not long out of your sickbed. Come and eat.” He handed over a small glass, containing an inch of amber liquid. “Drink this first.”

Frodo eyed the contents suspiciously. “What is it?”

“You're not strictly old enough but I think we can look the other way, just for today. It's my best brandy.” He slipped a finger beneath the glass to guide it to Frodo's lips. “One big swallow. Go on. It will put some fire back in your belly.”

Trusting to Bilbo's wisdom in such matters Frodo did as instructed, eyes widening as the smooth liquid warmed his throat and landed with a burgeoning glow in his empty stomach. Watching closely, Bilbo nodded. “That's better, lad. You've got some colour back in those cheeks. Now, come and make us some chamomile tea while I set out the plates and cups.”

An hour later the luncheon was consumed, the pots washed, and both hobbits sat at their ease in Bag End's cosy parlour, listening to rain patter against the window panes. Frodo was staring into the fire and Bilbo drew on his pipe for a few minutes before speaking.

“Today was hard on you, lad. Burying the old is one thing, but a child is another matter, isn't it?”

Frodo reached for his hanky, surprised that such a simple question should open the flood gates of his tears. “I kept seeing Marigold. When I left the Gamgee's she was as still as Dilly, and I wondered if I would be helping to bury her tomorrow.”

“Ahhh. I didn't know she'd been that sick. It's no wonder you were hit so hard.” Bilbo waited while his nephew composed himself. “I'm sorry I wasn't more help. I don't know whether I ever told you this but,” he took another deep draw on his pipe, “I was once going to offer for Pansy Goodbody, Berrydown as she was then. As things turned out, it was probably for the best that I was pipped to the post. But I'm sorry I wasn't paying more attention to your needs. Some Uncle I am.”
“It's alright, Bilbo. I understand and I don't blame you. Truly. It was just . . . it reminded me of another time.” Frodo worried at his damp hanky for a few moments before continuing, “I was at my parent's funeral but for years I have tried not to remember it.”

Bilbo nodded, relieved that Frodo had finally come to the heart of his grief. “I remember. You were so still and quiet at the graveside. Not one tear did you shed, until you climbed into my lap and sobbed yourself to sleep later that afternoon.”

Frodo looked up. “Did I? Yes. I think I remember now. The smell of Old Toby and lavender water.” He allowed himself a watery smile. “You have always been there when I needed you most.”

“And I always will be, lad. I always will.” Bilbo leaned forward to lay his hand upon Frodo's. “And if there's one thing I've learned in my long years, it's that this pain will pass. We may lose a few more before it's over, but the Shire will come through. We'll be sad for a time but the laughter will return.”

Frodo offered a smile but wondered, in his heart, whether there would ever come a day when he encountered a pain too great to, “pass”. He could not imagine living forever with the knot of sadness that he felt now.
“Careful, lass. Don't ye go breakin' any of my crocks,” Bell chided, as Daisy added another basin to what, in her mother's opinion, was already too large a stack.

Daisy only grinned as she turned to deposit them upon the kitchen table. “How many years have we been doin' this together, Ma? I aint dropped one yet.”

With a loud sniff, Bell turned back to the sink and her washing of the pans. “There's always a first time, lass. When ye've a smial of your own ye'll pay more mind, I'm thinkin'.”

Daisy paused in her clearing of the shelves. “When will that be, do you think?”

Her mother sniffed again, “That depends on ye and Bartimus, don't it? Or have ye decided to set yer sights on another? Ye were always a fickle one.”

Daisy's, “Ma!” was accompanied by a roll of the eyes that Bell heard, rather than saw.

“Well, it weren't that long ago ye had yer sights set on Master Frodo,” Bell turned to find Daisy still staring into the distance. “And ye haven't finished clearin' those shelves. Spring cleanin' don't do itself and we've Bag End to tackle when we've finished here.”

“I never did consider Frodo,” Daisy announced with some offence. “Anyway, he had his eye on May, not me.”

Bell shuddered. “I don't need ye to remind me. That's one Thrimidge I'll not forget in a hurry. I thought half the village had the Spring Fever. Between ye and May fightin' over Master Frodo, yer Da splittin' his breeches and Ruby Brockbank chasin' every lad that weren't spoken for, and one or two that were, I didn't know which way to turn.”

Daisy grinned. “I wonder if Frodo still writes to our May.”

“It's Master Frodo to you, my lass. I don't ask and she don't tell. And as long as the Water is between them I don't care.” Bell replied as she threw a tea-towel at her daughter.

Daisy snagged it easily from the air but set it down on the table as someone knocked at the door. “Are we expectin' anyone?”

Her mother sighed. “No. But that's no excuse for keepin' whoever it is waitin'.”

Daisy opened the door wide, to reveal a big bunch of wild flowers, behind which was a smiling Bartimus Brockbank. “Hello Daisy. I saw these and I thought of you.”

Daisy adopted her best bored-tweenage expression. “You saw a bunch of wilted weeds and thought of me, did you?”

Knowing that she should not allow her daughter to be so rude, still Bell waited, aware that Bartimus Brockbank was quite capable of defending himself from the cutting edge of her daughter's tongue. At first his face fell. Then his eyes took on a certain gleam. “They're only a down payment, so to speak. We can go into market and buy some pretty daisies. I saw some this mornin', as bright a yellow as that bonny frock your wearin'.”

Daisy looked back at her mother, pleadingly and Bell relented. “Go on with ye. I can manage this
job on my own.” When Daisy began to unfasten her apron strings Bell added, “But make sure ye're back to help make the tea. Bartimus can join us if he's a mind to.”

Bartimus answered for himself, only too willing to have more time away from his sister, Ruby. “Thank you, Mistress Gamgee. I'd like that. I'll make sure Daisy's back in time.” He eyed the bunch of flowers, and then Daisy, and the lass took them from him with a flourish, flashing her mother a broad smile as she laid them on the table.

Bell came to the door to watch them stroll down the lane, hand in hand. As they reached the bottom of the hill Daisy leaned in to whisper something to Bartimus, before dragging him off, in the opposite direction to the market. Bell rolled her eyes. “Tweens and trouble,” she muttered as she closed the door.

As she dropped the latch on the front door the back door opened, to admit her two youngest. As always, Marigold looked as though she had been dragged through a hedge, backwards. Her face and hands were grubby, her hair ribbons had obviously fallen out and were at present, stuffed into her pinafore pocket, and she was holding up her skirt to reveal a skinned knee.

Her older brother looked worried as he steered her to a sit upon the end of one of the benches beside the table. “We were only playin' hop-squares, but she couldn't jump over two at once. I'm sorry, Ma. I should have let her hop in the square.” Whereas Marigold did not seem at all upset about her injury, Sam looked to be upon the verge of tears.

Bell leaned in to examine the damage to her daughter's knee. “This aint too bad. I just needs cleanin' up a bit. Fetch the soft soap and fill me a basin with warm water, Sam lad, and stop yer frettin’.” To Marigold she offered a smile. “Five minutes and it will all be over and ye can play again.”

Marigold bent to examine the damage herself. “It don't hurt,” she announced firmly. “And that's all to the good, lass. But yer black-bright so a bit of soap and water won't hurt.”

Sam set basin and cup of soft soap on the table at his mother's elbow. “Thank ye. Go fetch a bandage from the medicine box. I've no doubt it will be on the floor within an hour, but we may as well try,” Bell instructed as she began to soap a cloth and dab gently at Marigold's knee. Now the little lass gasped, making to squirm away, but her mother snagged the leg with a skill born of much experience. “Soon be over, Marigold, lass. Soon be over,” Bell crooned as she continued to clean grit from the graze. Moments later Sam returned with a roll of linen and watched as his mother wrapped it neatly over the injury.

Bell stood back to examine her youngest. “Well, lass. Ye look a mess, but then, ye always do. Come on. Let's get yer hands and face washed and hair brushed. Then ye can play inside for a bit.” When Marigold's face began to crumple her Ma tweaked one grubby cheek. “Just so I can keep an eye on that knee. Ye can play with yer dolly until teatime.”

Sam obliged by pushing Marigold's favourite dolly into his sister's hands. Marigold accepted it with a beaming grin and Bell shook her head. “I'll never know what ye like so much about that doll.” It was one supplied by Frodo some years back, having been given to him by a rather eccentric aunt. Marigold frequently spent hours dressing and undressing the misshapen toy. Bell soaped up the cloth once more and began to scrub at her daughter's hands and face, while Sam fetched Daisy's hairbrush. Five minutes later a slightly cleaner and tidier Marigold was settled beneath the table with her dolly.

“Can I help with the cleanin', Ma?” Sam asked as he surveyed the half empty shelves.

“Aye. Mayhap ye can. Daisy is walkin' out with Barty and if we can get this job finished before tea
we can make a start on Bag End tomorrow. Fetch the stool from yer sister's bedroom. Ye should be able to reach the top shelf if ye stand on it, but have a care lad.”

“I won't break any pots, Ma. I promise.”

“Tis not the pots that worrit me. We can replace a plate but a broken leg is another thing,” Bell replied with a grin, ruffling his sandy curls.

Sam ran off to collect the stool and Bell bent to check on her daughter. Marigold had removed the first layer of her doll's clothes and was starting on the second, tongue poked between her teeth as she worried at buttons and ties. Rummaging in her capacious apron pocket, Bell handed Marigold a small wrapped sweetie, touching a finger to her lips. Marigold grinned as she popped it into her mouth and Bell tucked the empty wrapper back in her pocket.

Arriving in the kitchen at a more sedate pace than he left, Sam set down the stool beside the sturdy, floor to ceiling shelves, where all the Gamgee crockery and cooking pots were stored. Sam clambered up easily but his mother stayed him before he could collect the first load. “Just a minute lad. Lets do this carefully. Ye take down the pots and pass them to me. I'll put them on the table. I don't want you clamberin' up and down with yer arms full.”

Sam was an obedient child, long used to helping both his Ma and his Pa. He was just passing down one of the last loads when there was a knock at the door. Bell went to answer. It was Nedes Brockbank. “Hello, Mistress Gamgee. I was wonderin' if Barty was here. Only he promised to take our Ruby to visit her cousin, and he aint been seen since lunch time.”

Bell sighed. “He's taken Daisy out walkin'. Looks like he's forgot about his poor sister.”

Sam could see his Ma's best china flower vase in the far corner of the very top shelf. He considered getting down to move the stool closer but it was not that far away. If he stretched just a bit further his fingertips brushed it. Perhaps if he stood on his very tiptoes and leaned . . .

“They said they were goin' to market but I saw them turn off into Tom Cotton's fields when they got to the . . .”

Bell spun about and Nede's leaned in when they heard a clatter, followed by the unmistakable sound of fine china smashing on stone flags, and the equally unmistakable sound of flesh and bone making contact with the same surface.

“Sam!” Bell was on her knees at her son's side within a heartbeat, heedless of the shards of china surrounding him.

Nedes followed. “What can I do, Mistress?”

“Mama?” Marigold scrambled out from beneath the table, naked doll in one hand and freckles standing out against a suddenly very white face.

Bell spared both only a glance. “Go fetch Mister Bilbo, then get my Ham. He's down at Widow Rumble's today.”

The sturdy lad needed no more instruction and was running up the hill almost before Bell finished the last word. She tried to smile at her faunt. “Don't ye worrit, lass. Go back 'neath the table and play with yer dolly.” She had to swallow back bile before continuing. “Sam's goin' to be alright. He's just had a tumble. Like ye had.”

Rather than climb back beneath the table, Marigold stepped closer, however. Her face beginning to
Bell flung out an arm. “Don't come no closer, lass. Ye'll cut yer feet on all this mess.” Noting an edge of panic in her own voice, Bell took a deep breath. “Help me and yer brother by just stayin' safe 'neath the table, Mari, lass.” Marigold finally complied, hugging her dolly close. Bell forced herself to ignore the little sobs coming from beneath the table. Sam was in more need of her attention at present.

Sam Gamgee was still, and Bell's heart fluttered like a trapped bird before she detected the rise and fall of his small chest. He lived. Now she had to make sure that he stayed that way. Pushing down her fear, Bell ran her hands over ribs and spread-eagled limbs. Panic arose again as she found blood, but closer examination revealed that it was the result of some minor cuts, caused by the smashed vase. When she ran her hands over Sam's skull, however, she found a large knot forming, at the back of his head. Painfully aware of Marigold's wide, tear-filled eyes, Bell gently patted her son's pale cheek, her voice sounding much calmer than she felt within. “Sam? Sam, lad. Come on, now. Tis time to wake up.”

At that moment Frodo Baggins skidded to a halt just inside the door. “Bilbo is coming. How can I help?”

Bell felt so relieved to see him that she almost gave way to tears. “Can ye help me carry him to his bed? Be careful with yer feet. The floor's all over broken pot.”

Frodo picked his way through the mess with the nimble step of youth, and bent to take Sam's feet as Bell took her son's shoulders. Together they carried him to the small bedroom, which was his alone, now that his older brothers were away from home. By the time they were laying him in the bed Bilbo arrived. “Nedes has gone for Ham.”

Bell did not spare him a glance, concentrating instead upon removing her child's clothing so that she could examine him more closely. “Thank ye, Mister Bilbo. I'm sorry to trouble ye and Master Frodo, but I didn't know who else to send for.”

“Think nothing of it, Bell. Let me help you with that.” He stepped in to take over from Frodo, who was helping Bell settle her son. “Frodo, go and fetch Doctor Brockleby.”

Bell paused in her work. “We can't afford no doctor, Mister Bilbo. I thank ye all the same.”

Bilbo waved away his nephew. “Go, Frodo. I'll pay for the doctor,” he eyed Bell sternly, “And if that does not sit well with Bell and Ham, we shall come to some arrangement.”

Too worried to put up much resistance, Bell nodded. “We'll talk on it later. Can ye watch him for a minute while I fetch water and bandages?” Bilbo nodded. “And see if ye can wake him. I don't like it that he's not awake yet.”

“I will, Bell.” Bilbo settled upon the edge of the straw mattress and began to pat Sam's pale cheek. “Sam? Come on Sam Gamgee. There are pigs to be fed and potatoes to be dug. Your Ma and Da will not be happy that you haven't finished your tasks.”

When Bell returned, her arms laden with supplies, it was to see her son's eyelids flickering, and a relieved cry escaped her lips. “Sam, lad!”

Bilbo gave a tight lipped smile. “Do you hear that, Sam? Your mother needs your help. Tea will be late on the table if you don't wake up.”

It was never clear, later, whether it was the mention of tea, hearing his mother's voice, or Bilbo's
cajoling, but Sam's hazel eyes flickered opened at last. Bell settled at the other side of the small bed, setting the basin of water and her supplies at her feet. “That's it, Sam. Open yer eyes for me.”

At first Sam's gaze was rather vague, and he seemed to be having difficulty focussing upon anything for more than a moment, but gradually he seemed to settle. “Ma? Why is Mister Bilbo in my bedroom?”

Both adults grinned. “He's goin' to help me put ye to bed.” Suddenly all business, Bell wrung out a cloth and began dabbing at one of the cuts on Sam's arm.

Wincing at her touch, Sam eyes were drawn to the source, and they widened as he discovered that he was wearing only his drawers. “Here, what's happenin’?” He moved a hand to cover his private area and Bilbo chuckled as he stood, bending to drape a towel modestly over the youngsters hips.

“Nothin' ye need fret over, my lad. Now hold still while I clean up all this blood. Goodness, but I never knew a vase cause so much mess.” Bell was back in control, bathing and bandaging. “I told ye to have a care, but ye're a lad so ye didn't pay heed.” She reached a slightly deeper cut on Sam's leg. “And this one'll need a stitch. Mercy, lad.”

Suddenly realising the import of his mother's words, tears began to trickle from Sam's eyes. “I'm sorry, Ma. I'll clean up the mess, and I'll save up my pocket money to buy you a new flower vase.”

Bell paused in her gentle attack upon Sam's injuries. “Oh, lad. Don't ye fret. I told ye before that pots aint as important as ye.” When the tears did not stop she gathered him up, into her arms, rocking him like a babe. “Nay, lad. Don't cry. I'm not really angry at ye. Tis just the shock, is all. Hush now.”

Bilbo found a spare blanket folded at the foot of the bed and draped it over mother and child. “He'll be alright, Bell.”

“Well, now. What have we here?” All looked up to see a slightly out of breath Doctor Brockleby, Frodo at his side.

“Ah good. Sam had a bit of a fall and rattled his brains on the kitchen floor,” Bilbo replied for Bell. He retreated from the small room. “I'll leave you and Bell to sort things out.”

By the time Hamfast Gamgee arrived Bilbo was sweeping up the last shards of china and Frodo was sitting in Bell's rocking chair, with Marigold in his lap, playing pat-a-cake. Bilbo gave a reassuring smile. “I think Sam will be alright. Bell's with him and I sent for Doctor Brockleby, just to be sure.”

Ham paused only long enough to nod his thanks, before making for his son's bedroom. Bilbo threw the shards into the bucket, then filled the kettle. “I think we all need a cup of tea. I don't suppose anyone knows where Daisy is? We shall need to wash and put away all these c ROCKS, before the table can be set for afternoon tea.”

Frodo smiled at little Marigold. “Then we'd better help. Marigold can put the pans away on the bottom shelves, and I'll help you wash and put away the crockery.”

Bilbo chuckled. “Well, this will be a first. The Baggins helping the Gamgees with their spring cleaning, instead of the other way around.”

When Ham and Doctor Brockleby returned, the kitchen the table was cleared and Bilbo was filling an assortment of mugs with fresh tea. “Would you like a cup of tea before you leave, Doctor?” he asked.

The doctor set down his bag and took a seat at the table, while Hamfast Gamgee fetched a jug of
milk from the pantry, along with a plate of biscuits. After taking Bell and Sam some tea, he rejoined the others, who were sitting around the table, drinking and munching on the biscuits.

Bilbo set down his cup first. “So, how is the lad?”

Doctor Brockleby bit into a biscuit, chewing appreciatively before replying. “Samwise is very fortunate. He has a nasty lump on his head and I've put a stitch in one or two of his cuts, but he's got the resilience of youth and should be up and about tomorrow.” He patted Hamfast's large, square hand, where it rested upon the table. “Although I suggest he be spared potato digging duties for two or three days.”

Hamfast's reply was quick and decisive. “He'll not be diggin' taters for a good week, if I've anythin' to do with it . . . and I have.” He took a good mouthful of tea and grimaced before complaining, good-naturedly, “Bilbo Baggins, yer tea could have been pee'd by a gnat.”

Bilbo guffawed. “And yours could be used to paint wood.”

Hamfast grinned. “Tea should be strong. It puts hair on yer feet.”

“Ere, what's goin' on?” All looked up, to find a rather surprised Daisy Gamgee and Bartimus Brocklebank, standing in the open doorway. “Why's the doctor here?”

Bartimus stepped back. “I won't stay for tea, Daisy. Looks like you're not goin' to be wantin' guests.”

It was Doctor Brockleby who spoke up. “That's a good idea, Bartimus. And your brother is looking for you. When I met him down the hill, he said something about you promising your sister a visit to her cousin.”

Bartimus' eyes widened. “Oh heck! I forgot.”

Daisy shooed him out. “Go on. I'll tell you what's up tomorrow. Go. Or Ruby'll never let you hear the end of it.” She shut the door in the poor lad's face then turned back to her da. “Who's hurt, Da? Is it Ma?”

Hamfast stood to gather in his daughter. “No lass. It's little Sam. He had a bit of a fall and your Ma is sittin' with him.” When Daisy would have broken free to run to the bedrooms he held her. “He's alright, lass. Just got his brains a bit shook up, is all. The doctor says he's not to go to sleep for a few hours and one of us should stay with him 'til mornin'. Your Ma is takin' the first watch.”

“Can I see him?” Daisy asked quietly.

“Come on, lass.” Hamfast steered his daughter to the bedroom.

“Well. I've done all I can here, and I promised to visit Arty Sedgebury this afternoon.” Doctor Brockleby stood, jamming his hat upon his head at a jaunty angle and gathering up his bag. “It's fortunate I did, for I was half way here when Frodo found me.”

Bilbo stood to escort him to the door. “Thank you for coming so quickly. Pop up to Bag End tomorrow, and we'll sort out payment for this visit.”

Doctor Brockleby nodded understanding. “I will. Although I usually let my less affluent patients pay me as they can.”

When the doctor was gone Bilbo leaned back against the closed door and let out a large sigh. From his place at the table, where he was wiping crumbs from Marigold’s face, Frodo smiled.

Bilbo grinned back. “I don’t know about you, but I fancy something more substantial than biscuits. Let’s see what Bell has in her pantry. We can make afternoon tea for the family and then bow out to make our own.”

When Daisy and Bell came out from Sam’s room, leaving Hamfast to take his turn at his son’s bedside, it was to find the table set for tea, with tomato sandwiches, scones and a fresh pot of tea.

Bilbo beckoned them to sit. “I didn’t know what you were anticipating for tea, but if we’ve over done it, we can bring you some more scones, later.”

Bell lifted Marigold from Frodo’s arms, holding her close even as she smiled gratefully at the lad. “Thank ye, sirs. I don’t know what we’d have done without ye this afternoon.” She looked about the room in a dawning surprise. “Ye’ve put away all my crocks! And they’re clean.”

“It was the least we could do to help, Bell,” Bilbo assured her. “And don’t worry about coming to Bag End tomorrow. We can manage our own spring cleaning this year. The exercise will do us good.”

“No, sir. I wouldn’t hear of it. Daisy and me will be there straight after second breakfast. Clover was goin’ to come watch Marigold anyhow. I don’t think she’ll mind watchin’ Sam as well.”

Bilbo frowned. “Are you sure? We really don’t mind beating a few rugs ourselves.”

Bell pursed her lips. “There’s more to a good spring clean than beatin’ a few rugs, if it’s to be done right,” she asserted.

Bilbo took Frodo’s elbow and steered him toward the door. “Then, we’ll see you at Bag End after second breakfast, as always.”

“Yes, sir.” Bell accompanied them to the door, adding, “And we’ll talk about that doctor’s bill too.”

Once the yellow door was closed Frodo chuckled. “Am I awful to want to be a fly on the wall during that conversation?”

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The following morning was one of those spring days that seems determined to hold on to winter’s fraying coat tails. Rain had started some time during the night and had been falling steadily for hours. Still, at half past nine, there was a knock at the kitchen door and Frodo opened it to admit Daisy and Bell Gamgee.

“Come in. Let me take your cloaks. Goodness, did you get this wet just walking up from Number Three?” He placed a couple of ladder-back chairs by the fire and draped a cloak over the back of each.

Bell and Daisy set down their boxes of cleaning stuffs, patted hair into place and shook out aprons. “We did that,” Bell answered. “Tis a filthy day.”

Bilbo wondered in at that moment, pipe in one hand and empty mug in the other. “Hello ladies. Frodo and I were going to go for a walk, but I’m afraid the weather is not co-operating with our plans.”
Frodo took the mug from him and added it to the washing up in the kitchen sink. “How is Sam this morning?” he asked as he began to wash. Daisy took up a tea towel and set to, drying for him. Not so long ago Frodo would have felt uncomfortable in her presence, for Daisy had spent years teasing him. But they had recently reached an accommodation that left them more like brother and sister.

“He’s much better, thank ye, Mister Bilbo. And I was wonderin’ if I could have a word with ye, in private?” Bell asked.

Bilbo smiled. “Of course. Come into the parlour.” Frodo watched them leave, a little annoyed that he would not be a fly on the wall, after all.

Bell followed Mister Baggins down the hallway and into the cosy room, but declined to take a seat. In deference to her choice Bilbo also remained standing. “Out with it, Bell.”

“Well. It were good of ye to send for the doctor yesterday, but it don’t sit right with me and Ham that ye should pay.”

“I know that you would not have incurred the expense, had I not insisted upon it, so it seems only proper that I be the one to pay Doctor Brockleby.”

“I don't deny that his visit put my mind at rest.” Bell glanced about the comfortably appointed room, with it's oak panelled walls, richly coloured wool rugs and deeply padded arm chairs. “But we Gamgees have always tried to pay our way. So me and Ham have decided.”

Bilbo grinned, drawing upon his pipe and releasing a stream of scented smoke. “And what have you decided?”

“Yesterday, Master Frodo and ye finished the spring clean at Number Three, and didn't ask no payment for it. So our family's got together and decided we won't take no payment for cleanin' Bag End this spring.” Bell met Bilbo's eyes squarely, leaving him in no doubt that she would accept no argument upon the matter.

A spark of amusement lit Bilbo's sharp blue gaze, however. “But Bell, all we did was put away a few crocks. We could hardly accept the cleaning of the entirety of Bag End in return. That doesn't seem fair.”

Much to his further amusement, Bell folded arms across her expansive frontage. “Bag End may be bigger, but there's more of us to muck in. Ham can't do no gardenin' in this weather and even Marigold can help with the fetchin' and carryin'.” She nodded toward the window, where rain was spattering relentlessly. “And in this weather we can't tackle the big jobs, like windows and carpets.”

Bilbo pursed his lips, pretending to consider. In truth, he had anticipated this offer. “I don't know, Bell. I'm not unaware that you and Ham rely on this money to feed your family. As you so ably pointed out, Ham can't garden in this weather.”

“Tis only a day's wages. We can tighten belts for a day,” Bell announced, stoutly.

Bilbo sighed. “Very well, but upon two conditions.”

Bell looked uncomfortable. “That depends on the conditions.”

“That you allow Frodo and me to lend a hand, and that you and your family share meals with us today. We can even send down a couple of plates to Sam and Clover at number three. My pantry will easily support the extra mouths.”
Bilbo may as well have announced that Lobelia Sackville-Baggins be allowed to muck out the pigsty. Bell’s mouth opened and closed a couple of times, but no words issued forth.

Bilbo chuckled. “Frodo and I had been intending to walk to Bywater today. It's some time since we visited my sister, Dora, but this weather has put paid to that idea. It is a circumstance for which I am not entirely sorry, but it leaves Frodo and me rather under foot, as it were. It makes sense that we all work together today, otherwise you will only be chasing us from room to room. And eating here will save all of you having to traipse down the hill and back.”

Bell was practical enough to acknowledge the sense of that statement, and she was never so proud that she would turn down food for her bairns. “Ye could still be under foot,” she announced with a sniff, but she unfolded her arms, ostensibly to straighten an imaginary crease in her spotless apron. “But it do make sense to give ye a job to do. Leastways, then I'll know where ye are.”

The master of Bag End swallowed a grin. “I agree, Bell. I would never wish to be a nuisance when you are working.”

Bell sent him a glance that left Bilbo in no doubt that she was aware of his amusement. “Let's go back to the kitchen, then, and sort out who's goin' to do what. Master Frodo has a strong back. Mayhap he could help Ham to move furniture.”

Bilbo followed in her wake, a tender to her galleon in full sail.
With thanks to Frodo_Baggins_Of_Bag_End for the beta

Sam accompanied his Da up the hill to Bag End. As they approached they could hear singing coming from the open parlour window.

“That sounds like Master Frodo,” Sam announced.

“Is it now? Well, I never knew he could carry a tune so well. He's been hidin' his light 'neath a basket, and should stand up at the Ivy Bush of an evenin'.” Ham winked down at his son. “Anyone who could spare us from Old Filo's efforts is always welcome to jump on a table and give us a song.”

Sam giggled as his Da reached out to ring the bell. The bright tinkle had the effect of stopping the singing in its tracks, and the resulting silence was broken by the slap of feet on tile. Frodo opened the door, smiling when he recognised his visitors.

“Hello Mister Gamgee, Sam. Do come in. I was just drying the last of the breakfast pots. Would you like a cup of tea?”

The two Gamgee's remained at the door, however. “If you don't mind, young Master, we would as soon meet you on the hill. I'm afraid time is tight and I've only an hour afore Sam and me have to make off for the Sackville-Bagginses.”

“Of course. Forgive me. My time is so often my own that I forget others are not so blessed.” Frodo threw his tea-towel aside at once and stepped out to join them, leading the way up the side of Bag-End's steep side garden and onto the grassy roof. When they arrived beneath the ancient oak upon the hill's crown, he turned to enquire, “Are you sure that I have the skills required, though? We had no Thrimidge Prancers in Buckland.”

Ham snorted. “The way you steer the lasses about at the Harvest Reel I've no doubt you'll master Prancin'. 'Tis not much different to a line dance when all's said and done.” He collected a small linen drawstring bag from Sam, handing it over to Frodo. “Here's your ribbons and bells to be goin' on with. Have you got white breeches?”

Frodo opened the bag and drew out two shields of round bells, with ribbon ties and two arm garters, which fluttered with brightly coloured ribbons. “Mister Bentwhistle says they should arrive within the week. He has my measurements.”

“Well, if they don't arrive in time for Thrimidge Day you'll have to borrow some of my old ones. My Bell can probably bring 'em in and you can pull 'em in a bit more with the sash.” Frodo had just discovered that at the bottom of the bag.

Brow furrowing with some scepticism at the idea that breeches made to fit Ham's ample girth would in any way come close to fitting Frodo's slender tweenage frame, Frodo set the small bag aside. “I'm certain Mister Bentwhistle will not let me down.”
Hearing some discomfort in Frodo's voice, Ham chuckled. "Well, the offer's there. I'll never get into 'em again, that's for certain sure." He became all business. "Now. Come stand in front of me and we'll start with the timin' step. Sam lad, clap us a beat if you will."

Sam settled, cross legged, on the sweet grass and began to clap a steady rhythm. Ham demonstrated the step. "'Tis just a sort of skip on the spot. You don't never stand still when your prancin', 'cept at the beginnin' and the end."

As Ham knew he would, Frodo picked it up at once. "Good, Master Frodo. I told you it would be easy for you. Now skip toward me for four steps. 'Tis the same step, only you move forward a bit with each skip."

Frodo obliged and the two met. "Now four back. That's it. The main thing you got to remember is to stay in perfect time with the rest of the side. The bells on your legs will soon let you know if you're not right and 'twill sound awful."

Arriving back at his starting point, Frodo listened carefully to Sam's persistent rhythm as Ham instructed, "Now, come forward again and make as if you have a stick that you're going to hit against mine. Right hand."

Once more, Frodo met his tutor, lifting his arm to strike an imaginary stick, held aloft by Ham. "When do we get to practice with the sticks?" he asked as Ham waved him back. The two continued to skip in place and Frodo began to understand why the sturdier built Hamfast got so out of breath.

"Tom Buckleby is still carvin' yours. Each stick is made just for the dancer. They don't get passed on, unless it be in the family." Ham chuckled. "And I want to know you know what you're doin', afore I let you loose with one near my knuckles. Now this time, when you come forward, we skip round each other to the four beat, and back to place."

When Frodo got back to his starting position, he turned to find that Ham was in place before him. Ham grinned. "Don't worry, lad. Tis usual to get it wrong the first few times. You skipped to five when you turned in place at the end. You've got to skip three and use the last one to turn. Let's try it again."

An hour later, a rather sweaty Frodo dragged himself into Bag End's kitchen. Bilbo looked up from where he was stirring soup on the hob. He chuckled, waving a mocking hand before his nose. "Phew. You'd best get a wash before you do anything else."

Frodo complied all too willingly, filling a ewer from the boiler. "I think I need to do less reading and more walking. How Master Gamgee managed it all these years I can't imagine."

Bilbo tasted the soup and added a good pinch of salt to the pan. "Ham's waist has got broader of late, but gardening keeps his muscles in good order. Prancing is hard work at first, but you'll soon get used to it."

Frodo set his ewer upon the table, beside the small linen bag. "Were you ever a prancer, Bilbo? You've never mentioned it."

His uncle paused in his stirring, his gaze growing wistful. "Oh yes. I still have the stick somewhere, I think. Unless it went missing when they tried to sell off my home."

"You are a hobbit of many secrets, Bilbo Baggins. I'd love to see it, if you ever find it." Frodo took up his water jug. "But for now I need a good wash and a set of clean clothes, or I shall put us both off our tea."
That evening Hamfast joined his wife by the fire. Daisy sat at the table, showing Marigold how to
sew on a button, while Sam worked on his latest letter to May.

“How did Master Frodo's first prancin' lesson go?” Bell asked, as she picked at a knot in the wool
she was unravelling from one of Ham's old jumpers. Ham had no doubt the wool would be seen in a
jumper for Sam next winter.

“As well as I expected it would. He's a good sense of the dance, and once he's toughened up a bit,
he'll manage well enough.” Ham grinned as he sent her a wink across the hearth. “He didn't seem too
keen on borrowin' my old breeches, though. Ordered some from Mister Bilbo's fancy tailor in Michel
Delvin' instead.”

Bell sniffed at the airs and graces of gentlehobbits. “Just so long as that Bent Bristle, or whatever his
name is, don't go changin' the pattern to suit whatever the fashion is in Michel Delvin'. We don't
want no lace nor fancy doodads on 'em.”

Ham chuckled as he filled his pipe and set a taper to it, pausing to draw once or twice before
continuing the conversation. “Don't you worry, Bell, lass. He may be a tween, but he's got a better
head on him than most . . . most of the time.”

Bell ignored the rider.

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“Hello, Fern.” Frodo waved a cheery greeting to Fern Sandyman as he strode down the road, on his
way to Prancing practice at the Ivy Bush. So intent was he upon his destination that it was only as he
was several steps beyond the girl that her tear-stained face registered. He stopped and turned back.
“Fern, are you all right?”

Fern was seated upon a battered wicker case and looked as though the weight of the entire world
was draped about her shoulders. At Frodo's enquiry she only dropped her head, burying a sob in her
already soaked handkerchief.

Perplexed, Frodo tried again. “Have you been visiting relatives? Is somebody sick? Should I fetch
your mother?”

Her only response was a wailed, “Noooo!”.

Frodo knew little about the Sandyman family. Although Ted seemed to have his nose in everyone
else's business, the miller kept his own close to his chest. Fern's response told the lad more than he
needed to know about the situation in the Sandyman household. “Were you going somewhere?
Maybe I could carry your case. Are you heading home?”

Fern finally forced out some words, between sobs. “I can't go home. Da threw me out.”

That decided Frodo. This was obviously something serious, probably something best sorted by a
mother. If Fern's own mother was not willing to do so, he knew of one whose heart would not reject
another in trouble. He bent to offer her a hand up. “Come on, then. You can't stay here. The
Gamgees' smial is just a step up the hill, and Mistress Gamgee always has the kettle on the hob.”

When Fern looked up, taking his hand, the hope in her eyes cut to Frodo's heart. He seriously hoped
that Bell Gamgee would be able to help, for he felt more than a little out of his depth when it came to
sobbing lasses.

Five minutes later, Fern's case in hand, Frodo was knocking at the round yellow door of Number
Three, Bagshot Row. Fortunately, it was Bell who answered. Frodo smiled, a little apologetically. “I found Fern crying at the roadside and didn't know what to do. She says her father has thrown her out.”

Bells lips thinned, then she gathered the girl into her side. “Come in, both of ye.”

Frodo had to confess to himself that he would rather have left the matter to Bell Gamgee, but good manners dictated that if he was going lay a problem at another's' door, he should not walk away now. Bell took charge at once.

“Sam, take yer sister out to play for a while. I'll call ye when I've settled up here. If ye need aught, go ask Mistress Mugwort.” Having cleared the kitchen, she concentrated upon Fern. “Come, sit by the fire, lass. I know tis a warm day but yer shakin' like a leaf. Can I trouble ye to make a pot of tea, Master Frodo? Ye know where everythin' is kept.”

“Of course.” Frodo set to, relieved to be spared trying to sort out Fern’s problems himself. As a male and a tween he felt woefully inadequate when dealing with emotions. Nonetheless, he kept one ear keenly tuned to the conversation between Bell and Fern.

“Now, lass. Do ye want to tell me what's the matter, or would ye rather it were just we two?”

Frodo turned from the hob in time to see several thoughts flicker across Fern’s face. What those thoughts were, he could not discern, but something about them made him feel a little uncomfortable. Now Fern spoke, her voice rough from crying. “Tis alright. Frodo should know.”

Bell frowned at the omission of Master Baggins’ honorific, but only settled Fern in a chair by the hearth before taking her own, opposite. Between them, Frodo lifted the kettle and poured water into the large brown teapot upon the kitchen table. There was a period of silence, broken only by the tinkle of a teaspoon or the pouring of tea. Finally, Frodo handed mugs to Bell and Fern, taking one for himself and settling upon one of the benches by the table.

Once Fern had taken a swallow, Bell spoke. “Right, lass. Let's have it. I think I can guess, but why don't ye tell me why yer Da has thrown ye out of home?”

Once more, Frodo caught a glimmer of something in Fern’s red rimmed eyes, but if Bell saw it she said nothing. At last, the lass spoke. “Ma says I’m expectin’,” she announced baldly.

Bell nodded, unphased. “I thought t’would be that. How far along?”

Fern shook her head. “I don’t know.” She glanced aside at Frodo, a slight blush colouring her cheeks. “Tis two month since my last courses.”

Frodo took a hasty swallow of his tea, harbouring the perhaps unkind thought that he should have walked past Fern without stopping. Saradoc had explained about the birds and the bees before Frodo left Brandy Hall, saying that he did not expect Bilbo Baggins to have the sense to do so. He had been wrong. One thing both Saradoc and Bilbo had impressed upon him was that getting a girl pregnant, out of wedlock, was not the act of a gentlehobbit, so Frodo’s experimentation, like that of most tweens he knew, had stopped far short of consummation. Discussing it openly was, therefore, a little embarrassing.

Bell cast a sympathetic glance his way before returning her attention to Fern. “Have ye been to see Aster Tunnely?”

Fern’s eyes widened. “Da said if I did he’d whip me. He says I’m not to be seen visitin' the midwife.”
Bell snorted. “Yer Da's a fool, and I hope ye'll forgive me for sayin' so. Aster will tell ye whether ye are or ye aren't. If ye are, ye'll need help and if ye aren't, ye can go home.” She sniffed. “Although I pity anyone havin' to live under Ted Sandyman's roof.”

It was telling that Fern did not immediately leap to her father's defence. “Do you really think I might not be expectin’?"

Bell's homely face filled with compassion. “I don't know, lass. Have ye been over-tired of late? Sick in the mornin'? More important, have ye been with a lad?”

Fern dropped her gaze to her mug of tea. “Da took a switch to me because I fell asleep and let the stew burn. And I ain't been able to keep down breakfast for a week or two.”

Bell nodded. “And the lad?”

With Fern's downcast face, Frodo felt, rather than actually saw, her eyes flick his way. “Well . . . I don't like to say.”

“Nonsense, lass. He needs to take his share of the responsibility. For as long as I recall, it's taken two to make a bairn.”

Fern turned tearful eyes full upon Frodo now. “I'm sorry, Frodo. But I can't bring up a bairn on my own. I didn't want to tell.”

At that moment, had one of Gandalf the wizard's fireworks gone off, right outside the door to Number Three, it is doubtful that any of the occupants would have acknowledged it. Frodo blinked and Bell Gamgee's mouth dropped open. After what seemed like an age, Frodo tried to speak.

“Wha … How . . . We never . . .”

Bell Gamgee was the first to recover her wits fully and now her eyes narrowed upon Fern Sandyman. “Are ye tryin' to tell me that Master Frodo Baggins is the father of yer bairn?”

Fern would not meet her gaze, only chewing on her lip before nodding.

Frodo leapt to his feet, feeling both betrayed and angry. “Fern. We have never done . . . I have always promised Bilbo that I would not bring such shame on the Baggins name. How can you say this?”

Now Fern's face grew mutinous, her voice rising. “It were you! And now I'm thrown out of home because of it. What's to become of me?”

Faced with such certainty, Frodo tried to appeal to Bell. “Mistress Gamgee, you know me. I would never get a lass with child. I'm not even of age yet. You can't believe her.”

Bell studied him for a moment. “Sit down, lad. I don't want to believe it of ye, but tweens sometimes get carried away. I'm not so old that I don't remember that. Are ye certain?”

“Absolutely. I danced with Fern just once, at the Harvest Reel.” He directed his frowning face at Fern. “And we were in public view all the time.”

Fern wailed anew, dabbing at her eyes as fresh tears fell. “But what about all them times in the loft of the Ivy Bush, when you came to market? You said I were the prettiest lass you'd ever seen.” She turned pleading eyes upon Bell. “I didn't want to do it at first, cause it hurt, but he were so gentle, and after a few times . . . I sort of . . . got a taste for it.”
Frodo leapt to his feet once more, unable to remain still under such blatant untruth. “Fern Sandyman, you're lying! I don't know why, but you are.”

Bell sighed. “Alright. Ye're both under age so this is a matter to be sorted by yer elders. Is Mister Bilbo at home this mornin', Master Frodo?”

Feeling more than a little betrayed that Bell was not openly taking his part, Frodo grabbed at the possibility of an ally. “I left him in his study. He was intending to stay at home all day.”

Bell stood, reaching out to draw a reluctant Fern to her feet. “Come on, then. Tis time to bring this to yer uncle.”

So it was that ten minutes later, a confused Bilbo Baggins was ushering them all into Bag End's capacious parlour. Even as she settled into the well padded couch, Fern's eyes were everywhere, taking in the large room with its fine furnishings, and Frodo began to understand. When he caught Bell's eye he saw the same comprehension there, and began to feel a wee bit better.

“Is this true, Frodo?” Bilbo asked, having been briefly appraised of the situation.

Frodo bristled. “How can you ask that, Uncle? Of course it's not true!”

Bilbo waved the lad down when Frodo made to jump to his feet once more. “Steady, lad. I have to ask.” He frowned down at Fern, who was avoiding his gaze and worrying at the rather damp hanky in her hands. “I believe you, but it's your word against Fern's, and both carry equal weight to anyone who doesn't know you as well as I.”

Frodo sighed, raking a hand through his hair. “What can I say to convince you? Fern, why are you doing this to me?”

Fern continued to worry at her hanky and would not meet his gaze. “A lass shouldn't be left to raise a bairn on her own, Frodo. It's like Mistress Gamgee says, 'It takes two'.”

Bell frowned. “Aye. But which two?” When Fern would have protested, Bell waved her into silence. “I think we need to speak to your family too.”

Now Fern looked up in alarm. “Da won't like that. He says 'tis all my fault. He won't talk to no-one about this.” Her face crumpled into a fresh round of crying. “He says I ain't family no more.”

Bell fished in her bulging apron pocket and handed over a clean hanky.

Bilbo rolled his eyes. “Nonetheless, as both parties are under-age, it falls to us elders to sort this out. Bell, do you think Ham would be available to ask Ted to visit me?”

“He should be home for his lunch soon. I reckon he could do that. I'd send Sam, but I don't reckon Ted Sandyman would pay him much heed.”

“Until then, we need to decide what to do with Fern. I don't think it would be proper for her to stay at Bag End,” Bilbo noted with a nod to Frodo, who was biting his tongue.

Bell patted Fern's hand. “She can stay with us until things is sorted, one way or t'other. There's room, now May's away from home.”

“Will Ham be alright with that?”

“Ham may not believe the lass, but he'll not see her sleepin' in a hedgerow, neither.”
Fern spoke up again, her face stubborn. “I won't go where I ain’t believed.”

Bell snorted. “Then it's the hedgerow, is it? For I tell ye now, lass . . . the more I think on this, the more I'm thinkin' ye've seen a chance and decided to take it. But there's bed and food for the takin' at my home while we sort this out, if yer pride will stand it. Tis up to ye.”

Fern spent several moments chewing her lip, eyes roving a little covetously about the well appointed room. “Alright. But I don't reckon you'll get my Da to speak to you.”

“Ye leave that to my Ham,” Bell stood. “Come on, then. Ye can pay for yer keep by helpin' me make the lunch.” With that she herded the girl out of the smial and down the hill.

Frodo dropped into a chair as soon as the door closed. “You do believe me, don't you, Bilbo? I would never do that to a lass.”

Bilbo patted his shoulder. “I believe you, Frodo, lad. I don't know who Fern Sandyman has been tuppin' with, but I think Bell has the right of it. You happened along at the right moment, and Fern saw an opportunity to turn a miss-step into a step-up. I don't know which lad has been misbehavin', but it looks as though it's not a love match, at the least from her side, if she can throw him off so easily.”

“Throw him off?”

Bilbo sighed. “Frodo. I thought we'd taught you better than that. The lad deserves to know that he has a child and Fern is wrong to deny him the opportunity to be a father, even if not a husband.”

“What if he doesn't want to be a father?”

“Whether he wants it or not, he has a child. He must either marry the lass, or at the very least provide coin for the child's upbringing,” Bilbo asserted firmly. “Fern needs to put a roof over the head of her babe and food on the table. She can't work and look after the child. Unless, of course, Ted Sandyman takes back both mother and babe.”

Frodo scowled. “I doubt there's much chance of that happening.”

“We shall see.”

Evening was well advanced before a knock came at Bag End's door and Frodo's nerves were, by then, stretched tighter than a drum. It was Bilbo who answered, however, ushering Bell, Fern and Ted Sandyman into the parlour. Although Fern kept glancing at her father, Ted stood as far from her as was physically possible in the space available, and looked anywhere but at his daughter.

“Well now. Why don't we all sit down? Would anyone care for tea?” Bilbo asked in a voice that, to Frodo's ears, sounded overly bright.

Ted scowled. “Let's get this done with.”

The rest disposed themselves between chairs and couch. There was a long silence until, finally, Bell spoke up. “I'll start this off, then. I hope nobody minds that I took it on myself, but I decided we'd best be sure there was somethin' to talk about, afore words started flyin'. I took Fern to see Aster Tunnell this afternoon.” All but Fern's eyes turned to Bell, with varying degrees of hope. She let them down. “Aster says 'tis sure. Fern is with child.”

Ted's scowl returned. “Don't suppose she happened to say who's?”
Bell's reply was sharp. “Aster's good, but she ain't that good, Ted.”

“Then we'll have to take the chit's word for it, won't we? Not that it's aught to do with me. She's no kin of mine any more.”

Frodo’s surprise had long since turned to anger, and that anger had been simmering all afternoon. “I am not the father of Fern Sandyman's child!”

Ted's smug expression turned to an open leer as he leaned back in his chair. “Just what I'd expect to hear from a bloody Baggins. It's the word of the high and mighty Baggins family against the poor miller's lass!”

Bell Gamgee could not hold her peace against such an accusation. “From what I see of your family, Ted Sandyman, there's not a lot that's poor about it, unless it be in manners. That mill or yours turns a pretty penny.”

“I should have known you'd be against my lass. You Gamgees have always been in the Baggins family pocket,” Ted retorted.

“Oh. She is yer daughter, then? I was told ye'd disowned her. Thrown her out to live under a hedge.” Bell's eyes blazed with barely contained anger. “And I'd like to hear what her mother has to say about that.”

Ted's face took on the hue of a ripe plum. “Her mother says what I tell her to say. It's a shame your husband don't keep a tighter leash on your tongue, Bell Gamgee!”

Bell was just inhaling for a retort when Bilbo shot to his feet. “Enough! All these accusations are getting us nowhere. There's a child and a young mother to be fed and housed.” All settled down to a simmer, and Bilbo resumed his chair.

“You Baggins' have got enough coin to see them right. I don't see what the fuss is about,” Ted announced.

“The fuss is about me not being the father.” Frodo tried in vain to catch Fern's eye, but the lass seemed to be making a detailed study of the carpet at her feet.

“Well, you would say that. Prove it,” Ted crowed.

“You know very well that I can't,” Frodo replied. No longer able to contain himself he jumped to his feet, striding to the widow to put his back to the room.

Bilbo suddenly inhaled. “Perhaps we can.” Frodo turned about and now all eyes were riveted upon his uncle. “Although I'm afraid we may have to be a little indecorate.” Everyone waited expectantly for him to continue. “Fern, I am afraid that I must now ask you a rather indecorous question. You say that you and Frodo have . . . ahem . . . engaged in relations upon several occasions?”

Fern glanced toward her father, who pretended a sudden interest in a picture hanging above the fireplace. When no clarification came from that quarter she straightened her back. “If 'relations' means tuppin', we have. Even though I didn't want to at first. But he wouldn't take no and . . .”

Bilbo lifted a hand to stem the tide of extraneous information. “Don't dig yourself in too deeply, Fern. May I assume that you have seen all of Frodo's body, then?” He winked at Bell, who settled back to see where this was going.

Frodo turned in time to see Fern offer a pert and slightly insolent smile. “I have. Tis a nice body, too.
Even if he is a bit skinny."

Bilbo grinned back. “He's got his mother's looks, I think.” Then his features sobered. “But can I assume that he's been fully naked in your presence at some point?”

Fern's smile faltered. “Yes … I mean … no. It was cold in the loft.”

Bilbo offered his nephew a reassuring nod before continuing. “But I imagine, during the course of your many liaisons, there was at least one part of Frodo that you saw with some regularity?”

Now Fern's shifted in her seat, and she chewed upon her bottom lip for a moment, clearly worried about where this was leading. “I weren't too interested in lookin' at all of him, if you get my meanin’?” she finally announced, a little cautiously.

“Ah yes. I remember the passions of youth,” Bilbo replied with a wistful sigh. “Just where were you looking, if I may venture to ask so personal a question?”

Fern now offered a wide grin. “Where else would a lass be lookin', when she's faced with a strong lad, about to have his way with her?”

Bilbo's own smile held all the warmth of a tiger about to pounce. “I imagine your attention was held below his waist. Did you notice anything unusual there?”

Now Ted leaned forward. “Ere! Are you saying my lass has been with enough lads to know when somethin's not right? She was as pure as driven snow ’til your nephew got hold of her!”

Bilbo scoffed. “Oh, come now, Ted. We're country folk. We've all seen enough animals getting on with the business of life, to know what should go where and what things should look like. Generally speaking it's only a matter of scale. Add to that the fact that most tweens have sense enough not to go too far, but generally all have done a bit of exploring along the way. Ask a tween, lad or lass, to draw the male member, and I think most could provide a fair rendition.”

Ted subsided and Frodo could feel the blood rising to his face. Fern was also blushing. Bilbo graced Frodo with an apologetic look. “Fern. Did you notice anything different regarding Frodo's . . . ahem . . . member?”

“Member?” Fern asked in confusion.

Ted sighed, rolling his eyes. “His stick, lass. His stick. Grief. I should have disowned her long afore now. She's all the sense of a headless chicken. Gets it from her mother's side.”

Fern's blush deepened. “It looked pretty much like everyone else's I suppose,” she replied slowly.

“Nothing unusual in shape or colouring, then?” Bilbo persisted, as Frodo turned as red as a beet.

Fern, on the other hand, had gone from pink to white within the space of that question. “I . . . erm . . . it were a bit longer than usual . . . I think.” Under other circumstances Frodo would have been flattered.

“But otherwise, nothing unusual?” Bilbo persisted.

Once more, Fern chewed her lip before replying, a little uncertain now, “No.”

Bilbo nodded. “Fern, may I ask you to join Bell in the kitchen for a moment?”

“Why?”
“I think we have embarrassed Frodo enough. If he has to bare a portion of his anatomy for inspection, I think he would prefer not to do so within the presence of two females. And, Fern,” Bilbo frowned at the girl as she arose. “I suggest you use this opportunity to reconsider your accusations against my nephew.”

Fern bridled, turning to Bell for support. “Is he calling me a liar again?”

Bilbo seemed in no mood to give any quarter. “Oh, I know you are a liar, Fern. But I can understand why, I think. Thrown out of a comfortable home, I imagine Bag End looks like a good alternative. But I don’t think you would have been happy here, in the end. Now, go with Mistress Gamgee. Perhaps she can help you, where I cannot.”

When Fern looked as though she would protest further, Bell just spun her about and shooed her from the room. Fern scuttled off to the kitchen, followed by the bemused Bell.

Ted Sandyman narrowed his eyes. “What do you know, Bilbo Baggins? I hope you ain’t been doin’ stuff an uncle shouldn’t.”

Now it was Bilbo’s turn to appear scandalised and he did it well. “How dare you imply such a thing! I only know because I was told by the lad’s father when Frodo was born, that he has inherited the Baggins family birthmark.” He lifted enquiring brows at his nephew and Frodo gave a minute nod. His uncle continued. “Do we really need an unveiling, or will you accept my word?”

Ted stood and for a moment Frodo thought he may actually insist upon the examination. “I’ll take your word, for the lad’s sake. Although why I should, I’ll never know.”

Frodo released a long sigh and Bilbo continued, “The birthmark always occurs in the same place, a place that would have been very visible to Fern, had Frodo been engaging in the activities necessary to conceive a child.”

Ted Sandyman grinned and Frodo could almost see him filing away that bit of information for future humiliation. “Is that so?” He climbed to his feet, brushing a non-existent speck of dust from his lapel. “That’s it, then,” he announced, with all the concern of someone who had just been told that Tuesday followed Monday. “I’ll be off home. My missus will be thinkin’ you’ve locked me up and thrown away the key.”

Bilbo stepped in front of him. “Not so fast. You cannot just go throwing away your daughter, like chaff in the wind.”

“I’ll thank you not to go stickin’ your nose in my business, Bilbo Baggins, esquire. And you’ve just proved it ain’t got nothin’ to do with you.”

“The fate of a young girl and her child is the business of any caring member of this society,” Bilbo avowed with some heat. “If you are not prepared to keep the lass at your home, at least take action to discover the father, or provide some kind of support for her yourself. She is young and she is frightened. Why else would she make the accusation she has?” Bilbo’s voice softened. “Show some pity. Fern is your flesh and blood after all. Have you never made a mistake, Ted?”

Ted studied his toes for a moment, and for the first time since walking through the door, Bilbo saw a glimmer of love. “Damn you, Bilbo. Alright. Get her things and I’ll take her home. But I’ll find the lad responsible, if I have to shake it out of her.”

“Please don’t do that.” Frodo pleaded. “She’s very frightened, and once she starts to . . . to show, the lad will probably come forward anyway.”
“Alright, alright. All this didn't sit right with her mother anyways.”

Frodo smiled. “I'll go and fetch her. I think her belongings are at the Gamgee's smial.”

That same evening Bilbo and Frodo sat before the fire in the parlour. Bilbo was smoking his pipe and the sweet smell of Old Toby drifted in the air. For the first time all day, Frodo felt himself relaxing and he lifted a book from the table at his side.

“Feeling a bit better, lad?”

He looked up to find Bilbo smiling kindly at him. “Yes. Bilbo, I was so scared. I will probably marry one day but I want to be with a lass that I love.”

“I know, lad. Lots of folk make a go of it but love oils the wheels.”

“I want a marriage like my parents, or the Gamgees.” He paused before adding, “Well . . . maybe with not as many children as the Gamgees.”

Bilbo chuckled. “You don't get to choose the number of children, lad. We're not elves. And children are a natural result of loving.”

Frodo could feel himself colouring again. “Bilbo, did my father really tell you about the birthmark?”

“No. But I watched Primula bath you when you were but a few weeks old.”

“Oh. I'm glad you did.”

“I'll always watch over you, lad.” Bilbo opened his own book and soon the only sounds within the room were the crackle of the fire and the turning of pages.

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Frodo threw himself down on the blanket, accepting a clap on the back from Hamfast Gamgee. “Well done, Master Frodo. You only got one turn wrong and that's not bad for a first proper go at Prancin’.” He leaned in a little closer. “Truth told, even for your first go, you managed better than some of the older ones. Tis time we had some new blood.”

Frodo accepted a glass of elderflower cordial from Bilbo. “Did your sons, Hal and Ham, not wish to join the Prancers?” he asked after downing nearly half the glass in one gulp.

Bell Gamgee smiled a little sadly. “They didn't really have a chance. They was 'pprenticed off afore they could be asked.” Her smile brightened and she raised her cup in salute. “But we've got a new person to show fer the Hill.”

Bilbo and Hamfast raised their cups. “To Frodo Baggins. Hobbiton's latest Thrimidge Prancer,” Bilbo announced, and all three saluted the lad.

Hamfast lifted Frodo's Prancing stick, its tip trailing coloured ribbons, and studied it with a frown. “This ain’t the one Tom Buckleby carved for you.”

Frodo grinned at his uncle. “I hope you don't mind, but I borrowed Bilbo's old one, just this once.”

Bell chuckled archly. “You do know as how the Prancin' Pole them couples is dancin' around, and them sticks ye've all been wavin' about, is supposed to stand in fer somethin' else?”

Frodo frowned. “Something else?”
Bilbo chuckled. “Thrimidge was once a fertility festival. Although most of the symbolism has been lost under tradition. There's a reason Ted Sandyman referred to the male member as a stick.” He winked, pointing to a small rendition of a crescent moon part way down the borrowed Prancing Stick's length. “You'd better get Tom to make an adjustment to the carving on yours.” As light dawned, Frodo blushed furiously, much to the amusement of the adults.
“Come in Mister Bilbo.” Bell set down her basin, turning to collect a mug from the kitchen shelves. “Ye'll stay for a cup of tea.” It wasn't a question and Bilbo grinned as he took a seat at the table.

“That's good of you, Bell. I see you've made a start. Here are the soft raisins and candied peels I promised.” He placed two small paper bags on the table even as Bell set a mug of strong tea before him and pushed the honey pot closer.

Bell opened one of the bags, her eyes brightening as she sniffed the contents. “We do candied fruit in the Shire but there's somethin' special about the elven stuff. I swear they add some sort of spice to it.” She fished out a little cube of candied orange peel and popped it in her mouth, eyes rolling as she chewed. “Oh, now that's beautiful.”

Bilbo grinned. “I don't know about the spice but it does make cakes taste lovely. I see you've made a start on yours.”

“Aye. That gives me plenty of time to steep it in brandy.” Bell winked as she took up her basin once more and began to stir it's contents. At present, the bowl contained only butter and powdered sugar. “Thank ye for the brandy too. It'll make a grand weddin' cake.” She sniffed. “Not that Fern Sandyman deserves it, after the trick she pulled on poor Master Frodo.”

“Trust a Bracegirdle to get her pregnant. That clan could get a lass pregnant by just lookin' at her. Tis a wonder we're not overrun. Thank goodness they've not a brain between 'em. Most of the sensible lasses leave 'em alone.”

Bilbo decided he aught to defend the Bracegirdle clan, as they were not present to do so themselves. “Not all, surely. Hugo is always borrowing books from me.”

Bell shook her head slowly. “Beggin' yer pardon, Mister Bilbo, but sometimes ye can be a bit blind. Hugo Bracegirdle don't actually read those books. He told my Ham that he only carries them around to impress the lasses.”

Bilbo was stunned for a moment. “That would explain why I always have to prompt him to return them. At least Ted Sandyman has come up with the coin to ensure that Fern and Wyd will have somewhere to live. Has Caly finished emptying Pansy's smial?”

Bell checked the colour of her mixture, adding eggs and flour when she deemed it pale enough. “She's only taken her sister's personal stuff. The furniture weren't worth sellin' on so she's let the young un's have it. Of course, Ted's been crowin' about that fer days.”

“Ted's always been one to find a bargain. Although I think it a pity he would not buy them
somewhere better. Goodness knows, he has coin enough.”

Bell nodded. “Aye. Them smials along the river there flood too often for my taste. Still, the way Ted were goin’ on they’re lucky to get anythin’, and mayhap they’ll be able to afford somethin’ better in a few year. Daisy’s gone down today to help ‘em clean up. Nobody’s been in it since Pansy died.”

Pain flashed in Bilbo's eyes, for he had once considered offering for Pansy Goodbody, before he left on his adventure. Burying her last winter had brought home to him just how old he was getting. Other's had also noticed, and he had recently been considering taking up Lord Elrond's offer of a visit, but Frodo was not yet of age. “I doubt it. A butcher's apprentice doesn't earn much. Still, at least his uncle Bill is providing him with the job.”

“Aye.” Bell began folding in dried fruit, cherries, raisins, and the gifts from Bilbo. “Have ye heard whether Penly Whitfoot is here?"

“Frodo tells me he arrived this morning and has taken his usual room at the Ivy Bush. He has two more weddings to perform before Fern and Wyd.”

“No doubt he's negotiated his usual room rate, with Borden,” Bell pointed out with a sniff. “Penly's never been backward at usin' his title to get a good rate.”

Bilbo chuckled. “There are few other advantages to being Mayor and Borden Brewer is happy enough, as long as payment for the room covers the cost of linens and food. Borden has always considered it his gift to the wedding parties.”

Bell tipped her cake mixture into a waiting pan. “The amount Penly eats, poor Borden will be lucky if he does cover the cost. I'm amazed our mayor can get through the doors, he's grown so round. The whole family runs to fat and his son, Will, is goin' the same way. Goodness knows, I like a hobbit to have a bit of flesh on him, but the Whitfoots try too hard. At least his regular visit has come afore Fern shows the same shape.”

Bilbo drained his tea, running tongue around his teeth to remove the last of the tannin. “They could always have jumped over the brush.”

Bell rolled her eyes at the innocence of bachelors. “And a finer way to declare yer in the family way I can't think of. Ted would have walked the pair all the way to Michel Delvin, rather than standin' fer that.”

“You're probably correct.” Bilbo stood.

Just then, there was a knock at the yard door and Clover Mugwort stepped in. “Hello, Mister Bilbo. I thought I heard your voice. Don't let me interrupt, only I've brought this. I forgot when I called in before and you said as how you needed it for the cake, Bell.” The elderly lady held out a mug which was filled with powdered sugar.

Bell frowned. “But ye brought me the sugar earlier, Clover, love. I've put it in the mixture. Did ye forget?”

Clover blinked. “Well now. Fancy that. I must be gettin' old. Just lately I'm forgettin' all sorts.” She grinned. “Oh well. That's more for me to bake an apple pie. Yes. I'll make a pie.” Without a backward glance the old gammer left by the way she had come, leaving Bell and Bilbo staring at the door.

“She's been gettin' worse of late.” Bell noted with a worried frown. “Ever since she had the influenza this winter past.”
“I had noticed. She keeps forgetting to pay her rent but I've not the heart to mention it to her.” Bilbo straightened his waistcoat. “Well, I'd best get back. I left Frodo preparing luncheon and cooking is not one of his better skills. I'm still trying to get rid of the smell of burnt eggs from yesterday's lunch.”

Bell's greying brows climbed her forehead. “How ever did he manage to burn eggs?”

“By putting them on to boil and then sitting down to read a book. Seems Clover is not the only one with memory lapses. It's a blessing Frodo used a good pan or he would have burned the bottom out of it.”

“That lad takes too closely after ye, if ye don't mind me sayin' so.”

Bilbo chuckled. “You have a point. And it's a fact I think I'm rather proud of, on the whole.”

-A-

A week later, early on a bright June morning, Frodo and Daisy Gamgee were strolling down the hill together. Each carried a shopping basket, although Frodo's was empty, for he was on the way to market, Daisy's was filled with cleaning materials.

“How's the wedding planning going,” Frodo asked.

“Tis all done and dusted. I stitched the sixpence in Fern's hem yesterday and me and the lasses helped her make up the weddin' favours. We're goin' to send her back to her family after second breakfast, so we can decorate the smial. How are you and the lads doin'?”

Frodo grinned. “We'll be at the mill in plenty of time to pester your bride, don't worry.”

Daisy's laugh was bright on the morning air. “Tis good of you to stand by Wyd, after what Fern did to you.”

“She was just scared. And Wyd's family are too far distant, in Harbottle, to send many folk to the wedding here. I think they all appreciate you and the other lasses standing in as bridesmaids too.”

They paused by the bridge across the Water and Daisy grinned. “Tis only right. The Bracegirdles can't afford to pay to stay at the Ivy Bush and I don't think Mister Sandyman is too pleased about havin' to put up Wyd's Ma and Da, never mind anyone else.”

“No doubt they're being charged for food, nonetheless. At least Wyd is fairing better in your smial.”

Daisy shrugged. “One more mouth for a week ain't no real bother to us, and your uncle has been sendin' down the odd pie to fill the table. I reckon Sam is lookin' forward to havin' his room to himself again, though. He's got used to spreadin' out since Ham and Hal moved out.” She grinned. “And Wyd snores somethin' awful. I reckon bein' a newly wed aint goin' to be the only reason Fern won't be sleepin', if you take my meanin'.”

“Daisy Gamgee, you are wicked,” Frodo announced with a laugh. “You'd best get moving. I can see Honeysuckle waiting for you by the gate and I need to buy some bacon for elevenses.”

Daisy waved down the lane at her friend. “Mayhap Wyd will give you a bit of a discount,” she called over her shoulder as they parted.

Frodo went on his way, doubtful that Wyd's uncle, Bill Bracegirdle, would allow any such thing.

-A-
Three days later Bilbo heard, “Oh no!” Frodo stepped into the hall, still fastening the last button on his waistcoat.

“What is it?” his uncle enquired, poking his head out of his bedroom doorway, obviously in the middle of tying his cravat.

“It's raining.”

“Is that all? It's only a shower, and it's supposed to be good luck to have rain on the morning of a wedding.” Bilbo returned to his bedroom, making one more attempt to wrangle his new cravat into submission.

Frodo checked the window once more, hoping that Bilbo was correct. Now that he looked more closely he could see that most of the sky was blue so he dug out his comb and began to tackle his foothair. At least the wedding breakfast was to be held in Tom Cotton's barn.

Half an hour later Bilbo was proved correct as he and Frodo stepped out into a fine Forelithe day. Bartimus and Nedes Brockbank met Frodo at the garden gate, but as they were about to depart, Bilbo caught his arm. “Not too rough, now. Remember the teasing is supposed to be just that. We don't want the bride and her maids to arrive looking as though they've been dragged through a hedge.”

“Don't you worrit Mister Baggins. We've done this before. Fern and her maids will look as pretty as they were when they set out,” Bartimus assured him.

Still, Bilbo bent close to whisper in Frodo's ear. “Be extra careful with Fern. Remember her condition.”

Frodo offered a smile of reassurance. “We will, Uncle.” They parted company there, Frodo and his companions running off toward Bywater and the mill, and Bilbo going to join the groom's party in the Ivy Bush Tavern.

As soon as her maids saw the lads approaching they surrounded Fern. Frodo and the Brockbanks had been joined by a couple more local lads and they danced about the lasses, trying to dart between them to catch the bride. The lasses joined hands to form a ring and began to chant. “Sing or snatch. Sing or snatch.”

Frodo led the way, his clear tenor voice opening with an ancient song, his companions providing harmony. The lads and lasses sang verses, turn and turn about, as they wended their way to the market square.

*Sweet Flora, my heart's delight
Be loving, and do not slight
The proffer I make, for modesty's sake
I honour your beauty bright.
For love, I profess, I can do no less
Thou hast my favour won
And since I see your modesty,
I pray agree and fancy me,
Though I'm but a farmer's son.

No! I am a maiden gay
Tis very well know I may
Have lads of renown, in country or town
So! Robin, without delay
Court Hazel or Prue, May, Diamond so true,
Their loves will soon be won
But don't you dare to speak me fair,
As if I were at my last prayer
To marry a farmer's son

My father has riches' store,
Two hundred a year and more
Beside sheep and cows, carts harrows and plough
His age is above three score
And when he does die, then merrily I
Shall have what he has won
Both land and kine, all shall be thine
If thou'lt incline, and wilt be mine
And marry a farmer's son

A fig for your cattle and corn
Your proffered love I scorn
Tis easy to know, my name is Flo
And you're but a bumpkin born.
Well, since it is so, away I will go
And hope no harm is done.
Farewell to you – I hope to woo
As good as you – and win her too
Though I'm but a farmer's son.

Be not in such haste, quoth she
Perhaps we may still agree
For lad I protest, I was but in jest
Come, prythee sit down by me
For thou ar't lad that veryily can
Win me, if e'er I'm won
Both straight and tall, genteel withal
Therefore I shall be at your call
To marry a farmer's son

Dear lady, believe me now
I solemnly swear and vow
No lords in their lives take pleasure in wives
Like fellows that drive the plough
For whatever they gain with labour and pain
They don't with a scarlet run,
As southern lads do. I never knew
A High King's son that could outdo
A country farmer's son.

When the lads finished on a rousing chord they made another mock attempt to capture Fern, but her maids intervened again and now it was the turn of the lads to chant, “Song or loose, Song or loose”. Daisy took up the challenge, her friends joining in. Once again the lads and lasses took their parts.
*My sweetheart come along,
Don't you hear the fond song
The sweet notes of the nightingale flow
Don't you hear the fond tale
Of the sweet nightingale,
As she sings in those valleys below?
So be not afraid
To walk in the shade
Nor yet in those valleys below

Pretty Daisy, don't fail,
For I'll carry your pail,
Safe home to your cot as we go
You shall hear the fond tale
Of the sweet nightingale
As she sings in those valleys below
But she was afraid
To walk in the shade
To walk in those valleys below

Pray let me alone
I have hands of my own
Along with you I will not go,
To hear the fond tale
Of the sweet nightingale
As she sings in those valleys below
For I am afraid to walk in the shade
To walk in those valleys below.

Pray sit yourself down
With me on the ground
On this bank where sweet primroses grow
You shall hear the fond tale
Of the sweet nightingale
As she sings in those valleys below
So be not afraid
To walk in the shade
Nor yet in those valleys below

This couple agreed
They were married with speed
And soon to the bower did go
She was no more afraid
For to walk in the shade
Nor yet in those valleys below
Nor to hear the fond tale
Of the sweet nightingale
As she sung in those valleys below.
(*traditional folksong)

They were almost at the Market Place by then. Once more the lads darted in, but this time the lasses' linked hands gave way easily and Frodo and Bartimus swept in, forming a chair with their arms, to lift a giggling Fern off her feet and carry her to the wedding, laughing maids running ahead to strew
their way with rose petals.

As they entered the square, the assembled villagers shouted, “Here comes the bride, here comes the bride.” At one end of the crowded square an arch of ivy and blossom had been erected and beneath it stood a beaming Penly Whitfoot and a rather nervous Wyd Bracegirdle. Wyd's face cleared as he saw his bride, and as he and Barty set her down Frodo began to wonder whether Bilbo's misgivings about the match were wrong, for Fern gave her groom a wide enough smile.

Penly raised his arms and the cheering died down as groomslads and bridesmaids took their places to either side. “Fern and Wyd, today family and friends have come to witness you exchange vows and to share in the joy of this occasion.” Penly had his faults but nobody ever complained about his skills officiating at weddings. Now he smiled at the young couple. “Love changes with the seasons and the passion of springtime will be replaced by friendship before a yule Hearth. Nothing in life stays the same, just as an acorn becomes a seedling, a strong and mighty tree and then, in old age, a refuge for others. So, your life together will grow and many will come to roost in the safety of its branches.”

At his signal, Wyd held out his hand and Penly carefully placed an acorn in the lad's palm.

“Fern and Wyd, do you declare that you are marrying of your own free will?”

Fern darted a glance aside. Her brother, Ortis, simply stared back with his usual sullen expression. Her mother gave a small nod of encouragement and Ted simply scowled. Fern straightened her back and joined her groom in replying clearly, “I do”.

From a small table, Penly lifted two green silk chords, holding them aloft. “When your lives crossed you formed eternal bonds.” He placed Fern's hand over Wyd's, with the acorn between, wrapping them lightly with the chords. Now Penly smiled at the bride. “Fern Sandyman, will you share in Wyd's pain and always try to ease it?”

Fern's, “I will,” trembled a little.

“Wyd Bracegirdle, will you share in Fern’s pain and always try to ease it?”

Wyd's reply was filled with conviction. “I will.”

All within the market square declared aloud, “So the binding is made.”

“Fern, will you share in Wyd's hopes and dreams?”

“Yes . . . I mean . . . I will.” Fern blushed as her mistep produced some good natured chuckles.

“Wyd, will you share in Fern’s hopes and dreams?”

“I will.”

Everyone declared once more, “So the binding is made.”

Penly grew serious. “Fern and Wyd will you honour each other as equals in this marriage?”

Wyn made a point of catching the eye of Ted Sandyman as he and Fern affirmed, rather emphatically, “I will.”

Fern's mother had tears in her eyes as she joined others in calling again, “So the binding is made.”

Penly placed his own hands upon the couple's. “Fern and Wyd, as your hands are bound together now, so your lives are joined in love and trust. The bond of marriage is not formed by these chords,
but by the vows you have made, for you hold in your own hands the fate of this joining. May these hands be blessed this day. May they have the strength to hold through life's storms and the gentleness to nurture each other. May they build a marriage founded in love, and rich in caring.”

Penly picked up a cushion, on which rested two plain gold rings. “I ask you to seal the vows you share by giving and receiving rings.” He nodded to the bride. “Fern, please make your vow.”

Fern lifted the larger of the two rings, her voice shaking a little as she vowed, “Wyd Bracegirdle, I will hold fast to you, for all the days of my life, until death parts us. To show that I have made this vow I give you this ring.” Wyd held turned their bound hands so his was uppermost and she slipped home the ring on his third finger.

At Penly's nod Wyd took the second ring, holding it above his brides hand, his voice clear as he declared, “Fern Sandyman, I will hold fast to ye, fer all the days of my life, until death parts us. To show that I have made this vow I give ye this ring.”

In her nervousness, Fern's finger must have swollen, for Wyd could not get the ring past her second knuckle. But Fern would not to be thwarted now. “Push!” she instructed loudly, wincing as Wyd complied. There was a round of embarrassed giggling, but Fern did not seem to care.

Penly unwound the cords, presenting one to each set of parents. It was noticeable that Ted passed his to his wife. “Accept these as a reminder of the vows made by your children. If ever their vows start to unravel, yours is the task of helping them to come back together.”

Bartimus leaned in to whisper in Frodo's ear, “Ted will probably whip them into line with it.” Frodo pretended he had not heard and Penly was speaking again before he could be forced to reply.

A beaming Penly raised his hands to declare, “Wyd and Fern, on behalf of all those present, and by the strength of your own love, I pronounce you married.” He winked at Wyd. “You may seal your vows with a kiss.”

Wyd did so, with great enthusiasm, and Frodo grinned when he saw Fern respond in kind. There was a roar of approval from those watching, accompanied by a round of applause as Fern and Wyd parted, their faces pink and eyes shining.

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“The flowers! The flowers!” the bridesmaids called at once. With a twinkle in her eye, Fern lobbed her bouquet right at Daisy Gamgee, who nearly let it drop in her surprise. More than one person cast a knowing glance toward Bartimus Brockbank, who was looking rather smug.

“And now’s time fer the victuals!” called out Wyd's father, Dandy, to much applause and cheering.

Nedes Brockbank leaned in from Frodo's right to whisper, “Does Fern look a bit green to you?”

Fern was, indeed, looking a little pale and Frodo hoped this was not precursor to a bout of what Bell Gamgee referred to as, “the mornin' sickness”, apparently an affliction of many expectant mothers. Having overheard more than his share of discussions between females when living at Brandy Hall, it was a wonder to Frodo that any lass ever entered into the act of coupling, with it's potential consequences.

Nedes dug Frodo in the ribs. “She does. I reckon she's goin' to cast up. I hope she doesn't do it all over the cake. Daisy tells me that cake has been soakin' in brandy for a week or more... says you
could get tipsy just takin' a sniff.”

Fortunately, Fern made it through the exchange of cake before Flora Bracegirdle and Betony Sandyman ushered her from the barn, ostensibly to freshen up before the dancing. Several of the male worthies of Hobbiton took that opportunity to approach Wyd, offering advice that produced much ribald laughter.

Bartimus joined Frodo's table, Daisy Gamgee on his arm. “I don't think Wyd needs advice,” Daisy murmured with a grin. “He's got the tuppin' down well enough.”

Bartimus feigned shock, then fell into a laugh. “Daisy Gamgee, I hope your Ma doesn't hear you talk like that.”

Daisy tossed her curls. “What if she does? She knows, better than us, what those two have been gettin' up to.”

Frodo sighed. “I think, despite Ted Sandyman's best efforts, all of Hobbiton knows, and the rest of the Shire will catch on when the babe is born in November.”

Now Daisy shook her head. “Aye. There's bein' born early and then there's bein' born early. Nobody could pass off a nine month bairn for a six month one.”

Bartimus glanced over his shoulder to where the bride, accompanied by both mothers, had reappeared. Fern had brushed her hair and her bodice laces had been loosened somewhat, so that she looked less wan. Indeed, she was smiling broadly at her new husband, who tucked her under a beefy proprietorial arm.

“They don't seem too fussed,” Bartimus declared. “They're not the first couple to wed in a hurry, either.” He nodded toward a sour-faced Ted Sandyman, who had been consuming a steady flow of cider all afternoon. “I think Ted's more upset than they are.”

Ted was beckoning firmly to his wife, and Betony only had time to give one encouraging smile to her daughter before hurrying to his side. Daisy Gamgee frowned. “To hear Ted Sandyman tell it, Betony has him under thumb but 'tis clear who wears the breeches there.”

Bartimus grabbed Daisy's hand. “Who'll wear the breeches in our smial, Daisy?”

Daisy disengaged her fingers to smack Barimus' arm. “Who says we're goin' to find that out?”

Bartimus winced, but grinned as he rubbed his injury. “The bouquet says so.”

Daisy narrowed hazel eyes. “The bouquet may say I'm next to wed but it don't say who to.”

Bartimus slapped a hand to his chest, announcing for all to hear, “Daisy Gamgee, you've broken my heart.”

Daisy snorted. “Good.”

“If I let you wear the breeches will you marry me?” her swain asked, with a bat of his eyelashes.

Daisy pursed her lips. “I'll think on it,” she announced with a coy twinkle in her eyes.

“Aye. Well just make sure ye'll be gettin' wed fer the right reason. I'll not be looked down on by the likes of Ted Sandyman.” All three jumped, as Bell Gamgee made her opinion known.

Daisy grabbed Bartimus' hand and met her mother's gaze a little mutinously. “Lots of folk get wed
afore they come of age.”

Bell narrowed her gaze at Bartimus, who disengaged his hand rather hurriedly. “Maybe we should get to know each other better before getting wed, Daisy,” he declared, in a voice holding so little conviction and so much pleading that Frodo had to tuck down his head to hide a smile.

Daisy’s mouth fell open, then she stood, in a flounce of starched petticoats. Sticking her nose in the air, she stomped off with not a backward glance to either Bartimus or her mother. Bell took a moment to pat Bartimus’ shoulder before following her tweenage daughter at a more sedate but equally determined pace.

Bartimus dropped his head into his arms on the table and Frodo let loose the laughter he had been holding in. “You’re going to have an interesting ten years, caught between Daisy Gamgee and her mother.”

Bartimus looked up. “You don’t suppose Mistress Gamgee would let us wed when I come of age? That’s only five years.”

His friend chuckled. “I wish you luck in arguing that one.”

Bartimus dropped his head on his arms once more, his only response a long groan.
“Hello Clover. You're up early.” Hamfast closed the garden gate to Number Three as he spied Clover Mugwort ambling up the hill, empty shopping basket over her arm.

“Hmph. Folks is gettin' too lazy these days.” Clover frowned.

“What do you mean? I'm headin' out at my usual time for a Mersday. Tis a fair walk to Bywater and I've a lot of work to do at the Sackville-Baggins today.”

“Don't know what the world's comin' to. I wanted some bacon and a few other bits but Bill Bracegirdle ain't opened up and there's not a soul at market.”

“Nor likely to be, neither. You know they don't start settin' out the stalls till seven o'clock. Most will only just be settin' out from their homes. Tis only half past five.”

Hamfast studied his elderly neighbour. Clover had never been one to keep up with the latest styles but he was pretty sure that it had never been the fashion to wear one frock atop another, and she seemed to be sporting an assortment of brightly coloured feathers in her hair. “Tell you what, Clover, why don't you pop in and see Bell? She's just finishin' up first breakfast and I'm sure there'll be tea in the pot and a slice of toast to spare.” He held open the gate.

Clover seemed to give the matter some serious consideration. “I don't want to put her to no trouble.”

Ham shepherded her toward the door, “Tis no bother. And I happen to know Bell was meanin' to go to market herself today. Mayhap you can walk down together later.”

He opened the door and ushered her in, to find Bell at the kitchen sink. Daisy was brushing Marigold's hair and Sam was drying pots. Bell called over her shoulder. “Have ye forgot somethin', Ham love?”

“No lass. I've found somethin', or more proper, someone. Clover here was just comin' back from market.”

Bell turned about, with a frown, glancing across at the mantle clock. “From?”

Ham gave her a speaking look. “Aye. Seems Clover forgot they didn't open up 'til later.”

To her credit, Bell did not pause, despite noting the feathers in her elderly neighbour's grey hair. “Tis easy done, to lose track of time. Come along in Clover. Have a seat while I finish these breakfast pots. There's tea in the pot. Sam, pour Mistress Mugwort a mug. Tis a long walk to market and back and she'll have a thirst on her.”

“I'll be off then, Bell.” Hamfast made his escape, certain in the belief that his wife would sort matters.

Daisy was staring at Clover's dress and Bell tapped her on the shoulder as she passed to replace breakfast plates on the shelf. “Don't forget to feed the pig, Daisy.”

Daisy leaned in to whisper in her mother's ear while Clover was concentrating upon adding honey to her tea. “She's wearin' two frocks, Ma, and feathers!”

“I know. Off with ye. The slops is ready.” She made a point of handing over the bucket. With one more backward glance at the eccentrically dressed Clover, Daisy departed. “Sam, take yer sister out
to play. I'll not be needin' ye for ought 'til second breakfast.” Once she and Clover were alone, Bell took a seat opposite her neighbour. “That old clock of yours has never told the right time,” she observed.

Clover stared into her mug. “Tis not the clock that's the matter, Bell.” When she looked up her eyes were brimming with tears. “I just thought four o'clock meant afternoon, it bein' mid summer and bright of a mornin'. I expect everyone's noticed I've been doin' a lot of stuff like that of late.”

Bell reached out to take Clover's hand, where it lay, listless, upon the table top. “Not too much, Clove, love.” She gave a soft smile. “But ye may want to go home in a bit and take off one of them dresses.” Reaching up, she picked half a dozen red and yellow feathers out of her neighbour's hair, laying them gently upon the table.

Clover's eyes widened and she looked down at herself, bursting into tears when she saw her dress. Bell was on her feet at once, rounding the table to sit at her neighbours side and draw her into a hug. “Tis alright, Clove, love. Most of us get a bit forgetful as we get older. Hush now.” She rocked Clover until the tears finally ran dry, drawing back to hand over a hanky when the storm was over. “Come on. Ye go and change while I put together second breakfast, then ye can come eat with us and we'll go down to market together.”

That evening Bell, Hamfast and Daisy sat around the kitchen table of Number Three. “Did you sort out Clover this mornin'?” Ham asked as he swallowed the last of his bacon sandwich.

Bell shook her head. "I'm thinkin' Clover's gettin' too forgetful to be livin' alone.”

“Aye. In the normal way of things her son would have been lookin' after her. But Harry's gone and the rest of her family's in Bree.”

Daisy refilled her father's mug with tea. “She once told me she had relatives in the Chubbs, but she didn't say who nor how close.”

“She does. I think she's got cousins on her mother's side, away over in Stock.” Bell held out her own mug for replenishment and Daisy obliged. “I don't know how close they are, though, and I think there was some sort of fallin' out. I'm not sure they'd take her in, even if she asked.”

“What do we do, then?” Daisy asked.

“Seems to me that the first thing is to see if she wants to go to family, and if family will have her,” Hamfast replied.

“But what if they don't?” his daughter asked, with some concern.

“Then we become family, as we've always been,” Bell replied calmly. “Clover's always been there for me when I needed help. 'Tis time to turn about and be there for her.”

Hamfast pursed his lips. “That sounds right, but can you manage, love. I know well enough that the burden will fall most on you, while I'm workin'.”

“I'll help,” Daisy offered. “I looked after Pansy Goodbody for a while and I've been helpin' out the Widow Rumble with her laundry and stuff for ages.”

Bell smiled at her daughter, with some pride. “There'll be no money in it, Daisy lass. I know Butter gives you a penny a week but Clover won't be able to afford that.”

Daisy looked affronted. “I don't want her money! Clover Mugwort's been like an aunty to me for as
long as I remember. She is family.”

“Well said, lass.” Hamfast beamed at his eldest daughter. “But first things first, we need to speak to Clover and, mayhap, her family. If they can mend things we should give them the chance to care for their kin.”

“I've invited Clover for second breakfast tomorrow. That way at least we'll know she's gettin' a good meal in her at the start of the day,” Bell announced. “I'll talk with her after eatin'. Fer the time bein’ she knows enough to know that she needs help, and mayhap we can work somethin' out.”

The next day dawned sunny and clear and Bell sent Sam around to Clover's as soon as second breakfast was on the table. Hamfast was away with Mister Bilbo to Needlehole in the north of the Shire, so it was a small family who sat down at table. Just Bell, Daisy, Sam and Marigold.

For some minutes there was quiet, as all concentrated upon their sausage and egg, but chewing slowed by the time they switched to bread and jam and the second cup of tea. Bell smiled as Sam reached out to wipe his little sister's sticky mouth. Marigold scowled and tried to pull away, but the lad had her measure and simply followed with his napkin. Bell poured more tea into Clover's cup.

“Tis good to share breakfast. I miss havin' a table full.”

“Aye. Things have quieted down a bit now the older ones is gone. Them two lads of yours were a rowdy pair when they got goin'. Not that there was any harm in 'em,” Clover added quickly.

“Can't say I miss them much,” Daisy interjected, a little haughtily.

Bell chuckled, patting her eldest daughter's hand. “Ye just like bein' top of the tree.”

Daisy sniffed, the perfect image of her mother. “And what if I do. Tis my turn.”

There was a twinkle in Bell's eyes as she replied, “Aye, lass. Just so long as ye remember what it were like to be bottom branch and last in turn, when yer dealin' with the young uns.”

Clover grinned at the tween, who appeared to be mulling over that advice. Meanwhile, Bell fetched a wet cloth from the sink and swept in to lay seige to her youngest's face and hands. When Marigold was scrubbed to her liking she shooed her, with Sam, into the back yard to play.

“Daisy, love. Would ye make us a fresh pot of tea?”

“Yes, Ma.”

Daisy was becoming quite biddable of late and Bell's eyes narrowed in thought before she turned back to Clover. “I do miss my lads. I expect tis worse for ye, Clover, love. Ye'll be missin' Harry more than ever.”

Clover nodded. “Tis supposed to get better with time but it don't seem like three years since he went. Some mornin's I wake up to hammerin' out in the yard and I forget it's not him.”

Bell nodded. “If Tom Buckleby is startin' work too early don't be afraid to tell Mister Bilbo. He only let out the workshop again on the understandin' that ye weren't put out by it.”

Daisy brought back the big brown teapot and refilled Clover's mug, before topping up her mother's and her own. At a nod from her mother she re-joined them at the table.

Clover added honey. “He don't bother me none. Truth told, other than those times, tis good to hear some life in the place, and Tom does the odd job for me if I ask. He fixed that back door catch the
other day and wouldn't take a penny for his efforts.”

“Aye, Tom's a nice chap. Not that he's a patch on your lad, Harry, when it comes to carvin'. Harry could carve a rose so fine ye'd want to sniff it.” Bell nodded to the mantle, where a little carved wooden box took pride of place beside Mister Bilbo's old clock.

“That were one of the last things Harry ever made. I'm glad it came to you.” Clover's eyes misted for a moment and she fished in her apron pocket for a hanky to dab at her eyes, before adding more honey to her cup.

“Hamfast were pleased as can be when he gave it fer my birthday. He ordered it months afore, so Harry could have plenty of time to carve it right. I'll never part with it, because it were a gift from both in a way.” Clover reached over to add more honey to her cup and Bell smiled. “Ye'r sure ye want to add more, Clover? That'll be yer third spoonful and ye usually only take one.”

“Oh. I'm that forgetful of late.” Clover's earnest gaze found compassion in Bell's. “I'm almost afraid of puttin' ought on to cook, for fear I'll forget and burn out the smial.”

Bell nodded. “If I'm honest, that's one of the reasons we invited ye fer breakfast.” A wave of her hand included Daisy in her statement. “Have ye thought on what to do about it? Tis only natural to become a bit foggy with age but most folk have family around to help.”

“My Harry should be here to look after his old Ma.” Clover asserted querulously, her gaze suddenly darting about the kitchen. “Where is that lad of mine, anyway?”

Daisy's eyes widened, and Bell patted her daughter's knee beneath the table. “He's gone, Clove. Remember? We lost him in that storm, three year since.”

“There I go again. Oh Bell, what am I to do?” Clover dropped her head in her hands and Bell rounded the table to sit at her side, slipping an arm about her trembling shoulders.

“Ye're not alone. Have ye thought of letting family help? Daisy tells me ye've got relatives in the Chubbs.”

That had the effect of straightening Clover's spine and setting sparks in her eyes. “I'll not be beholden to Bramble Chubb! I'd rather live 'neath a hedge!”

Bell patted her hand, where it clenched upon the table. “Alright Clove . . . alright. Daisy said as how there may be some trouble there, but I had to ask.”

“I'm sorry, Bell. 'tis just that when me and Hamdon moved to the Shire, we asked Bramble if she'd put us up for a while. Just 'til we got on our feet and all. Ham's folk were from Bree, so there was only my side of the family to ask. Bramble said if I was daft enough to marry a lad from Bree, then I should stay in Bree. If it weren't for old Master Gorbadoć's kindness, me and Ham would have been under a hedge, and my little Harry no more than a faunt. Twas the Master of Buckland that put us in Mister Baggin's way, sayin' he had a smial and workshop had just come empty. No. I'd not ask Bramble for aid, had I not a wit left to remember her name.”

Daisy's eyes flashed but her mother laid a restraining hand upon her clenched fist.

“We've all said things in anger that we've come to regret later. Have ye and Bramble talked since? Mayhap age has softened her.”

Clover's lips thinned. “We aint given each other the time of day and I've not had word of her, or her family, for years.”
Bell released her daughter's hand to pat Clover's. "Then mayhap tis time ye tried. Holdin' on to hurts for so long aint good for a body. How's about we send a letter? My Sam could write it for ye. If Bramble's not changed her mind yer no worse off, but mayhap she's thought on it a while and doesn't know how to let ye know she's sorry." When Clover began to waver, she pushed a little harder. "Come on Clove. Ye know me and Daisy will be happy to look after ye, but there's nothin' like family."

Clover sighed. "Alright. Get your Sam to write, but Bramble Chubb always did live up to her name, all tangles and prickles."

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"Mr Frodo, can I ask a favour of you?"

Frodo opened his eyes, shielding them with the book in his hand as he looked up at his young neighbour. He had come into the garden a couple of hours ago, with the intention of reading, but warm sun and the gentle drone of bees had lulled him into a doze. Now he sat up. "Of course you can. Sit down." He waved to a space on his rug and Sam settled down, cross-legged.

"Ma's asked me to write a letter for her and it's important, so I want to make sure I've got it right before we post it." He held out a sheet of his best paper, a birthday present from Frodo last year, upon which was a meticulously penned missive.

"Of course." Frodo accepted the page and began to read, brows rising as he perused. "I had no idea poor Clover was so ... frail. It's very good of your family to help her. Please let me know if Uncle Bilbo or I can help in any way."

Sam shrugged. "Thank you, sir. Tis only right we look after her. Mistress Mugwort has been aunty to me all my life. Ma says Daisy and her will do the lookin' after if needed, but family would be better."

Frodo nodded. The Brandybucks had been kind to him after his parents died and he was certain that Uncle Saradoc and Aunt Esme loved him, but he had never really felt at home until he came to live with Bilbo. He handed the letter back. "That looks alright to me. You've kept to the point. Where does her sister, Bramble, live?"

"A tidy way. Over the river. Newbury." Sam's voice held all the wonder of one who has never left his home village.

"I know, Newbury." Frodo frowned. "I don't remember a Mistress Bramble, though. There again, I was young, and I would only have known her by a family name."

"It's Chubb."

Frodo's frown deepened. "I knew lots of Chubbs but I still don't remember a Bramble. Still, I don't suppose I met everyone." He nodded toward the letter. "If you address and seal it I can take it down to the post for you later. I'm taking some letters for Bilbo."

Sam grinned. "Would you? Ma gave me coin for the postage and I could do it, but I promised Pa I'd go help him with Widow Rumble's garden this afternoon, so I wouldn't be able to take it until tomorrow. I could give it to you on my way to Mistress Rumble's."

"Of course. I'll drop in on my way home to let you know the cost."

"Thank you, Master Frodo."
When Frodo slipped into Bag End's kitchen he found his uncle beating cake batter. “Ooh! Are we having cake for tea?”

Bilbo's face was serious. “Not us, lad. Heather Twofoot passed away last night. Arty just popped in to let me know. I'm making this for old Daddy Twofoot. You can drop it off and present our condolences when you take the post down to Hobbiton. You know where he lives. It's that big cottage off Market Square, behind the The Ivy Bush.”

“I know it. Will he be moving in with family do you think, now that Mistress Twofoot is gone?”

“I don't know. Why? Have you grown tired of your old Uncle Bilbo already? Fancy a move, do you?” Bilbo grinned.

“I could never tire of you, Bilbo.” Frodo giggled. “Or at least of your library.”

Bilbo rolled his eyes as he began to fold in flour. “Oh, the mercenary nature of tweens,” he intoned, in a voice so reminiscent of Dora Baggins that Frodo's giggle escalated into a full-blown laugh.

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Only a week later there was a knock at the back door to Number Three and Clover entered, holding a folded and still sealed letter in her fingers, as though she were expecting it to bite. She held it out to Sam, who was scrubbing potatoes at the table. Belatedly she offered Bell greeting before returning her gaze to the lad. “Can ye read this to me, lad? I can read a bit, but my hand is shakin' so that I don't reckon the words would stay still long enough for me to make 'em out.”

Sam rinsed his hands, accepting a towel from his Ma to dry them before opening the letter. The seal was unfamiliar, a tiny periwinkle, but the hand was very fine. He opened it carefully, going to the signature first. “Tis written by a noter but signed by somebody called Mistress Larkspur Banks.”

Clover frowned. “I don't know no Larkspur Banks. Oh, don't tell me tis meant for someone else and I've accepted it by mistake. I didn't think to look at the address.”

Sam rushed to reassure her at once. “No. I checked before I opened it. It's addressed to you.”

“I hope it ain’t bad news. Letters is always bad news,” Clover muttered, wringing her hands.

Bell steered Clover to a seat at the table and joined her there. “Now, let's not find trouble afore it finds us. Let Sam read it.”

Sam cleared his throat and began.

“Dear Aunty Clover,

I do not expect you to know me, but I am Bramble's daughter. Ma passed away ten years ago but she often spoke of her sister, Clover. I was so pleased to receive your letter because I've been trying to trace you for the longest time. I know it will not be a surprise to you if I say that Ma was not the easiest person to get along with, but as she got older she changed, and I know she wanted to tell you how sorry she was for the way she treated you and Uncle Hamdon. I hope you will accept my apologies on her behalf.

As for your question . . . of course you can come and stay with us. We have a nice cottage with plenty of room for one more. There is just Bert and me and our girls, Candy and Mallow. The girls are already excited about their new aunty and have promised to help me decorate your room. But perhaps I am getting ahead of myself. Do you still want to stay with us if your sister is not here?”
Please let me know as soon as possible if you want to join our little family and I will send Bert to fetch you. He says that if you just say the word he will come with the pony and cart, for you and whatever things you want to bring.

Please say you will come.

Yours sincerely

Larkspur Banks

(As dictated to Knapweed Noter.)"

Clover's eyes were wide. “She sounds a bit posh, don't she?”

Sam slid the letter across the table to her. “I think that's just the Noter. It's normal for them to tidy it up a bit as they write it down.”

Bell beamed at her neighbour. “Although 'tis a shame you won't get to make up with yer sister, it sounds like her daughter is a nice enough lass.”

Clover lifted the missive, squinting at it as though not quite believing what Sam had read. “All this time and I never knew I had a niece, nor grand-nieces.”

“Mayhap there's even more family you aint heard of. What are ye goin' to do, Clover, love?”

Clover shook her head slowly. “I don't rightly know. Tis a lot to take in. They're family but I've got family here, too.” She waved her hand to take in the whole of Number Three.

Bell Gamgee took the letter from Clover's fingers, folding it carefully before handing it back. “I think ye should sleep on it. Sam will write yer letter, whatever yer answer. If ye decide to stay here we will look after ye as one of our own, but just think on the fun ye could have with two little nieces.” She stood. “Now. Will ye stay to sup with us or would ye like me to send round Daisy, with a plate when 'tis ready?”

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A few days later Daisy Gamgee knocked at the back door to Number Two Bagshot Row, not waiting for a reply before letting herself in. Seeing no-one in the kitchen she made for the door to Clover's little bedroom. “Clover are you in here?”

“What?” came the muffled reply.

“Can I come in?”

“Aye.”

Daisy opened the door to enter a darkened room. “Are you poorly, Clover?”

A small lump beneath the bed covers replied, a little grumpily, “No. But I will be if folks keep wakin' me up in the middle of the night.” Clover sat up, revealing a scowl and that she was fully dressed. “What's the matter? Is your Ma sick?”

Daisy frowned in confusion. “No. She sent me round to see if you were sick. We were worried when you didn't come for lunch.”
“Lunch? Why would we be havin' lunch in the middle of the night?”

So certain did Clover sound that Daisy began to question her own world-view, and was relieved when a tweak of the curtains at the window admitted a beam of bright sunshine. “Tis midday, Clover.”

Clover blinked as she processed this piece of unexpected information. “Midday? But we had supper not an hour since.”

Daisy sat down upon the edge of the bed, her voice soft. “No Clover. You had second breakfast with us, then came home. You said you were goin' to do some mendin'. Ma weren't too worried when you didn't come for eleves but she sent me to make sure you were alright when you missed lunch.”

Tears began to gather in Clover's brown eyes as she looked down at her crushed skirts. “I've got in a muddle again, haven't I?” Fishing about in her apron pocket she produced a hanky and blew her nose. “Oh, what am I goin' to do?”

Daisy patted her hand. “Tis alright, Clover. There's no real harm done and Ma's set aside some ham and a tomato if you still want lunch.”

Clover gave a disconsolate shake of her head. “I don't think I want ought to eat.”

“Then why don't I make us a nice pot of tea? You come join me when you've straightened up a bit.” Daisy returned to the kitchen. Here, at least, most was in order, although it took her a while to find the tea caddy amongst the newly washed pots on the drainer. By the time she was pouring hot water into the teapot a much tidier Clover appeared, still clutching her hanky.

Daisy stirred the pot as Clover sat at the small table. “I found a couple of scones and some jam in the pantry, so I thought we could have a snack.” Daisy had learned well from her mother that folks disinclined to eat could often be tempted if the food was put in front of them. Sure enough, Clover helped herself to a scone and a dollop of jam. Daisy handed over a large mug of tea and took a seat opposite. Lunch was but half an hour ago, but she was a tween, and tweens never turned down food. She salved her conscience by telling herself that she was encouraging Clover, and Ma was going to bring down a strawberry flan later, when she finished her baking.

“Have you thought any more on whether you're goin' to move?” Daisy asked around a mouthful of scone and jam.

Clover frowned. “Move what, lass?”

“Move you. Remember? You've been invited to go live with your niece and her family.”

“Niece?” Clover waved a dismissive hand, announcing querrilously, “I can't be expected to keep everythin' straight in my head.”

Daisy resisted the urge to sigh, seeing the letter upon the table and sliding it closer. “Larkspur and her lasses are lookin' forward to havin' you.”

Clover's confused expression cleared. “They are, aren't they? I was readin' her letter again only this evenin' . . . no . . . this mornin’.”

“So, have you decided?”

Clover frowned as she set down her scone. “I don't know. Tis a tidy way to travel alone, and I'm not
as young as I was.”

Daisy smiled. “But you won't be alone. Larkspur's husband, Bert, will come for you.”

“But what if I get there and decide I don't like 'em? What if they don't like me? I won't have no home to come back to and no way of gettin' here if I did.”

“I'm sure Mister Bilbo will wait a while afore lettin' out the smial again, if that's what's stoppin' you. Or maybe you could go for a short visit first?” Daisy offered.

“A visit? That could work I suppose. But I don't want to be no trouble to no-one.”

“You're never a trouble to us, Clover. You've been an aunty to me for all my life. Tis good to be able to do somethin' for you in return.”

Clover smiled for the first time. “There's those who think ye're too big for yer petticoats, Daisy Gamgee, but there's a soft heart under all them frills.”

Daisy laughed. “Don't you go tellin' that to all and sundry. Bartimus Brockbank don't need to know he can wrap me round his finger if he's a mind to.”

“Lass, he's known that for months. Why do you think he stays around?”

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So it was that a month later Bell Gamgee was helping her neighbour to pack a bag for a visit to her newly discovered family. “Don't ye go worritin' about the smial, Clove. Me and Daisy will run through it after, ye've gone, to make sure the fire's out and the pantry's cleared. And we'll pop in regular to check nothin's gone amiss.”

“You're a good neighbour, Bell. I think I've caught all, but it'll be good to know ye're keepin' an eye on things. My head is so muddled of late that I'm likely to leave a crock of milk to go off or a candle burnin'.”

There was a loud knock at the front door and Clover flinched. Then she smoothed the skirts of her best frock and went to answer. A round, barrel of a hobbit stood upon the threshold, his broad face wreathed in an equally broad grin. “Are ye Aunty Clover?”

Clover was almost bowled over by the warmth of that smile. “Aye. I suppose I am. Twill take a bit of gettin' used to, but I reckon I must be.”

The round hobbit at her door gave a bright laugh. “I'm Bert, Larkspur's husband. But ye know that. Are ye ready fer the off? Only I wanted to get as far as Bywater today, then give old Prancer an overnight rest afore settin off back. I've got a couple of rooms booked at the Green Dragon.”

Bell and Clover leaned aside to look around Bert's generous frame. In the lane was a brightly painted cart, drawn by an old, but obviously well cared for, pony. The name “Prancer” may have been appropriate at one time, but it must have been several years in the past, for Prancer was far too round to do any such thing nowadays.

Noting their skeptical faces Bert laughed again. “He's getting' long in the tooth but don't ye worrit, Aunty Clover. He'll get us there . . . and back if ye've a mind fer it. Although I think Larkspur and the bairns would be disappointed if ye decided not to stay.” He shrugged. “Still. We'll cross that bridge when we get to it, as my Da used to say. Let's get this cart loaded. Have ye lots to take?”

Clover did not have a lot, and it took but minutes to load the small cart. Bell stood by her friend as
Bert worked. “Now, don't ye forget to send word of how yer doin'. If ye can’t afford a noter, Tom Carter will bring a message, and Mister Bilbo says, if yer still there, he'll pop in to see ye next time he's visitin Brandy Hall.”

“Clover! Wait a minute!” Daisy Gamgee came trotting up the lane, hampered in speed by having to hold a large, round tin, level in her hands. When she reached Clover she thrust out the tin. “Me and Buttercup have baked you a cake. Tis hard iced and wrapped so it should be good for the journey as long as you don't open the tin.”

Clover passed the tin to Bert, who stowed it with the rest of her meagre baggage. Then she drew Daisy into a tight embrace. “Lass, ye've been as a daughter to me. I'll miss ye.” She eyed Bert a little sceptically. “If I decide to stay.”

Bert grinned, brown eyes twinkling. “Yer welcome to visit, lass. Ye may have to share a bed with the bairns but we'll fit ye in.”

Daisy gave Clover one last squeeze, then stood back. By now all were on the verge of tears, for they suspected it could be their last time together, but it was Bell who grounded them, straightening with a sniff to announce, “Well now. That's enough of the blubberin'. Time ye were on yer way if yer to make it to the Green Dragon afore they stop servin' suppers.”

“Right ye are, Mistress. Come on Aunty Clover. Let me help ye onto the cart.” Bert held out a strong and work-worn hand in invitation, but Clover waved him away.

“My mind may be foggy, lad, but I can remember how to get onto a cart.” She stepped up as spritely as a tween and settled her skirts about her on the cushioned board. “Daisy, thank ye for the cake, and pass my thanks to Butter.”

Daisy's bottom lip was quivering too much to speak so she only nodded tightly, and Bell put a comforting arm about her daughter's shoulders.

Bert chuckled softly as he unhitched Prancer, hoisting a heavy tether-weight into the cart. “Don't ye worrit, me and Larkspur will look after Aunty Clover, and the lasses can't wait to climb all over her.”

Clover was recovered enough to look scandalised. “Well, I hope they remember I'm an old gammer, not a tree.”

Bert only laughed the louder before clucking to his pony. “Come on, Prancer. There's a bag of oats and a warm stable waitin' for ye in Bywater.”

Clover did not look back as Tom guided them down the lane, but Bell and Daisy watched until the cart turned the corner at the foot of the hill, where several folk had come to wave her off, and disappeared from view. Bell decided that, if she was any judge of character, Clover would find her welcome with the little Banks family, and Hobbiton would not see her again.
“Bilbo, how old were you when your parents died?”

Bilbo pulled his gaze from the soothing flicker of the parlour fire. “Gracious, lad, whatever brought that to mind?”

Frodo shrugged, setting down his book. “I suppose I was thinking of Mistress Mugwort. She’s never been quite the same since her son died.”

“Ah. Clover has been much on my mind too. I’m glad your Aunt Esmeralda took the time to visit the Banks family for us. I did want to put my mind at rest that all was well. She says they’re a very good sort. Bell and Hamfast are going through Clover’s belongings to send those she listed, and I’ve asked Tom Carter to stop by to collect them next week.”

For some minutes they sat in companionable silence, then Frodo asked again, “But how old were you?”

The silence that followed was longer than Frodo would have liked, and he wondered whether he had touched upon something that still pained his uncle. But when Bilbo spoke again his tone was light. “I was in my thirties when they died. My father went first, only three years after I reached my majority. He did not return from the Ivy Bush one night and they found him face down in the Water next morning.”

“I’m so sorry, Bilbo.” Frodo sighed. “Our family does seem to have a poor affinity for water.”

Bilbo nodded. “Bungo liked a drink but, despite the talk at the time, I don’t believe drink was the reason for his accident. You know how slippery the planks on that bridge become in winter. There’s been talk of building a stone one for ages, but we never seem to get around to it.”

“All people can be cruel,” Frodo commented ruefully, and Bilbo offered him an understanding smile.

“All can, but not all. My mother lived for another eight years or so, but she seemed to have lost her spark and just faded away. She died seventeen years before Gandalf knocked upon my door and yet I was still missing her. I think, had she still been alive, I would never have taken that journey. It is strange how things turn out.”

“Do you still miss them?”

Bilbo knocked the dottle from his pipe on the fender and fished in his pocket for a penknife. “My parents? It hurt a lot in those first few years but, with time, the pain lessened, and the many good memories crowded out the few bad ones.”

Frodo touched the little hole in his own heart and swallowed.

“And what about you, Frodo. I have been lax in enquiring but, if I’m honest, I did not want to open old wounds. Do you still miss your parents?”

Frodo let his eyes roam the comfortable room as he pried tentatively at the walls around his hurt. “For many years I tried not to look at the memory . . . tried not to feel. I think that’s why I was always getting myself into trouble at Brandy Hall. I needed the distraction.” He allowed himself a tiny smile. “But Bell Gamgee is very easy to talk to.”
“Bell does have a way of collecting confidences,” Bilbo replied, adding with a wink, “Thank
goodness she also has a way of keeping them.”

“I've been thinking about Mama and Papa a lot, of late. It's not easy after all this time. Sometimes I
have trouble even remembering what they looked like, although I know Mama had dark hair and
smelled of lavender.”

Bilbo scraped determinedly at the inside of his pipe bowl. “You were very much younger than I
when your parents died.” He tipped his scrapings into the fire and sucked experimentally. Apparently
satisfied that it was clean he stretched up to lay the pipe upon the mantle. “I seem to remember your
Aunt Esmeralda being a bit of an artist in her youth. Would you like me to write to her? She may
have made a sketch of Drogo or Prim at some time.”

Frodo’s eyes widened. “Would you? If she has a drawing I would be happy just to see it once.”

“I shall write in the morning. Your aunt keeps a good track on Baggins family doings so, if she does
not have a sketch, she will be the one to know if anyone else has.”

“Did she do that drawing of you? The one that you try to hide in your study?” Frodo enquired with a
mischievous grin.

“Hide? I don't hide it.” Bilbo adopted his best innocent manner. “I just don't understand why anyone
would want to look at it.”

“When was it drawn? Did Aunt Esme do it?”

“If you must know, it was drawn by an elven acquaintance of mine. We meet, upon occasion, in the
wilds above Needlehole.”

Frodo’s interest was piqued at once. “I always wondered why you went up there. Is it Gillas? The elf
we met on the road to the Tower Hills?”

“Actually, no. But he is a relative of Gillas, I believe. Like him, his people wander the land,
sometimes escorting their kindred to the Havens.”

“What's his name?”

Bilbo considered for a moment. “Elves are a very secretive people. I don't think it would be proper to
share his name with another without first asking his permission. Perhaps I will take you to meet him
one day.”

Frodo sighed. “It seems that all the peoples of Middle earth are secretive. Even the dwarves, who
come trading sometimes, don’t have much to say about their home in the mountains. You’ve told me
more about the Lonely Mountain than they do.”

“There you have rather touched upon the biggest fault with this world, including the Shire, I’m
afraid. We are all so absorbed in our own doings that we have become disinterested in the wider
world.” Bilbo shook his head. “The world is growing dark, Frodo. Oh, the Shire is safe for the
moment, but beyond our borders there are things moving in the shadows.” When he saw Frodo
shudder he shrugged, as though chasing away unpleasant memory. “Don't mind me, Frodo. I'm Mad
Baggins, remember? I fear I've spent far too much time locked up with elvish history of late.” He
drew a deep breath. “Enough of my maunderings. What do you think of that book?”

By luncheon the next day Bilbo had written his letter and Frodo combined a trip to the market in
Hobbiton with a visit to the Ivy Bush Tavern, where Borden Brewer acted as local postmaster as
well as landlord. There he met Bartimus Brockbank and the two wondered through the various market stalls together.

“Look, Frodo. There’s Fern Bracegirdle. Wow! She’s huge!”

“She’s carryin’ low. That bairn will drop soon.” Both lads turned to discover old Buttercup Rumble behind them. She gave them a toothless grin from above her huge muffler. “A six-month bairn, my eye!” she scoffed.

For a moment Frodo was mesmerised, for her muffler must have been longer than she was tall. It went over her head and wrapped around her neck and chin at least twice, before being knotted, it’s ends reaching down to her waist. “Cat got yer tongue, lad?”

“No, indeed.” Frodo hastily stepped aside to allow her access to the fish stall. “I’m afraid I don’t know much about having babies.”

Buttercup cackled. “And fish live on dry land,” she crowed.

Frodo’s mouth opened but no sound issued, and Bartimus rescued him by the simple expedient of grabbing his friend’s arm and steering him toward Olin Bakers shop. The two stood, looking at the heaps of fresh baked loaves, although neither made any move to buy. From the corner of his eye Frodo watched Fern’s gravid progress through the market.

“Have you two made up?” Bartimus asked when he discerned the subject of Frodo’s gaze.

“I haven’t spoken to Fern since wishing her good fortune at the wedding. She seems happy with Wyd at least.”

“But are you still mad at her?”

Frodo considered for a moment. “Do you know, I thought I was over it by the time of the wedding, but every time I see her I feel a little knot of resentment, here.” He rubbed his stomach.

Bartimus snorted. “I’m not surprised. In fact, I’m more surprised you’re civil to her at all.” Both lads turned to watch as Fern, obviously having completed her shopping, turned for home, down the lane which led across the bridge.

Frodo frowned, wondering what it would have felt like to be a father. Perhaps one day. At that moment Olin appeared. “What can I get you, gents? I’ve some nice fruit loaf if you fancy something for your tea. Lovely toasted with a good spread of butter.”

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Almost two weeks later the postman, (Borden Brewer’s pot boy) climbed the hill from Hobbiton to deliver a large, flat package to Bag End. Frodo answered the door, bringing the parcel through to the kitchen and setting it by Bilbo’s plate. “The postmark says it’s from Brandy Hall,” he observed with some curiosity.

Bilbo set down his fork, wiping hands upon a napkin before breaking the large red wax seal and grabbing the bread saw to cut the string. Brown paper parted to reveal a letter and what appeared to be a piece of board. Lifting the letter, Bilbo began to read. “It’s from your Aunt Esmeralda. She says all Clover’s belongings have arrived safely at Newbury. Clover sends her regards to all and most especially to the Gamgee family.”
“I shall pop down to Number Three later to let Mistress Gamgee know,” Frodo offered, his eyes still upon the contents of the package.

“Esme says that she doesn’t know of any sketches made of your parents at the time, but she has tried to draw some from memory. She hopes she has done them justice.” Bilbo lifted the board, to discover that it was protecting a large piece of thick paper. “Oh my.”

Frodo left his seat to lean over his uncle’s shoulder. For a moment his heart seemed to stop, and he had to remind himself to breathe as memories flooded in. Here was Papa.

Drogo Baggins, like so many hobbits, was fond of his victuals, and it showed in his round face. Esmeralda’s simple pencil drawing had rendered the twinkle in his eyes perfectly, the permanently dishevelled nature of his light brown hair and the broad smile that lifted his cheeks.

Bilbo slid the picture aside to reveal another and Frodo had to fish in his pocket for a hanky. Primula Baggins stared up at him from pale eyes that, Frodo remembered now, were the same sky blue as his own. Her glossy dark curls were dressed with a ribbon, and full lips were bowed in a warm and winsome smile.

Bilbo glanced up at his nephew and then back to the drawings. “She has more than done them justice. You have your mother’s eyes and your father’s smile. Esme does not draw enough nowadays. She has a rare skill when she puts her heart into it.”

Frodo swiped at his eyes and blew his nose. “I had no idea Aunt Esme could draw at all. I don’t ever remember seeing her do so.” He ghosted a finger across the delicate rendition of his Mama’s cheek.

“Esmeralda used to draw a lot as a lass, but I suppose when Menegilda died and Rorimac passed on the running of the Hall to Saradoc, she could no longer find the time. We should ask Tom Buckleby to frame these for you. Then we can hang them on the wall.”

“I would like to have them framed, but would you mind terribly if I hung them in my bedroom?”

“Of course not, lad. They’ll look fine over the mantle, where you’ll see them when you wake up every morning.”

Frodo leaned down to wrap his arms around Bilbo’s shoulders in a quick hug. “Thank you, Bilbo. I can drop them off at Tom’s workshop when I visit the Gamgee’s. Then I must sit down and write a thankyou letter.”

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Drawing his cloak closer about his body, Frodo ran from Tom Buckleby’s carpentry workshop to the back door of Number Three Bagshot Row. Marigold Gamgee must have been watching at the window as she stood at the sink, because the door was opened even before he had time to knock.

Bell Gamgee’s voice came from the dim interior somewhere behind her youngest daughter. “Come away in, lad, and hurry about it afore that wind steels all the heat.”

Grinning, Frodo obliged his neighbour, closing the door himself, once he was safely inside. He blinked, eyes adjusting to the darker interior of the winter kitchen. Bell smiled up at him from her chair by the range. “Marigold, top up that pot and pour Master Frodo a mug of tea. He looks half froze.”

Frodo slipped off his cloak, laying it aside before stepping before the range to warm his hands. “It is turning quite bitter out there. Even Tom has his stove lit.”
Bell nodded, before returning to her mending. A large bedsheet was draped over her knees to pool on the floor about her feet, and Frodo frowned, for she seemed to be stitching a long seem right up the centre of it. “Are you making something?”

“Makin’?” Bell’s frown cleared. “More like, remaking. This sheet is so old tis getting’ thin so afore our Sam puts his foot through, I’m side-to-middlin’.”

Frodo accepted a mug from Marigold, who gave him a shy smile before returning to her station, stepping onto a low stool so that she could reach to wash the luncheon pots. “Side-to-middling?”

Bell paused long enough to wave him to Ham’s chair on the opposite side of the hearth. “When a sheet’s thinin’ in the middle ye chop it in half, turn both ends around and stitch it back together again. That way the thin bit’s now on the edge. Tis a big job but the sheet lasts a bit longer. But ye didn’t come visitin’ to ask about my mendin’. What brings ye to my door today?”

“I was dropping something off at Tom’s and thought I’d pop in to pass on a message. My Aunt Esmeralda wrote to say that she had visited Mistress Mugwort again, and all Clover’s belongings have arrived safely. Clover asked my aunt to pass on her regards to you.”

Bell smiled broadly. “Well, now, that’s good news and I thank ye for it. And t’were good of yer …” She was interrupted by a rap at the front door. “Now who can that be? Seems tis my day for callers.”

Unlike her older sister, Marigold needed no prompting and was soon unlatching the round front door, to reveal a pale and gasping Fern Bracegirdle. Bell took one look at her latest visitor and jumped to her feet. “Come away in lass. Whatever brings ye out on a day like this in yer condition?”

She escorted Fern to the chair hastily vacated by Frodo. “Marigold, fetch a blanket. Fern, lass, yer almost blue. Young folk. Sometimes I think ye’ve not the sense ye were born with.” Almost to herself she added, “Although some seems born with more than others.”

Fern sat down gratefully, still trying to master her breath as she held out a large, empty milk pail. “There weren’t no milk left at market, so I thought I’d come up and see if Mister Sedgebury had any, but he weren’t home and I came over all funny.” She winced, rubbing a hand across her vast stomach.

Bell accepted a mug of tea from Frodo and placed it in Fern’s hands. “Take a sip of this. What was Wyd thinkin’ of, sendin’ ye out in this weather?”

Fern leapt to her husband’s defence at once. “Please don’t go thinkin’ bad of him. He’s away on business for Bill. He didn’t want to go, my time bein’ so close an’ all, but Bill twisted his ankle on the ice a couple of days ago, so he had to go in his place.”

“How are things, down there?” Bell asked with a nod to Fern’s huge belly.

Fern winced. “My back’s been botherin’ me since early this mornin’ but tis alright.”

Frodo collected his cloak, hoping to make a quick exit, for this conversation was getting a little too specific for his taste. As he was swinging it about his shoulders, however, Bell looked up. “Not so fast, lad. We may need ye.”

She ignored his stricken expression, returning her attention to Fern. “Have ye had this pain afore?”

Fern gasped, squirming a little in the chair, and her reply came through clenched teeth. “Can’t say’s I have.”

Bell nodded sagely. “It runs from back to front? Feels like someone is pullin’ strings down to the floor?”
Fern’s eyes widened with each question, realising where they were leading. “It can’t be that. Tell me tis not that. Tis too early. Folks will know.”

Bell sniffed. “Just who do ye think don’t know that ye were expectin’ afore ye wed?”

Fern looked stricken. “They guessed but they didn’t know. I was hopin’ to hold on a bit longer.”

At Fern’s expression Bell softened, accepting the blanket from Marigold and draping it about the expectant mum’s legs. “Oh, lass. Bairns come when they’re ready. Ye can’t just tell ’em to hold on another month or two. Now, where’s Wyd gone? We can send someone to fetch him.”

Tears began to roll down Fern’s face. “He’s away over in Harbottle. Tis two days to get there and back.”

Bell glanced out of the window, where a strengthening wind was bowing branches on trees across the lane. “Likely longer in this weather.” She straightened. “Well, he’ll come home to a nice surprise and that’s all there is to it. There’s no point in sendin’ ye home alone, even if it were safe to go that far in yer state. Ye’ll have to stay here.”

“I couldn’t. Won’t Master Gamgee be angry?” Fern asked as she looked about the ordered and homely Gamgee residence.

“Now, why ever would he be angry? And even if he was, tis not somethin’ that can be helped.” Her sniff told Fern all she needed to know about Bell Gamgee’s relationship with her husband. “He’ll live with it or join Clara in the barn. Now, let’s get ye settled in our bed.” A twinkle appeared in Bell’s eyes. “If he don’t want to share with a cow, Ham can bed in with Sam fer one night. With our brood twon’t be the first time. The birthin’ room’s no place fer fella’s.”

Frodo swallowed his fear, straightening his shoulders. “What can I do to help?”

Bell smiled kindly at him. “Good lad. Will ye go fetch Aster Tunnelly? Tell her Fern’s about twelve hours in.” When Frodo would have bolted for the door she stayed him. “No need to run. Fern won’t be poppin’ for many an hour yet. The first one always takes longest, and we don’t need ye to break a leg afore gettin’ to Aster’s. I’ve birthed enough bairns to know the ropes, but I’d rather have the midwife here.”

Once out of the door, Frodo ignored Bell’s instruction, running as fast as he could. Later, having escorted Aster Tunnelly back to the hill, Frodo took refuge in Bag End, his close brush with potential fatherhood having only birthed in him a strong desire to put as much distance as possible between himself and Fern Bracegirdle.

It was as Frodo was raking the ashes from the kitchen range to prepare for first breakfast the next day, that a beaming Sam Gamgee came calling. Bilbo entered from the hallway, still knotting his cravat, as Frodo opened the back door.

“Pa says will you and Mister Bilbo come down to Number Three to join him in wettin’ the head of Mistress Bracegirdle’s baby?”

Frodo looked to his uncle for advice. “Of course we’ll come,” Bilbo called expansively, on behalf of them both. Too polite to wish to make his uncle appear a liar, Frodo plastered on a smile and allowed himself to be led down the hill.

Number Three’s kitchen appeared full to bursting. As well as Bilbo and Frodo there were, Daisy, Sam, Marigold, Bell and Hamfast Gamgee, Aster Tunnelly and, surprisingly, Fern’s mother, Betony Sandyman. Of Ted Sandyman there was no sign.
Ham Gamgee bowed them in and, from his wide grin and slightly unsteady gait, Frodo suspected that he may have been doing a little too much head wetting already. “Come in sirs. Tis many a year since we’ve heard a bairn’s cry on the row.”

Behind him, Bell rolled her eyes then tilted her head to Frodo. Curious, he moved to join her as soon as Hamfast turned to pour cider into a mug for Bilbo. Bell took Frodo’s arm, ushering him toward the bedrooms. “Fern wanted to see ye special,” she confided, and Frodo’s heart dropped to somewhere around his knees.

Feeling him tense, Bell smiled. “Stop yer worrittin’. Fern’s not about to say anything daft. Her and Wyd have settled in nicely together, and I don’t doubt there’ll be lots more bairns in the future.” She pushed him gently into the room before closing the door behind him.

Fern lay in the middle of the large bed, a small bundle at her breast. Frodo blushed at the sight but when she beckoned him closer, fascination made him comply. His gaze was drawn at once to the tiny pink face pressed close to Fern’s paler skin. All unwitting, he found himself smiling at the sight.

“She’s called Anemone,” Fern announced quietly. When her eyes met Frodo’s there was a peacefulness within, that had never been there before.

“She’s so tiny,” Frodo observed.

“Thank goodness,” Fern asserted with a grin. “I wouldn’t want no bigger. As it is, I don’t think I’ll be sittin’ without a cushion for a few days.”

Frodo tried to smile away another blush. “She is beautiful.”

Fern patted the mattress and Frodo perched stiffly upon the edge. “Frodo, I asked Bell to fetch you special. I wanted to say how sorry I was for what I did to you. It weren’t right and I didn’t tell you proper afore. Will you forgive me?” Anemone had stopped suckling and Fern adjusted her clothing.

“Thank you, Fern. I think I forgave you a long time ago but thank you.” He offered a genuine smile, his voice a little wistful as he added, “Although I almost wish she was mine.”

Fern gave a proud smile. “Would you like to hold her?”

His eyes widened, and he would have refused, but Fern was already holding out the little swaddled bundle, showing him how to support body and head. When Bell looked in a few minutes later Fern was dozing, and Frodo was humming a soft lullaby to Anemone. With a nod of approval, she collected the babe, laying her in the Gamgee family cradle at the bedside. Quietly, she ushered Frodo from the room. “All’s forgiven, then?”

“Yes.” Frodo took a deep breath, feeling freer than he had for a long time. Within the space of twenty-four hours he had regained some of his own childhood and had the privilege of being one of the first to welcome another child to the magic of that journey. Life was good. “They’re going to be a very happy family, I think.”

Bell grinned. “Come and have a mug of cider, afore my husband drinks the lot and I have to pour him into a bed afore the day’s even started proper. He’s that pleased ye’d think it were one of his own bairns.”

Frodo followed her back into the crowded kitchen, wondering whether one day he would be wetting the head of his own bairn. He hoped that, if the occasion arose, his kitchen would be as full of friends and well-wishers as Number Three was today. Grinning widely, he accepted a brimming mug from Hamfast, lifting it in a toast to little Anemone Bracegirdle, Hobbiton’s newest resident.
A pair of muddy, but good-humoured, members of the Baggins family strode into the courtyard of Brandy Hall. The huge front door stood closed, so Frodo tugged on the bell-pull. When there was no reply after a little while, Bilbo knocked. With still no reply Bilbo rolled his eyes and tried the handle. The large round door split open easily down its centre at Bilbo's touch, a waft of warm air beckoning in the weary travellers. Bilbo exchanged glances with his nephew before leading the way inside. “They're probably all in the fields.”

Bilbo was about to call out when a small, tousled head, peeped out from around a nearby door. Bright green eyes widened at sight of the two strangers, then the little faunt wailed, “Mama!” before jumping into the hallway and fleeing around a corner.

Bilbo snorted. “Now that we've been spotted we should remain here.” He dropped his pack to lean upon a walking staff, awaiting his turn to wash feet in the basin beside the door. “No doubt half a dozen gammers will come in response to that wail.”

Sure enough, within minutes a scowling, grey haired lady appeared, trailing half a dozen wary little faunts, the “wailer” balanced on her hip. Frodo stepped forward, with a broad grin. “Hello, Aunty Del.”

Her scowl melted away at once. “Frodo Baggins! Bless me! I swear you've grown a good three inches since last I saw you.” She surveyed him from head to toe. “And a proper gentle-hobbit you look at last.”

Bilbo joined his nephew. “I finally managed to drag him to the tailor a couple of years ago. Good day to you Asphodel. How is Rufus? Do his joints still trouble him?”

“They do, and he makes sure everybody knows it. If you've a mind to speak with him, you'll probably find him snoring by some fire.” Asphodel bent to one of her taller charges. “Go tell Mistress Esmeralda that Mister and Master Baggins have arrived. She's in the big lambing barn.” The faunt ran off as fast as his little legs would carry him, slamming the door in his haste.

“Asphodel hasn't changed, then.” Frodo giggled.

It was nearly an hour before a rather rumpled Esmeralda Brandybuck arrived in the nursery wing, and she paused for a moment to tuck a strand of damp hair beneath her kerchief and strip off a blood-stained pinafore. Concerned when she heard none of the usual shrieks and giggles within she opened the door and peeped in.

All of Brandy Hall’s newly ambulatory youngsters were seated upon the floor in a wide circle. About the fringes of this group stood several of the ladies tasked with caring for them and in the centre, Bilbo Baggins held court upon a low stool.

“‘You’re a booby,’ said William. ‘Booby yerself!’ said Tom.”*

The children giggled.
“And so the argument began all over again, and went on hotter than ever, until at last they decided to sit on the sacks one by one and squash us, and boil us next time.”*

Bilbo’s tale enraptured even the elders, but it was Frodo that Esmeralda was most drawn to. His clothes were of the finest cut, if a little travel stained, but it was his face that truly struck her. The pinched and slightly closed look, that had haunted his features for so many years after his parent’s death, was gone. He was smiling softly, blue eyes sparkling with life, and the sight unpicked a little knot of concern within her heart.

“And Bert and Tom were stuck like rocks as they looked at me. And there they stand to this day, all alone, unless the birds perch on them; for trolls must be underground before dawn or they go back to the stuff of the mountains they are made of, and never move again.” Bilbo paused for dramatic effect, clapping his hands together for emphasis as he finished with, “And that is what happened to Bert and Tom and William.”*

Esmeralda stepped up to the circle. “And that is what happens to little faunts who do not wash their hands and faces before luncheon. Off you all go, now.” She made shooing motions and the little ones were shepherded away by their carers.

Bilbo jumped up, brushing some of the dust off his breeches. “Hello Esme. I’m afraid we’re a little earlier than anticipated. We met Tom Carter as we were approaching the ferry and he gave us a lift for the last mile.”

“So I see. If any of those faunts have nightmares about dwarves and trolls I shall send them to you.” Despite her declaration she was smiling. “You’d best follow me to the bathing rooms. You look the worse for travel and I look the worse for work. Sara won’t be home until dinner. We’ve promised the ox team to Applegarth Farm tomorrow so he’s pushing through the last of our ploughing.”

Some hours later Brandy Hall’s huge dining room was bursting at the seams and, after the quiet of Hobbiton, the many talking and laughing voices were almost an assault on Frodo’s ears. Some latecomers arrived, and one waved frantically. It was a moment before Frodo recognised his old playmate and conspirator, Folco Boffin. When he waved back Folco made a well-remembered hand signal and Frodo nodded emphatically.

“An accomplice of The Terror of Brandy Hall?” Bilbo murmured in his ear.

Frodo grinned. “He was co-conspirator on many a midnight raid in the kitchens. He always claimed that he was being led on by me, but he ate twice as much as I did. Would you mind if I disappeared after dinner? I would like to catch up with him.”

“Of course not, lad. I shall probably go and share a pipe or two with Old Rory.”

Frodo grinned. “I don’t know why you call him Old Rory. You’re older than he is.” Even as he finished the statement he frowned, for it occurred to him that this was indeed true, and yet Bilbo looked little older than Rory’s son, Saradoc.

Bilbo absently patted his breeches pocket, where a fine gold chain trailed from a secure fastening on his waistband. Apparently satisfied, he took a nonchalant sip of the very good wine they had been served with desert. “I’ve always said that adventures are good for a body,” he offered, with a faint smile.

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“It was just as Ham Gamgee bent down to give Bell a kiss that his breeches all but exploded. I swear
you could have heard them rip half way across the field!” Frodo’s grin was wide, his eyes sparkling.

Folco hooted with laughter. “So that’s what really happened. By time the tale reached us here, he was prancing about the field in his altogether. Couldn’t imagine that in staid little Hobbiton.”

“Hey!” Frodo punched his companion playfully on the arm. “Hobbiton’s not staid. You should visit for the Harvest Reel one year. Hobbiton knows how to throw a party and it doesn’t have all the traditions of Brandy Hall tying it down. At Hobbiton’s parties I can dance with a lady or a dairy maid and nobody bats an eyelid.”

Folco handed over a recently assembled ham sandwich and started another for himself. They were sitting in Brandy Hall’s deserted main kitchen, the table before them scattered with left-overs from dinner. Frodo reopened his sandwich to spread it liberally with mustard.

“What do you miss the Hall?” Folco asked, snaring the mustard pot for his own sandwich.

Frodo chewed as he considered. “Sometimes. But … I don’t know how to describe it … I just feel at home in Bag End. You and I had lots of fun here, and Aunt Esme and Uncle Sara were very kind to me, but I never really felt that I fully belonged.”

“We did have fun, didn’t we?” Folco grinned. “You never sat still. We tagged along to see what you would get up to next.”

“That’s just it, though. I couldn’t sit still for too long, because when I did I started to remember my Mama and Papa, and that hurt too much.”

Folco set down his sandwich, his eyes widening. “Frodo … I never knew that. And I thought I knew all about you. I’m so sorry.”

Frodo shrugged. “I don’t think I knew it myself and we were both still young. The quiet of Bag End has forced me to re-examine my life.”

Folco took up his sandwich again. “I could scarce believe it when I saw you at table. Good job you didn’t arrive a week later. I’m only here for the calving.”

Frodo’s eyes widened. “You’re not fostered at the Hall any more either? I thought you had a couple more years at least. Have you gone home to Newbury then?”

“Papa struggles managing the farm nowadays. He's teaching Filby and me. Papa fell … broke both legs a couple of years ago. They never set properly. It makes walking or standing for long difficult. So, we’re learning how to look after the dairy herd.”

“Do you like it? I know you’ve always enjoyed being out of doors, but it must be a lot of responsibility for a couple of tweens.”

Folco gave a little laugh. “There’s times I’d rather be getting into trouble and chasing lasses. It’s not as though Papa did it on purpose. He still lets me have time to visit friends. He and Filby can manage the farm alone for a few days. Our calves are delivered. So I’m come to help with calving here and catch up with friends. Enough of me. What do you do with yourself, all alone with Mad Baggins?”

Frodo chuckled. “I have discovered that “Mad” Baggins is not nearly so mad as he’s painted. Either that, or I’m growing as mad as he is. He’s teaching me elvish. Did you know that elves have two main languages? In fact, I’ve even met elves. Can you believe that?”

Swallowing the last of his sandwich, Folco pursed his lips as he began to collect the dirty dishes.
“Why go chatting with elves? There’s whispers they’ve been seen in the Woody End … strolling through Shire lands without so much as a by-your-leave, Papa says. He says they think they own the place.”

For a reason not quite clear to him, Frodo found himself leaping to the defence. “Well, elves lived all over Middle-earth long before we did, you know. We’re the newcomers.”

“Papa says that’s just hearsay. Hobbits have lived in the Shire for generations. It’s our land, given to us by some old king of the big folk. Not that there’s been sight of any king for many a year. Papa says it’s likely there is no king any more. This is hobbit land. Elves have no right to tramp over it without asking first,” Folco announced with some pique.

Frodo tried a different tack, a little surprised at the vehemence of his usually affable friend. “Have you been having any trouble on the borders lately? I know we used to get men tramping about sometimes.”

Frodo started washing dishes and Folco took up a towel to dry. “Last month there was a bit of a commotion. Some big folk came through the gap in the High Hay, down by the bridge. I didn’t see it myself. Stuff like that's been happening more frequently. Newbury folk lock their doors at night nowadays.”

“Then I can understand why you would be wary of any strangers.” Frodo handed over the last dish and went to empty the water from his bowl. “But, you know, elves are very different to men. Bilbo tells me they won’t even chop down trees to build a fire. I can’t imagine them doing any harm to our lands. They’re only passing through and the elves I met actually rescued Bilbo and me. We were being attacked by ruffians at the time.”

Folco sounded a little mollified. “Suppose that’s alright, but now there’s another tale you need to tell. I thought you weren’t getting into scrapes anymore. Now you drop a ruffian attack into the conversation … calm as you please.”

His companion chuckled. “Maybe that’s a tale for another day. I need to get some sleep. Tomorrow, Bilbo and I are walking over to Newbury to visit an old neighbour of ours.”

“From Hobbiton? Is that Mistress Mugwort, by any chance?” Folco began to put away the clean dishes and Frodo concentrated upon returning their left-overs to the pantry.

“Why, yes! Have you met her?”

“Seen her about. She's moved in with Bert and Larkspur Banks. A nice old gammer. Though she can sometimes be a bit … ” Folko put a finger to his temple and tapped. “Is everyone in Hobbiton a bit touched?”

Frodo grinned. “Does she seem happy to you?” he asked as he hung the tea towel to dry.

“I’ve not seen that much of her. Bert Banks is a capital chap. He always stands his round in the pub.”

The next morning dawned blustery but dry, with fluffy clouds scudding across a pale blue sky. Esmeralda provided Frodo and Bilbo with a basket, crammed with cakes and pies, bread and all manner of vegetables, for no hobbit would consider arriving unannounced without food in his hands, and with the injunction not to try walking back after dark. “You should be perfectly safe in daylight, but Bounders are having trouble protecting the areas closer to the bridge. Sara sent some of our
ponies over to Newbury so folk can reach any trouble faster, but don’t take any chances. I’m sure someone can put you up for the night if it’s too late to start back.”

The walk to Newbury was uneventful and there were many other hobbits on the River Road, some of whom waved a greeting to Frodo, obviously remembering him from his years at the Hall. However, one or two scowled at a memory, and after one such encounter Bilbo noted, “You need to mend some bridges, Frodo, lad. I always think it’s wise not to let things fester.”

Frodo nodded, but perhaps that was something he would leave to another visit.

After five miles they cut across country from the main road, down a drover’s path. In the distance, across newly tilled fields, they could see the line of the High Hay and a ghostly smudge of the Old Forest beyond. It took but two hours more to reach the village of Newbury, which was little more than a couple of long, low farm houses, some tied cottages for the labourers and a small tavern. After their cold walk Frodo and Bilbo did not need to consult upon their first stop.

The tinkle of a bell over the door brought the landlord of The Three-Legged Pony from his kitchen. He smiled broadly. “Good day to ye, Gentlehobbits. Tom Barley’s my name and welcome to my establishment. What can I get for ye? We’ve a good strong cider to quench a thirst and I can mull it if ye’ve a mind to chase off the chill.”

“That sounds quite excellent. We’ll have two halves of your best mulled cider. Thank you,” Bilbo announced as he leaned against the dark polished wood of the bar and fished in his pocket for change. Master Barley filled two mugs from a keg then carried them to the hearth. Lifting a poker from the embers he plunged it into each mug in turn, releasing the rich smell of apples into the air.

Two tankards of steaming golden cider were placed upon the bar, a little ash floating on their surfaces. “That’ll be two farthings, sir.”

Bilbo slid one mug toward his nephew as he handed over the requested coin. “Business looks quiet,” he commented, nodding to the spotless but empty interior.

The rotund Tom waved a hand dismissively. “They’re all in field or barn. We don’t get much trade ‘till evenin’.” He ran a cloth over the already glowing bar top. “From yer accent yer not from ‘round here. If ye don’t mind me askin’ yer business, what brings ye to Newbury? We’re well off the beaten track fer visitors.”

Bilbo had been taking several sips of his cider and now smacked his lips in appreciation as he set down his tankard. “My name is Bilbo Baggins, and this is my nephew, Frodo. We’ve come to stay with family at the Hall and thought to visit an old neighbour of ours. She recently came to live in Newbury. Perhaps you know the Banks family?”

Tom grinned, revealing several chipped or missing teeth. “Half the village is called Banks. They’ve been labourers round these parts for as long as I care to recall. I think I know who yer talkin’ of though. ‘Tis Bert and Larkspur yer wantin’. They’ve an old aunty new come to live with ‘em.”

“That will be them,” Bilbo confirmed. “Can you direct us to their cottage?”

“Aye … Clover. That’s the name. Nice old gammer. Dotes on them faunts.” He waved a strongly muscled arm toward the door. “Turn right as ye go out. There’s a row of cottages a few steps down the lane and Bert’s the one with the blue door. He’ll be in the fields but Larkspur and the faunts are about.” Tom looked hopefully at the pair. “Will ye be wantin’ lunch? I’ve some good thick beef stew and the missus floats a fine dumplin’, if ye’ve a mind for a bite.”
Frodo’s stomach gave a growl that drew a grin from both his elders and Bilbo fished in his pocket once more. “I think Frodo just settled that question. And we don’t wish to impose too deeply upon Mistress Bank’s hospitality. We’ll have two portions if you please.”

Tom turned for the kitchen then paused, frowning over his shoulder at the two. “Frodo? Now where’ve I heard that name afore?”

Bilbo raised a brow at his nephew and Frodo shook his head, announcing emphatically, “No bridges here, Bilbo. I promise.”

Tom’s face cleared as he clicked stumpy fingers. “Ahh! I know who ye be. Yon lad used to live at the Hall and ye’ll be Mad … er … well known too, Mister Baggins, sir.”

Mad Baggins chose to ignore the hesitation, smiling instead as he replied, “Yes. Frodo has been living with me in Hobbiton these seven years now, but it seems he is still remembered … fondly… in these parts.”

Tom displayed the gaps in his teeth again, green eyes twinkling. “Fondly is it? As I hear it, if there was mischief to be got into, he was in it. But there, t’was all innocent and no real harm done. No doubt yer all grown up and have put such things behind ye.”

“Yes, indeed!” Frodo hurried to assure their host. Tom disappeared into the kitchen and Frodo let loose his breath.

The stew was as good as promised, with dumplings that melted in the mouth. As they were finishing Bilbo glanced out of the window at a greying sky. “It’s a long walk back to the Hall. I don’t suppose you have a room available for guests, Master Barley?”

Tom positively beamed. “Just Tom will do, sir. We don’t get many travellers here abouts but I do have one room. Tis not grand but there’s four beds and a fire and I doubt ye’ll have to share with strangers tonight. I can have it ready by the time ye’ve finished yer visitin’ and the missus is roasin a nice bit of pork for supper.”

“Then I thank you, Tom, and we would like to book the room for one night, along with supper for two.”

Tom almost bounced on the spot and Frodo surmised that the inn got little opportunity to put up guests. No doubt the few copper pennies Bilbo was asked to hand over for room and board would be a welcome bounty. He just hoped that the beds were not lumpy.

Their host almost fell over his sturdy feet in his haste to return to the kitchen. “I’ll tell the missus, right away.”

A few minutes later they had said their temporary goodbyes to Tom and were standing before a round blue door, set into a low, cob-walled, thatched cottage. It was Bilbo who knocked. At first they wondered if they had been heard, over the excited shrieks and giggles within, but eventually the door swung open to reveal a slightly dishevelled but widely smiling Clover Mugwort. Clutching at the corners of her apron hem, like a pair of tassels, were two little lasses with shining eyes and apple cheeks.

Clover’s smile grew even wider when she recognised Bilbo and Frodo. “Well, bless me! What brings you to Newbury, sirs?”

Frodo held out the basket. “Why you, Mistress Mugwort. We were just visiting family in Brandy Hall and thought we’d pop over for a visit.”
A younger lady, with dark, glossy curls and hazel eyes peered over Clover’s shoulder. “We weren’t expectin’ visitors but ye’re welcome as can be, sirs. Won’t ye come in out of the cold?”

Clover and the faunts stepped aside to admit their guests. Both gentlehobbits bowed as they crossed the threshold and Clover made introductions. “Mister Bilbo Baggins and Master Frodo Baggins, this is my niece, Larkspur Banks.” Larkspur offered a little curtsy and Clover tugged playfully at the dark curls of her wee companions. “And these are Candy and Mallow.” The faunts remembered their manners enough to bob wobbly curtsies, before running to their mama, who gathered in her chicks. Clover accepted the basket, setting it upon the broad kitchen table amongst some baking debris.

“Good day to you ladies,” Bilbo responded with a smile. “I hope we are not intruding too much upon your hospitality.”

It was clear they had caught the small family in the middle of baking biscuits. Larkspur turned at once to grab a damp cloth to wipe down the table, a faint blush colouring her cheeks. Her words tumbled out in a fluster. “Please excuse the mess, sirs. We weren’t expectin’ no visitors. Won’t ye sit down? Would ye like a cup of tea? Ye’ve come a long way. Would ye like a bite to eat? I’m afraid we’ve no parlour but yer welcome to a seat at table. Tis so good to see ye both. Clover has told me so much about ye.”

Bilbo waved a hand as he motioned Frodo into a chair. “Do not trouble yourself on our account, Mistress Banks. We were not expecting to be feted. Please carry on with your baking. Frodo and I will happily accept a cup of tea, but we have just had luncheon at the pub. Clover, why don’t you show me where to stow all this food. Esmeralda Brandybuck sends it with her kind regards.”

If Clover found the request a little strange she made no show of it, instead leading Bilbo through a small door. Once inside the surprisingly capacious pantry Bilbo left the unpacking to Clover, instead, leaning back against the closed door. “How are you, Clover? By the way, Bell sends her regards.”

Clover paused in her unpacking, turning to smile at Bilbo. “Do you know, Mister Baggins, I feel better now than I have since my Harry died. The little lasses is as bright as buttons and keep me on my toes, and Lark and Bert have given up their parlour, so I can have a room of my own. Tis all set up with bed and chair, and there’s even a lock if I’ve a mind to use it, which I haven’t.”

“Bell will be pleased to hear it. Esmeralda Brandybuck gave us a good report, but I wanted to make sure for myself before letting out Number Two again. How’s the memory nowadays?”

“Well … see, that’s the thing. Since I’ve been here my mind don’t seem so foggy as it was. Them little faunts has given me a new lease on life and I think I’m goin’ to be very happy here.”

Bilbo grinned widely. “Then I am very happy for you.” Now he stepped in to help Clover empty the basket. “And I can feel easy about letting out Number Two to Daddy Twofoot.”

“Daddy Twofoot? What happened to make him want to leave his cottage? Nothin’ awful I hope.”

Bilbo sighed. “I’m afraid Heather died recently, and Dayton can’t bear to stay on in the cottage alone. His son and his family will be moving in, if I can provide number two Bagshot Row for Dayton. But I wanted to be absolutely certain that you were settled here before moving in anyone else.”

“Well, thank you for the caring, Mister Bilbo. But I’m very settled here. You let out that place with my blessin’ and tell Daddy he can have anythin’ of mine that’s left there. If they don’t suit him, you give ‘em away to any as needs it. Mayhap Fern and Wyd could make use of that old dresser of mine. They don’t have much coin and they’ve a bairn to feed by now.”
“They have indeed. She’s called Anemone.”

“Is she, now? You must tell me all about the doin’s in Hobbiton since I left.”

Frodo and Bilbo spent a very enjoyable afternoon with the Banks family. Frodo gave the little girls piggy back rides and played “cats’ cradle”, and Bilbo related gentler sections of his old adventure, in between bringing Clover up to date on all the doings of her old neighbours. Tom Banks arrived in time for tea, which was a lavish affair, thanks to the generosity of Esmeralda Brandybuck. When the last morsel had been consumed and a pipe shared, Bilbo and Frodo returned to The Three Legged Pony in the gathering dusk.

Their room turned out to be small but clean and a cheerful fire danced in the grate. Two of the beds had been made up with crisp, white, sheets and good, thick, blankets and Frodo was pleased to pronounce the mattresses lump free. Supper was served in the general room, where the locals also made them feel most welcome, particularly when they discovered that young Frodo Baggins had a fair singing voice.

Bilbo declared dinner to be a veritable feast. There was a pork shoulder, roasted to perfection, creamy, mashed potatoes accompanied by honey roasted carrots and parsnips, the whole dressed in a golden gravy. A fine apple crumble, drowned in thick and shiny egg custard, topped off the excellent meal. The Baggins duo adjourned to their beds with full tummies and fell asleep almost instantly.

They were jolted awake some hours later by the sound of shouting beneath their window and the distant call of a horn. “Awake! Awake!”

*Words and paraphrases from JRR Tolkien’s “The Hobbit”.*
For several moments Bilbo only blinked blearily, and it was the younger Frodo who leapt out of bed to push aside the curtains, fling open the window, and call down, "What's happening?"

Someone opened a door below, and light spilled out to illuminate a milling crowd of hobbits, wielding pitchforks and any other weapons they could muster. Tom Barley turned to shout up at his guests. "That's the Bounders' horn on the bridge. There's ruffians in the Shire. Don't ye go worritin' sirs. Me and some of the lads will see to it." He grabbed the arm of one of the younger hobbits. "Go saddle up them ponies the Master sent from Brandy Hall."

The lad spoke up. "There's six ponies but there's only four of us I know of who've ever rode afore."

Another shouted, "The rest of us will have to go a'foot. I reckon all will be done by the time we get there and four won't be no good against big folk … if that's what it is."

There was more milling about and Frodo began to fear that the party would never get started, as the villagers began to argue about who would best be able to learn the art of riding within the timeframe allowed. In the end he called down, "I can ride! Just let me put on some breeches and I'll join you."

To Frodo's surprise, Bilbo now called from over his shoulder, "As can I. I'll come too."

It was almost an hour before the ponies were fetched from a nearby farm and saddled. Then the riders were galloping out of the village, along the road to the Brandywine Bridge, Frodo and Bilbo among them. The rest of the group ran along behind but were soon lost to view as the sturdy little ponies ate up the distance. To their right the line of the High Hay loomed ever closer and to their left the sound of the Brandywine river grew louder in her spring flood. Frodo knew that the Boffin farm lay closest to the bridge and he hoped the horn had warned them to lock the doors to house and barn.

By now Frodo and Bilbo were at the front of the small party of riders and Frodo pointed to a wildly arching flame off to one side. As he drew rein it became clear that it was a hobbit waving a burning brand. There was a moment of jostling as some of the ponies took exception to the flame and their inexperienced riders fought to keep them under control, but Frodo managed to master his mount first. "It's Farmer Boffin isn't it? We heard the bridge horn. Is something wrong here?"

Fobert Boffin planted his torch in the earth and stepped closer. "Why, 'tis young Master Frodo, and Tom Barley! Wrong? Somethin' wrong? I should say there's somethin' wrong! Ruffians! Big Folk, and they've made off with my two best milkers!" He waved back toward the lights of his low farmhouse. "They knocked the livin' daylights out of my poor lad, Filby. I can't run after 'em on my poor legs, neither!"

"Is Filby all right?" Bilbo asked, having regained control of his mount.

"Aye, The Missus is seein' to him. But what about my beasts? 'Tis the second time this month! First time they took Dotty and that were bad enough. But this time 'tis two! Two!"
"Which way did they go? Did you see?" Bilbo demanded. It was difficult to see anything beyond the bright torchlight.

"Back toward the bridge, of course. If I were a younger hobbit …" he shook a large fist.

"How many? Were they carryin' ironmongery?" Barley asked with some trepidation. Men were known to carry swords and there were few weapons in the Shire, beyond slings and the occasional hunting bow.

"Aye. Girt big swords they had! 'Tis a wonder they didn't run my Filby through. He's got a nasty cut on his arm but mostly they used clubs instead. I reckon that's all as saved him."

From one of the other riders Frodo heard a muttered, "A pitchfork's got longer reach than a sword. If we catch 'em, we'll have 'em." He decided it would be impolitic to point out that a Hobbit pitchfork would be little longer than the sword of a Man.

"How long ago was this?" Bilbo turned his pony back toward the road.

"'bout an hour. Ye may catch 'em afore the bridge. They were on foot and my Beton's a contrary one to herd. She'll slow 'em down."

Frodo scanned the horizon to their right. "The sun is on the rise. It should make tracking easier soon."

Bilbo shook his head. "There's no need to track. The break in the High Hay by the bridge is the only way out of the Shire from here. We make for the bridge. If they're out of the Shire we need to go that way, and if they're not we can lay an ambush there."

Frodo's heart was pounding, his thoughts muddled by fear and he marvelled at his uncle's clear thinking. Here was Bilbo who stole the Arkenstone from a king in the attempt to prevent a war and at that moment it seemed an unspoken decision was made by the riders. When Bilbo nudged his pony back onto the road and into a gallop, the youngster noted that everyone followed their new leader without question.

When they arrived at the Brandywine Bridge it soon became clear that their quarry had eluded them. It seemed Beton had not succeeded in slowing them down sufficiently after all. The riders arrived as the sun was climbing above the trees of the Old Forest and, if the scene upon the bridge were not evidence enough, the tracks of both man and beast could clearly be seen leading up the bank and onto the road.

The bridge itself seemed to be filled with hobbits. Three of the Bounders were surrounded by small knots of others, some tending their injuries, the rest in heated discussion.

"We heard the horn," Bilbo announced. "What happened here?"

His calm but commanding tone cut through the hubbub and all stilled. One of the ladies who had been tending a Bounder stood forward. "It were big folk. My Brock couldn't stop 'em alone so 'twas him as sounded the horn. They stole a couple of cows but even with help he couldn't stop 'em when they came back through. There were four of 'em and two cows. They had great long swords and cudgels."

"Is everyone alright?" Bilbo asked.

"They'll live. Although Brock will be limping for a day or two," another well-dressed hobbit, carrying a healer's scrip, pronounced.
"Then we will leave you to tend to your people and go after these villains. How far ahead of us are they?"

Brock's wife replied, seemingly having taken the role of spokesperson. "About half an hour by pony, I reckon."

Bilbo nodded. "Thank you, Mistress. There are more people following on foot from Newbury if you need them." With those words Bilbo wheeled his pony about, to lead his party down the road.

Frodo noticed that some followed more reluctantly now. The High Hay and bridge marked the boundary of the Shire to the East (indeed some did not even acknowledge Buckland as a part of the Shire at all) and even most Bucklanders had never stepped upon the road to this side of the bridge. Additionally, the Old Forest had a nasty reputation for swallowing travellers and only a deep ditch and a scant half mile stood between the road and its ominously dark trees to their right. If Bilbo noticed their trepidation he made no concession to it, clicking his pony into a trot. They had ridden hard in an attempt to catch their quarry before they reached the road and the ponies were now too tired to gallop.

The hard surface of the road revealed no tracks of any kind, unless it were the ruts of many years of cartwheels. Frodo drew alongside his uncle. "Should we be travelling so fast? They may have turned off the road and we'll miss their tracks."

Bilbo nodded ahead. "There are steep ditches to either side for about half a mile. They couldn't get a cow out of them if they went in. Once beyond this bend the ditches grow shallower, but the road runs straight for miles and if they're still on it we will see them long before we're upon them."

"What of the trees?" Frodo enquired. Ancient trees lined both sides of the road to Bree.

Bilbo dismissed his worry. "You can hide a man behind a tree, but a cow is quite another matter. These sparse trees won't offer much cover. If we don't see them, then we will be forced to slow further and check for tracks, for they will have left the road and headed off into the wilds."

Sure enough, soon the road straightened out, to run arrow-straight into the east. As Frodo had feared, there was no sign upon it of either men or cows. Apparently noticing the same, Bilbo called for them to slow down. "Everyone look out for tracks. I doubt they'll have ventured toward the forest but if they don't know of its reputation they may have tried, so check both sides."

The murmurer from earlier made another observation. "If they've gone in there I don't fancy followin' fer the sake of two cows."

This time Bilbo wheeled about, bringing their little troupe to a halt. "If anyone is feeling uncomfortable they can leave now, with no questions asked and no recriminations. Some of you have young families to consider. But know this. This is about more than a few cows. We need to show outsiders, whatever their size, that we are willing to defend our land. Now, we don't know what is ahead, but if we have to fight we all need to know that each is willing to look to the others' backs." His brow may have been wrinkled by age but Bilbo Baggins' back was straight and there was a determination in his sharp blue gaze as it swept each face.

One or two looked uncomfortable but then, as if upon some unspoken command, all squared their shoulders. Tom Barley nudged his mount forward and the others followed. "We're with ye, Mister Baggins. Don't ye worrit none. Whatever happens ye can rely on us to see the job done." His words were followed by a quiet but inclusive chorus of ayes.

"Good lads!" Bilbo's broad smile was all-inclusive. "Come on, then. Let's see what we can see."
It took only ten minutes to find where big folk and cows had left the road. A group of small hills rolled on their left, the nearest of which was crowned with a ragged group of birch trees and a thicket of hawthorn. "If I was goin' to hide myself and a couple of cows that looks like the best place fer miles about," Tom announced as he drew alongside Bilbo and Frodo.

Bilbo sighed. "I don't think they have much intention of hiding, Tom. They have made no effort to disguise their path through the bracken to that tallest hill. They know there is no way for a large group to approach them from this side without being seen."

Tom raised himself in the saddle. "The land looks clear beyond too. So goin' around won't help us none."

"True. Still, we're close enough to see them if they went through and out the other side. I'm certain they are still in there. We just have to hope that they don't have an archer."

"Perhaps one of us could sneak up unseen and then report back?" Frodo suggested. "They may not spot one person on foot."

"Aye. I hear tell big folks is a bit stupid that way. Niles Proudfoot says as how he once had one walk past, so close he could have touched his cloak, and the fella never even knew he was there."

"Don't believe all you hear, Tom. These big folks were wise enough to enter the Shire under cover of darkness and steal two cows, and they have sense enough to know that horn will have summoned help. They know we're following and they know where to wait for us. But Frodo may have a point. What say you, lad? Do you think you could do it?"

Frodo swallowed hard. The suggestion was his, but he had assumed that Burglar Baggins was the hobbit for the job. He leaned closer to whisper, with a glance at the fine gold chain fastened to Bilbo's belt, "I thought perhaps you could use your 'birthday present'.

Bilbo pursed his lips, one hand automatically going to his pocket. There was a pause, during which Frodo watched many thoughts flit across his uncle's face. Then Bilbo shook his head, his own voice little more than a whisper as he replied, "There's too much dead bracken between us and them. I may be invisible but my passage will not be and I'm too old to squirm beneath like you."

Bilbo had a point. He was a little too old to be squirming through bracken on his belly. Suddenly Bag End, with its cosy garden far from the borders of the Shire, sounded rather inviting to Frodo. Still, he had always craved adventure, and now he had it. He surveyed again the ground between road and destination. "I think I can do it."

Bilbo clapped him on the back. "Come on then. Everyone dismount and mill about a bit. Look as though we're stopping to discuss tactics or rest the ponies. Hopefully, that will give Frodo an opportunity to slip away unnoticed."

Five minutes later, having discarded his cloak and swapped his nice white shirt for the brown of one of his companions, Frodo was creeping out of the smelly mud of the ditch and into the musty russet remnants of last year's bracken. He resisted the urge to sneeze as he squirmmed slowly closer and closer to the crown of the hill, hoping that his passage would not be noted by any movement of the dry dead fronds above him.

The bracken thinned and then stopped as Frodo drew nearer to the tallest hill. Here there was no option but to move in the open, so he tried to weave a zig zag path, as low to the ground as possible. Frodo experienced an incongruous flash of amusement as he considered the condition of his fine breeches by now. This was followed by another as he realised that such a thought would not have
occurred to the Terror of Brandy Hall before moving in with, arguably, Hobbiton's leading citizen. Whyever did he volunteer for such a dangerous task? In his mind he could hear Bell Gamgee declare, "I always said Buckland weren't no decent place for law-abidin' hobbit folk."

Even as Bell's voice faded away Frodo found himself amongst the roots of the hawthorn and he paused to listen. For a while he heard nothing and then, suddenly, a blackbird's alarm call shattered the air and there were the unmistakable sounds of scuffling movement at the other side of the thicket. Frodo tucked himself in as close to cover as possible, desperately hoping that any fight would not come his way.

Bilbo had shown his nephew Sting often enough for Frodo to instantly recognised the sound of a sword being drawn, followed by one muffled cry of pain and the distressed lowing of a frightened cow. The commotion was over quickly, although it could not be quick enough for Frodo.

There was a moment of silence in which Frodo lifted his head, and then several huge horses exploded from the copse, only an arm's length from his hiding place. He ducked flying hooves, getting only a fleeting image of tall, green-clad riders, some with bundles draped across their saddles, then they were all galloping off at great speed toward the road, where they turned left and continued toward Breeland with neither a pause nor backward glance.

Jumping to his feet, Frodo watched his companions, already remounted, gallop up toward him as fast as their little ponies would take them. When they arrived Bilbo leapt down, running to Frodo and grabbing him in a hug that would have put Beorn himself to the test. "When we heard the noise we thought you had been trampled or at the least discovered." He pushed Frodo back for a moment to check him from toe to crown, then grabbed him into another hug. "I have never been so pleased to see you covered in mud."

"What?" Frodo regained his balance to look down at the disreputable state of his clothing.

"I had thought to find you covered in blood, lad. Thank the Valar that you are not. Did they hurt you at all?"

"Bilbo! I never even saw them, except from the rear as they galloped away." He turned back toward the hedge, searching for and now easily finding the thinning area that the riders had pushed through.

Bilbo followed him into the dim light of the copse. "Then what made them flee?"

There was a clear circle within the crown of trees, with a scatter of what appeared to be ancient carved stone, the remnants of a building perhaps. Some of the smaller ones had been set in a circle and contained the cold ashes of a fire. Two travel packs spilled their contents onto the ground and, to one side, tied securely to a tree, were Farmer Boffin's cows. They were rolling their eyes in alarm but seemed otherwise unharmed.

"Fobert will be pleased to see these two," Tom Barley announced. "They don't seem to be harmed none, but I'm not getting' too close 'til they've settled down a mite. I've a mind to keep my toes."

The rest of the hobbits were looking about the place. "Do ye think we scared 'em off?" from one fellow was met with a loud chorus of jeers. "Then why else did they leave?" he demanded.

Bilbo bent to examine the soft mulch beneath the trees. "I think there were two different lots of men here."

Tom frowned. "How can ye tell when they're all wearin' boots?"

"Like feet, all boots are different. We followed two sets of boot prints from the road. One had a hole
"in the heel and the other had a crack across the balls of both soles." He quartered the clearing, head down. "I think our potential ambushers were ambushed themselves," he announced.

"How do ye get that?" asked Tom, with some scepticism.

Bilbo obviously could not resist the temptation to show off. "I am rather well travelled you know, and I've learned a lot in those travels." He pointed to one corner of the clearing. "Several horses were hobbled here for some time. The grass is well cropped and some of the droppings are quite dry. See the boot marks around them? These are well crafted boots with squared-off toes and clean soles. These are the men who own the horses."

He returned to the gap in the hedge through which they had all entered. "Our cattle thieves came in through here and before they had taken more than a few steps they were set upon by the square toes. You can see the heel tracks where they were dragged over to the horses."

"A couple of the horses did seem to have big bundles thrown over the saddle. It was over so quickly that I didn't see very clearly but now I wonder if those were unconscious men," Frodo added.

"Or dead," Tom Barley suggested, dourly. "I've heard tell big folk have a likin' fer killin'."

Frodo noted that Bilbo did not deny the statement. He was hardly in a position to, from the tales he had related to Frodo of his experiences outside the Lonely Mountain. Instead he observed, "I see no blood but whoever these new men were, they did us a good turn at least. We did not have to fight, and Fobert will get his livestock returned, with no harm done to any."

"Other than the thieves," Frodo added.

"And I say well done to that," Tom Barley announced stoutly. "I hope as how they was harmed, good and plenty."

Bilbo frowned and looked as though he would argue that, when a cry of surprise arose from the other side of the hearth. "Look at this, Mister Baggins. Have ye ever seen the like? 'Tis fine work."

One of the hobbits from Newbury was holding up a large brooch and everyone crowded around to examine this exotic find.

It was too large to be purely decorative and had probably been used to clasp the long green cloak that lay discarded to one side, at least until that clasp broke. It was made of silver, in the shape of a six-pointed star and if any device had been graven upon it, it had long since been worn away by use.

Bilbo turned it this way and that, then shrugged. "For a moment I thought I had … but no. It is finely crafted and looks quite old. A family heirloom perhaps? Maybe we should leave it here in case its owner returns to look for it."

They laid it upon one of the hearth stones before they left.

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It was dark by the time Frodo and Bilbo returned to Brandy Hall later that day, and dinner had been finished hours before, but Esmeralda prepared a splendid supper for her guests, shared around the private family dining table.

"So, has your Mistress Mugwort settled in?" Saradoc asked as, despite her scowl, he helped himself to a second piece of his wife's excellent coffee cake.

Bilbo cut himself a big wedge of pork pie. "She has. Bell will miss her but the Bankses seem a good
"I've never met that branch of the family, but the Banks clan have a good reputation in Buckland. Good honest farming stock," Saradoc replied pragmatically, washing down a mouthful of cake with a good swig of tea.

Esmeralda clapped him hard between the shoulder blades when he began to cough. "Serves you right. I've told you not to bolt your food," she muttered.

Frodo grinned, remembering many a similar exchange from his youth in their care.

When he recovered his breath, Saradoc took another swallow of tea. "I need to do a final check of the barns before bed. You know how careless Putnam Bracegirdle can be."

Esmeralda rolled her eyes. "Why do you leave him in charge of the barns then?"

"Because Rylan is away visiting his family, remember? You're the one who persuaded me to let him go for the week, and now Folco will be returning home to help his family with the farm so we're another body short. It will be a few days before his brother is well enough to cope."

Esmeralda obviously decided not to argue that point. "Did you check on Filbert before you came back?" Esmeralda asked as she poured more tea for Bilbo.

"We did and he's only got a cut on his arm and a few bruises," Bilbo replied.

"You and I will be having a chat tomorrow," Esmeralda promised Bilbo with a frown. "Need I remind you that Frodo is not of age yet?"

Saradoc grinned, crammed the last of his cake into his mouth and stood. "Well, I'll leave Esme to it. I'm off to check all is locked up for the night."

Bilbo appeared blithely unconcerned. "Goodnight Sara."

Frodo chorused meekly, "Goodnight Uncle Saradoc."

Esmeralda topped up everyone's teacup. "And how are you two getting along nowadays? You don't write nearly often enough."

Bilbo added more milk to his cup. "We rub along nicely." He shot Frodo a wink. "I think."

Frodo grinned widely. "I am enjoying Hobbiton very much. And sometimes Bilbo and I go exploring in the Shire. I've been all the way over to the other side of Michel Delving. They've been having trouble with men there too and we met elves." He bit his tongue as soon as he noted Bilbo wince and his aunt's eyes widen.

"Have you, indeed? You do seem to get about a lot, for one so young," Esmeralda replied, somewhat pointedly.

"I have seen it before!" Bilbo announced with a loud snap of his fingers.

Esmeralda rolled her eyes. "Now what is it, Bilbo? Seen what?"

"That six-pointed star. It was smaller but it was worn by a little boy I met in Rivendell. Well now. Fancy that. I had completely forgotten."

Frodo's aunt narrowed her eyes. "Can we leave that story for another day? For now, I want to hear
about this visit with elves."
Bartimus swung their joined hands as he and Daisy strolled toward the wooden bridge. The day had been hot and the air above the small river was slightly cooler, so they paused, to lean upon the wooden rail.

The water was so clear that Bartimus could see small fish, facing upstream as they waited for a shrimp supper to drift their way. On a broad rock shelf overhanging the little river, Periwinkle Proudfoot had hitched her skirts above shapely knees and was dangling her feet in the cool flow. Bartimus felt, rather than saw, her eyes flick his way, before she leaned back, to offer her face to the sun. The action also had the effect of offering her ample bosom, only just covered by her low-cut blouse, for Bartimus' interested inspection.

"It's been a grand day, Barti, and...Hey! You're walkin' out with me!"

"Oh, come on Daisy. I'm a red-blooded lad. You can't blame me for looking, when it's pushed in my face." Bartimus' grin fled as he noted the sparks in his love's eyes.

"Lookin' is it? And what's she got that I haven't, I'd like to know."

Bartimus tried again to make light of it. "Well, her knees are pretty. And you must admit, the rest..." Barty cupped his hands before his chest, leaving Daisy in no doubt what "rest" he was referring to.

Too late, he realised that he had taken the wrong tack.

Before he could protest, Daisy grabbed his wrists and slapped his hands firmly upon her bodice. "And what are these, then? Not big enough for you?"

As soon as her grip loosened, Bartimus snatched back his hands, as though scalded. It wasn't that he had not caressed those breasts before. They'd done their share of kanoodling in quiet corners. But he wasn't used to Daisy being quite so emphatic, and in quite such a public place. Up the lane Daddy Twofoot grinned as he returned to weeding his little patch of front garden. Bartimus felt the blood rush to his face and was actually quite relieved that it wasn't rushing elsewhere. Daisy's breasts felt good, even through the bodice. "They're very nice," was all he could muster in his flustered state.

When Daisy's eyes narrowed he took an involuntary step back. "Nice? Is that all? Nice!" She planted her hands firmly upon her hips. "Mayhap, if nice is all I am to you, you'll find more fun with her!"

Before Bartimus could string together a conciliatory reply, Daisy stormed away, in a flurry of
bouncing curls and flouncing petticoats. He sighed. Rescuing this situation was going to be tricky and best done after Daisy had time to cool down. From her perch on the rock Periwinkle gave him a knowing grin, but he could only offer a scowl in return.

Perhaps a half of beer would help him compose a suitable apology. He turned back to Hobbiton and the prospect of a half pint of beer at the Ivy Bush. One half became two and two became three. By the time three was leading to four, Bartimus was beginning to think that perhaps he was not the one who needed to be apologising. Daisy was being far too sensitive. That lass could fly off the handle at a sneeze.

Bell Gamgee looked up from her mixing, as the front door to Number Three swung open so violently that she feared for its hinges. Her eldest daughter stormed in, flung it closed behind her with a thunderous "bang", then, without a word, marched through to her bedroom, slamming that door too.

Bell sighed, considering the cake batter in her bowl, then shrugged. She had noticed no blood, so any conversation with Daisy would be best left until after the lass had cried out some of her hurt. Bell gave her mixture a few more turns before dolloping it out into the cake tin, smoothing the top, and slipping it into the oven. The empty bowl was filled with cold water and left to soak in the sink before she wiped her hands on her apron and entered the fray.

Daisy's tears had dried and she was sitting, when Bell settled herself upon the edge of the bed.

Daisy's opening salvo was concise, if lacking some detail. "I hate lads."

Bell shrugged. "They can be unloveable at times." There was only one lad who could get the better of her Daisy, but she asked anyway. "Is it all lads yer hatin' or just the one?"

Daisy pouted. "They tell you you're the prettiest lass they've seen, then they go oglin' another."

"Ah. It would be Bartimus yer hatin', then. Who was he oglin'?"

"Periwinkle, bloody, Proudfoot!"

Bell decided to let the language slide, just this once. "She's a bonnie lass," she offered.

"Bonnie! She's got a chest on her that would put a milk cow to shame. I'm surprised she can see her feet."

"That's enough of that kind of talk, my lass. Bein' angry ain't no excuse to be rude. I'll not have such things said in this smial." Bell did not shout, but her tone left no doubt of her earnestness, and Daisy had enough sense to recognise when she had overstepped the mark.

"Sorry, Ma."

Bell gave a small sniff, then settled herself more comfortably. "So, what are ye goin' to do about it? Aside from stewin' yer anger in here."

Daisy stuck her nose in the air. "If I'm not pretty enough for Bartimus Brockbank he can walk out with Periwinkle, and welcome!"

"So, ye'll be lookin' for another lad, then? One who ain't three foot seven, with thick dark curls, chocolate brown eyes and a crackin' set of shoulders?"

As Bell listed Bartimus' attributes, Daisy grew a little uneasy. This was her Ma, after all. "Ma!
You're too old for Bartimus, and you're married!"

Bell grinned. "Daisy, lass, I may be older but I ain't lost the use of my eyes. I can admire a nice cream cake, 'specially when it's waved 'neath my nose, but that don't mean I want to eat it. Lookin' ain't necessarily wantin'."

Daisy subsided into thought and Bell waited, patiently.

"Mayhap I was a bit quick to push him away." A fire kindled in Daisy's eyes. "But that Periwinkle knew what she was doin', flauntin' herself that way."

Bell's lips twitched. "And I suppose ye never did no teasin'. 'cause if ye didn't I'm wonderin' why ye spent so much time feedin' those pigs, every time young Master Frodo came callin'. There was times that poor lad didn't know where to put his eyeballs. Ye were his very own Periwinkle Proudfoot, and don't ye try to deny it."

"I don't know what you mean." All the same, Daisy's eyes twinkled at the memory.

"Daisy Gamgee, I birthed ye and the apple don't fall far from the tree. I may be gettin' on, but I did my fair share of petticoat twitchin' in my day."

Daisy couldn't resist a giggle. "I bet Da didn't know what hit him."

"I knew he were the one for me. It took him a bit longer to work it out, but he got there in the end. Now, I ain't pushed either of ye, but it seems to me that Bartimus and ye could make a good go of a marriage. Beneath all yer vinegar ways, yer a Gamgee, and we're a sensible lot. There's more to Bartimus Brockbank than broad shoulders, too. He knows how to look after family. The heavens know, he's kept Ruby out of trouble more than a few times. I reckon if he can keep her on the straight, he can cope with ye." When Daisy looked as though she would protest, Bell rolled on. "Ye'll keep him on his toes, but as long as ye don't go stompin' on 'em he'll stick by ye. The question is, do ye want him?"

Daisy sighed. "I suppose I do. There ain't no other lad that takes my eye."

"Then it seems to me that one of ye is goin' to have to apologise."

Daisy's lips thinned. "Well, it ain't gonna be me."

Bell threw up her hands and stood. "I give up. Ye and Bartimus will have to sort it out."

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"Evenin' Mister Bilbo, Master Frodo. What can I get you?" Borden Brewer wiped down the already-spotless bar of the Ivy Bush Tavern, as Bilbo fished in his pocket, and laid some coppers down.

"A half of your best for me, and a half of cider for Frodo, if you please, Borden." As Borden filled tankards Bilbo turned to survey the customers in the smoke laden gloom. "How's business today?"

Borden set down a pint of beer and turned back to fill Frodo's tankard. "It's been quiet, although young Bartimus over there has been raisin' my profits steadily this past two hours. I'm thinkin' of sendin' him home before I have to get someone to roll him there." He set the filled tankard before Frodo and leaned in as he swept up the coins. "Don't suppose you'd care to have a word with him, would you? Him bein' a friend of yours and all. Only I reckon that face he's pullin' is scarin' off some of my customers." He drew back with a wink and Bilbo gave his nephew a gentle nudge toward the corner.
"Hello Barti. How long have you been here?" Frodo offered a bright smile as he sat.

Bartimus lifted slightly bloodshot eyes to squint at the clock above the bar. Frodo wondered whether the squint was caused by the blue haze of pipeweed smoke, hanging just beneath the rafters, or Bartimus' own haze of alcohol fumes. "'Bout two hours," came his friend's slightly slurred reply.

Frodo took a deep swallow of his cider as he considered his next question. "It's not like you to be out so late. Is someone else seeing to the milking tonight?"

Bartimus shrugged, not bothering to raise his morose gaze from his tankard. "S'pose so."

About to take another swig of his drink, Frodo set it down. The conversation was not likely to become any better if both sides were inebriated. He leaned in, "Is something wrong, Barti?"

"Lasses," his friend announced, in the lugubrious tones only someone deep in his cups can muster. "They want you to look at 'em, and when you do, the others get all huffy."

"Does the lass, erm, lasses, have a name?" his friend asked, already anticipating the reply.

"Daisy, no, Periwinkle, no, Daisy. Oh, shit." Bartimus took another swig of ale.

Frodo was nonplussed. Daisy, he had anticipated, but how did Periwinkle figure in this? Unbidden, an image of Periwinkle Proudfoot's ample charms popped into his mind and Frodo took that mouthful of cider after all. Its crisp bite drew him back to the here and now. "Have Daisy and Periwinkle had some kind of falling out? Peri always seems such an" he swallowed the word, 'obliging', "a nice lass."

If Bartimus noticed that his friend did not make the same observation about Daisy, he made no comment. "Probably. Knowin' Daisy, she'll likely try to black her eye, if she don't black mine. Maybe she'll black both our eyes ... eyeses?" The words echoed mournfully around Bartimus' almost empty tankard as he took another swig.

Light began to dawn, bringing with it a sense of surprise. "You and Periwinkle? Did Daisy catch you and Periwinkle...?" Frodo waved his hand, not sure how far 'Bartimus-and-Periwinkle' went.

Bartimus nodded. "Periwinkle was there, and a lad can't help it, and Daisy saw me, and she put my hands on her, and she was all soft, and then she was cross. You know?"

Frodo wasn't altogether sure he did know. "Can't help what, Barti?"

"You've seen her. All the lads look. What red blooded lad wouldn't?"

"I've seen both Daisy and Periwinkle. Which one were you looking at?"

"Periwinkle." Bartimus dropped his head into his hands.

"Right. And how does Daisy come into it?" Frodo asked, although he suspected he now knew.

"Daisy was with me." Bartimus raised his head, his tone pleading as he added. "I was only lookin', Frodo. A lad can't help lookin' when the view is just there."

Whilst Frodo could not condone, he was well aware of Periwinkle Proudfoot's flirtatious ways. Ways that would put even Bartimus' sister, Ruby, to shame. He had heard many a matron pronounce that Periwinkle was heading toward a hasty wedding one day. Daisy Gamgee was not an ugly lass, by any means, but he had to admit that she had not Periwinkle's assets. "Only looking? So what did
you put your hands on?"

"Daisy."

Frodo blinked. "You looked at Periwinkle, and put your hands on Daisy? I can see how that may make Daisy angry."

Bartimus arranged his face into a frown. It took some time, for the large quantity of alcohol he had consumed was beginning to numb his facial muscles. "It wasn't debilerate...debrilitate..."

"Deliberate?" Frodo supplied, helpfully.

"Yes. That. Daisy put my hands there." Bartimus cupped both hands upon his friend's flat chest, then let them drop sullenly, back onto the table. "She's a nice handful, you know."

Frodo took a hasty swallow of his cider. There had been a time, a few years ago, when he had been granted a glimpse of that, 'nice handful'. His younger self had been both embarrassed and aroused. Nowadays, Daisy was like a sister to him and the sudden resurgence of the memory only made him uncomfortable. "Then what happened?"

"I said they were nice and she said that wasn't good enough. Then she ran off." Bartimus lifted his tankard, scowling when he realised it was empty. "More, sort of, swished. She wore a lot of petticoats, as I recall." He began to fish in his pockets, obviously searching for more coins, and Frodo laid a hand upon his arm.

"Don't you think you've had enough ale, Barti? Your Da will be wondering where you are by now. Let's, you and I, get some fresh air and I'll walk you home. I'm sure Daisy will come around, when she's had time to cool down."

"D'you think? My Daisy's got a temper on her." Bartimus set his jaw. "Well, if she thinks I'm goin' to 'pologise, she's got another thing comin'."

Were he honest, Frodo was no more sure of Daisy cooling down than Bartimus was, but he decided to keep that to himself for now, taking some comfort in the thought that his friend still considered her "my" Daisy. The important thing was to ensure that Bartimus did not land in a ditch on the way home. He stood, slipping a hand beneath Bartimus' elbow to lever him to his feet. "Come on, Barti. It will all seem clearer in the morning."

Frodo added that comment to his list of 'things not to be sure of'.

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Frodo looked up from his book when he heard the slam of a garden gate, in time to see Daisy Gamgee, basket over her arm, stroll down the lane toward the village. Marking his page, he hoped Bell Gamgee had given her daughter a long shopping list.

Marigold answered the door, smiling brightly as she stepped back to admit him to Number Three's kitchen. Bell Gamgee looked up from spreading jam on the bottom layer of a butter yellow cake. "Hello young sir. Marigold, lass, fetch the lemonade and pour a cup for Master Baggins. Sit yerself down. I hope ye don't mind me finishin' this." Bell waved at the cake.

Frodo took as seat upon one of the benches either side of the long table, and smiled. "I saw Daisy leaving. Does she have a lot of errands to run?" He almost winced at his own pointed statement and Bell obviously had no difficulty catching his meaning.
"That has me thinkin'. There's a lot on that shoppin' list for one lass to carry. Marigold, take up that other basket and run after yer sister. Ye can give her a hand in the carryin'.

Marigold frowned, but laid a cup before Frodo before grabbing up a basket and leaving, throwing a, "Bye, Master Baggins," over her shoulder. The door was closed before Frodo could reply.

Bell nudged the honey pot toward him. Her lemonade was like her tea ... it could stand up for itself. "She's been wantin' out all mornin'. Right, Master Frodo, now everyone's out of the way, what's troublin' ye?"

"Thank you." Frodo added a good dollop of honey to his mug. "Nothing. At least, the trouble is only borrowed. Have you noticed anything different about Daisy today?"

Bell began to spread butter-cream atop the jam. "Different?" She grinned. "I wouldn't say Daisy's mood is different. She's always been a lass of ups and downs. But she's down at the present, I'll grant ye."

"Has she said why?"

Bell gave the filling one last swirl with her knife before setting the top in place and pressing it down lightly. "She has," was her bald reply as she began to spread more butter-cream on the top layer. Bell Gamgee was nothing if not loyal. Frodo would wheedle no confidences from her.

He sighed, not wishing to give away his own confidences, but unable to determine how this matter was to be settled without somebody giving way, somewhere. "Bartimus has told me of his problem with Periwinkle Proudfoot and Daisy. I walked him home from the Ivy Bush last night."

Bell scraped the last of the icing onto the top of the cake and slid basin and spoon toward Frodo. He was no bairn, but what growing lad would refuse such gooey sweetness? Frodo grinned as he accepted, running his finger around the spoon and sucking it clean.

"Daisy tells me she caught Bartimus giving the eye to Periwinkle." Bell sniffed before she continued, "She seems to think he should go about blindfolded. I've tried talkin' to her, but she's got her mind made up that she'll have nothin' more to do with him."

"Do you think she's right? I know Bartimus is heartbroken and I don't believe he intended to act on any look."

Bell shrugged as she lifted the extravagant cake onto a plate. "You may be right, but right or wrong, Daisy's got her mind set. At present I'm not even sure she'll take him back, even if he was the one to say sorry."

Frodo grimaced. "Bartimus was in no mood to say sorry last night. Although once he's over the hangover, he may be more inclined."

Bell sat down. "I'm thinkin' Bartimus is more likely to come around than our Daisy. He's besotted with her, may the heavens help him."

"Underneath her bluster, I think Daisy loves him too," Frodo offered before swiping the last scrap of icing from the bowl.

"She does that, but she's also daft enough to cut off her nose, just to spite her face."

Frodo sighed. "What should we do?"
Bell smiled at the tween, reaching across to pat his hand. "Let's just give it some time. 'Tis early days, yet, and things have a way of settlin' themselves with a little time." She nodded to the recently iced cake. "Mayhap a nice piece of cake after supper will sweeten Daisy's temper at least."

Marigold joined her sister at the bridge and the two strolled into the market square together. Daisy pulled out her list. "You go to the baker's. Ma wants three pound of bakin' flour." She handed over some coins to a beaming Marigold, holding it back for a moment as she added, "And don't go buyin' yourself a biscuit with the change. Ma knows how much the flour costs." Marigold's face dropped, her steps a little heavier as she crossed the busy square toward Olin Baker's establishment. Perhaps she would be able to charm a tiny biscuit from Mistress Baker. Her smile had worked in the past, although nowadays it was not as effective as it had been when she was a wee, gap toothed, faunt.

Daisy made her way to the fish stand. Hobbits usually caught their own fish, if they needed it, but Pa had expressed a fancy for some smoked and there was only one smokehouse in the West Farthing. She was just slipping the small package into her basket, and handing over her coin when she became aware of another figure at her side.

"Hello, Daisy." Periwinkle Proudfoot gave a smile, so sweet that Daisy later swore she could feel her teeth rotting in her head.

Not to be outdone, Daisy responded with an aloof smile that could have frozen Bywater Pond solid. "Good day to you, Periwinkle. She glanced pointedly at the smaller lass' overflowing bodice. "Careful you don't lean too far over, now. You don't want to go gettin' fish scales on that ... bodice."

Periwinkle's eyes narrowed but her voice remained as sweet as honey, and several passers-by edged a little closer. Hobbiton was a small place and most were already aware of the rift between Daisy Gamgee and Bartimus Brockbank, along with its cause. "Why thank ye, Daisy. Fancy ye thinkin' of my new frock. I love how ye've freshened up yours, by-the-by. Is that band around the hem a new fashion from Michel Delvin'?"

Daisy was wearing one of her older frocks, because Ma insisted that, even with an apron, dresses could be spoiled when working in the house. The band of yellow fabric was actually from one of Daisy's older frocks and had been added in her last growing spurt, when her blue skirt had become too short for decency. She was saved from coming up with a sharp retort by the fishmonger. "Yer change, Miss Gamgee."

"Thank you." Daisy turned from the stand, deciding that escape was a better plan. Ma wanted some eggs. To her annoyance, Periwinkle fell into step at her side, acting for all the world as though they were bosom pals. Daisy ignored the uncharitable thought that Periwinkle certainly had more than enough bosom to go around. "Were you wantin' somethin', Periwinkle?"

"Not really. I was just wonderin' if ye'd seen Bartimus today. Only Orton Sandyman said he saw him comin' out the Ivy Bush last night. Said Master Baggins was helpin' him along and Bartimus seemed ... unwell." Daisy could feel Periwinkle's sly glance.

"No. I ain't seen him today, and Orton Sandyman needs to stop spreadin' gossip." Daisy sniffed loudly, turning suddenly aside toward the butcher's shop, in an attempt to shake her off.

Periwinkle stuck like a cocklebur. "Oh, I don't think 'tis gossip. Leastwise, is it gossip if 'tis true?"

Daisy sighed, fed up with this game. She stopped, dead, forcing Periwinkle to backtrack a step. "Look, Periwinkle, if you fancy Bartimus, you get on with it. He don't belong to me, any more than I to him. Now, I've got shoppin' to do and I don't have time to be gossipin' with you." She spun about, in a swirl of party-coloured skirt, and made off to the baker's to collect her sister.
She did not see Periwinkle's slow smile.

Across the square, Bartimus Brockbank was weaving gingerly through the market crowds. Even with his broad-brimmed hat, the sun was far too bright on his overly-sensitive eyes. Pa had shown no sympathy for his delicate condition, dragging him out of bed at dawn to do the milking. Bartimus had to concede that it was only fair, as Ruby had stepped in for him the previous evening. His brother, Nedes, had been no kinder, waving a fat bacon sandwich under his brother's nose and laughing when Bartimus bolted for the privy. At least, once he had done the milking, his stomach was able to deal with the small bowl of honey-sweetened porridge that Ruby set in front of him. Now he was trawling the market, in hopes of seeing Daisy. Somebody needed to make an apology, and he knew Daisy well enough to know it probably wouldn't be her ... even if, in his opinion, she was the one in the wrong.

"Hello, Bartimus."

He glanced down, to lock eyes with a smiling Periwinkle Proudfoot. He determinedly did not let his gaze slide lower. "Hello, Periwinkle. What brings you to market?"

"Oh, I just fancied a walk, and Ma wanted some ribbons for the bodice lacin's of my new frock." Talk of lacings and bodices drew Bartimus' gaze inexorably southward, as Periwinkle knew it would, and she took a deep breath, placing her current ribbon laces under considerable strain.

Once more, Bartimus ruthlessly dragged his gaze northward, to find Periwinkle smiling up at him from beneath fluttering lashes. Then, a flash of colour in the distance, caught his eye and he saw Daisy across the square. At that very moment she looked up, obviously seeing him. Bartimus was a tall lad with an impressive set of shoulders and a nice, round tummy, so it was difficult to miss him, even in a crowd. A smile had begun to quirk Periwinkle's lips then died, as she turned to see what had drawn Bartimus' attention.

Bartimus watched, helplessly, as Daisy obviously spied Periwinkle and her mouth took a downturn, eyes narrowing. The hand Bartimus had begun to raise in a friendly wave, froze when Daisy spun about, grabbing her protesting younger sister's arm to drag her toward the bridge and home.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Several matrons scowled in his direction but Bartimus ignored them, as he abandoned Periwinkle and turned back for home. Pa would have to make do without his pipe weed this evening.

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"Morning, Bell. What brings you to my door?" Bilbo motioned her into Bag End's sunny kitchen.

"I was wonderin' if ye or Master Frodo had seen Bartimus Brockbank today?"

Bilbo pulled out a chair and Bell settled herself. "Not for a couple of days, now. Although I understand that he intends to call in here for Frodo, at lunch time. They're going for a half at the Ivy Bush." He set a glass of lemonade before his guest. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Bell took an appreciative sip. "Ye'll have heard about Daisy and Bartimus havin' a tiff?"

Bilbo took a seat opposite and grinned. "Frodo told me although, in truth, I had already heard it from half the village. I believe Bartimus is taking it rather hard. That's why Frodo has offered to take the lad out."

"No doubt. I heard tell Bartimus was a bit too deep in his cups the other day. He'll not win Daisy's favour that way and 'tis to be hoped Master Frodo can help temper his drinkin' in future."
"I think that is his intention. He's hoping to coax his friend into a walk, so that they can have a chat. We both hate to see Bartimus and Daisy parted. They seemed made for each other."

Bell nodded. "Bartimus is the only lad strong enough to rein in our Daisy. She's too quick to take flight and he keeps her feet on the ground. Then again, he's needed to be too responsible since his ma died, and Daisy's just the lass to give him a few fireworks."

"She'll do that. I have no doubt. You don't need to convince me, Bell. You need to convince them." Bilbo grinned. "And I can't be the only one who says that Daisy reminds me of a young and stubborn Hamfast Gamgee."

"I remember. And I reckon she's got as much of me in her as she has her Da. It took me months to convince him I were the one for him. I think Daisy is willin' to let go her temper, if she's put in Bartimus' way but what do ye think of Bartimus?"

"From what I've heard, Bartimus only wants the opportunity to say sorry." He shrugged. "But every time he tries to approach Daisy she turns tail."

Bell snorted. "My Daisy ain't never turned tail in her life, but I'll grant ye, she's been avoidin' him. I reckon if they would just come face to face they'd make up."

"I take it that is the reason for your visit. And here was I, hoping you just enjoyed my company."

Bilbo waggled his brows and Bell chuckled.

"Bilbo Baggins, yer a good enough fella, fer a gentlehobbit, but yer company's only good fer a while. Once ye start talkin' about elves and history and stuff I don't understand a word yer sayin'."

Bilbo thumped a fist to his chest, with a dramatic roll of his eyes. "Bell Gamgee, you cut me to the quick." Then he gave a good natured chuckle. "Come on, then. Out with it. What can we do to reunite these star-crossed lovers?"

"There ye go again. What's stars got to do with it? No. Don't tell me. I catch yer meanin'. We need to put one in the way of the other and leave 'em be. Can ye speak with Master Frodo? Mayhap we can get Bartimus to meet up with Daisy on the lane, by accident, as it were."

Bilbo cracked a broad grin as he rubbed his hands. "I do believe that can be arranged."

-Daisy studied her reflection in the mirror. A present from Da a few years ago, it was just large enough to check lips and ringlets. Mirrors were expensive and this had been purchased at second hand, from Widow Grub, who asserted that she was too old to have need of it any more. Now, Daisy surveyed her face within the foxed borders of its surface. She supposed it wasn't a bad face. She had a good, strong jaw, and fine apple cheeks. Her mouth was a little too wide and she wished she had Marigold's green eyes. Hazel eyes were just so common in her opinion. With a glance at the closed door, Daisy stood on tiptoe and tilted the mirror as far as she could, in order to continue her inventory.

Her bodice laces were not yet tied and she tucked a hand either side of her breasts, squeezing until she had produced a cleavage, sighing when she let go and they bounced apart again. Inspiration struck and she rummaged around in the top drawer until she found a pair of fat woollen mittens. Stuffing one beneath each breast, she drew her laces closed and turned to the side to assess the result.

That's when she saw her sister, standing in the doorway. Before she could make a grab for her,
Marigold, giggling wildly, darted from their shared room. "Ma ... Ma! Our Daisy's playing with her titties and they're all swollen!"

Pausing only long enough to yank out the mittens, Daisy chased her sister into the kitchen. There she came to a sudden halt when she met her mother's gaze across the table. Bell Gamgee pursed her lips before setting her attention upon her youngest. "Marigold Gamgee, the slop bucket be yonder. Go feed the sow."

Marigold frowned in confusion. "But Ma!"

Ma's brows drew together. "And while yer feedin' the sow, ye can think on the rights and wrongs of tryin' to get other folk into trouble."

Hanging her head, Marigold had the presence of mind to murmur, "Sorry, Daisy," as she lifted the pail and exited the back door. She didn't wait to hear if Daisy would accept her apology, which was just as well, because Daisy was still simmering.

"Sit down, Daisy." Bell's tone left no room for argument, but Daisy was confused when a cup of milk and a biscuit were set before her. Bell Gamgee sat down opposite, with a cup of strong tea. "Now, lass. Don't ye think this has gone on long enough?"

Daisy squirmed, taking a sip of milk and a bite of the ginger biscuit as she considered her reply. The best she could come up with was, "What do you mean?"

"I mean the fuss between ye and Bartimus. Heavens, lass. He were only lookin'." She nodded to Daisy's now loose bodice and the lass hurriedly yanked the laces closed. "There's more to love than looks. Looks may start bairns but they don't raise 'em."

"Tell that to Bartimus Brockbank," Daisy replied, her tone downgraded from angry to sullen.

"Now ye can just stop that, my lass. I've seen yer Da take a second look at a bonnie pair of knees in his time."

"That's different," Daisy announced with a scandalised flush of colour. "You've been married for years."

Bell Gamgee rolled her eyes. "What's the length of a marriage to do with it? The important thing is that, even though yer Da's belly is broader than his shoulders nowadays, and his knees creak in the cold, it's his bed I climb into every night. And, think on this, lass...what does it say of his love for me that he looks at another set of bonnie knees, but he prefers my company of a cold night?"

Daisy squirmed a little under the weight of her mother's words. "They was talkin' together in the market the other mornin'. I saw 'em. She was grinnin' up at him like a cat that's got the cream and he didn't look too upset about it."

"We live in the same village, lass. Would ye have Bartimus scowl at the lass every time she crosses his path?"

Her reply was a muttered, "And why not?"

Bell had her daughter on the run so she continued to push. "Daisy Gamgee, what makes ye think yer any less bonnie than Periwinkle Proudfoot?"

Daisy looked down pointedly at her bodice, pausing to tie a bow in the laces.
Her mother just waved a hand. "Bless ye. Is that all? Ye just wait. When Periwinkle has had a couple of bairns them breasts ye so admire, will droop so low she'll be able to tuck 'em into her apron waistband." Her words surprised a smile from Daisy and Bell nodded. "There's but one conversation can be had with a pair of breasts and, young as ye are, it still won't take ye long to realise that the same talk can get borin'. Tis the heart and head as keeps a marriage goin', not the body. Bodies get worse with age, but minds get better, and love grows." Bell glanced out of the front window and fished in her pocket, drawing out some coppers with a sudden change of topic. "Now run down to market. Ye forgot the eggs yesterday."

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Bilbo looked up from his book as the doorbell tinkled and Frodo sent a speaking glance his way as he set aside his own book and jumped up to answer.

"Hello Barti. I'm running a little late, I'm afraid. Would you mind coming through to the kitchen? I have some scones that need another ten minutes in the oven." He steered his friend down the hall. "I dare not leave them to Bilbo. He's reading and tends to forget, until he sees the smoke." Frodo hoped that his friend did not hear the soft snort issuing from the parlour.

Barti allowed himself to be led, sitting at the kitchen table and sniffing appreciatively at the sweet odours coming from the oven. "I hope you're going to let me have one of those."

Laughing, Frodo offered a plate of biscuits. "They'll be too hot for eating, but we made these this morning."

Bartimus helped himself to two and Frodo grinned as he took one himself and sat down opposite. "Have you seen Daisy today?"

Lowering his brows, Bartimus took a large bite out of his biscuit and chewed before replying. "No." He sighed. "I don't know what to do, Frodo. I'm not interested in Periwinkle Proudfoot. I'm really not. Daisy's the one for me."

"Then why did you pay attention to Periwinkle?"

"Damn it, Frodo! I didn't 'pay attention'. Periwinkle was just there. I only glanced. It wasn't as if I leapt off the bridge and grabbed her. I would never do that, even if I hadn't got Daisy standing next to me."

The outburst left him feeling deflated and he set down the biscuits, suddenly uninterested in food. "I swear Periwinkle Proudfoot did it on purpose. Did I tell you she shoved herself in front of me at market?"

"Yes. I'm afraid she does seem to like causing mischief. Bilbo tells me her parents argue a lot, and she's been more or less left to raise herself. I feel sad for her."

Bartimus was not feeling so generous of nature. His own sister had a reputation as a bit of a flirt, but she was a good and kind lass at heart, and never made eyes at lads who were already taken. "Well, you feel sorry if you must. I can't find it in me."

Frodo stood to open the oven door. Satisfied, he grabbed a towel and lifted out a tray of golden, steaming, scones and set it on the table. With fingertips and much hissing, the delicacies were picked and all but thrown onto a wire cooling tray.

"Well, Barti. I think you're going to have to be more careful in future. Keep your eyes and thoughts on the prize."

"If there is a future. How am I ever going to get Daisy back?"
Clapping him on the back, Frodo smiled. "I think you will have to eat humble pie first. Come on. Let's go and have that drink. Maybe inspiration will strike on the way."

Frodo waited until they were right outside the gate to Number Three before coming to a sudden halt, patting his breeches pockets. "Bother!"

Bartimus grinned. "What is it? Forgot your hanky? I hear it's a Baggins trait."

Frodo rolled his eyes. "Very funny. No. I've forgotten my money."

"That's alright. We're only having a half. I can stand you to that and you can pay me back next time."

"No. That won't do. I promised to take you for the drink, so I should be the one to pay. Just wait here and I'll run back. It won't take me a minute." Before Bartimus could protest further, Frodo darted back up the lane.

That's when Bartimus realised where he was standing. He turned his back to the gate, pretending to study the valley below, but he was all too keenly aware of the sound of the door opening behind him. Bare hobbit feet made little sound but the latch on the gate was clear enough. There was a pause, during which Bartimus expected to see Marigold or Sam trot past him and down the lane. Instead, there was a long silence, and he began to feel a strange tingling between his shoulders.

"Hello, Barti." The voice held none of its usual hauteur.

Bartimus turned slowly, to see Daisy Gamgee standing, with a basket over her arm but one hand upon the gate, as though poised to flee back into the smial. He had to swallow before replying.

"Hello Daisy. How are you?"

He had expected a glib reply but Daisy's chin wobbled as she answered, "Miserable."

"Me too."

Now, both spoke at the same time. "I'm sorry."

Bartimus jumped in. "No. I'm the one who should be sorry. Periwinkle don't have anything I want, and I'm sorry I ogled her."

Some of the fire returned to Daisy's eyes. "Don't you go spoilin' my apology, Bartimus Brockbank! I was too quick to shout at you and I'm sorry. I know you don't want that feather-brained chit."

"I don't. I want you, Daisy Gamgee, and I always will, temper and all. I want to wed you."

Daisy's eyes widened and at first he thought that the comment about temper was a step too far.

Then, "Wed? Oh, yes please!"

Before he knew what was happening, Bartimus found her arms clamped about his neck and Daisy's lips locked firmly upon his. After the initial shock of being bashed on the back by a shopping basket, Bartimus got into the spirit of it, grabbing her close and letting his lips respond in kind as he savoured the feel of Daisy's soft curves plastered against his front.

Bell Gamgee stepped back from the window with a nod, before turning back to her mending. Frodo watched from Bag End's front door, then stepped back inside with a grin, to discover Bilbo waiting in the parlour doorway. "Did it work?"

"Do you fancy a half at the Ivy Bush, Bilbo? It seems Daisy Gamgee has stolen my drinking
partner."
La-di-da Lobelia and Potty Petunia

Chapter Summary

We all have that one aunt. Imagine what it's like for hobbits.

Chapter Notes

With thanks to FallenLeaves271 for the beta on this chapter

It was one of summer's warmer days and, returning from a pleasant stroll about the village, Frodo decided he had earned a half in the Ivy Bush. Glancing through the open stable doors he was surprised to see Doctor Brockleby, trying to hitch his cart to a fidgety pony.

"Hello Doctor Brockleby. You look frazzled. Can I help?"

The freely perspiring Bill Brockleby gusted out a huge sigh. "Yes, please. If you could just thread the shafts, then hold her nose while I attach the harness. Bella here loves to tax my patience when she knows I'm working alone."

Frodo helped him roll the cart into place, then moved forward to stroke Bella's velvet nose while Bill fiddled with the necessary straps and buckles. The perverse little pony immediately stilled. "Is someone very sick?"

Bill Brockleby nodded as he checked the contents of various boxes and bags always stored in the back of the cart. "Yes. Ackley Sandyman has had one of his spells."

"Ted's father? I hope he recovers. How old is Ackley now?"

Bill climbed onto the padded bench and took up the reins. "A hundred, if he's a day."

"He's almost as old as Bilbo."

"Yes. And you'll forgive me, but if I don't get going he may not make it much older." He snapped the reins and Frodo stepped aside as Doctor Brockleby clicked his pony out of the stable yard and into a ground-eating trot.

The tap room was quiet, for it was only midday and there was no market. "Mornin' Master Frodo. What can I do for you? Have you letters for the post? Only Whit is on his rounds already. I had to leave poor Doctor Brockleby to hitch up his own cart." Borden Brewer gave the already spotless bar a swipe with his ever-present cloth.

"Just a half of cider, if you please, Mister Brewer. I saw the doctor on my way in and gave him a hand, although, in truth, he had most of it done by the time I arrived."

Borden set a mug before Frodo, scooping up the pennies. "Aye. It's old Ackley. I hate to speak ill of anyone, but it's time he let go. I reckon he's only hanging on so he can make life hell for poor
Betony.

Frodo decided not to comment, only raising his mug in salute, before taking a long swallow and savouring the cider's cool progress from mouth to stomach. Birky Bracegirdle had no such qualms about commenting, however, as he piped up from a corner table. "Mean old bugger he is and always was. He only tumbled down them stairs in the mill 'cause he were drunk as a fiddler." He snorted into his mug. "And wasn't it handy that Ted found the love of his life just after the accident? Poor Betony didn't know what she were gettin' into, not that there weren't enough of us tryin' to warn her."

Borden nodded. "I'll never know what she saw in him."

"Oh, he can sweet talk when he wants to. Mind you, I reckon he were talkin' with more than his face, if ye take my meanin'." Both Borden and Birky smirked and Frodo buried his face in his cider pot.

Borden shook his head. "I think she was hoping to get a place of her own. It can't have been easy living with five sisters."

Frodo tried to steer the conversation aside. "How is Mrs Brewer these days?"

Borden had been married for thirty years and still his gaze took on a softness when speaking of his wife. "Maisy's as right as ninepence, thank you. I'll tell her you were asking. She's in the brew-house."

"No she's not." A smiling Maisy came in from the kitchen, wiping hands on her all-enveloping apron. "Hello there, Master Frodo, Birky." She leaned in to give her husband a peck on the cheek, receiving a glowing smile in return.

"How's Mister Baggins nowadays? I haven't seen him in here for a while. I hope he's not poorly."

"No, Maisy. He received a new book last week and he's deep in translation." Frodo glanced about and leaned closer. "And I think Aunt Lobelia wants to speak to him about something, so he's been keeping a low profile."

Maisy's smile turned into a grin. "I can understand that, well enough. I wouldn't want to talk to her neither. That family would try the patience of the mildest soul."

Frodo swallowed the last of his cider. "And Bilbo is certainly not that." Offering a bright, "Good day," to all, he wondered back out into the sunshine.

A couple of hours later a loud and very persistent banging on the front door had Bilbo trotting from the parlour to answer. It was usually his habit to check, through the window, to see who was calling before answering, but the racket had him so flustered that he just flung the door wide, prepared to berate whoever was damaging his paintwork. The words died in his throat as he beheld Lobelia Sackville-Baggins.

"And about time too! In most civilised circles it is not considered polite to keep people knocking at your door, Bilbo Baggins." She lowered her umbrella.

Taking a moment to recover his wits, Bilbo made a point of scrutinising the green paintwork of his door before replying. "And in most civilised circles it is considered polite to ring the bell, when one is provided, rather than attacking the paintwork with the handle of one's umbrella." He folded his arms, standing square in the middle of the opening, so that Lobelia would be forced to push him out of the way if she wished to gain entrance.
If Lobelia was in any way chastened by Bilbo's reply, she made no outward show of it. "I refuse to ring that ridiculous bell."

Bilbo turned to study it, bushy brows raised. "I see nothing wrong with it. It is very well executed." Indeed it was. Poured from brass and kept well polished by Frodo once a week, it was a long, sinuous dragon, holding a bell within its sharp front claws.

Lobelia sniffed. "It is also considered polite to invite your visitors in for a cup of tea."

Bilbo conceded her point, sweeping wide his arm and stepping aside so that she could enter the cool hallway. "Please come into the parlour, Lobelia." Just as she was passing he called out, very loudly, and directly into her ear, "Frodo, would you fetch us some tea?" He bit back a grin as Lobelia flinched.

Frodo, who had ducked back into the kitchen as soon as he heard his aunt's voice, called back, "Yes, Uncle."

Lobelia preceded Bilbo into the well appointed parlour, selected the most comfortable armchair and took some time settling in, smoothing down her fine green skirts and hooking her umbrella upon the chair arm. Feeling somewhat irked, because that was traditionally his chair, Bilbo took the one opposite and waited. Finally satisfied that she had eliminated all creases, Lobelia looked up. "I have called upon a matter of some importance."

"Your matters always are, Lobelia." He added, under his breath, "To you."

Lobelia's eyes narrowed but she pressed on. "Of some importance. Now that Lotho has come of age..."

"Did he have a nice party?" Bilbo interrupted. "Last year wasn't it? I am so sorry that Frodo and I could not attend." In truth, they had not been invited, which was considered the height of bad manners, and he enjoyed watching Lobelia literally squirm in her seat. It gave him some pleasure to imagine the creases she was creating in her skirt by doing so.

She recovered well, however. "It was a small affair. Unlike some, Otho and I do not hold with too much ostentation." As an obvious dig at the 'ostentation' of his own parties, Bilbo could only hold back a grin, for Otho had a reputation for being rather parsimonious when it came to entertaining.

The trembling rattle of crockery heralded the arrival of Frodo, with a tray that he set upon the low table between them. Bilbo frowned, for Frodo was not one to falter when carrying the largest of trays, then he noted the pinched lips, the shaking of the lad's shoulders, and it became clear that he had been listening to the exchange from the hallway. Frodo turned tail before Bilbo could even say, "Thank you," and ran for the sanctuary of the kitchen, from whence Bilbo faintly discerned the sound of laughter.

As he poured tea, Bilbo could not blame the lad. Even if one disregarded the acerbic exchange, Lobelia was exhibiting her usual 'un-ostentatious' sartorial flair today. Whilst her skirts were always elegant enough, Lobelia had an unfortunate love of extravagant headgear. Upon her head squatted a huge hat, dressed with yellow and blue flowers, and the most enormous yellow bow it had ever been Bilbo's misfortune to behold. The hat wobbled precariously with each bob or tilt of her head, setting flowers and bow dancing, as though caught in a perpetual high wind. Bilbo supposed that the confection was held in place solely by Lobelia's not inconsiderable will and, for one wild moment, he considered testing that theory by trying to knock it off her head. Instead, he asked, "Sugar?"

"Four."
"Of course." He added the requisite amount and handed over the cup and saucer, noting as he did so that Frodo had made his own feelings known, by setting out only the second best china. Lobelia obviously noticed too, for she sniffed loudly before sticking out her pinky finger and taking a delicate sip. Bilbo sampled his own, relieved to discover that his nephew had at least used the best tea. "So, what is this very important matter?"

"Lotho."

Bilbo offered a plate of biscuits. Frodo had chosen carefully again for, although fresh baked this morning, he had apparently sought out the most malformed of the batch. With a frown, Lobelia selected one that looked rather like a squashed oliphaunt. To his eyes, Bilbo's looked like nothing other than Lobelia's hat, and he took great pleasure in biting off its 'bow'.

When Lobelia showed no signs of expanding upon her statement he tried again. Whilst Lotho had his faults, Bilbo had heard no rumours about any bad behaviour. Still, anything was possible. He, of all hobbits, was well aware of that. "Is Lotho in some kind of trouble?"

Lobelia's eyes widened and the flowers upon her hat began to tremble rather alarmingly. Bilbo was reminded of a kettle coming to the boil and half expected her millinery confection to explode straight up, and bounce off the parlour ceiling. "Trouble! Lotho has always been the most respectable of hobbits. He was raised a gentlehobbit and, unlike your own nephew, does not associate with the kind of riff-raff that would lead him into any kind of mischief."

By now, Bilbo was feeling quite exasperated and, almost of its own volition, his hand strayed to the fine chain running into his breeches pocket. Gritting his teeth, he resisted the temptation to don his magic ring but, oh, it was a tussle. Instead he gusted out a sigh, his patience worn thin. "Then what is it that you want, Lobelia? For goodness sake, come to the point!"

"Well, I must say! Clearly, your manners are not improving with age." Her eyes narrowed again, in a piercing gaze that would have done credit to Elrond of Rivendell, and she seemed to be counting Bilbo's every wrinkle and grey hair. "Then again, what can we expect from you." Lobelia took another bite of biscuit, chewing deliberately before continuing. "Otho and I have decided that Lotho is ready to take over management of our finances. It will be good practice for when we are no longer there to guide him. Consequently, we would like him to receive some proper training."

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Bilbo frowned. "Otho has always managed quite well, surely he could teach his own son? And I fear I do not have the time to take on another pupil." The prospect of teaching Lotho did not appeal to Bilbo at all. He was in the process of showing Frodo how to manage the household accounts, but that lad was a joy to teach, absorbing knowledge like a sponge. He had no such expectations of the sullen Lotho Sackville-Baggins.

"You. Good gracious, Bilbo. I would not trust you to teach my son anything...unless it be how to spin a tall tale."

Bilbo was so relieved, that he did not even take offence at her comment. "Then what do you want from me?"

"Your dear departed Mama was a Took. I was wondering if someone at Great Smials would be willing to foster Lotho for a year." Her voice took on all the innocent guile of a snake about to strike. "Perhaps someone close to the Thain?"

The gleam in Lobelia's eyes revealed all. To have her son fostered by the Thain's family would be a real feather in her cap...not that it needed any. (Bilbo seriously doubted there was any room among the flowers.) As the son of Belladonna Took who, in her turn, was a daughter of The Old Took,
Bilbo would be within his rights to claim such a boon. Was he sure he wished to put his very good relationship with the Thain in jeopardy however? "I was under the impression that you and Otho only had a few properties to manage, and a piece of grazing land. Surely that does not require any detailed training. I know that Otho learned all his accounting skills from his father, as did I."

Lobelia puckered her lips so tightly that they would have looked more appropriate at the other end of her digestive tract. "Well, if you are unwilling to assist your own family I will, of course, understand." She set down cup and saucer. "It has ever been your nature to hold close your good fortune."

Bilbo gave an inward sigh. As far as he was concerned he had earned any good fortune that had come his way and, despite Lobelia's assertion, had given away a great deal of it. "Of course, I will always assist my family where I am able. I shall write to Ferumbras directly, although I cannot anticipate his response. You must know that many folk vie to foster their sons at Great Smials."

Lobelia nodded. "I am certain that he will find a place for Lotho. We Sackville-Bagginses are of the higher social strata after all." She gathered up her umbrella and stood, the hat wobbling precariously for a moment before finding its balance.

Bilbo wondered what she would do if it rained, for it was unlikely her arm would be long enough to hold the umbrella above the towering floral concoction. Opening the door to facilitate her departure, he was disappointed to observe a cloudless sky. "Good day, Lobelia."

The lady did not deign to reply, trotting off down the path without a backward glance.

Frodo appeared at Bilbo's shoulder. "Would you like me to count the teaspoons?"

It was a week later, at first breakfast, that Frodo dropped several envelopes on the kitchen table, before snagging a slice of toast and commandeering the butter dish. "There's one from Great Smials. It looks like Aunt Eglantine's hand."

"Oh?" Bilbo's face showed delight, trepidation and resignation by turn. Then he plastered on a smile that only made Frodo suspicious. "Why don't you open it lad, while I freshen this teapot?"

Having been apprised of the reason for Lobelia's visit, Frodo opened it cautiously. Inside was a short note from his aunt Eglantine, which he read aloud.

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"Dear Bilbo
Ferumbras was intrigued by the wording of your letter and asked if I would write for clarification. I see that you requested a fostership at Great Smials for your relative, Lotho Sackville-Baggins. You are no doubt aware that fostership usually lasts at least three years, however we would be happy to reduce it to one year, as a favour to family, however distant. Ferumbras noted a hint of warning in your letter, however. We have had few dealings with your cousins and wonder if perhaps there is something we should know, that could not be contained within your formal request. Ferumbras says he will hold his reply until he hears from you, via me.

Eglantine

P.S. How are you and Frodo nowadays? We would love to have you visit again. Pippin misses Frodo's bedtime stories."

-0-
"Whatever did you say in your letter, Bilbo?"

Bilbo sat, topping off Frodo's teacup before replying. "I didn't wish to say too much in the formal fostership request. Those things are bound into the records you know." He winced, offering a shrug. "I felt I had to warn them, however."

"Warn them about what? I know Otho and Lobelia can be annoying, but I would have thought Lotho, on his own, would not be much of a challenge to Uncle Paladin. He takes care of all the fosterlings nowadays and I'm told he can be quite stern when he has to be."

"Were it just Lotho, I would have no compunctions. Pal. could actually be the making of the lad. But Lobelia has been wanting to see the inside of Great Smials for years. She and Otho have never been issued with an invitation, however. Her son's fostership would be the perfect opportunity, in her eyes, for several visits. That's something I would not inflict on any of my relatives or acquaintances without due warning."

Frodo's eyes sparkled. "I see. You had better send your warning then."

Bilbo sliced into a mushroom with all the intensity of a dwarf beheading an elf. "Perhaps tomorrow."

Several days later they were at market when Bilbo was rapped, smartly in the small of the back, by the handle of Lobelia's umbrella. He spun about so quickly that for a moment Frodo was certain that he was about to wrest the offending item from her hands. Instead, he pasted on a grimacing smile.

"Lobelia. How nice to see you. Has Buttercup Rumble forecast rain?" He made a point of scanning the deep blue sky.

Lobelia Sackville-Baggins pursed her lips, scowling at him from narrowed eyes. "No. Have you written to Great Smials? We have received no reply if you have."

"Written?" Bilbo's blank expression fooled nobody, and Frodo made a sudden study of his foothair.

"Bilbo Baggins, I think you have lived far too long. Your mind is obviously failing. Although, goodness knows, you never had much left after your ridiculous adventure." Lobelia continued at the slow pace one would use when explaining to a faunt, emphasising the occasional word with a tap of her umbrella handle upon Bilbo's shoulder. "The letter (tap) I asked you to send to the Thain (tap) regarding his fostership (tap) of Lotho."

"Oh. That letter." Bilbo rubbed his shoulder. "Well, I don't think Ferumbras Takes on the fosterships personally. Paladin sees to most of that nowadays."

Lobelia waited for him to continue and when Bilbo only returned to a study of the selection of cakes on Columbine Grub's stall, she halted him by hooking her umbrella handle about his elbow.

Now Bilbo did something that Frodo rarely saw. He lost his temper, wresting from her hands the ridiculous, if effective, weapon. "Lobelia, I have written, however I have no control over the actions of the Thain of the Shire. Ferumbras Took will reply when he is good and ready. Now I would appreciate being allowed to continue my shopping without acquiring any more bruises from wayward umbrellas!" Thrusting the umbrella back into the astonished Lobelia's hands, Bilbo stomped off through the gathering crowd.

Frodo was so surprised by the outburst that he did not immediately follow. His aunt recovered her wits first, raising her umbrella, then obviously thought better of tapping him on the chest, using it instead to gesticulate. "That uncle of yours needs to remember how a gentlehobbit is required to behave. I dread to consider what terrible habits he is instilling into you."
It was fortunate that Frodo's temper did not flare as quickly as Bilbo's. "I learned most of my manners at the Hall of the Master of Buckland." Whilst the Thain was titular leader of the Shire, the Master was almost his equal.

Lobelia sniffed. "That is not necessarily something to be proud of, Frodo Baggins. The Brandybuck clan have always been too independent, in their little enclave beyond the river. I am not even certain that Buckland could properly be considered a part of the Shire." Before Frodo could muster a suitable retort his aunt turned, bustling off in the opposite direction to Bilbo.

"Well. That was entertainin' and no doubt," Bell Gamgee commented from his elbow. "Don't ye pay her no mind, Master Baggins. Her Bracegirdle family ain't so sniffy about the Brandybucks that her own cousin didn't up and marry one a few years back."

Frodo found himself grinning. "That's true. Although how the family could produce two such opposites as Lobelia and Hilda is beyond me."

Bell tucked her arm through his. "Come on, lad. I bought that cake yer uncle was studyin' so hard." She slipped it into his shopping basket. "Walk me home and ye can have a cup of tea with me, while ye wait for yer uncle's temper to cool. Mistress Lobelia is the only person I've ever seen who can get 'neath Bilbo Baggins' skin."

Frodo shrugged, but turned them both for home, nonetheless. "He's growing a little more irascible with age."

"There's got to be some pleasures come with age. Mayhap not havin' to hold yer tongue is one of them. How old is Mr Bilbo now?"

For a moment, Frodo considered and when he answered it was with a hint of surprise. "I hadn't really considered it before, but he's nearly one hundred and eight."

"And he don't look much older than eighty. Truth to tell, were it not for the grey hairs I wouldn't even put him at that. 'Tis a goodly age and that's for sure. He looks set to beat the Old Took."

Lobelia and her family were forgotten only days later, when Frodo and Bilbo received an invitation to Brandy Hall.

"Frodo!"

Said Frodo braced himself as Merry raced toward him. And well he may, for the seventeen year old lad packed quite a wallop when he threw himself at his older cousin. Despite his size he leapt at Frodo, wrapping his legs tightly about the older lad's waist, and almost bowled over the both of them.

After recover some of his breath, Frodo returned the hug and managed to wheeze out, "You've grown since our last visit."

Merry giggled, planting a smacking kiss on his cousin's cheek before dropping to his feet. "I should hope so! You've stayed away too long." When he spun to greet Bilbo the older hobbit took a defensive step back, but Merry only leaned in to give him a brief but strong hug. "Hello, Uncle Bilbo."

Bilbo had long ago ceased trying to work out in whether he actually was an uncle to the lad. He did not share the fascination for such matters evinced by other hobbits, and was happy to accept the honorific, correct or not. "Hello Merry, lad. You must have been all but pasted to the windows, watching for us."
As he spoke, Rorymac, Esmeralda and Saradoc stepped from the relative darkness of the doorway. Esmeralda came forward to envelope Frodo in a chamomile-scented hug, before moving on to kiss Bilbo's cheek. "I will swear they heard my son's shriek at the other end of the Hall."

Merry only grinned, unrepentant. "Somebody had to let everyone know you were here."

Bilbo and Frodo stepped forward to greet the Master of Buckland. "Good day and welcome," Rorymac announced formally. Then he frowned. "Bilbo Baggins, how old are you now?"

It was not the sort of question one asked once a hobbit reached maturity and Frodo was reminded again that there was something a little odd about Bilbo. Bilbo was, in fact, at least ten years older than Rory but whereas his step was sprightly, Rory now leaned upon a finely carved stick. When they shook hands Rory's fingers were bent with arthritis whilst Bilbo's were long and straight. "Old enough not to have to answer that," Bilbo announced firmly as he moved on to shake Saradoc's square hand. Saradoc slapped him on the shoulder.

"Humph!" was Rorymac's comment. "Well, you'd better come along in. Bilbo, you'll come to my rooms. I want to know all the doings of Hobbiton and we'll open a bottle of Old Winyards."

Esmeralda shook her head. "Merry will take your bag to your room, Bilbo. I'm sure you'll find your way there later." She winked, offering a grin. "Or should we send Merry to fetch you? Old Winyards is pretty strong."

Bilbo rolled his eyes. "It'll take more than one shared bottle of wine to put me in my cups, Esme. Don't you worry." He leaned in to murmur in her ear as he followed Rorymac. "Although I would have preferred a bath first."

Esmeralda patted his dusty shoulder. "Just ring the bell when he releases you. I'll make sure there's water heated."

Merry scooped up Bilbo's pack and wrapped an arm about Frodo's shoulders. "Come on. I shall tell you all about cousin Marmadas while you're having your bath. You will not believe who he's courting. At his age too. He's positively ancient to be marrying."

Frodo chuckled. "Merry! He's only in his fifties!"

An hour later Frodo was settled in a chair by an open window of the small suite of rooms set aside for family guests. In the distance, beyond a sloping lawn, sparkled the Brandywine river, rolling benignly between willow fringed banks. Merry sat upon the round window sill, a half-eaten apple in his hand.

A light knock at the door announced the arrival of Esmeralda, her green eyes twinkling as she announced, "Petunia has heard of your arrival and demands that you take tea with her." Her smile dimpled as she saw her nephew's eyes widen. "I'm sorry." Here she raised a brow at her son. "It seemed she heard Merry's announcement of your arrival. As Bilbo is ensconced with Rorymac, you will have to go alone."

"She wants me to visit today?" Frodo scanned the small plate, which had contained a cheese sandwich and an apple, realising that he could not legitimately declare that he had already taken tea. Such a small repast could only pass for a snack.

Frodo stood, checking his newly washed and brushed foothair and tugging his weskit straight. "How is Aunt Petunia these days?"

Merry tried valiantly to hide a smirk at his mother's, "Much the same. I would get rid of the waistcoat
if I were you. I have tried to convince her to open a window, but you know how she is about flies. Her rooms are like an oven today. I at least managed to convince her that a fire was not necessary."

Frodo complied, remembering all too clearly his aunt's hatred of flies and her consequent insistence that all windows in her vicinity be firmly closed. Over the years, several elderly visitors had fainted from heat prostration when visiting the lady. Unbuttoning his waistcoat he grimaced at his younger cousin, who was beaming with all the glee of one who knows he has been spared a trial, and can legitimately sit back to watch another suffer. Esmeralda narrowed green eyes. "Don't get too smug, my lad. I can always send you to keep Frodo company."

Merry jumped up at once. "Papa said I was to work in the dairy this afternoon. It's my turn to help churn the butter."

"Then you'd better hop to it. You know how your Aunt Hilda is if you're late."

Merry needed no further prompting but did offer Frodo a wicked grin as he departed. Esmeralda was more sympathetic. "Come on, Frodo. It's just an hour and then you will have done your duty for this visit."

Minutes later Frodo was knocking at the door to Petunia's small suite of rooms. "Go away!" was the sharp response.

For one wild moment he considered doing just that, then took a deep breath. "It's Frodo, Aunt Petunia. You invited me to tea."

"Ahh. Primula's child. Took your time, I must say. I nearly started without you." The door rattled, opening at last to reveal his aunt.

Petunia Brandybuck was a lady of advancing years. As a youngster she had been one of Brandy Hall's prettiest maids and within days of coming of age she had accepted an offer of marriage. It was as she and her beau were digging out what was to be their marital home that a poorly supported roof had given way, burying them both. By the time rescuers dug them out the lad was dead, and it was said by many that poor Petunia's wits were buried with him. Now she was tolerated by all and loved by most, despite her eccentricities. The grey-haired lady squinted up at him. "You're very tall for a five year old."

Frodo tried not to wince, for this comment had been repeated regularly throughout Frodo's tweensage years. "Yes. May I come in, Aunt?" In truth, he did not particularly wish to, for the heat flowing out from the room behind her was enough to fell a dragon.

"I suppose so. But you cannot stay for long. I am expecting my little niece for tea." She stepped back, tucking stray hair beneath a drooping linen cap. Frodo tried not to dwell upon the fact that Petunia was wearing two dresses, one blue and one green, a yellow cardigan and a much stained blue crocheted shawl. In truth, most of the garments were stained but he knew that Esmeralda fought a constant battle to get Petunia to change her clothes. Indeed, she had been known to resort to sneaking into Petunia's rooms while the lady slept, and stealing them for the laundry.

Frodo took a deep breath and stepped in. Petunia closed the door after him, with a snick that sounded ominously final to the lad. "How are you, Aunt?"

"Fit as a fiddle," Petunia declared. "Now, what do you want?"

"I have come to tea. You sent Aunt Esme to invite me." Frodo tapped his chest lightly, feeling the fine linen already sticking to his skin. He would probably need another bath by the time he left. "I am
Frodo, Drogo and Primula's son."

"Nonsense. They don't have a son. Frodo is a bonnie little lass. As you are here and she is not, however, you may as well join me. I will not tolerate bad manners in youngsters and if she arrives late it will do her good to discover we have eaten all the food." She pointed to the table and, in a voice more appropriate to the training of a dog, instructed, "Sit!" After several years at Brandy Hall, Frodo had learned some of the tricks for soothing Petunia. "Let me help you to your own chair first, Aunt." Petunia's face lit up at once, and she took her place, sitting delicately when Frodo pushed her chair closer to the table. Only then did he take his own seat.

Were the room not so overpoweringly hot on this summer day, Frodo may have enjoyed his tea, for Aunt Esme had ensured that there were sandwiches and cakes aplenty. As it was, he perched upon the edge of his chair in the, probably vain, hope of allowing any air to circulate freely about his torso, and set himself to endure.

Petunia poured tea, managing to get almost as much on the table cloth as in the cups. "Who did you say you were, again?"

Frodo added his own milk and sugar. "Drogo Baggins' son. I used to be fostered at the hall but I live with my Uncle Bilbo, in Hobbiton, now."

"Mad Baggins? I trust you do not intend to go haring after dwarves, young lad!" While Frodo selected a chicken sandwich, Petunia helped herself to a cream bun. Knowing her of old, Frodo did not bat an eyelash. Petunia had once told him that, beyond a certain age, gentlehobbits no longer need conform to society's rules with regard to the order in which one consumed the courses of a meal. It was a matter of principle to her, to start at dessert and work backwards.

"No Aunt." Frodo loosened his collar a little and took a deep draught of his tea.

"I should think not. Nasty things, dwarves. They smoke, you know. Terrible habit. I trust you do not smoke." Petunia emptied some of her tea into a saucer, blew upon it and then raised it to her lips. As the principle growers of pipeweed in Middle Earth, many in the Shire were partial to a pipe, but Petunia held a fanatical dislike of the smell. Upon one occasion she had used a broom to shoo away one servant, because she had detected the odour of smoke upon his clothing. That would have been bad enough, but she had first insisted that he strip down to his undergarments, before permitting him entry to clear the breakfast table. Were the occupier of the room anyone other than "Potty" Petunia, there would have been quite the scandal.

Frodo considered carefully, for Bilbo had recently allowed him to experiment with a milder weed. Deciding that a little white lie would be better on this occasion, he shook his head. "No Aunt."

Petunia scowled across the table. "You don't have much to say for yourself, sir. I would think that, if you take the trouble to disturb an old lady, you could at least offer her some entertaining conversation."

Racking his overheated brain, all Frodo could offer was, "The weather is quite warm, don't you think?"

"It is summer. Of course it is warm." Petunia's eyes narrowed. "I begin to wonder if you are as addled as your uncle."

Whilst he appreciated the fact that Petunia appeared to have at last grasped who she was entertaining, the long walk and the heat found Frodo's patience wearing thin. "Bilbo is not addled. He is a very
good and sensible hobbit and I wish people would stop implying otherwise!"

Petunia, who had been in the process of sucking whipped cream off her shawl, pursed her lips. "No. Mad as a hatter, he is. Tells tall tales of dragons and treasure as I remember." Her eyes took on a gleam. "And if you try to tell me otherwise I shall not believe you."

Frodo silently counted to ten. "No Aunt Petunia."

"How old are you, lad?" Petunia carefully opened a chicken sandwich, removed the chicken and reassembled the bread before taking a bite.

"I shall be thirty this twenty-second of September."

Her gaze growing distant, Petunia replaced the half eaten and empty sandwich back upon the sandwich plate. "Now, what does that remind me of? Aha!" She leapt up, showering the carpet with crumbs and pieces of chicken. "If you are living with Bilbo Baggins you can take a present to my niece, Frodo. She will be five this year."

Frodo felt an almost irresistible urge to bang his head upon the tea table.

Blissfully unaware of his exasperation, Petunia began rummaging in a large chest of drawers, finally returning with a misshapen parcel, loosely wrapped in brown paper and tied with what appeared to be a dressing gown chord. "She has the same birthday as you, you know? It must be something to do with being a Baggins. Although I suppose it makes it easier when organising parties."

"I suppose it does," Frodo replied as he viewed the package, with some trepidation. Petunia's gifts had become something of a legend in Hobbiton. In the past, they had included a matchbox containing a spider which, to Frodo's relief, was dead upon arrival, and an empty wasp nest. This was in addition to a collection of strange, hand-stitched, animals and dolls, many of which were totally unidentifiable. For the past twenty-five years Petunia had been convinced that not only was Frodo five years old, but that he was also female. Many had tried to disabuse her of this notion, of course, and been rewarded by a whack on the legs with a broom...Petunia's weapon of choice. "Thank you. Er...I shall ensure that she gets it."

"Good. Good." Petunia narrowed her eyes. "Well. That's enough chatter. You had best get off. I have things to do."

Frodo had managed to consume but one sandwich and half a cup of tea, but he was more than willing to take this opportunity to escape. Besides, everyone in Brandy Hall knew that to outstay your welcome with Aunt Petunia was most unwise, if one wished to escape whole. Snatching up the package, he backed away. "Thank you for the tea, Aunt Petunia. Should I send Bilbo to see you when he is free?" After all, why should Bilbo be excused the pleasure of Petunia's company?

"Bilbo Baggins? Why would I wish to see him? Take my advice, young lad. Stay away from the Baggins family. Touched in the head, the lot of them. Even that little Frodo. I invited her to tea, you know. She forgot. Touched. Just like the rest of them."

By this time Petunia was waddling away toward her bedroom and Frodo took his opportunity to escape. Outside he found Merry, lounging against the wall. His gaze ran up and down Frodo's form, taking in the strange package, the blank gaze and the linen shirt that was plastered to his body. "Come on, Cos. Let's go for a walk outside, so that you can cool down." He took Frodo's elbow and began to steer him down the hall. "You've got that look Mama gets when she's been to visit Aunt Petunia."
Frodo's brain was still trying to right itself, so he followed without protest. "What look?"

Merry opened a small door and the two stepped out into sunshine and a light breeze. Frodo took a deep and very relieved breath.

Merry grinned as he led his cousin to sit on a bench by the door. "Remember a couple of years ago, when you visited and we went for a pony ride? You have that look that Fredi got when he was thrown and hit his head on a tree root."

Fresh air began to work its magic and Frodo grinned. "At least I won't have a headache for my trouble." He lifted the package, shaking it carefully. "Although whatever is in here could well induce one."

"I don't know about you, but I want a good bath when we get home." Bilbo hoisted his pack higher up his back.

"You were the one who suggested walking the last few miles. I told you it was going to rain." Frodo looked down at his muddy and matted foothair with some annoyance.

They were on the last leg of their journey home from Buckland, and the rain he referred to had stopped as swiftly as it had started. Not before soaking them both and turning parts of the Bywater road into ankle deep mud, however. "Perhaps it's time we had a meeting about getting this road repaired. When was it last done, anyway?" As a rule, local villages got together to repair the main roads around them, and both Hobbiton and Bywater shared responsibility for this one. The Bywater part was in reasonable condition but it was apparent that some work was now required at the Hobbiton end.

"Two years ago, or is it three? How old is Sam Gamgee now? As I remember, we did it the day before his fourteenth birthday."

"Then it's been five years. That's far too long. You'd better call that meeting soon, before the autumn weather sets in and makes repair impossible. If we leave it much longer traders like Tom Carter will begin to complain, and people will stop coming to market. You don't want to be on the wrong side of Bell Gamgee when she can't buy some honey."

Bilbo scowled. "There's always something. You do realise that one day these responsibilities may fall to you? It's likely that, should I decline the village council nomination, they will probably ask you to stand."

Frodo swallowed in a suddenly dry throat. That Bilbo was ageing was undeniable, even if he did still look hale and hearty, but Frodo chose to bury any thought of life when his uncle would no longer be around. Hopping over a particularly deep wheel rut, filled with muddy water, Frodo switched the subject. "You spoke to Master Spelt in the Green Dragon, when we came through Bywater. Has anyone heard how Ackley Sandyman is doing nowadays?"

"Filbert spoke with the doctor last week. It seems Old Ackley has pulled through again. Were Betony not so good a nurse he would have wasted away years ago, and I suspect Ted would have been pleased to let him. He's always wanted to be master of that mill."

"Surely he already is, in all but title. Old Mister Sandyman can't run the mill from his bed."

"Hah! Oh yes he can. It's Ackley that still makes the big decisions there, and Ted resents it. He would have knocked down and rebuilt the place in brick if he had his way. He even talked of adding
a long leat and turning the wheel into an overshot. Fortunately, he was opposed by both his father and the village. It would have ruined the pond and the leat would run through common land." Bilbo glanced back. "Oh bother!"

"What is it?" Frodo answered his own question when he looked behind to see Lobelia and Otho Sackville-Baggins, picking their way through the mud of the road some distance behind. "Oh."

When he turned back, however, Bilbo was nowhere to be seen. Confused, Frodo looked for a gap in the hedge, then a soft splash caught his attention. Looking down, he saw a set of footprints beside his own, that seemed to disappear into the distance. Even as he watched he saw the strange sight of muddy water splashing up as though someone had stepped into it.

Realisation dawned. Bilbo had put on his old magic ring. It was the first time, since Frodo had known his uncle, that he had ever actually seen, or not seen, the results of wearing the ring. For some reason he had always assumed that there would be some kind of ghostly shadow; something to indicate the presence of someone wearing it. But there was nothing. He watched for so long that Otho and Lobelia came within hailing distance, and he had no option but to wait until they drew near. Bilbo may get away with bad manners but Frodo was not yet of an age to do so.

"Good afternoon Aunt Lobelia, Uncle Otho. What brings you out on such a day?"

Lobelia leaned upon her husband's arm. "We were coming to visit your uncle."

Otho frowned. "I could have sworn I saw him with you as we turned that bend."

Frodo blinked. "Erm. He remembered someone he had to visit and turned off."

Both Sackville-Baggins frowned deeply, looking about at the hedge lined road with its ditches to either side. Bilbo was clearly not within sight, however. Otho spoke up. "Well, as we have found you, perhaps you can save us the rest of the journey in this quagmire, by passing on a message?"

"I'd be happy to," Frodo lied.

"Tell him we have still not heard from the Thain, upon the matter of Lotho's apprenticeship. He must write again, in case his first letter has gone astray."

Frodo was not in the least surprised that what should have been couched as a request was, instead, issued as an instruction, and he was more than a little relieved that these kinds of responsibilities were not yet his to don. Indeed, he fervently hoped that Bilbo outlived both Otho and Lobelia. "I shall pass on your message," he replied simply.

"See that you do," Lotho said, with some emphasis, as he helped his wife turn about and they both began picking their way back up the road toward Bywater.

"Thank you and you're welcome," Frodo muttered under his breath as he set off to follow Bilbo's footprints down the road to Hobbiton.

When he stepped into Bag End's familiar hallway Frodo dropped his pack and set about washing his feet in the tray of water set ready by the door. He could see, from the damp towel, that Bilbo had preceded him. "Bilbo?"

"In here, Frodo. Are you alone?"

"Yes uncle. Quite alone. Just as I was on the Bywater road."
Frodo followed the voice through to the kitchen, where Bilbo was pouring hot water into a teapot. "Come in, lad. Sam's stoking the copper in the wash-house, so we can both have a nice bath later. Sit down and have a cup of tea. Bell Gamgee has been her usual magnificent self and stocked the larder with milk and food, including a rather large apple pie and some cream. I've cut us both a piece."

The good humour was not fooling Frodo however. He sat down. "Don't you go playing the sweet uncle to me. You left me to deal with both the Sackville-Bagginses!"

Bilbo filled his own and then Frodo's cup. "I'm sorry, but I really was not in the mood to entertain those two. You have no idea how relieved I was when they did not follow you through that door."

Frodo swallowed his first bite of pie and paused. The shortcrust pastry melted in his mouth, combining perfectly with soft apple, still slightly tart, and with a hint of cinnamon. The cream was a rich round contrast. When he spoke he found some of his irritation had melted away with the pastry. "I didn't want to entertain them either and I have a message for you. Lotho says...now let me remember this correctly. Lotho says I am to tell you that they have not heard from the Thain, on the matter of Lotho's apprenticeship, and that you must write again, in case your first letter has gone astray. You will note that there was no "please" or "thank you" in that message."

"I was afraid it was about that."

"Have you replied to Aunt Eglantine's letter?"

Bilbo shifted uncomfortably in his chair, taking the time to chew and swallow a large chunk of pie and a good draught of his tea.

"Uncle?"

"It may have slipped my mind."

"Slipped your mind?"

"Oh, alright. I kept putting it off and then we got that invitation to Brandy Hall."

"Bilbo. You had best have that letter written by tomorrow. I'll run it down to the Ivy Bush for you." It felt rather strange to suddenly be the adult in this relationship but it really was too bad of Bilbo to postpone the matter. It was especially bad of him to simply disappear. "That's the first time I've ever known you to wear that ring of yours. It gave me quite a jolt, I must say. You could have given me some warning."

Bilbo patted his waistband, where the fine gold chain was attached. "I don't like to wear it so much nowadays. Gandalf said it was not wise, and I must say that it doesn't feel the same as it did, somehow."

"What do you mean? How has it changed?"

"It's hard to explain. It just felt like a useful trinket at first. Putting it on made me feel no different. In fact, the first time I wore it, in Gollum's cave, I didn't even realise it had made me invisible, until he started cursing me." Bilbo topped off his tea, adding some more milk.

"And now?"

"Now, when I put it on the world feels sort of shadowy, and sometimes I imagine someone is searching for me or looking over my shoulder. It's rather uncomfortable."
"Perhaps you had better heed Gandalf's warnings, then. He seems to know a lot about those kinds of things. Using a magic ring to hide from elves and dragons is one thing, but it seems a little bit excessive to use it just to hide from Aunt Lobelia. And you wouldn't even need to hide from her if you just sent that letter. I'm going to check on that hot water."

As he spoke Frodo had been making for the door. He opened it to reveal a flushed Sam Gamgee. "Hello Master Frodo." There was a suspicious glint in his hazel eyes and Frodo wondered if he had been listening outside the door and, if so, how much he had heard. Sam straightened his waistcoat. "The water's boiled in the copper, sirs. Shall I start fetchin' it in for your baths?"

"Yes. Thank you, Sam. I'll help you set up the tub."

The summer heatwave continued, unabated, and a week later Bell Gamgee looked up from her ironing, in answer to a knock at Number Three's open front door. Recognising her visitor she smiled broadly. "Hello Master Frodo. What can I do for ye? I'm afraid yer shirts ain't finished yet. Daisy found a couple of buttons missin' on one and we had to find some more. Ye can come in and wait, if ye've a mind. I'll only be a little while."

Frodo stepped in, clambering onto one of the benches beside the table. "It's good of you to do the extra load of laundry for us. We're still catching up after our visit to Buckland."

Bell selected a fresh smoothing iron from the hob. "Tis no trouble. I've not as much laundry as once I had, with only Daisy, Sam and Mari to look after now." When Marigold appeared at the back door, her apron filled with kindling, she smiled. "There's a good lass. When ye've set that in the basket fetch Master Frodo a cup of cold water from the pantry."

"Yes Ma."

"I don't want to put you out, Marigold," Frodo rushed to assure the youngster, who he knew had a list of tasks to take care of now that she was old enough to help her mother.

"It's no bother, sir." Marigold selected a cup and stepped into the pantry, where a large jug of water was always set cooling. When she returned, to place the cup in front of him, Frodo smiled. "Thank you." Marigold smiled prettily, before heading outside again.

"Mari's a sweet lass. She's none of our Daisy's wild ways." Bell stretched out the sleeve of one of Frodo's shirts and applied her iron. "I remember the days when Daisy was the bane of your life."

Frodo sipped his cold water. The day was hot and, despite having both the front and back doors open, the kitchen was even hotter, for the range must be kept lit to cook, heat irons, and provide hot water. "I must confess that when she and Bartimus got together I was a little relieved."

Bell laughed. "I bet ye were. Did ye and Mister Bilbo have a nice time at Brandy Hall?"

"Aside from having to take tea with Aunt Petunia and getting half drowned in the rain, on the way home, yes, thank you. Let me know how much I owe you for the shirt buttons. I don't know how I lost them."

Folding the shirt neatly, Bell added it to the small pile upon her table and lifted a fine red silk handkerchief, smoothing it out and sprinkling it with water. She flicked a drop of water upon the iron sole. "Ye don't need to worrit about that. I had a nice set of horn ones from one of my Ham's old shirts that suited nicely. I was choppin' up his shirt for dusters anyway." She applied her cooling iron to the red silk. "I saw Bert comin' up the hill with yer post earlier. I hope there weren't no bad news."

Frodo shrugged. "I'm not sure whether you'd call it good or bad. Has Bilbo told you of Lotho
wanting to be fostered at Great Smials?"

Bell sniffed. "He did. Beggin’ yer pardon, Young Master, but it seems like a load of nonsense to my mind. Even I can do numberin’ well enough to keep smial and hearth together. What's he goin’ to learn there that his Pa can't teach him?"

"Well, I think it has more to do with Lobelia and Otho getting a foot in the door of Great Smials. They've always resented the fact that they haven't been issued with an invitation before now. The letter we got today was to let us know that the Thain has accepted Lotho for the year. They don't have it all their own way, however. Ferumbras is too old to take on any fosterlings himself, so Uncle Paladin will be doing the job, and he will stand for no nonsense." Frodo grinned.

"Aye. As I hear it, him and his lady is raising four of their own. They'll put the Sackville-Bagginses, the whole lot of 'em, in their place easy enough. When is Master Lotho leavin' for Tuckborough?"

"I believe they expect him within the month. No doubt Aunt Lobelia is selecting her hat as we speak."

Bell shuddered. "Aye. She'll not let him travel alone, even if he wanted to. I hope ye'll forgive me for sayin' such, but as I see it, tis way past time them apron strings was cut. He's of age now and should be findin' his own way in the world." She placed the last hanky upon the pile and set down her iron before planting hands in the small of her back, and leaning back with a sigh. "There now. All is done. Would ye like our Marigold to give ye a hand takin’ this lot up the hill?"

"No, thank you, Mistress Gamgee. If you'll just pile them on my arms I can manage. No doubt Marigold has enough to do." He held his arms out.

"She's only pickin' some peas fer supper, but if ye think ye can manage I'll not argue." Bell began to pile up his arms with clean laundry. "Have a care now. I don't want to have to do all this again 'cause ye've tripped in the lane."

"Don't worry. I've done that walk so often over the years that I could run it blindfolded."

What Frodo had not taken into account was that, with both arms full of laundry, he could not open the door to Bag End. He resorted to kicking and could hear Bilbo grumbling his way down the hallway before the door was wrenched violently open. "Who...oh...it's you, Frodo. Well, come in. Then be a good chap and go put the kettle on." Although his voice sounded calm enough, Frodo detected a dark glitter in his uncle's eyes. "Your Aunt and Uncle Sackville-Baggins are here."

Frodo's eyes widened and he scurried past the parlour door with much haste. Some minutes later, however, he had no option but to enter the room, tea tray in hand. Lobelia and Otho shared the settee, while Lotho had commandeered Frodo's armchair by the hearth. Bilbo sat in his usual chair and had drawn up a small table. "Set the tray there Frodo. Why don't you join us? It is some time since you took tea with your aunt and uncle, after all." The invitation was issued with much glee, for Bilbo was very aware that Frodo had managed to avoid the dubious pleasure last time his Aunt had visited.

"I'll fetch another cup."

As Frodo left Bilbo called out, "And you'd best bring more hot water. You know your aunt prefers her tea weak."

Frodo resisted the temptation to poke out his tongue, returning after as long a gap as he could reasonably excuse. "Sorry, I had to wait for the kettle to boil."
Bilbo only raised a brow, lifting the teapot lid so that his nephew could top up the pot. Frodo drew up a footstool, the only seating left to him in the room, and ignored a smirk from Lotho.

Lobelia examined a slice of seedcake with obvious disdain, allowing her husband to take the lead for once. Otho set down his cup precisely upon its saucer. "I do not see why we had to come all this way to hear the Thain's reply, Bilbo. You could have sent a letter and saved us the walk."

"Yes, indeed," Lobelia chimed in. "It is beyond me why Master Ferumbras did not write to us directly." No doubt the lady had been hoping for a letter to be delivered within sight of her neighbours; a letter such as the one now gracing the arm of Bilbo's chair, within its fine cream envelope and bearing the Thain's large green seal.

Bilbo lips twitched in a knowing smile. "I suppose he thought, as I had been the one to forward your request, I should be the one to reply to."

Otho's nose twitched. "Well then. What is the Thain's reply?"

Once more, Lobelia could not resist interjecting. "I should think he would be more than willing to take on such a pupil as our dear Lotho." Dear Lotho offered a smile of such hauteur that Frodo wanted to poke out his eyes.

Seeming to relish the tensions circulating within the parlour, Bilbo made a production of opening the letter and studying its contents. After some moments Lobelia rolled her eyes. "Well, what does the Thain say?"

Bilbo cleared his throat. "Master Ferumbras, the Thain, thanks me for my enquiry." He drew the paper closer to his face, as though trying to bring the words into focus, and Frodo bit his cheek when Lobelia's fingers twitched, clearly yearning to snatch the missive from Bilbo's hand. Once more, Bilbo cleared his throat. "He regrets that he is unable to accept any fosterlings at this time."

"What!" Otho and Lobelia leapt to their feet as one. "How dare he turn down our son! The Sackville-Bagginses are a respectable family."

Frodo bit down harder on his cheek when he saw the gleam in Bilbo's eyes and nudged his uncle's foot. Bilbo raised his voice to be heard over Otho and Lobelia's protests. "He has, however, instructed Master Paladin Took to offer a fostership at Great Smials, if you are amenable."

There was instant silence as Otho and Lobelia exchanged glances. Frodo noted that Lotho had remained seated and silent throughout, as though relishing the drama as much as Bilbo. Otho recovered the power of speech first. "Paladin, son of Adalgrim? Next in line for the position of Thain?"

Bilbo's grey brows arched. "Well, I don't think Fer. intends to turn up his toes quite yet, but yes, Paladin is next in line, and has lately been taking on some of the day-to-day tasks, including fostering."

There was another silent exchange between Otho and Lobelia, while Lotho's gaze hardened. Lobelia turned to Bilbo, with a smile so sweet that Frodo would later swear he could feel his teeth rotting in his head. "That would be most acceptable. Of course, Otho and I would need to visit, just to check out the accommodations and ensure that Lotho will receive the education he requires."

Bilbo offered a smile of his own, that would have put a honey pot to shame. "Paladin has anticipated your concerns and suggests that you accompany Lotho, perhaps staying at Great Smials for a few days, until your son is settled."
Lobelia patted her hat, setting its feathers trembling. "That is very generous of Master Paladin. Has he indicated when he expects us?" Lotho's lips thinned.

Once more, Bilbo made a production of consulting the letter. "Upon the first day of next month."

Otho clicked his fingers and Lotho stood, as though tugged by an invisible thread. "Come, Lotho. Your mother and I should make travel arrangements."

Bilbo retained the face of polite host as he escorted his visitors to the door, only letting go once the large green door swung closed behind them. "Phew. Thank goodness that is over. Put the kettle on again, Frodo. We deserve a peaceful cup of tea after that."

Frodo gathered the cups and plates. "Did you notice Lotho?"

Bilbo held out the tray for Frodo to fill. "What do you mean? If I were to be totally honest, I try not to look at any of that trio for any longer than is absolutely necessary."

Frodo took the tray from him and led the way to the kitchen. "I rather got the impression that Lotho does not want to go to Great Smials."

"Well, it is settled now, so he will have to make the best of it. I always said this idea was more about Otho and Lobelia's ambition to see the inside of Great Smials, than any learning required by Lotho. That said, it can only be to the lad's advantage if Pal. rubs away some of those sharp edges. I have never understood where Otho and Lobelia got their airs and graces from. We Bagginses have always been a fairly ordinary lot."

Frodo grinned. In his mind a more extra-ordinary hobbit than Bilbo Baggins did not exist.

Whether or not Lotho wished to go to Great Smials became moot in the face of Lobelia's wants. He departed, on time, and with his parents in tow. For his part, Frodo discovered himself contemplating the boredom of a life without a selection of eccentric Aunts to alternately annoy and amuse him.
"I don't see that this is needed. There's nothin' wrong with good honest workin' hands." Bell Gamgee's voice drifted to Frodo from the open kitchen window of Number Three, Bagshot Row.

"Oh Ma! You're so old-fashioned. I want my hands to look nice when Barti puts the ring on my finger. All my friends will want to look at it after." Frodo grinned at Daisy's exasperated tone and, deciding he needed to investigate, stepped up to knock upon the faded yellow door.

"I'll get it, lass. Ye'd best keep beatin' that if ye want them fancy hands." The door swung open to reveal Bell, wiping her own work-worn hands upon the ever present apron. She smiled broadly. "Hello, Master Frodo. Come in, won't ye?"

Frodo followed her into the room that served as kitchen, dining room and parlour for the little smial. "I was passing and thought I'd just pop in to say hello." He surveyed the table, which was filled with what appeared to be cooking ingredients, but for no dish he had ever encountered.

"Hello, Master Frodo." Daisy was a little red in the face as she appeared to be furiously beating a bowl full of lard.

"Hello Daisy." Frodo grinned, for Daisy only used his honorific when in front of her parents. "Are you making pastry?"

"No. And 'tis a waste of good lard if ye ask me," Bell replied with a sniff. She lifted a small glass bottle, removed the stopper and waved it beneath Frodo's nose. "We're makin' hand cream. Would ye believe it?"

Her visitor inhaled tentatively at first, then smiled. "Oh, that's lovely. Rosewater, if I'm not mistaken."

"Aye. And a pretty penny it cost. My husband is turnin' into a spendthrift over this weddin'."

"Ma! It didn't cost that much, and our Sam gave some coppers to it as a birthday present."

Bell rolled her eyes and waved Frodo to a seat at the table. "Ye'll take a cup of tea, young master." It was not a question, so Frodo did not bother to reply, just watched as his hostess started gathering mugs, teapot and kettle.

The lard in Daisy's bowl was now whipped smooth and Frodo watched in fascination as she added oatmeal. "Frodo, pass me the honey pot?"

When Frodo would have obliged her, Bell's hand shot out, to stay his upon the pot. "Daisy Gamgee! Ye may have taken to droppin' the 'Master', and don't think I don't notice, but ye'll not drop common manners. There's a word to be added to that question, my lass."

Frodo dropped his gaze to the table to hide a grin, but he could almost hear Daisy roll her eyes.
"Would you pass me the honey pot, please, Master Frodo?" Her tone was sweeter than the honey beneath Frodo's hand, and the sound of a quick intake of breath made him risk a glance at Bell's face.

For one moment mother and daughter locked gazes, almost equally matched. Then Bell lifted her hand, so that Frodo could comply. When Daisy would have grinned, her mother poured cold water on her triumph with, "We'll have a talk later, Daisy Gamgee," and Frodo saw her daughter swallow.

"I thought you were going to do laundry today?" Frodo asked, in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Bell poured boiling water into the teapot, swilled and emptied, before adding leaves and filling it. "I were, but that sky looks a mite fretful for dryin' laundry."

"Mackerel sky, mackerel sky. Never long wet. Never long dry," Daisy intoned in a sing-song voice, as she drizzled honey and stirred it into her mixture.

The sky was indeed covered in a light film of bubbling white cloud, that looked very much like the scales of a fish, or the ripples left in sand after water has flowed. Already that morning there had been one light shower. "I suppose it's not the best drying weather," he conceded, watching in fascination as Daisy counted drops of rosewater.

Bell poured three mugs of tea and took a seat opposite Frodo, adding a generous helping of milk to his but only a splash to her own and Daisy's. "How's Mister Bilbo today?" she asked as she pushed the honey pot back toward her guest.

"He's well, although he has been rather restless of late. He's talking of hiking out to Needlehole next week."

"Gracious. He's goin' to wear out his feet with all the walkin' he's doin' of late. Seems to me ye've both been out and about more than ye've been home this year. 'Tis not two weeks since ye got back from Tuckborough."

"I know." Frodo sipped tea that even generous helpings of honey and milk could not soften. The Gamgee family liked their brew strong, and Bell had once been unwittingly overheard to describe Bilbo's tea as "gnat's pee". Fortunately, Bilbo had taken the assessment in good part.

"Maybe he fancies visitin' his dwarf friends," Daisy offered as she held out the bowl for her mother's examination. "What do you think, Ma?"

Bell frowned, but dipped in a finger and, lifting the tiniest amount, spread it upon the back of her hand. "Tis clarty," she observed with some distaste. "What do ye think, Master Frodo? I know Mister Bilbo is a one for this kind of thing."

Politeness prompted Frodo to sample a dab. "It is a little greasy," was his tentative offering as he rubbed it into the back of his hand. "Although it does seem to disappear after a few moments." He sniffed. "And it does smell lovely."

He was rewarded with a triumphal smile from Daisy. "See, Ma. I bet this is as good as anythin' them fancy elves can make." She drew close a mismatched selection of empty pots and jars and began the messy task of transferring her concoction.

"I know that," Frodo stated, pointing to a tiny heap of what appeared to be twigs. "That's Dyers Bugloss. Are you going to be doing some dying, Daisy? It can make some lovely red shades."

He was surprised to see a blush climb her throat. "How came you to know that?"
Frodo grinned. "Buckland has one of the few dyers works in the Shire. When I was fostered at Brandy Hall I sometimes had to work there...usually when I was in trouble over something. If you need salt for setting the dye, Bilbo and I have plenty to spare."

Bell Gamgee folded her arms and leaned back. "Oh, she'll need no salt. 'Tis one thing to make hand cream. I'll give ye that 'tis useful in winter. But our Daisy here is not content with what nature gave her, and is set on paintin' her lips. Can ye believe it?"

Frodo blinked. "Painting her lips?"

Daisy screwed tight the last lid and took up a cloth to wipe her hands. "I don't see what all the fuss is about. Lots of folk make lip balm. It stops your lips peeling in cold weather."

"Aye, it does. But not all add red dye to it." Bell turned back to Frodo. "I hope ye'll forgive me for sayin' this, young master, but I've heard tell of some ladies, in places beyond our borders, who paint their faces." she frowned at her daughter. "And they're not the kind of ladies as good folk would bring to tea."

Frodo was beginning to regret his curious nature, and wished he had gone straight home. "I'm afraid I don't know anything about that. Some people in Buckland do trade in Bree, but I was too young to pay much attention to their tales when I lived at the Hall."

Daisy planted hands upon her hips. "Ma, 'tis just a little help I'm wantin'. I want to look my best on my weddin' day. I bet you did too."

Bell relented a little. "Well, I'm not sayin' I didn't get my Da to bring me a pint of beer to wash my hair the week afore my weddin'. But there's a difference between lookin' yer best and lookin'… different. Baritimus knows what ye look like. Goodness knows, he's even seen ye feedin' pigs. He wants to wed ye, not some stranger who'll wash away with a ball of soap."

Daisy considered for a moment, hazel eyes shifting from dyestuff to other ingredients. She sighed. "Alright. Maybe you're right. We'll make the lip salve without the dye this time."

Bell nodded. "There's my sensible lass. Now, get this mutton fat melted and chop that candle wax smaller afore ye add it to the pan." Once more her attention turned to Frodo. "I hope ye and Mister Bilbo have marked the day on yer calendar. Ye were the first Daisy and Bartimus invited."

"Don't worry, Mistress Gamgee, I made sure to watch as Bilbo drew a big red ring around the date. We won't forget." He winked as Daisy added ingredients to her pan on the hob.

"I shall be one of the lads trying to carry off the bride, after all."

Daisy shook her head. "Just don't you go crushin' my new frock, Master Baggins. We went all the way to Michel Delvin' for that cloth."

Frodo laughed. "I wouldn't dare!"

Daisy grabbed a sip of tea as she stirred. "'Tis a pity we couldn't do the handfastin' on Barti's comin' of age, but the mayor has another weddin' to do up Scary way on that day."

"It's fortunate old Tansy Proudfoot decided to choose now to go and live with family over in Tuckborough," Frodo observed, in an attempt to sidestep the conversation he knew would ensue. Daisy and her parents had been arguing over it for months. Unfortunately, his efforts were largely ignored.
Bell sniffed. "I still don't understand why that's so important to ye. There's a brush in yon corner and plenty of folk willin' to witness ye and Barti jump over it. Well, at least it means ye've got a few more weeks to get yer cottage sorted. 'Twill look nice once ye've got them new curtains up."

"I'll not live over the brush, Ma. Folks will be sayin' me and Barti have a need to hurry. I want a 'proper' handfastin', with the mayor to lead it. I'll not have folks whisperin' and checkin' the width of my waistline all day."

Frodo cleared his throat as Daisy's mother rolled her eyes. Mother and daughter were more alike than he suspected either of them realised.

Some weeks later Bilbo Baggins sat, pipe in hand, upon the bench by Bag End's front door. The pipe was cold and his pale blue eyes were fixed upon some point far distant. A plaid rug, pulled around his shoulders against the chill when he first sat, had slipped down unnoticed, to pool about his hips.

"Bilbo!" Frodo appeared in the open doorway, two mugs in his hand. "I've been calling you for ages."

His uncle blinked, turning a grey head. "Have you?" His mild manner stood sharp contrast to Frodo's exasperated tone. "I'm sorry, lad. Did you want me for something?"

Frodo grinned and shook his head, handing over one of the mugs and pulling the door shut behind him as he joined the older hobbit on the bench. "I was asking if you wanted tea. And you do realise you've let all the heat out of the smial? I've had to rebuild the parlour fire. Why ever did you leave the front door open?" He wrapped hands about his own steaming mug.

Bilbo stuffed his pipe into a jacket pocket and tugged the rug back about his shoulders. "Did I?"

Frodo shifted to study his uncle's face more closely. "Are you feeling alright, Bilbo?" His brows drew together. "You've been a little distant of late."

Bilbo took a sip of his tea, the fingers of his other hand playing with the fine gold chain running into his breeches pocket. "Distant? Perhaps. I've just been remembering."

Frodo followed his gaze to the horizon as understanding crept in. "Remembering your journey?"

"Yes. I've been wondering what happened to Gloin, Balin, and my other friends. We corresponded for many years but I've just realised that I haven't heard anything from them for ages. I wonder if some of them are even still alive. Gloin must be rather old by now."

Frodo wondered how long dwarves lived, for Bilbo was hardly in the first flush of youth himself. "I didn't realise. You never mentioned any letters to me."

"That's because they stopped arriving shortly after you joined me here," Bilbo smiled at his nephew, patting the lad's corduroy clad knee. "And you've been such good company that I'm afraid it was quite some time before I noticed."

"Do you miss them a lot?" Frodo's stomach began to turn lazy somersaults. Too often of late, he had found Bilbo staring at the easterly horizon, golden ring clenched tight in his palm. Now that he considered it more closely he realised that the intrepid adventurer spent more evenings relating his tale, too.

"I miss my friends and the open road. I miss the anticipation of new things around the next corner."
Frodo looked askance. "You mean goblins, trolls and orcs?"

Bilbo grinned. "Perhaps not those, but strong dwarven ale and elves singing in the moonlight would be nice, and I would like to see Erebor restored to its full glory. I have only known it in the ruinous state Smaug created, and I yearn to see it lit by crystal lamps, ringed with the sound of hammer on anvil. Even in its desolation I could tell that it was once a magnificent world."

"From what you've told me, it's a long and perilous journey. I don't like to think of you travelling alone beyond our borders. Of late even the fringes of our dear Shire have become dangerous, as we discovered ourselves, not so many years ago. We would be dead, were it not for the intervention of elves and those strange men."

Bilbo shrugged. "Perhaps I won't be travelling alone."

The somersaults in Frodo's stomach began to roll faster. "I will go with you, of course, if you decide to leave the Shire. But I don't think I'd be much use in a fight against trolls or goblins." The reluctance in his tone was not lost upon the perspicacious Bilbo Baggins.

"Ah, Frodo," Bilbo offered a wistful smile. "I knew you would offer to go with me. That is why I have postponed saying anything to you. I know you want to see beyond our borders one day, but I do not think that day is now. You are still in love with our own pleasant land, with its little rivers and green fields." He grinned knowingly as he nudged Frodo's shoulder. "And perhaps you'll find a lass to share it with, and fill Bag End with lots of mischievous faunts. I'm certain there's room enough for a dozen."

Frodo considered that prospect for a moment, watching a noisy flock of sparrows land in the hawthorn hedge. "Why did you never marry, Bilbo? I know you lost your chance with Pansy Goodbody, but there must have been other ladies who took your eye."

"Ahh. There I'm afraid my reputation stood against me. What respectable maid would want to marry someone who could decide to up and leave with the next caravan of dwarves to travel through, leaving her to raise their children alone?"

Frodo's eyes widened in outrage. "I cannot believe you would ever abandon a child, Bilbo."

Bilbo shook his head. "Of course not, but what maid would take that chance? Besides, even now there are some who think I found the whole journey within the dregs of a beer mug. To them I am 'Mad Baggins' and dragons are a thing of elvish legend, those that believe in elves that is. They cannot imagine such a beast striding the earth nowadays."

"If I remember your story correctly, they would be right. Smaug was the last of the dragons, wasn't he?"

Taking out his pipe once more, Bilbo examined it for a moment, before knocking out the dottle on the edge of their bench. "Maybe so. Frodo, you have no concept of the vastness of the world beyond our borders. The Shire is but a tiny enclave of peace within it, and my own journey gave only a glimpse of other parts. There may indeed be other fire drakes out there, or worse."

A cold shudder trickled down Frodo's spine. If he was not prepared for orcs and trolls, how would he fare against a dragon?

As though sensing his unease, Bilbo laid an arm about the lad's shoulders. "You are not ready for such a journey yet, but I promise that if I do go, I shall take others with me. It is long past time I wrote to my friends in Erebor, or perhaps even to Gandalf."
"How would you even reach Gandalf? He travels about a bit and it is years since he visited us."

Bilbo's pale blue eyes began to twinkle. "Oh, there are ways of reaching him, although it can take time, and a wizard is at nobody's beck and call. Dwarves may be easier, however." He shivered, drawing his rug closer. "Come on. Let's go inside. I'm getting cold and it is time for elevenses."

Bilbo said nothing more on the topic, although Frodo noted an increase in the number of letters going to and from Bag End for a while. Soon all that was forgotten as the much-awaited wedding day grew closer.

One day in March Bilbo Baggins strolled down to Number Three Bagshot Row and knocked upon the yellow door. As he knocked, he noted the state of the paintwork, and made a mental note to have it painted later in the year.

"Come in, Mr Bilbo." Marigold held the door open and Bilbo stepped into the welcoming warmth of Bell Gamgee's kitchen.

"Thank you, Miss Marigold."

Marigold blushed prettily and Bell smiled as she rolled pastry. "What can we do for ye, Mister Bilbo? I hope ye don't mind if I go on makin' these pies. Only if I leave the pastry it'll stick."

She was in the middle of hand-raising a pie and the part-cooked diced pork and seasoning stood ready in a bowl. Marigold was stirring a pan of jelly and now moved to pour the contents through small holes left in the top of the pies already baked. Bilbo could feel his mouth watering at the prospect of one of Bell Gamgee's pork pies.

"You carry on, Bell. You have much to take care of, with the wedding coming up."

She sighed. "I have that. And we still don't know what to do about the cake."

Bilbo took a seat at the huge kitchen table. "Yes, young Sam told me you were worried about that."

Bell dropped a generous dollop of pork into her pie. "We was plannin' on a small family party, but with our family it turned out bigger than expected. One of the lads, Hamfast, will be comin' home, and our May. Then my family decided to invite themselves and that meant Ham's side wanted to come.

"Daisy and Bartimus got themselves some silly romantic notion to hold the weddin' close to Bartimus' birthday. 'Tis too early in the year to have the weddin' outside, and the only place big enough now to hold us all is Tom Cotton's barn. Any other time of year even that wouldn't be free, but he says he can move what fodder is left, over to one of his smaller ones.

"Trouble is, now that's sorted I don't know how I'm goin' to be able to bake a cake big enough. Ye know what it's like in Hobbiton. Folk will come, invited or not." She dropped the pastry lid on her pie and began crimping it shut, practised fingers effortlessly creating the frilly edge. "I don't mind that, so long as they bring a plate of sandwiches or some such. But everyone should have a bit of the weddin' cake. It wouldn't be proper otherwise." Slipping her knife into the centre of the lid, she made a hole for the later addition of jelly. "I can bake it in bits and then fix it together, but with my little oven it will take days, and half the cake will be stale afore it's iced."

"And that is is the reason I am here. Olin Baker has an oven big enough."

Bell's eyes widened. "I know, sir. But, beggin' yer pardon, we can't afford to have a proper bakery cake. Not with buyin' Daisy's frock material and gettin' all the other food." She shrugged. "Folk will
bring somethin', sure enough, but we should have a good spread waitin' for them. And beer and cider
don’t come cheap, neither."

Bilbo waved his hands. "I wasn't suggesting you pay for the cake, Bell. I do not wish to appear
nosey, but as your neighbour I should hope I understand your financial position. I did not know what
to give Daisy and Bartimus for a wedding present, and it occurred to me that providing their wedding
cake would be more appropriate than presenting them with a set of silver teaspoons, that they would
probably never use."

Bell opened her mouth, as though about to protest, then shut it again. "I'll have to ask Ham. 'Tis kind
of ye to offer and I'll not deny it would be a help, but 'tis a thing that has to be agreed upon by the
both of us."

"I understand completely, Bell. She's your first daughter to marry, and you want to do all you can for
her." Bilbo stood. "Just let me know what you decide."

The next morning Ham and Sam were working in Bag End's vegetable plot when Bilbo opened the
kitchen window. "Good morning. It's a raw day. Would you care to stop for a cup of tea? I have the
kettle on for elevenses and Frodo baked some biscuits yesterday."

Hamfast Gamgee tucked his cap into his breeches pocket with a grin. "That's a grand offer and thank
you. There's not a Gamgee alive will say no to a pot of tea."

Bilbo grinned. "Come in, then, and get warm by the fire."

A scant five minutes later Sam and his Da were seated comfortably at the table, the warm kitchen
range at their backs, big mugs of tea in hand, and a plate full of biscuits before them. Hamfast bit into
a biscuit. "Ginger. Very nice. I'm glad I've seen you this mornin' Mister Baggins. Bell told me of
your chat about the weddin' cake."

Sam watched in silence as he munched on his own biscuit, aware that he was not generally
considered old enough to join in such conversations. If he stayed quiet his elders may not notice him,
besides, there was always the prospect of being offered another biscuit.

Bilbo topped up Ham's mug. "And have you reached a decision?"

"Me and Bell had a long talk last night and we've decided to say yes to your offer. 'Tis a kind
thought and will be a load off Bell's mind. Will you be doin' the askin' of Olin Baker?"

Bilbo grinned. "Capital! I shall mention it to him while I'm at market tomorrow. Have Bell or Daisy
pop down to the bakery later in the week to discuss what you would like in the way of fillings and
icing." He wagged an ink-stained finger. "And tell her not to worry about the cost. You can have
whatever takes your fancy. Frodo and I love Daisy very much, and we want her to have the very
best."

"Thank you both very kindly, Mister Baggins. We'll not feel right if tis too fancy. I'll have Bell visit
the baker this very week." Ham stood, and Sam gulped the last of his tea, casting one last longing
glance at the pile of biscuits remaining. "Come along my lad. Them peas won't plant themselves."

As they were leaving Bilbo winked, slipping a biscuit into Sam's hand.

Time rolled on, as it is wont to do, and the week of the wedding arrived. Frodo took his friend to the
Ivy Bush for a quiet evening. "How are things going, Barti? The Gamgee household is all of a
flutter, I can tell you." Frodo set a pint of cider in front of his friend.

"I've got Tom Cotton's barn cleaned up, and me and anyone else who's got the time, are going up to
decorate it on Trewsday, so that we can set up tables and the like on Hensday morning, before the ceremony."

"The lads and I have the songs for the Carrying Off sorted so I have nothing planned for Trewsday. I can help with the decorating if you like? I think Sam and Hamfast plan to be there too."

Bartimus let out a relieved sigh. "That would be a help. Do you think you could meet us by the party field early morning? We're going to have to cut greenery on Trewsday too. I don't want to do it the day before because Daisy will kill me if it's all wilted on the wedding day."

Frodo chuckled. "Daisy being Daisy, I expect she may just do that. Let's hope it's a fine day. I don't fancy tramping through woods and pulling down ivy in the rain."

"It did come down a bit yesterday. Spring's not the best season for a handfasting but Daisy was determined. That's why we decided to do it in the barn. If it turns out to be a fine day after all, we can always throw open the doors."

"What's all the rush on the handfasting?" Frodo leaned in close. "Daisy's not...you know?"

Bartimus frowned in confusion. "Know what?"

Frodo leaned closer. "You and she haven't been...you know...getting together." When Bartimus still looked confused Frodo rolled his eyes, outlining his question clearly. "Are you and Daisy expecting a babe?"

His friend drew back in horror. "No! Daisy's Pa would drag me to that wedding by my ear if she was. That's assuming her Ma didn't kill me first." He leaned in again, adding with a wink, "Not that we haven't come close a time or two."

Now Frodo chuckled. "I wondered, when I saw you two disappear for so long during the last Harvest Reel."

Now Bartimus grinned into his cider. "That was a close one, I'll grant you. For once it was our Ruby that dragged me away, instead of the other way around."

Bartimus' younger sister was a notorious flirt and even Frodo had been caught in her traps a time or two. He smiled at the pleasant memory. He had not put up much resistance, after all. When Barti looked as though he would start to quiz his friend about that smile Frodo decided a change of subject was in order. "Have you got the rings?"

"Oh yes. That was easy. Da gave me Ma's ring for Daisy, and Mistress Gamgee has given us her Da's ring for me. We've tried them on and only Daisy's needed making smaller. Bert Fennelly has done it. Turns out he's a dab hand with fine metals and that's saved me another long walk to Michel Delving." Bartimus set down his empty mug. "Honestly, Frodo. With all the things Daisy has insisted that we need for this wedding I was beginning to worry I'd wear out the road between Hobbiton and Michel Delving."

"I hope you won't be letting her run you ragged like that once you're married."

Bartimus grinned. "I probably will."

"You're a lost cause, Bartimus Brockbank," Frodo laughed, waving his empty mug, "And it's your turn to buy a round."

Bartimus stood with a chuckle. "At least I only have to walk as far as the bar for that."
Early the next week a deceptive peace reigned in the Gamgee household. "Oh, come on, Daisy. Let's have a look at it." Sam Gamgee dropped his head in his hands. "We've been waiting ages and Ma won't let us eat until you've got it sorted."

"Oh shut up, Sam! Ma...it's not right," came a plaintive call from the direction of the bedroom shared by Daisy and Marigold.

Bell Gamgee let out a long-suffering sigh. "Then ye'd best let me take a look at it. Although it can't be that bad. And I am not sewing one more ruffle on that underskirt. 'Tis well yer gettin' wed in a barn, for ye'll likely not get through any door smaller, with all them flounces."

The bedroom door opened and Sam swivelled to take his first look at his big sister's wedding frock. Daisy Gamgee would never be counted as one of the Shire's great beauties but he didn't think he had ever seen her look prettier, apart from the tears welling in her eyes. The material for her dress had come all the way from Michel Delving, courtesy of a cart trip funded by Mister Baggins. Having worn a silk dress for her own wedding, Bell Gamgee had insisted that nothing less would do for her daughter, so she and Ham had been quietly saving for several years. The shimmering fabric was a pretty shade of blue that seemed to make Daisy's hazel eyes glow golden and, despite her mother's complaints, the skirt was plain, pinned up here and there to reveal the flounces of a many-tiered petticoat, that hung just a couple of inches below the hem. The bodice was cross-laced with gold ribbons, over a fine white lawn blouse that had been embroidered with tiny blue daisies by the lass herself.

Despite all her finery, Daisy turned pleading eyes upon her mother. "'Tis too big about the waist." She slipped her hand inside the skirt waistband, waggling it to illustrate, and Bell sighed.

"And doesn't that say a lot about fittin' a fancy waistband instead of ties? Come here then. 'Tis little wonder it don't fit, mind ye. Ye've been doin' so much frettin' and worritin' that ye've likely lost some weight. Yer Da was only sayin' yesterday that yer face was lookin' a mite pinched." She took up some pins and pleated a little fabric at each side of the band.

Daisy pouted. "Pinched? Maybe we should have put that red dye in the lip salve after all."

Bell concentrated upon placing her pins. "Nonsense, lass. 'Tis nothin' that a good night's sleep won't fix." She stood back to survey her work. "There now, go take it off and ye can unpick and cut out the extra cloth. I'll sew it back on, for I'm faster with a needle. 'Twill only be an afternoon's work between us."

Daisy's voice rose higher. "But I don't have an afternoon, Ma! I've got to go with the lads to make sure they pick the best ivy. Then there's the actual decoratin' to watch. They'll not get it right if I don't keep an eye on them."

"I'm goin' to help, Daisy," Sam interjected. "I'll make sure they get it right for you. I promise."

His older sister laid a hand on his cheek and finally gave a little smile. "I know you'll do your best, but I don't think some of them older lads will pay much attention to you."

Now Bell took her daughter's shoulders and spun her about, giving her a little push, back toward the bedrooms. "They'll do it right. Stop gettin' in such a stew. Bartimus is in charge of that bit and he'll want it just as nice as ye. Ye can't do everythin' yerself, and 'tis time ye learned to trust others."

Sam piped up as mother and daughter disappeared. "Master Frodo is helpin' as well. We'll make it all perfect for you, Daisy. I promise."
"There now," Bell said as she followed the fretful bride-to-be. "That's three sensible lads lookin' after the job. And between the two of us we can have this skirt sorted on time."

That afternoon Farmer Cotton's barn was a hive of activity. Nearly every male in Hobbiton, young or old, was present, for this was traditionally their contribution to any wedding celebration. Long trestles had been set up along one wall and Sam was one of those untangling strands of ivy and laying them out for others to weave into thick garlands. Still others were adding meadowsweet, lilac and ribbons of blue and gold, before handing them off for hanging from the rafters or about what would later be the buffet tables.

Every ladder in Hobbiton had been pressed into service and some were less steady than others. Bartimus Brockbank stood, holding one of the less stable ones as his friend, Frodo Baggins, threaded a garland behind a post and dropped it to a sulky Orton Sandyman who was taking the weight. As Frodo reached just a little too far, Bartimus grabbed the rungs tighter. "Have a care, Frodo! I don't want to be responsible for you breaking your neck."

Frodo chuckled as, task completed, he began to clamber down. "That would annoy Daisy no end. She'd have to step around me on the way to the hand-fasting."

Bartimus' eyes widened. Daisy was his beloved, after all. "Frodo! Don't talk like that about Daisy. She'd be upset if you were hurt, and you know it."

As Frodo reached terra firma he clapped his friend on the back. "I didn't mean it, Barti. I know she would and I promise I shall try not to kill myself. Now let's move this ladder along so that we can fix the other end of this garland."

Orton scowled. "Aye, let's. This thing is bloody heavy."

Frodo had his back to Orton as he helped with the ladder, so he took the opportunity to roll his eyes at Bartimus, who hid his grin by shifting the ladder along. When it was placed against the beam to his satisfaction Bartimus fetched another, and Hamfast Gamgee trotted over to help. "Right lads. Let's have Barti and Master Frodo up the ladders, while me and Orton here hold them steady." He cast about the huge room, eyes finally lighting upon another. "Charlie Proudfoot, come and pass up the garland to Bartimus, will you? Bartimus, you hold it in place while Master Frodo ties it on."

Bartimus took no offence at being ordered about so. No doubt Mister Gamgee had helped decorate more weddings than he. Orton relinquished the heavy garland all too willingly, taking hold of the base of Frodo's ladder instead. The meadowsweet was making his nose itch anyway. Once he had handed up the garland to Bartimus, Charlie stood back to watch as Frodo tied it on the beam.

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Those at the top of the ladders had both hands full of garland and ribbons and Ham was using his, along with a sturdy foot, to steady Bartimus' slightly rickety ladder. That was when the itch in Orton's nose became unbearable. At first he tried wrinkling his nose. Then he tried holding his breath and pressing his nose to his upper arm. Nothing seemed to help and, before he could give any warning, Orton convulsed in an almighty sneeze.

The ladder in his hands rattled and then, to his horror, began to slide sideways. With Frodo's weight at the top that was all it took for control to slip from Orton's hands. Try as he might, he could not right the ladder and Frodo was not fast enough to make a grab for the beam above him. His startled shout had everyone turning to look as, almost in slow motion, the ladder leaned further and further over, a white-faced Frodo hanging on. The clatter of the ladder landing upon the floor was accompanied by the sickening thud of Frodo doing the same, and all was followed by a moment of absolute silence.
Charlie Proudfoot was the first to move, dashing to the still form. "Frodo?"

Hamfast held on to the other ladder until Bartimus had clambered down, and then joined the growing crowd about Frodo. "Let me through. Step aside now." Doctor Brockleby elbowed his way to the front, dropping to his knees at Frodo's side. "Somebody fetch my bag. I left it outside." It was Sam Gamgee who ran for the door.

Frodo was stirring and would have sat up, but the doctor stayed him with hands upon his shoulder and hip. "Be still, Frodo, while I see what damage has been done. Bartimus, go fetch Mister Baggins. I've no doubt he'll want to be here." With one more pained look at his friend, Bartimus dashed out, passing Sam at the barn door, as the lad returned with Doctor Brockleby's bag.

The doctor ran experienced hands along Frodo's limbs and torso. "Did you bang your head?"

Frodo blinked. "Only a little. I don't hurt. I'm alright...aaah!" Doctor Brockleby had just reached Frodo's left arm, partially trapped beneath his body at present.

"Not hurt, eh? I suspect you've a broken arm, there." Bill probed gently at Frodo's skull. "At first look that seems to be all the damage, but I'll check you over again once we've got you into bed." He leaned back to look around the circle of faces. "Somebody fetch one of those trestle tops. We'll use it to get him home. And I'll need four strong lads to carry."

Once more, Frodo protested, although he looked as white as one of Bell Gamgee's freshly laundered sheets. "I can walk."

Doctor Brockleby's voice was firm. "No, you cannot. You all but went through the floor. It was only Orton's attempts to slow the ladder's fall that saved you from worse injury."

Milo Burrows scowled. "T'was Orton who caused the fall in the first place. Stupid lad."

Orton bristled. "Are you saying I did it on purpose? I sneezed! I can't help sneezing. It was these bloody flowers."

Milo squared up. "Well, if you knew you couldn't get on with flowers why did you come in the first place? You've done nothing but complain since you walked through those doors."

Hamfast Gamgee pushed his way between the two. "Here, now. That's enough of that. It were an accident. Plain and simple. I saw all."

Milo and Orton continued to glare at each other over Ham's shoulder until parted by a few of the burlier lads, with the requested trestle top. Frodo was rolled carefully onto it.

An hour later Frodo was curled in his bed, sleeping. Doctor Brockleby passed a small bottle to Bilbo. "He should sleep for a while now. Give him five drops of this in some water in four hours. He can have more through the night but no closer than every four hours. A good night's rest will go a long way toward making him feel better."

The journey home had not been improved by a steady downpour of rain, but Bilbo had met the stretcher-bearers halfway down the hill and held Frodo's hand the rest of the way. Once there, the doctor's more detailed examination produced no more broken bones but a lot of bruises. Once the arm had been splinted and placed in a sling, Frodo was dosed and had fallen asleep almost instantly.

Bilbo frowned down at his nephew. "Poor lad. He was to have led the groomsmaids for Daisy tomorrow. I don't suppose he'll be up to that now."

Bill Brockleby began to clear away his equipment. "I wouldn't recommend it. He'll feel better once
his fever has broken and he's a strong lad so that could happen as early as tonight. He may be well enough to attend the wedding itself, but he's going to be awfully stiff tomorrow, at the very least. I'll ask Aster Tunnely to pop around with some pain medicine later." He snapped the bag shut. "I'd like you to keep an eye on him overnight. If you don't think you could manage that I can ask Aster to stay. There's no ladies due to birth at present and she's a good nurse."

Bilbo shook his head. "No. I'll watch over him. I wonder if you could do me a favour on your way down the hill, though?"

"Of course."

Bilbo accompanied the doctor to the front door. "Could you drop in at Number Three and let them know about the groomslads? They'll have to organise someone else. Poor Daisy and Bartimus. They must be so worried about their friend. Please let them know that Frodo is going to be alright."

Bill patted him on the shoulder, accepting the loan of an umbrella. "The Gamgees are a good sort. If I know Ham and Bell they'll have lots of volunteers for Chief Groomslad. Daisy will still be carried to her wedding in style. But I will let them know how Frodo is faring."

It was a frowning Daisy Gamgee that invited Doctor Brockleby into Number Three's crowded kitchen, where they gathered about the table, along with a very worried Bartimus.

Hamfast spoke first. "How is he?"

Bill smiled. "He has a broken arm and a lot of bruises, but he should be fit enough to be out of bed tomorrow. I'm afraid he will not be well enough to take one the role of Chief Groomslad, much as I believe he will try to protest otherwise."

"Thank goodness he's not hurt worse," Bartimus breathed out. "My brother, Nedes, has said he'll take on the job of Chief Groomslad."

Daisy leaned her arms upon the table with a sigh. "We were worried we'd have to put off the weddin'."

Sam stiffened in his seat and Hamfast fixed his daughter with a glare. "Daisy Gamgee! I hope that weren't your only worrit! Poor Master Frodo could have been hurt serious."

The bride to be raised her hands to ward off his ire. "No, Da! Of course not. Master Frodo is like family. I'd be worrited, weddin' or no."

"Aye. Just think on your words in future, then. You've always had a tongue that gets ahead of your head."

Daisy dropped her gaze at her father's censure, and Bartimus stroked her hand beneath the table.

Doctor Brockleby shook out his umbrella again. "Well, I should be off. I promised to visit the Widow Rumble this afternoon. Good day to you all."

Bell saw him to the door. "Good day to ye, too, and thank ye fer takin' the time to visit. Please pass on my regards to Buttercup. And watch yerself on that muddy road. 'Tis as wet as an otter's pocket out there."

Doctor Brockleby grinned. "I will." As Bell closed the door he turned up his collar and picked his way down the lane to Hobbiton.
Chapter Notes

Thanks to FallenLeaves271 for the beta

The long anticipated wedding day dawned clear and bright, with enough heat to begin drying the puddles left from the previous day's rain.

"Daisy, stop messin' with them flowers a minute and come and eat yer breakfast." Bell Gamgee set down a plate, containing fried eggs, bacon, mushrooms and fried bread. The table was filled this morning, for the Gamgees' oldest son, Hamson, and their second oldest daughter, May, had arrived late the previous evening. They were already tucking in, and a similarly loaded plate sat before Bell's place.

Daisy looked up from where she was adjusting the yellow daisies in her bridal posy. "Ma. I told you I wasn't hungry."

Bell lifted the flowers out of her hand and turned her about by the shoulder. "Aye, ye did. 'Tis a long time to the weddin' feast my lass and I'll not have ye faintin' away on yer da's arm. Now sit down and get that eaten. Them flowers can wait half an hour. Goodness knows, ye've been faffin' with 'em fer long enough already."

When Daisy dropped into her place on the bench, her older brother pushed across the teapot and milk jug. "'Tis goin' to be alright, Sis. Me and Da are goin' to check the barn and help Bartimus finish off, after breakfast."

"I thought you told me it was all done." Daisy would have jumped out of her seat had her father not laid a firm hand upon her arm. "We got it all finished lass. Stop worritin'. Your Ma just wanted us to make sure everythin' is still in place, and I said we'd help Bartimus finish settin' out the tables."

Daisy chewed on a mushroom for a moment. "Does Nedes know what to do? He's never been Chief Groomsld before."

"He's helped others a time or two, and he said he'd nip in to see Master Baggins this mornin'. Just to learn what he had planned. Although the job's much the same for all weddin's." Her older brother, Hamson, chuckled. "Don't you worrit, Sis. Nedes may not have Master Frodo's fine singin' voice, but you'll be swept off your feet, and in front of Penly Whitfoot on time."

"Talkin' of Penly, has anyone seen him?" Daisy enquired around a mouthful of bacon. Having started eating she discovered that she was hungry after all.

"I saw him goin' into the Ivy Bush yesterday," Sam offered as he swiped egg yolk from his chin and sucked it off his finger. Bell tapped his wrist and he hastily dropped his hand to his lap where, having forgotten to pick up a napkin, he surreptitiously wiped it on his breeches.

Bell sighed as she topped off her daughter's mug. "Grief, lass. Anyone would think there'd never been a weddin' in Hobbiton. Ye've got yer Da checkin' on the barn and I'll send Sam down to look in at the Ivy fer the Mayor. Will that suit ye?"
"What about the food and the cake?" Daisy was obviously not easily mollified and Bell rolled her eyes in exasperation.

Her father slapped a meaty hand upon the table, setting crockery rattling. "Daisy Gamgee! That's enough!" Daisy recoiled, eyes wide, before Hamfast's rare show of temper. "I'm goin' to trust you to get dressed and out of our front door by midday. You don't have to do anythin' else but trust the rest of us to do what we need to do, to make this weddin' happen."

Bell laid a gentle hand upon her husband's and, just like that, Ham's anger subsided. She smiled at her daughter. "When ye've finished that breakfast May and me will help ye with yer bath and dress yer hair, lass."

Daisy swallowed back a retort, wisely choosing to swallow the last of her tea instead. "Yes Ma. Sorry Da."

Bell nodded. "'Tis alright, Daisy, lass. We all want this to be the perfect day for ye and Bartimus. Don't ye worrit none. We'll make sure it is."

Up the lane, in Bag End, Frodo and Bilbo were also eating. Bilbo set a small glass of clear liquid beside Frodo's plate. "The doctor left this for you."

Frodo frowned. "What is it? I don't want to go back to sleep. Nedes is calling in shortly about the Carrying Off."

Bilbo snagged Frodo's plate and began to chop up the bacon. "It's just something for the pain." He fixed his nephew with a gimlet gaze. "And don't try to tell me you are not in any pain. I watched you limp down that hall, and your face is greyer than a wizard's beard." Bilbo slid the plate back and although Frodo grimaced, he downed the contents of the glass without further protest.

Frodo adjusted the knot in his sling before taking up his fork. "Have you seen any of the Gamgees this morning?"

"Not yet. I'll pop in later if you like. Were there any other jobs you were supposed to do today, beside carrying off Daisy?"

"No. Maybe I could still walk with the groomslads, even if I can't lead."

Bilbo snorted. "You'll find it difficult enough just to walk down that hill. You are lucky to be walking at all, my lad. I've set one of my walking sticks by the door for you, by the way."

Frodo rolled his eyes. "I won't need a walking stick, Bilbo."

The gimlet made an appearance once more. "Humour me."

On the outskirts of Hobbiton, breakfast was the very last thing on Bartimus Brockbank's mind. Arriving at Tom Cotton's barn he was surprised to find one of the doors ajar. Somewhere very close by, Bartimus could hear cows lowing. With Frodo's accident, the remainder of the lads had lost their appetite for celebration, and the decorating had been finished quickly. Bartimus frowned, for, as the last to leave, he was sure he and Orton Sandyman had closed the doors firmly behind them. Perhaps someone had arrived early to help with the final setting up.

Bartimus slipped inside, taking a moment to let his eyes adjust to the darker interior. What he saw had him opening those eyes very wide indeed. The barn was occupied, but not by people. Somehow half a dozen cows had pushed their way inside and were busy munching upon those flower garlands they could reach. Additionally, the scent of ordure, which had been so meticulously scrubbed away a
few days before, once more hung ripe in the air. Bartimus could clearly see several pats, no doubt a result of the rich bounty the cows had been browsing upon.

Hamfast Gamgee laid a hand upon Barti's shoulder. "Our Daisy ain't goin' to be too pleased about this."

Barti turned about to see that Ham was accompanied by several other villagers, obviously come to help finish off the preparations. "What am I going to do, Master Gamgee?"

Hamfast could see not entirely unexpected tears beginning to fill Bartimus' eyes. He was a strong lad, but everyone reached their limit at some point. Hamfast began to roll up his sleeves. "First we get these ladies into the field out back. Then, Bartimus you'd best go find shovel, bucket and brush, to clean up this floor. I'll give you a hand with that. Hamson, open them doors wide so we can air it out, then you and Sam go knockin' on doors, cottage and smial. We need folk to cut and fetch more ivy and flowers. 'Tis goin' to take the whole village to do it, but Daisy and Bartimus are gettin' wed today, if I have to take brush in one hand and flowers in the other."

"Ye won't have to do that, Ham. We'll all see it done," Birky Bracegirdle called out, followed by a ragged chorus of ayes.

Soon, people replaced cows in the Cotton's barn. Hamfast Gamgee's prediction that it would take all of the village was not far wrong. Indeed, there were so many males in the space that it was difficult not to fall over one another, but by the time the ladies started arriving with platters of food, later in the morning, the barn looked almost as it had when work had finished the evening before, and the sweet perfume of meadowsweet and other spring flowers was beginning to replace the stink of cow dung.

It was as the ladies were arranging the food that Olin Baker's apprentice arrived, red-faced and out of breath. The lad took several moments to catch his breath, during which time Bartimus' stomach descended to somewhere around his feet. As soon as the lad regained the power of speech Bartimus knew his stomach had been correct.

"My master says he's right sorry, sir." The lad took a deep breath. "We was loadin' yer cake onto the wagon when the pony bolted." Another breath. "T'were another wagon passin' as did it."

Bartimus grabbed his arm as the youngster fought for more breath. "The cake?"

"In the mud, sir. There's a pothole just down the lane there. The pony were goin' so fast when it hit, that the cake just bounced out the cart."

Bartimus dropped his head. "No. This can't be happening."

Borden Brewer patted Bartimus' back. "Out of interest, do you know whose cart it was, scared your pony?"

"It happened so fast, but my Master says it looked like the miller's cart."

Bartimus' hands curled into fists. "The Sandyman's." Orton Sandyman had been noticeably absent this morning and a few sets of eyes lit upon Milo Burrows, who threw up his hands. "I ain't seen him neither."

Farley Brownlock frowned. "Wasn't it Orton who helped Bartimus close up the barn last night?"

"It was," Bartimus ground out. He would have stormed off, with full intention of beating the entire Sandyman family into a pulp, but Borden and Hamson grabbed his arms.
"No time for that. You need to get yourself home and changed out of those clothes. Daisy may be cross about the loss of a wedding cake but she'll be crosser still if her groom turn up looking like that." Borden had a point. Bartimus was sweaty, his clothes stained by greenery and bovine effluvia.

Flora Fennelly and several other ladies stepped up. "Looks like we ladies have work to do as well." Her companions nodded. "We can't make you a big fancy weddin' cake in the time, but if we run home now we can make you a dozen smaller ones."

Spotting the fine tiered stand which had been set up for the wedding cake, May Gamgee brightened. "I've a better idea. Everyone go home and bake a couple of dozen decorated buns. We'll set them up on and around yonder stand and it'll look as pretty as a picture. It's the latest thing in wedding cakes in Michel Delving." Working as a parlour made in Great Smials, May knew all the latest fashions and fancies.

By this time Olin Baker had arrived. "Come to the bakery, ladies. I'll see you right with flour, sugar, and eggs." He fixed a no-nonsense expression upon his round face as he faced Hamfast Gamgee. "And at no cost."

When Ham looked as though he would have protested Olin waved a flour-dusted arm. "My gift and my apology to the bride and groom."

The ladies of Hobbiton gathered up their baskets and bags and dispersed quickly. Olin approached the downcast groom. "I'm sorry, Bartimus. I'm afraid our pony, Onion, can be bloody-minded when he gets the bit between his teeth. He was too strong for young Birky Goodbody here."

Birky and Olin both looked so distressed that Bartimus could not hold any anger against them. He smiled down at the youngster. "It's alright, Birky. It was an accident. You'd best go help Master Baker clear up."

Hamfast Gamgee watched the concern drain from young Birky's flushed features and clapped Bartimus on the back. "That was well said, lad. Now 'tis time you ran home and got washed and changed. You'll be cutting it close to get back afore our Daisy arrives." He winked. "Although, as groomsads, your brothers will no doubt help us out there. There's no rule says that once they've carried off your intended they have to bring her here by the shortest road."

For the first time since stepping into the barn, Bartimus allowed himself a grin. "Well, if everything else fails, we can always send someone to carry off the mayor too."

As Bartimus strode off Hamfast leaned in to Borden. "'Tis a thought."

"Funny you should say that. I haven't seen our mayor since first breakfast. I'll go make sure all's right there." He winked. "Send me word when Bartimus gets back. Me and the missus can take our mayor on a tour of the brew house if needed."

Half and hour later Borden stepped into the unusually empty Ivy Bush. "Maisy, have you seen our Mayor of late?"

Maisy gave her husband a sidelong glance. "What are you up to Borden Brewer?"
Borden threw up his hands. "Not me! Well, not all me, anyhow."

"Not all you?"

Her husband grinned. "Well, with all that fuss at the barn this morning, Bartimus is running a bit late. You wouldn't want Daisy to find her groom sweating like a pony that's just run ten miles, and covered in cow dung, now would you?"

Maisy shook her head. "If you'd turned up like that to our wedding I'd be married to Adelard Took now." She gave him a considering look. "Hmmm..."

Borden chuckled, sweeping her into strong arms to nuzzle her neck. "No you wouldn't. You know you would have been bored with him within weeks."

Maisy grunned, giving him a knowing shimmy. "I suppose I could have supervised your bath."

Borden's gaze darkened and he nipped at her earlobe, then suddenly sprang away at the sound of a throat clearing. "What can we do for you, Sam lad?"

Sam Gamgee turned a blushing face from the study of his toes. "Da sent me to ask if you'd found the Mayor yet, Mister Brewer."

"We've neither of us seen him, lad," Maisy replied, with a warm smile for the youngster, as she set aside the broom still clasped in one hand. "Why don't we split up and see if we can find him about the village. Mayhap he's taken himself off for a walk."

Back on Bagshot Row, Bell Gamgee stood, tying gold ribbons and white daisies into her daughter's hair while Marigold stood to one side, adding the finishing touches to her sister's bridal bouquet. Bell tapped Daisy's head with her comb. "Sit still Daisy, lass. Ye don't want to spoil all our hard work with creases in yer skirt."

Daisy stopped squirming, but straightened when she heard a knock at the front door. Marigold rushed to answer, beaming when she saw the small group of lasses on the doorstep. "The bridesmaids are here," she announced as four pretty lasses tripped, giggling, inside. All curtsied, with a chorused, "Mornin' Mistress Gamgee."

Bell smiled broadly. "Mornin' lasses. My, but don't ye look bonnie? All of ye. I don't think I've seen that many ribbons since last year's prancin' pole. Sit yerselves down. Yer bride is almost ready."

There was much careful arranging of skirts as they sat. "May, go fetch that lemonade from the pantry, and don't forget the ginger biscuits. We want our bridesmaids in good voice on the way to the handfastin'."

Daisy scowled. "But Ma...we need to be goin'. I think we're late as 'tis. Barti will think I'm not comin'."

Her mother tucked another flower amongst Daisy's curls. "Nonsense lass. 'Twill do him good to wait a while. It'll give him longer to think on what he's gettin'." In truth, May had cornered her mother in the pantry earlier, to explain about both barn and cake, and relay the request from her Da that they delay the bride a little. Marigold had only recently returned from helping Fern Bracegirdle decorate a couple of dozen tiny cakes, silently enduring her sister's censure in being late to help her don her wedding frock.

The girls tucked in and soon the room was filled with lively chatter and bright voices, discussing the merits of this song or that for the bridal procession. Honeysuckle Chubb helped herself to a second biscuit, her eyes turning dreamy. "'Tis pity Master Frodo isn't leadin' the lads this time. He's got a
beautiful voice."

Rose Cotton grimaced. "We passed him and Mister Baggins walkin' down the hill as we were comin' up. Olin Baker was helpin' cart some barrels out to the barn and offered them a lift."

"How did he look?" Daisy grabbed a biscuit for herself.

"Master Baker? Much as usual. All over flour," Rose replied.

Daisy chuckled. "Master Frodo! How did he look?"

"Oh. He's got his arm in a sling and you should see the big bruise he has on his cheek. He was limpin' too...usin' a stick."

Honeysuckle sighed. "He looked so disguised, with that stick."

May chuckled. "You mean, distinguished."

The others rolled their eyes, for it was well known that Honeysuckle Chubb had long been drooling upon Frodo Baggins from afar. Rose winked at Daisy as she asked, "Have you spoken to Master Baggins yet, Honey?"

Honeysuckle choked on a mouthful of lemonade and the others slapped her back as they giggled. Bell handed a mirror to her daughter. "There now, Daisy. What do ye think of that?"

All held their breath as Daisy looked at herself...for she was known to be a bit fussy about her appearance. For long moments she said nothing, simply staring at the carefully crafted crown of flowers and ribbons, then her mother saw tears gathering. "Oh, Daisy, lass! Don't fret. It's not to yer likin' I can change it. We've time."

Daisy reached back to grab her mother's work-worn hands. "No Ma! No. I ain't never felt so pretty in my whole life." She jumped up to grab her in a tight hug. "Thank you, Ma. For everythin'. I don't think I've said it enough, but you're the best Ma in the world."

Bell sniffed back a tear of her own as she placed a soft kiss on her daughter's temple. "I'll not say raisin' ye was easy, Daisy Gamgee. Ye've a mind as stubborn as Olin Baker's pony sometimes, but I'd not change a freckle on yer face."

She held her daughter at arm's length, to meet her eye to eye. "I don't think I'm wrong about Bartimus Brockbank. He's a good chap and I hope he will look after ye well. But ye mark this carefully my lass. If ever he takes a hand to ye, ye come straight back here. Ye'll never be turned away, no matter what." She let her gaze roam over the open-mouthed maids at her table. "That goes fer all of ye when yer turn comes. I don't hold with any marriage that makes room fer fists."

Daisy hugged her mother again. "Don't worrit Ma. Barti would never hit me." She flashed a wicked grin. "He knows I'd kick him where it hurt...just afore I walked out."

Bell chuckled. "There's my lass."

Marigold turned from her station at the front window, eyes sparkling with excitement. "They're here!"

Indeed, outside a chorus of male voices began singing. Lasses sprang up to shake out skirts and arrange petticoats. Ringlets were tossed, ribbons untangled, and Bell handed over her daughter's bouquet with a quick peck on her cheek and a whispered, "Bless ye. I'll see ye up at the barn."
Marigold opened the door with a flourish and the maids formed a giggling cordon around the bride, chanting, "Sing or snatch! Sing or snatch!" as she stepped out to face a small group of lads, led by Nedes Brockbank. The lads were singing one of the traditional bridal songs, and if Nedes was a little off-key nobody minded in the excitement.

Sweet Flora, my heart's delight  
Be loving, and do not slight  
The proffer I make, for modesty's sake  
I honour your beauty bright.  
For love, I profess, I can do no less  
Thou hast my favour won  
And since I see your modesty,  
I pray agree and fancy me,  
Though I'm but a farmer's son.

The girls began to stroll down the lane, a beaming Daisy at their centre, as first one lad and then another feinted, in vain attempt to break through her ring of petticoat protectors.

At that same moment Bilbo paused at the entrance to Tom Cotton's largest barn. "Oh my. Doesn't this look magnificent?" He turned, about to clap Frodo on the back, when he noticed his nephew's quizzical expression. "What is it, lad? Is something amiss?"

Having obtained an unexpected lift, the Baggins pair were a little early, and food was still being arranged on long trestle tables to one side. Other than that, however, the space looked wonderful, with its many garlands of flowers and pretty bridal canopy.

Frodo rushed to reassure his uncle. "Oh, it looks perfect." He pointed to a garland decorating the tables. "Only I thought that garland was decorated with lilac, not bluebells." He nodded to others, twined about the poles of the bridal canopy. "And those were trimmed with daisies, not meadowsweet."

"Maybe Bartimus changed his mind after you left. It's the groom's prerogative...or should that be the bride's?" Bilbo shrugged. "Let's find you a seat before it gets too crowded in here and I'll go and see if Hamfast needs any help."

In the village, others were performing another, increasingly important, task.

"No sign?" Borden asked as Sam returned.

"No sir. I've run all the way to the Brockbank cottage, thinkin' the mayor may have wanted a word with Bartimus before the weddin', but he's not been there." Sam grimaced. "And now Bartimus is worritin'. I told him, it ain't no good him worritin' about that 'cause he's got enough to tend to, gettin' bathed and changed and back to the barn before our Daisy arrives. She'll have his hide if he's not there before her."

Maisy bustled from around the corner of the stables, mopping her face on her apron. "I've been down to Deep Coomb Farm, but the Brownlocks haven't seen him."

"And I checked our privy... you know...the old one up by the brewhouse? I thought maybe he'd got locked in. You know how the hinges sometimes stick?" Borden shrugged. "I don't know where else to try."

Sam's eyes widened on a sudden thought. "You don't reckon he's fallen in the river, do you?"
About to declare the idea far-fetched, Borden considered a moment. "Well, Milo Burrows did say some of the banks looked loose after all the rain we've had the past week."

Sam swallowed. "You don't think he's drownned, do you?"

Maisy patted his shoulder. "Now lad, let's not get in front of ourselves." Nevertheless, when allocating the next tasks she took into account Sam's young age. "I'll walk one side of the Water, from Stone Bridge to Bywater, and you walk the other, Borden love. Sam, you run back and tell Nedes to take Daisy to the barn by the long road." Sam was off before another word was spoken and, taking a deep breath, Borden and Maisy crossed the village square, toward the bridge.

Sam was beginning to wish he had longer legs by the time he found the bride's party. He seemed to have been doing nothing but run, with messages from one person or another, since the moment he climbed out of bed.

Maids and groomslads were well into the third verse of 'My Sweetheart Come Along' and Daisy was growing frustrated, for they were showing a marked reluctance to carry her off. She leaned aside to whisper to Rose Cotton, "I wish they'd get on with it. Bartimus must be worritin'. I'm all for keepin' a groom waitin' a bit but this is gettin' silly. 'Tis not like I weigh too much for them to carry me off. Ma had to bring in the waist on my frock only yesterday!"

Rose Cotton nodded, slipping loose from the circle when she saw Sam Gamgee run up and grab Nedes' arm to whisper hurriedly. When Sam departed she drew the Chief Groomslad aside. "What's goin' on Nedes Brockbank? Daisy's of a mind to be wed today, not next week."

Nedes drew her further aside. "There was a bit of a hitch and Barti is runnin' late." When Rose's eyes widened in alarm he hastened to reassure her. "'Tis all sorted. Don't fret. He'll be there." Then he winced. "But now there's been another problem."

"What!"

Nedes shushed her, pulling her even further aside when he noticed Daisy turn to watch them. "They can't find Mayor Whitfoot."

Throwing up her hands, Daisy shouted, "That's it! Everyone just stop." She turned back to the pair, placing hands on her hips, her eyes flashing fire. About her, the singing faded away. "Nedes Brockbank, you tell me what's goin' on right now! We've done so much walkin' I'll be too wore out to dance at my own weddin'. Whatever the bother is, out with it!"

Nedes turned to Rose for support but she only shrugged and backed away. He fixed on a smile. "There's been a bit of a problem at the barn, and Bartimus is runnin' a bit late is all."

Daisy studied him, watching a blush creep up from his neck. "Nedes, you could never lie worth a copper penny. What's wrong at the barn?"

Nedes mopped a sudden sweat from his brow. "The decorations just needed a bit of tweakin' and we...Barti and a few others...had to redo them this mornin'.' When Daisy's scowl deepened he hastened to add, "'Tis alright now. It looks pretty. Honest. And when I set out for here Barti was runnin' home to get changed."

Still Daisy made no move. "And that's it?"

Nedes shuffled his feet, glancing down the lane at Sam Gamgee's hastily retreating back. "Well...there may just be one more wee problem."
Daisy said nothing, allowing her silence alone to draw the rest from his reluctant lips. "We can't find the mayor," he finally blurted.

There was an all-embracing silence as everyone took in the import of his confession. Everyone knew Daisy's opinion of 'living over the brush'. Rather than the expected tirade, however, large tears began to roll down her cheeks. Her sister, May, drew her in, letting Daisy's tears soak the shoulder of her nice new frock.

Rose Cotton sighed. "Look. The cat's full out of the bag. Let's just get to the barn. We may as well wait with everyone else, and Daisy's ma and da should be there by now."

The younger Marigold tried an optimistic note. "Maybe by the time we get there they'll have found the mayor."

Nobody else looked hopeful.

In the barn, Sam Gamgee arrived, red-faced and gasping for breath. He ran straight to where his parents and Bartimus' father, Oakley, stood in a huddle by the handfasting canopy. Frodo watched, with interest, as Sam whispered something, and all visibly blanched.

Bilbo, along with the rest of the guests, looked on in confusion. "I know things were a bit delayed, but it's not that bad, surely?" He patted Frodo's knee, ignoring the lad's wince, and made his way to Hamfast's side. "What is the trouble, Ham? Can I do anything to help?"

Hamfast leaned close, his voice barely more than a whisper. "They can't find Mayor Whitfoot. Maisy and Borden Brewer is out, walkin' the river banks."

"The river! Oh dear." As he spoke he became aware of a stirring in the gathering and Bartimus Brockbank strode in. The groom's smile dropped when he saw the expressions on the faces of his present and future parents.

The heads of the assembled villagers, and family, swivelled from groom to parents and back again, faces exhibiting confusion, curiosity and, sadly in some cases, the delighted anticipation of the birth of a good bit of gossip. Bartimus made his progress to the front in as dignified a manner as he could muster, resisting the urge to hurry. When he reached the handfasting canopy Hamfast drew him in to the family huddle.

"What's happened, Master Gamgee?" He glanced at Bell. "Is it Daisy?"

Bell patted his arm. "No, lad. Daisy's as right as rain and on her way."

"Then what's the matter. I can see something is. And where's the mayor? Shouldn't he be here by now?"

"Ah. Now that's where the problem lies."

As matters were being explained to Bartimus, Borden and Maisy Brewer were walking either side of the river, eyes peeled for any sign of a body in the water. "Penly? Mayor Whitfoot?" They were almost hoarse with calling, and beginning to give up hope, for they were now quite a distance from the village proper.

"Here." The voice was so thin that Borden almost didn't hear it above the rush of the rain swollen river. It was only when Maisy pointed from the other shore, that he realised it was not his own wishful thinking.
Part of the bank had recently fallen away here and, when Borden stepped as close to the edge as he dared, and looked down, he could see a very bedraggled Penly Whitfoot, up to his ample chest in water and clinging determinedly to an overhanging branch. He looked a very sorry sight, his fine velvet suit slathered in mud and an assortment of twigs and leaves crowning his grey head.

"I'll fetch a rope!" Maisy called as she ran back to the village along the other bank. Neither had thought to bring one, believing that if the ageing and rotund Penly had fallen in, there would be little need for haste in extracting his lifeless body. To find the mayor alive was almost as big a shock as finding his body would have been.

By the time the bride's party arrived at Tom Cotton's barn, Daisy was dry-eyed. However, once she saw Bartimus, standing beside the canopy, all calm fled. Breaking into a wail, she ran into his arms, much to the mingled amusement and astonishment of the assembly.

Once she had subsided a little, Bell stepped in to dry her daughter's eyes. "Don't ye worrit none, lass. If it comes down to the line, yer da will do the handfastin'."

Daisy's eyes filled again. "But I wanted a proper ceremony," she sniffled.

Bell's brows climbed. "Do ye not think yer da good enough then? Yer da and me was handfasted by my grandda, and I don't see as it did us any harm."

Daisy stepped back, mouth opening and closing soundlessly for several seconds, while her mother folded her arms. Daisy swallowed. "You're not wed? You mean me and Mari and Sam and the others...we're..."


Daisy regrouped. "Sorry Da. Sorry Ma. I suppose it was different then."

"If you mean by that, there were no money to bring the mayor all the way from Michel Delvin', then yes. Things was different." Hamfast scowled at his daughter.

"Ahem." Bilbo had been standing to one side and now he stepped in. "May I suggest a compromise?"

All eyes turned to him at once, in the desperate hope that he would. "I have been representing Hobbiton at the Shire elections for many years, so I suppose you could look upon me as some kind of official. If you are willing, I would be happy to undertake the handfasting, in the mayor's absence. Then, once he is found, Penly may be prepared to deal with the requisite paperwork."

Not entirely sure of the difference between ordinary paperwork and 'requisite' paperwork, Daisy looked aside at Bartimus.

"I'm willing if you are, Daisy. We've waited a long time for this day, and all our friends have come to help us celebrate." Daisy considered for a moment then nodded, taking his hand.

Faces hopeful, the couple faced their parents. Oakley Brockbank shrugged. "Me and yer Ma jumped over a brush too. I don't see nothin' wrong with that, but if ye got yer heart set on a fancy do, then I reckon Mister Baggins here is as good a hobbit as any, to say the words."

Bell smiled at Bilbo. "I can't think of no-one I'd trust more to do the honours. Mister Bilbo has been like an uncle to all my young uns."
Hamfast nodded. "You'll get no argument here. Mister Bilbo will do for me, and in my eyes there's none wiser."

That last elicited a few titters from the gathering, but nobody dared comment aloud. Bilbo's knowing gaze swept the assembly. "Then we'd best get on with it, so that we can begin consuming the lovely repast provided."

There was a general scramble as groomslads and bridesmaids arranged themselves to either side, along with much tugging of weskits and shaking out of petticoats. Bell spun her daughter about, dabbed at her eyes, pinched her cheeks and shook the creases out of Daisy's skirt. Oakley straightened Bartimus' collar and the bride and groom stepped beneath the flower bedecked canopy, where Bilbo stood, smiling. Silence fell.

Bilbo's clear and cultured voice reached the farthest corners of the large barn. "Daisy and Bartimus, today your families and friends have come together to witness you exchange your marriage vows." He smiled at the couple. "Love changes all and that is as it should be, for life is about change." He nodded to Nedes Brockbank, who placed an acorn in Bartimus' upturned palm. "Just as an acorn grows into a seedling, and from there, to a mighty oak, so too your love will grow and change. Daisy and Bartimus, do you come to this marriage of your own free will?"

The couple replied in confident and perfect unison. "I do."

Bilbo held aloft two green silk cords. "When your lives crossed you formed eternal bonds." He nodded to Hamfast, who laid his daughter's hand in Bartimus' and stepped back as Bilbo tied their palms together loosely about the acorn.

"Daisy Gamgee, do you vow to share in Bartimus' pain and endeavour always, to ease it?"

Daisy's voice was clear. "I do."

"Bartimus Brockbank, do you vow to share in Daisy's pain and endeavour, always to ease it?"

Bartimus' reply was firm. "I do."

Behind them, came a chorus of, "So the bindin' is made," from friends and relations.

Bilbo waited for the echoes to die before continuing. "Daisy, do you vow to share in Bartimus' hopes and dreams, doing all within your power to help bring them to fruition?"

Daisy frowned, mouthing the word, 'fruition'.

Bilbo leaned in to whisper. "Do you promise to help make his dreams come true?"

"Oh. I do."

"Bartimus, do you vow to share in Daisy's hopes and dreams, doing all within your power to bring them to fruition?"

"I do."

Once more the assembly declared, "So the bindin' is made!"

Bilbo stepped closer, placing his own hands upon theirs. "Daisy and Bartimus, as your hands are bound now, so your lives are joined in love and trust. These cords are only a symbol, for your marriage is formed, not by silk, but by the vows you exchanged before family and friends." His eyes
brimming with unshed tears, Bilbo looked deep into their shining faces. "May your hands be blessed this day. May they have strength to hold together through all of life's storms, and yet be gentle enough to nurture each other, and any that may spring from this union. Like the oak tree, may you build a marriage rooted and thriving in love, bringing shelter to all fortunate enough to come beneath its branches."

He accepted a small cushion from Oakley, upon which rested two plain golden rings. "You have chosen to seal your vows by the giving and receiving of rings." He smiled. "Daisy, please make your vow."

Daisy lifted the larger of the two rings, looking boldly into her groom's eyes. "Bartimus Brockbank, I will hold fast to you for all the days of my life. To show the world that I have made this vow, I give you this ring."

Bartimus turned their two bound hands so that his was uppermost and Daisy slid the ring home on his third finger.

Now Bartimus took the remaining ring. Turning their hands again, he held it over Daisy's, the love in his gaze clear for all to see. "Daisy Gamgee, I will hold fast to you for all the days of my life. To show the world that I have made this vow, I give you this ring." He slipped it onto her waiting finger; a very smooth and soft finger, it must be said.

Bilbo unwound the cords, presenting one to Hamfast and the other to Oakley. "Accept these as a reminder of the vows made by your children upon this day. If those vows ever begin to unravel, it is your task to help bring them back together."

Now Bilbo raised his hands. "Daisy and Bartimus, on behalf of all here present, and..."

"Hoy! That's my job, Bilbo Baggins!"

There was a collective gasp and all heads swivelled toward the barn doors, where Penly Whitfoot stood, flanked by Borden and Maisy Brewer. As he waddled toward the shocked couple, parting the observers like Ulmo parting the sea, he cut quite a figure. His grey hair was damp, as though just washed and, instead of the fine velvet suit he usually wore on such occasions, he sported a pair of plaid breeches, held up by a piece of twine, and an obviously borrowed smock, that strained alarmingly across his prominent stomach.

When he came before the marriage party there was a great deal of shuffling of feet. Bilbo took all in his stride however. "Hello Penly. You're a little late, so we decided to go on without you."

Penly frowned. "I can see that." He let the silence build for several moments before breaking into a broad grin. "And I can hardly blame you. Well, Mister Baggins, have these two made their vows in the proper manner?"

"We have witnessed their vows, yes."

"And I see they've exchanged the rings."

"Just this minute, yes."

"Well then, let's make this all legal and proper." He came to stand beside Bilbo, who ceded his place at once. Penly smiled out at the assembly. "I don't think we need go through all the rest again. There are cakes to be eaten after all. Together, then, Mister Baggins." Penly raised his hands, motioning for Bilbo to do likewise, and together they pronounced, "Bartimus and Daisy, on behalf of all those present, and by the strength of your own love, we pronounce you married." Penly winked at
Bartimus. "You may seal your vows with a kiss."

Bartimus and Daisy did not need telling twice, and the roar of approval from the guests made the rafters ring. As soon as they parted the bridesmaids called, "The flowers! The flowers! Throw the flowers!"

Laughing, Daisy turned her back to toss the beribboned bridal bouquet over her shoulder. There was much squealing as Honeysuckle Chubb snatched it neatly from the air, and she glanced shyly at Frodo Baggins who, all oblivious, appeared to be laughing at something Bert Fennelly was saying.

Once the noise had died down Hamfast stepped forward. "And now I think we could all do wi..." He spun about just in time to catch Bartimus, who crumpled silently to the floor. Daisy shrieked and from the back Ted Sandyman could be heard to exclaim. "Good grief! What now?"

A few minutes later Bartimus was sitting in the open barn doorway, at his new wife's insistence, sipping a glass of water. Behind them, the rest of Hobbiton was tucking into the vast quantities of food laid out. Bell Gamgee arrived, bearing two plates of food, handing one to Daisy and setting the other in Bartimus' lap. "When did ye last eat, lad?"

"Er...supper last night, maybe?"

Bell rolled her eyes and Bartimus hastened to explain. "I was going to have second breakfast, but with all the trouble at the barn this morning, I forgot."

Daisy placed a hand on her hip. "Just what was this trouble with the barn that everyone keeps talking about?"

Bell left the newlyweds to sort it out for themselves, but a few moments later she clearly heard her daughter shriek, "Cows!"

Hamfast chuckled as he tucked his wife into his side. "Wait till he tells her about the cake."

"Wait till he tells her about the cake."
"He's here, Bilbo!" Frodo jumped up from his seat in the parlour window and ran to the hall, leaving Bilbo to follow from his study at a more sedate pace.

Throwing open the door, Frodo stood, grinning, as Merry dropped nimbly from the cart and caught the large carpet bag tossed down to him by Tom Carter. "Thank you, Mister Carter. Please pass on my regards to your family."

Tom Carter tipped his battered hat. "'Tis welcome ye are, Master Brandybuck. 'Twas a pleasure travelin' with ye. Just ask at the Ivy Bush when ye want to go home to Buckland. Borden will know when I'm due out that way next." The carter waved to Bilbo and Frodo, clicked to his pony, and was off up the lane toward Overhill.

Merry sauntered up the garden path, but as soon as he neared the door he dropped his bag and all pretence of maturity, flinging himself at his cousin. Long used to his antics, Frodo was already braced, thankful that the almost-full-grown Merry had dropped the habit of leaping up, to wrap legs about his cousin's waist. Even so, Frodo let out an "Oof!" and it was some moments before he could draw breath. "Hello, Merry."

"It's been an age!" Merry announced as he unpeeled himself and turned to offer a hand to Bilbo. "Thank you for inviting me, Uncle Bilbo."

The elder Baggins grinned. "Why so formal, lad? Come and give me a hug. I won't break, you know." Merry needed no further coaxing. "Come inside then. Frodo will put your bag in the back bedroom and you can come into the kitchen for a bite to eat...unless you want a wash first. There's hot water in the boiler and I can ask Sam Gamgee to light the copper in the wash house if you'd prefer a bath."

Merry was a tween, so his reply was not unexpected. "I'm starving." He lifted an arm to sniff tentatively at his armpits and wrinkled his nose. "I've been staying at inns along the way, so I'm not too ripe. If you can stand it, I'd rather eat first, but I would love a bath later."

Frodo grinned. "I've smelled riper. I can remember a time when Bilbo and I were almost refused admission to Great Smials. I'll nip down the hill to ask Sam to light the copper, after I've dropped off your bag." He reached down to lift said bag and grunted. "Good grief, Merry. Just how long are you anticipating staying? You must have your entire wardrobe in here."

Merry grimaced. "Mama insisted. She seemed to think that Hobbiton has some grand social life. She even made me pack my best suit, and I lost count of the number of pairs of under-drawers she put in there."

Bilbo steered their visitor toward the kitchen. "Well, you're too late for the Lithe Fair and too early for the Harvest Reel, but we'll try to keep you entertained. There are some rather pretty walks hereabouts, and somebody in the village is bound to have a birthday party."
Later that evening three satisfied and clean hobbits sat about Bag End's comfortable parlour. A window stood open to the soft summer air and Merry watched a couple of moths dance about one of the candles. He inhaled the sweet scent of Old Toby and turned to find Bilbo drawing on his pipe and handing a lit spill to Frodo. Merry's jaw dropped. "Frodo! If Mama saw you smoking she would wash your mouth out with soap."

Frodo's eyes gleamed as he lit his own pipe and, when it was drawing to his satisfaction, lobbed the spill into the empty parlour grate. In the haughty tone frequently used of older siblings to younger he scoffed, "Honestly, Merry! I am nearly of age you know. I've been smoking for ages now. Anyway, Aunt Esmeralda isn't here to see me." Blue eyes narrowed. "And you're not going to tell her, are you?" In truth, he had been smoking regularly for only a couple of months, but he retained a healthy fear of his aunt Esmeralda's soap dish.

Bilbo chuckled as he chided, "You have not been smoking for that long, Frodo."

Merry's eyes took on a familiar twinkle. "Well, you're not quite of age, and you know Mama's opinions on smoking. I shall consider whether or not to tell her."

His cousin raised dark brows. "I see. And will there be a price for your beneficent silence?"

"You know, I believe there may be."

"If this silence comes at too high a price, I may just decide to take my chances with your mother's soap dish."

"Then I shall have to consider my price very carefully," was Merry's arch reply.

Having observed the exchange with growing amusement, Bilbo stepped in. "So, what would you like to do while you are here, Meriadoc?"

Merry threw his arms wide. "Why, everything, of course."

Hobbiton was a small village, so 'everything' did not take long to accomplish. The market was much the same as that which set up outside Brandy Hall, and the people likewise, but one thing Merry did notice and he mentioned it over luncheon one day.

"Uncle Bilbo, there is a lock on Bag End's door, but I've never seen you use it. Aren't you afraid you may be burgled in the night?"

Bilbo blinked. "Burgled? In Hobbiton? Who would want to burgle their neighbour?"

Merry frowned. "What about ruffians? Don't you have those? The East Road isn't too far away, after all, and Bounders can't stop everyone at the bridge."

Bilbo set down his knife and fork. "Buckland has not been having more trouble with cattle rustling has it? Rorymac has mentioned nothing in our correspondence."

Merry shrugged. "Not lately but, after that trouble a few years ago, Uncle Rory still insists that the hall and all the barns are locked and guarded after dusk."

"I am afraid that is the cost of living on what my neighbours would insist is the 'wrong' side of the Brandywine. But no, lad. We rarely have need to lock the doors at night in Hobbiton or Bywater, or indeed, any of the villages west of the river. Except, perhaps, for those to the far west, beyond Michel Delving." Bilbo took up his cutlery again. "Although if it worries you I will lock the door at night while you are here."
"Oh, no! Don't change things for me. I was just wondering."

Frodo patted his younger cousin's hand. "It's alright, Merry. I've lived here for ages now, and I can't remember a single instance of theft."

Bilbo chuckled. "Unless we count the price of flour from the Sandyman mill."

Initially, Merry remained close to Bilbo or Frodo, but a week into his visit the day dawned sunny and clear, imbuing him with the urge to take a nice brisk walk. Bilbo had gone off in the early morning, on some business in Bywater, and Frodo was reading. In Merry's opinion his previously energetic cousin spent far too much time just sitting around nowadays, but Frodo would not be winkled out of his armchair, so Merry decided it was the perfect day to test his navigating skills. There was only one main road through Hobbiton, after all.

It was a market day and he was still a growing lad, so Merry spent some time buying a few odds and ends of food, just to keep him going until lunch time. Then he considered the distance to Bywater and back, and bought a few more, in case he missed lunch. By the time he left the village his tummy was full, the sun was quite high, and anyone who was going anywhere upon business had probably already reached their destination, leaving the Bywater road largely deserted.

Merry strolled along at a meandering pace, counting the wildflowers in the hedgerows to either side and humming a walking song, recently learned from Bilbo. Rounding a corner he spotted Bilbo ahead of him. As there was some distance between them, and Merry was quite enjoying the freedom of walking alone, he did not call out. A long way ahead two people rounded a bend, walking toward Hobbiton. Both looked rather well-to-do, the male in a fine linen suit and the lady elegantly attired in lilac silk, although the precariously balanced arrangement of feathers and bows upon her head rather spoilt the image, in Merry's opinion. Ahead of him, Bilbo hesitated. Then he just winked out of existence.

Merry blinked, staggering to a halt. Then, being of a curious age, ran ahead. Skidding to a halt where Bilbo had last stood, Merry discovered a gap in the hedge and ditch, forming the entrance to a field of ripening oats, but there was no sign of his uncle. Had he just witnessed Bilbo using his fabled magic ring? The one he told tales of, but which nobody could actually say that they had seen? In common with many hobbits, Merry had doubted its existence, and yet he had just witnessed Bilbo disappear, had he not? Even as he scanned the length of the hedgerow, Bilbo suddenly reappeared, several yards ahead, and Merry caught a wink of gold as the older hobbit slid something into his pocket.

Bilbo had apparently not seen Merry, so the tween decided to keep this new knowledge to himself. There were definitely questions to be answered however, and he decided that cousin Frodo would be the one to ask. Frodo owed him a favour, after all. Merry stepped back into the road, almost bumping into the other two travellers, who halted so quickly that the lady had to reach up a hand to steady her extravagant hat.

Almost everyone in the Shire was related to everyone else, but Merry did not recognise their faces. Still, they were his elders so he offered a small bow and, "Good morning Mistress, Master."

He had not expected anything more than a 'good morning' in reply, so was surprised when they addressed him. It was the male who spoke. "You are the Brandybuck lad visiting Bag End, are you not?" The tone was rather haughty, but Merry took the high road, having been raised to offer politeness even when it was not reciprocated. "I am, sir. Meriadoc Brandybuck. At your service."

The lady was as aloof as her companion, assessing him down her nose. "From across the river I expect."

"Yes, Mistress." Deciding that their attitude justified just a touch of sass in response, he added, "My
grandfather is Rorimac Brandybuck, the Master of Buckland. But you have me at a disadvantage. May I know who I am addressing?"

The male had the grace to colour. Now he inclined his head. "I am Otho Sackville-Baggins and this is my lady wife, Lobelia."

Merry bowed once more, preparing to lie through his teeth. "It is a pleasure to meet you," and he could not resist adding, "I have heard my Uncle Bilbo speak of you often."

Otho's eyes narrowed. "Yes, well. We are related, after all."

"Cousins, I believe."

Lobelia's lips pursed. "Upon the distaff side, yes. Bilbo having no issue of his own, Otho is his heir."

Merry stammered. "Erm…I thought Frodo was his heir." He was still rather distracted by Bilbo's disappearance, although now very much aware of the reason for it. Had he a magic ring, Merry was in no doubt that he would have used it too.

Otho's gaze darkened, his tone icy. "Adoption does not necessarily result in someone being declared an heir, in the eyes of the law, young Master Brandybuck." The couple stepped around him, rather as they would a pile of pony dung, and hurried off toward Hobbiton without so much as a 'goodbye'.

Too curious about Bilbo's disappearance, Merry had little interest in taking offence at the couple. He shrugged, poking his head back through the hedge but, whether by magic or simply a good turn of speed, Bilbo was no longer in sight. All thoughts of exploring Bywater were forgotten. Merry turned back toward Hobbiton instead, choosing to follow his uncle example and walk along the margins of the field, rather than encounter the Sackville-Baggins' again. He definitely needed to wheedle some information from Frodo.

It was some time before Merry reached Bag End once more, for he stopped off for a snack on the way. When he did not find Frodo in his chair he called out. "Frodo? Uncle Bilbo?"

There was no reply and a quick exploration of the smial and garden revealed no sign of either cousin or uncle. Perhaps Frodo had gone out after all. As he stood, frustrated that the questions spinning around in his head were not about to be answered, there and then, his gaze fell upon the door to Bilbo's study. Although the door often stood open, Merry had never actually set foot across the threshold. It was Bilbo's private domain, and he noted that even Frodo only entered when invited. Upon a writing slope sat a large, red leather-bound book, with the initials BB tooled in one corner. Frodo had once told him that Bilbo was using the book to write down recollections of his great adventure.

Merry had been raised to be a very polite gentlehobbit. There was a possibility that one day he would be the Master of Buckland, after all. He was also still a rather young hobbit, however, and young hobbits have an inquisitive streak. Perhaps he would learn more about that magic ring within the pages of Bilbo's book. One more quick glance down the hall to ensure that he was still alone, and Merry tiptoed into the study where, pausing to wipe hands upon his breeches, he untied the leather thong and opened the book.

The title page read, "My Diary. My Unexpected Journey. There and Back Again." It seemed that Bilbo had changed his mind upon several occasions regarding the title of his tale. Turning the page, Merry scanned Bilbo's neat hand and, by the time he was halfway down the next, was completely drawn into the tale of Burglar Baggins. He had heard bits and pieces of the story, but never the whole, and in the precise order that events occurred. So engrossed was he in the exciting tale that he did not notice Bilbo's presence, until a smoke ring
drifted across the page. He leapt up, closing the book with a snap and clasping hands behind his 
back, in a vain attempt to deny his actions. Even as he did so, he knew it was futile. He had been 
ocught, red-handed. "You came home, Uncle Bilbo." Then he lifted his gaze to meet Bilbo's 
squarely, choosing to acknowledge his fault and face the consequences, as his father had taught him. 
"I'm sorry. I did not mean to intrude."

"I see you got as far as the arrival at Master Beorn's house. What do you think of my prose?" Bilbo's 
tone was mild but there was a disconcerting glitter in his eyes.

"Erm…very good."

"It's not really ready for public reading yet. That is why I keep it in my private study."

Merry winced at his uncle's emphasis upon the word 'private'. As they often did, when he was in 
rather, words fell over themselves in their haste to exit his mouth. "I am sorry. Only I saw you on the 
Bywater Road. And then I didn't. And when I got here you were not. Nor was Frodo. So I had 
nobody to ask. And your door was open, with the book just there."

That Bilbo managed to comprehend the flood was to his credit. "And your curiosity got the better of 
you. I suppose that's what comes of having a Took for a mother. My own mother was a Took, you 
know."

"Belladonna Took was my mother's, great grandfather's sister, I think," Merry supplied after a 
moment's consideration.

"Great grandfather?" Bilbo drew deeply upon his pipe, his pale blue gaze grown distant. "How the 
generations flow by." Now his eyes snapped back to Merry. "I suppose relatives, particularly young 
ones, should be forgiven the occasional indiscretion."

Merry swallowed. "I would be very grateful if you would." Still, he had been holding the question in 
for too long, and now it popped out without further preamble. "Did you use your magic ring on the 
road just now?"

Bilbo raised bushy brows. "My, my. You have been busy this morning. Do you believe in magic, 
then, Meriadoc?"

Merry glanced back at the book, its secrets held close once more. "I think I do." And still his Tookish 
nature asserted itself. "May I see your ring?"

Something in Bilbo's face grew dark as one hand trailed down a fine chain. Merry took a careful step 
backwards. Then Bilbo's mood lightened and he patted his pocket. "I don't think so. Such things are 
best kept hidden." He gently tapped Merry's forehead with the stem of his pipe. "As are others, until 
I am ready to reveal them. Perhaps I need to make use of door locks after all, even install some 
additional ones. Do I need to have a lock put on my study door, Merry?"

"No, sir," Merry replied in some haste.

"I shall overlook this little episode, but I may not be so forgiving in future."

Relief flooded Merry's voice. "Thank you, Uncle Bilbo. I shall not enter your study again. I promise. 
And I am sorry that I betrayed your hospitality."

Bilbo indicated the door, Merry hurried out, and Bilbo closed it quietly behind them. "Then we shall 
say nothing more upon the matter. I believe Frodo will return shortly, so you had best go and set the 
table for tea."
Merry scurried off, so he did not see Bilbo's avuncular smile.

One day, late the following spring, Sam straightened, glancing up at the sun. "You'd best go wash your hands, Master Frodo. It's nigh on teatime and Mr Bilbo will be calling you."

Frodo sliced off another faded blossom and grinned across at his companion. "How do you do that?"

"Do what, sir?"

"How do you always know what time it is, regardless of the season, just by looking at the sun?"

Sam shrugged as he bent to his own task again. "I don't rightly know. I suppose it comes of workin' outdoors so much. But Mister Bilbo will be callin' you. You should put some of Ma's cream on your nose too. It's looking a mite pink."

Frodo reached up to touch, and winced. "I didn't think the sun would be so strong this early in the year."

"Da says it's goin' to be a good summer this year." Sam dropped another tattered blossom into their shared bucket.

"I've obviously been spending too much time indoors over the past few years," Frodo cleaned his knife blade on an oily rag Sam carried for the purpose, then sheathed it before slipping it into his breast pocket.

They both turned at the sound of Bag End's kitchen door being unlatched. Bilbo stuck his head out to call, "Frodo. Teatime," before disappearing again.

"You'd best go home for your own tea, Sam. It's likely I won't be back to help you later." Frodo frowned. "I don't know whether it's his age, but Bilbo seems to want me close at hand more often nowadays."

"Don't you worry about me, Master Frodo. Our Mari will put mine away until I get there. I just want to finish this bit, so I can make a start on cuttin' back that lavender tomorrow, before I help Da at the Sackville-Baggins'."

"How are my dear cousins nowadays? I haven't seen them for months … although I don't necessarily count that as a loss."

"Much as always." Sam schooled his features to what impassivity he could, but it was not enough to fool Frodo, who grinned broadly.

"I see. Well, don't let them get away with too much. I know that Bilbo offered your Da extra money, if ever he wants to just work for us. I have no doubt that the Sackville-Baggins' would find someone else to run about after them...eventually."

"Frodo! Come on, lad. The tea's stewing in the pot!" Bilbo had not bothered with the door this time, instead flinging open the kitchen window to call.

"You'd best be off. Mister Bilbo don't sound in the best of moods."

Frodo sighed. "No. He's been a bit irascible for weeks. Something is gnawing at him and I think it's time I discovered what." He gave Sam a small grimace before trotting off across the vegetable garden to the kitchen door.
Sam watched the door thoughtfully for a while, before returning to his work. Da would argue that Mr Bilbo's doings were none of his business, but a hobbit could wonder, couldn't he?

Inside, Frodo washed his hands at the kitchen sink as his uncle fussed at the table. "Sorry, Bilbo. I started chatting with Sam and didn't realise I'd been so long."

Bilbo poured tea. "It's nothing, lad. I'm afraid I have been a bit on edge of late."

"Is there some particular reason? I know you've been having trouble with a part of your book. Can I help?" Frodo threw aside the towel, hurriedly snatching it up again when Bilbo scowled, and throwing it over a rope strung beneath the mantle.

"It's not the book."

Frodo settled into a chair opposite Bilbo, and helped himself to the butter dish and a slice of bread. "Then what is it? You'll forgive me for saying it, but you've been a bit like a troll with a sore head of late."

"No I haven't," Bilbo snapped. Then he frowned. "Have I?"

His nephew chuckled. "Yes. A very old and grumpy troll, whose just been deprived of a tasty bite of hobbit flesh."

"Yes. Well. Maybe I have been a bit distracted of late." He poured tea for them both. "You have remembered that you come of age this year?"

Frodo dropped a dollop of bilberry jam onto the side of his plate. "I'm hardly likely to forget. I shall be thirty-three and you will be eleventy-one. But I don't see why that should make you grumpy. We can have our usual party and I shall get the key to the door." He grinned. "Although, as you never lock the door, it really won't make that much difference, will it?"

"Key to the door. Yes. I've been wanting to talk to you about that."

Bilbo paused for so long that Frodo felt obliged to assure him. "If you haven't got time to get one cut I'm sure I'll manage. As I said. You never lock it anyway. It's only a formality."

"Nonsense, lad. Of course you shall have a key. In fact…" Bilbo paused again, fingers tracing the chain that ran from breeches waistband, securing his magic ring in his pocket, and Frodo set down his bread.

"What's the matter, Uncle. You're worrying me. Is something wrong? Are you sick?"

Bilbo planted both hands upon the table. "Now, when have you ever known me to be sick? But I have begun to feel a little … well … a little weary of this place."

"Bag End?" Frodo's bright blue eyes swept the large, well appointed, if a little untidy, kitchen. Bag End was one of the biggest smials in the Shire and certainly the biggest in Hobbiton. Its tiled floors were scattered with thick rugs, its rooms filled with fine furniture and lit with the most expensive beeswax candles. There was space enough for a dozen hobbits and the present two incumbents could spend a whole day within it, without seeing each other from morning to night. Frodo adored it. After spending most of his childhood in the rabbit warren of Brandy Hall, Bag End's spacious rooms had allowed him to breathe deeply at last.

He noticed that Bilbo was frowning. "Bag End? No. Not Bag End. The Shire. I am weary of getting up each morning, and knowing exactly what is going to happen in my day, until I go back to bed in
the evening."

They had been having similar conversations for a couple of years now and, every time they did, Frodo's stomach dropped. "We could go on one of our hiking trips if you like. We haven't been for a few months, now that I come to think of it. You like tramping all over the Shire."

Bilbo sighed. "You're a good lad, Frodo, but I hope you will forgive me when I say that, after one hundred and ten years, I feel that I have seen every corner of the Shire five times over. I want to see wild woods and mountains again." He thrust out his chin. "There now, I've said it. I have made my decision."

Frodo chewed his bottom lip. "My offer to travel with you still stands, you know."

"You could go with me, but I don't think your heart would be in it, would it?"

"I've always wanted to see those places you told me about, the high fells, Rivendell, the elven forest, the Lonely Mountain." Even as he uttered the words Frodo was thinking of all the dear parts of the Shire he would miss … the Gamgees, Merry, little Pippin, the Lithe Fair, sharing the flame at Yuletide and the simple pleasure of a soft feather bed at the end of a busy day with his friends.

Bilbo smiled softly. "But not quite yet, eh lad? You'll miss your friends and, even after coming of age, you'll have a lot more growing up to do, you know."

Frodo bridled, as any young person would when told they were not yet considered to be an adult. "Most people would say that I am quite grown up. Lots of hobbits my age are already married," he pointed out defensively. "Look at Daisy Gamgee."

"They are, indeed. And most are very happy with that state of affairs." Bilbo reached across the table to lay his hand upon Frodo's. "Others wait, and you're obviously one of those, but have you completely ruled out having a family, Frodo? Because if you travel with me, I do not intend to return, and there are few hobbit lasses to be found outside the Shire."

Frodo considered all those he had kissed over the years, and all the bairns he had dandled upon his knee. He had always pictured himself filling Bag End with faunts and yet, at the same time, he wanted to travel with Bilbo. Until now he had hoped the two would not be mutually exclusive. "I'm not sure. I suppose I could always return alone, once I've seen a bit of the world with you."

"Hmph. You know how well that went for me? I never wed because no hobbit lass would consider sharing her life with 'Mad Baggins'. Are you ready to take that risk, Frodo? You are still very young, even though you do have a good head on your shoulders, but I was fully fifty years old before I went away with Thorin and company."

The Tookish side of Frodo's nature warred with his home-loving one for several long moments, and he let his eyes roam once more about the familiar kitchen. He sighed. "You may be right, Bilbo. I would dearly like to see the world one day, but I'm not sure I'm ready to give up life here, yet." His voice grew hopeful. "I don't suppose you'd consider waiting just a few more years?"

"No lad. It's time I moved on. I've taught you all that I can. Which brings me back to the matter of a key. I shall be leaving Bag End and all of my estate to you. You'll have a comfortable income on the rents from Bagshot Row, as long as you're sensible, and I'll leave you my savings too."

"Oh, Bilbo. I don't need your money. Uncle Saradoc has been keeping safe the inheritance from my parents. I shall be receiving that on my birthday."

"And it's good of him to do so, but I won't need a lot of money on the road, and the property and
coin will make you a good catch for some lucky maid. It's the least I can do for you, having tainted you with the 'Mad Baggins' epithet. No doubt it will come back to the fore once it's known I've run off with dwarves again."

Frodo took a moment to blow his nose. "I shall miss you, Bilbo."

Bilbo patted his hand, clearing his throat before reaching for a scone. "And I you. Now. As it will be our last together, and your coming of age, what say you to our making the birthday party this year particularly magnificent?"

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Bilbo stood before the full length mirror, as Bressingbard Bentwhistle tweaked at a seam or tugged at a sleeve on the newly finished walking suit. Frodo had long ago come to the conclusion that the suit fitted his uncle perfectly, but this was a dance Bilbo and his tailor performed every time a new garment was completed. They, too, knew that it was a perfect fit, but the niceties must be observed.

Bilbo finally grinned. "Yes. This will do very nicely, Bress."

"It's always a pleasure to fit you, Bilbo. You understand the intricacies of tailoring. This fabric will last very well, too. I don't know where my brother obtained it, but it's as strong as any I've encountered. In fact, I broke a couple of needles sewing it and had to cut down some of the seam allowances to get that collar to lie flat. It's a perfect choice for a walking suit. But are you certain you don't want me to make a cloak to match?"

"No, thank you, Bress. I'm rather fond of my old dwarven cloak. It's seen me through these many years and I think it will do me for a little longer."

"It's a dreadful fit, Bilbo," Frodo commented. "The hem has trailed on the floor for so long that it is frayed, and you tore a piece out of it on some brambles only last winter."

"There now. I would be remiss if I allowed my best customer to be seen in such a garment. How will I convince others to use my services if they see you in such a state? You will ruin my reputation." Bressingbard's tone was only half-joking.

Bilbo sighed. "Alright. I shall meet you halfway. I will not have you make a new cloak but I will send you the old one to be repaired, if you can guarantee to have it returned to me by the end of August."

Bressingbard pursed his lips, then raised his hands in submission. "Very well. At least you will not look too disreputable." Satisfied, he turned his gaze to the younger Baggins. "Come along, young master. You have a new party suit to try on. You only come of age once and you should look your best. All the lasses will be eyeing you up as prospective husband material."

Frodo rolled his eyes, but disappeared behind the curtained section of Bressingbard's tailoring shop, to change into the beautiful dark green suit he and Bilbo had ordered, on their last visit to Michel Delving. Bilbo entered another curtained cubicle to remove his own new suit, while Bressingbard began to box up Bilbo's party waistcoat. The tailor's disappointment at not being commissioned to produce a whole new party outfit for Mister Baggins, had been mollified by the request for a new travelling suit and a fine silk waistcoat.

Young Master Baggins re-appeared first, standing a little self-consciously before the full length mirror. He stilled in surprise. As Mister Bentwhistle had promised, the green velvet of the suit brought out the blue of Frodo's eyes perfectly. Bressingbard reached in to smooth the collar and tug
at a stray basting thread that had escaped the eagle eye of his assistant. The fine silk of the waistcoat shimmered in the sunlight streaming through several windows, its blue and gold patterning a perfect foil for the suit fabric.

Bilbo handed over his own new suit to Bressingbard’s assistant, for packing, and grinned at Frodo’s open-mouthed expression. "That's certainly an improvement on your old maroon tweed. That outfit has grown so worn that it's only fit for walking in. This, now this is the suit of a well-to-do young gentlehobbit, who is coming of age."

Frodo turned this way and that, noticing for the first time the way his shoulders had filled out in the years since he first visited the Bentwhistle establishment, and the way the breeches hugged strong thighs. It finally came home to him that he was no longer a youth, but a full grown hobbit. In four months’ time he would be responsible for his own life decisions, be they right or wrong.

He had always assumed that coming of age would reveal to him all the mysteries of life, and that it would be plain sailing from then on. Well, Frodo Baggins would be coming of age within months and, seeing Mister Bentwhistle's assistant folding Bilbo's new walking suit, he felt as though someone had just slashed his sails. Life was about to change again.

Bilbo seemed oblivious to his thoughts, however. "Bress, can you recommend someone to make several dozen ladies' scarves and some handkerchiefs? I know that is not your kind of work, but I am sure you have the right contacts."

Master Bentwhistle nodded. "My brother has someone who undertakes such work. His shop is open today if you want to pop next door as I finish attending to Master Frodo."

"Excellent. I can buy the cloth and make arrangements at the same time." Bilbo picked up his battered walking staff and made for the door. "When you’ve finished here I'll meet you at the inn, Frodo. After I have spoken to Hardeband, I have an appointment with the mayor, then I want to collect something from the Mathom House."

"Yes Bilbo." Frodo knew what the appointment was for. All Bilbo's properties had to be signed over to his nephew with great care. Lobelia and Otho would use any loophole they could find, to prevent Frodo inheriting Bag End, and Bilbo was determined to ensure that every 'I' was dotted and every 'T' crossed.

What Bilbo could want from the Mathom House Frodo could not imagine, and his uncle had not seen fit to tell him. Indeed, Bilbo seemed to be distancing himself from his nephew more and more of late. For his part, Frodo wanted to hang on to the desperate hope that Bilbo would change his mind at the last.

A few days later, Frodo leaned across to top up his uncle's coffee, then set the pot back on the parlour hearth to stay warm. "How many do you want to invite to the party this year?"

Bilbo drew deeply on his pipe then, satisfied that it was fully lit, tossed his spill into the empty hearth. "I suppose we must settle upon a number, if only for the catering."

"If we dispense with a sit down affair, we could probably fit about thirty in Bag End. We could set out the food in the kitchen and move the dining table into one of the spare bedrooms, out of the way. That would give us more standing room."

Bilbo lifted his hand in a dismissive wave, announcing airily, "Oh, thirty won't do. How about one for each year of our combined birthdays? One hundred and forty-four, for the main group."
"What! Bilbo, they'd all suffocate! I suppose if we could rely on good weather we could spill out into the garden, but even then I'm certain we couldn't accommodate so many. If it were high summer we could have used the party field."

"We could still use the field. We just need some large pavilions," Bilbo stated, in a tone which mistakenly suggested that this was a common occurrence.

Frodo chuckled. "And where are we going to get these pavilions from? I'm certain there are none to be had in Hobbiton."

Bilbo winked and tapped his nose with the stem of his pipe. "Oh, don't you worry about that, lad. I still have a few contacts outside the Shire." He grinned widely. "Yes. One gross of hobbits, and we shall use the party field. Those are just the ones we shall invite to the main pavilion, of course. The rest can use other pavilions. I shall speak to Tom Cotton about the use of the field tomorrow."

Frodo blinked. "Bilbo! How many more do you want to invite? One gross is surely enough. You sound as though you're talking about half the Shire."

"Why not? Now, be a good chap and fetch pen and paper. We shall start compiling a list of the foodstuffs required. We should buy locally where we can, but we may need to have some shipped in, perhaps even from outside the Shire."

"How will we find presents for so many? Even with some mathoms I think you will struggle. Honestly, Bilbo, I don't think you've thought this one through."

"Oh yes, I have. I didn't want to say anything too soon, but I placed an order for some presents for the youngsters just before Yule. They're coming from Dale. We shall have some special ones for close friends and relatives, of course, but there will be enough for all. Don't you worry."

Frodo's face grew serious. "Do you really have to go, Bilbo?"

Bilbo drew on his pipe several times before replying. "I'm sorry, lad. I've enjoyed having you here and I hope you've been happy too."

"I think these have been some of the happiest years of my life."

Bilbo drew a deep breath, his jaw set. "Thank you, lad, but I must go. I shall miss all these silly hobbits, but I feel so restless and trapped … like a firefly in a jar. I want to see mountains again, wide skies and ancient trees. And you need to stretch your own wings, lad."

Frodo stood. "I'll fetch that paper." If his nephew's shoulders slumped a little, Bilbo did his best to ignore it.

Several days later Bilbo and Frodo Baggins sat at the parlour table. "Right, that's the last of my invitations written. How are you doing?" Frodo asked as he leaned back, throwing out his arms to either side and stretching mightily.

"Just five more. Then you can take them down to the Ivy Bush for posting."

Frodo began collecting into neat piles all the envelopes scattered upon the table between them. "It's going to cost a fortune to post all these. Are you sure I can't deliver some of the more local ones personally?"

"Definitely not! Some of our less well-off guests never get mail. Having the postman deliver the invitation will be half the fun of the party to them."
Frodo giggled. "You do realise that half of those people can't read, and will not be able to write an acceptance letter?"

Bilbo slid the last invitation, with its gold calligraphy, into a fine cream envelope, and handing it to Frodo to seal with a generous splodge of red wax. "They will come, though. In fact it is entirely possible that some who are not invited will come anyway. That's why I ordered extra of everything."

Frodo shook his head, frowning. "Then why send invitations at all?"

His uncle paused to consider for a moment before replying, simply, "Because that's the proper way to do it, and I would like to be remembered for doing at least one thing properly."

Dark brows climbed in disbelief as Frodo commented, "You've never let that bother you before."

"Well, this is a special event, for both of us." Bilbo patted his pocket. "Now, what was I about to say?" His face brightened and he arose to collect a couple of envelopes from the mantelpiece. "Ah yes. Add these to the invitations, will you? You'll need to take extra coin to pay for them."

The envelopes were bigger than the rest and sealed carefully. Frodo read the address on the top one and his eyes lit up.

"Gandalf the Wizard,
c/o The Prancing Pony,
Bree,
Breeland,
Eriador."

"You're inviting Gandalf? Will this reach him? Will he come. Will he bring fireworks, do you think?"

Bilbo fished in a tray on the mantelpiece, tutting as he handed over a jumble of coins. "Goodness, Frodo. You're like a pump with two handles." He began marking off replies on his fingers. "Yes. I am inviting Gandalf. No, I do not know whether this will reach him in time. He travels about a bit but he has led me to believe that, if he is to be reached at all, it will be at this address. Whether he will come is his business. As for fireworks … that I will leave to his discretion. It is not wise to be too demanding of a wizard."

"I do hope he comes and that he brings at least a few fireworks. That really would make the party special." Frodo examined the second envelope, and his brows climbed even further.

"Dain Ironfoot,
King Under the Mountain,
Erebor"

"Bilbo, I know that mail often goes to Bree, via traders from Buckland, but I'm not sure they'll be willing to travel all the way over the mountains, or know how to find anyone else who will."

"Nonsense, lad. I got a letter to Dale about the presents. There's a small party of dwarven traders camped beside the Ivy Bush. They're travelling back that way tomorrow. Just hand it over and they'll see that their king receives it."

Frodo absorbed that piece of information as he dropped all the correspondence into his shopping basket. "Are you inviting the king to our party? I'm not sure Hobbiton is up to entertaining a king."

"Gracious me, but you are full of questions today." Bilbo adopted his most teacherly tone. "The
dwarves of Erebor did a lot of travelling. They happen to be very good at making tents and pavilions, and we shall need several rather large ones. Off with you now, or you'll miss those dwarves. They said they would wait for my letter but they need to be away today."

When Frodo crossed the wooden footbridge over the Water he easily picked out the large and highly decorated waggon of the dwarves. Hobbiton Market was in full flow and the dwarves were surrounded by a goodly collection of ladies, selecting pans and shiny copper pots. So many ladies, indeed, that Frodo despaired of getting close enough to speak to one of the traders. He knew better than to come between a hobbit matron and her selection of an iron frying pan.

Just as he had decided to drop off the rest of the correspondence at the Ivy Bush, for the landlord, (Borden Brewer also acted as local Postmaster) he quite literally bumped into Orton Sandyman. "Sorry, Orton. I didn't see you."

Orton sneered, as he always did when he encountered Frodo. Master Baggins had long since decided not to let it bother him unduly, for Orton sneered at most folk. "What have you got there, Baggins? You've been busy. Are these the invitations for that fancy party your mad uncle is planning?"

Sneering was one thing but insults were quite another, so Frodo’s reply was somewhat waspish. "Yes they are, and some are bound for Buckland, so I need to get them to Borden before Tom Carter leaves later." He made to step around his antagonist but Orton only sidestepped with him.

"They say everyone's invited. I could save you the postage on mine by taking it now." Orton held out his hand and his sneer tried to become a smile … with little success.

Frodo’s smile was more pleasant but held about as much warmth. "Bilbo says they must be posted. This is my coming of age party, after all, and he says it is the way of a gentlehobbit." He let his smile widen. "And who said that everyone was invited?"

Fire flashed in Orton's eyes for a second, and then he stepped aside to wave Frodo on. "We'll see about that, Master Baggins. The Sandyman family have been looked up to in the Shire for longer than Bungo Baggins and his heirs. The Sandymans have always worked for their living. They didn't need to marry into money, steal it, or even be adopted into it."

Frodo's hands tightened into fists and it was fortunate that Bartimus Brockbank chose that moment to step in. "Hello, Frodo. I haven't seen you for days." He pointedly ignored Orton as he took Frodo's arm, and determinedly steered his friend toward the Ivy Bush. Behind them, Orton offered a rude salute before sauntering away.

"Thanks, Barti. I was almost on the verge of punching him."

Bartimus grinned. "I know, but you need to stand in line for that one. He still gives our Ruby the eye once in a while, and I know one or two other brothers of tweenage lasses who have a place reserved in that line, long before yours."

Frodo's smile was genuine this time. "Then I wish the first in line would make his move, so that the rest of us can step up." He nodded toward the bar. "I'm afraid I haven't time for a drink today. I've come to post some letters, but I'd be happy to stand you a half, for preserving my dignity just now."

"It's alright. I was coming in to have a half with old Adelard there. He's promised me a return match of dominoes. I lost last week, so it's my turn to buy the cider."

By now they had reached the wide, polished bar presided over by Borden Brewer. "Hello young
masters. What can I get you?"

Bartimus waived Frodo ahead. "Uncle Bilbo has sent me with a pile of letters for the post. I hope I haven't missed Tom Carter. Some of these have to go to Buckland." He deposited several heaps upon the counter and the level of conversation in the bar dropped appreciably.

Borden blinked. "That's a fair few, lad. It will take me a while to count them."

"Oh, that's not necessary. There are three hundred letters for the Shire and one to go to Bree. The one for Bree will have to go by way of Buckland."

The barman-cum-postmaster drew himself up to his full three foot, five inches. "I know how to get post out of the Shire, Frodo Baggins. You'll have to pay extra for it, though."

Frodo emptied his pockets of Bilbo's coins and Borden began to count. In the end he returned one copper penny, with a smile. "That will cover it nicely, and I'll make sure Tom gets those he needs to, don't you fret none." He swept up the envelopes and dropped them into a large box. "Can I do aught else for you?"

"No, thank you Master Borden. I have one more errand to take care of in the market." Frodo turned back to Bartimus. "Thank you, again. Give Daisy my regards, and the next time we meet I shall buy you that half."

Bartimus slapped him on the back. "Yes, you will. You can be sure I'll remind you."

Back out in the sunshine, Frodo paused to search for Orton, thankful when he was nowhere in sight, and made straight for the waggon of the dwarves. They were starting to pack away the remains of their wares, so it was now an easy matter to hand over the letter for their king.

A few days later, one balmy summer afternoon, there was a loud rap at the door, followed by the jangle of the bell. Frodo ran to the parlour window to observe Tom Carter's waggon in the lane, his pony waiting patiently.

"See if that's the post, will you Frodo. I've dealt with one batch of acceptance letters already this morning, and Witly Grub will insist upon discussing every envelope he hands over."

Frodo grinned as he trotted to the door. Borden Brewer's potboy-com-postman was a notorious chatterbox. "It's not Witly. It's Tom Carter I think." Opening the door revealed that it was indeed Tom, standing amid several stacks of fine, flat, square boxes.

Tom tugged his forelock. "Good day to ye, young Master Frodo. I've packages addressed to Mister Baggins from, he squinted at one of the boxes, one Hardeband Bressingbard of Michel Delving."

"Hello. Let me help you with these. I believe Bilbo is expecting them. Do you require payment?"

Frodo bent to lift the first pile, blinking when he discovered how light it was.

"No, indeed, sir. Portage was paid by Mister Bressingbard." He joined Frodo in setting all the piles on the polished tile of Bag End's hallway.

"Hello, Tom. Will you stop for a cup of tea?" Bilbo appeared from the kitchen doorway. "How is your family?"

"I'll not stay, if ye don't mind, Mister Bilbo. I've packages to deliver in Bywater afore I can stop. The missus and young ones is fine, and I thank ye for askin'. Oh, there now, I almost forgot." Tom began patting the capacious pockets of his dusty coat, finally producing a rather crumpled, and slightly
grubby, envelope. "The missus has asked me to give ye this." He thrust out the envelope and Frodo accepted it, passing it back to Bilbo. Tom shuffled a bit apologetically. "Ye'll forgive the hand, if ye please. I'm not used to writin' much more than addresses. But in case ye can't read my hand I'd like to say, thank ye for the invitation, and me and mine will be pleased to come to your party."

"Thank you, Tom. Frodo and I will be very pleased to see you there. I shall be sure to tick off your acceptance on our list."

Frodo set the last pile of packages on the floor. "I'm very pleased you will be able to come, and I'd love to meet Mrs Carter and your faunts at last."

Tom tugged his forelock once more. "I'd best be off, sirs. Good day to ye."

"Good day, Tom."

The Shire's best carter strode away down the garden path, leaving Bilbo and Frodo surrounded by their packages. Frodo frowned. "I know you were expecting these, but what are they?"

Bilbo stuck his head out of the doorway to glance up and down the lane, as though expecting the hedgerows to be bristling with spies. In truth, there had been more foot traffic than usual up and down the lane of late; mainly youngsters, hoping to get a glimpse of the party preparations. He closed the door firmly before replying. "We have so many guests coming that it would be impossible to find individual presents for all, so I got Hardeband Bressingbard to have pretty scarves made up for the ladies and handkerchiefs for the rest."

Bilbo bent to select one of the square flat boxes and lifted the lid. Within was a layer of white tissue paper which he swept aside to reveal a beautiful, carefully folded, square of fine lawn, printed with a pattern of spring flowers. Frodo opened one of the smaller boxes. It too contained tissue paper, within which were folded four white linen handkerchiefs. "Bilbo, these are beautiful. But they are rather grand, don't you think?"

It was a custom in the Shire for birthday celebrants to give away gifts, however they were usually small items, often second or even third hand. Indeed many were passed from party to party for years. Nobody was offended. The food was the important thing in any Shire party, after all. To hand out brand new presents to everyone could be considered a little ostentatious. Not that this bothered Bilbo Baggins. He opened a third package, uncovering another scarf, this one printed with golden autumn leaves. "Nonsense, lad. This is a very special party, my last in the Shire and your first as Mister Baggins."

"Mister Baggins. I suppose I shall have to get used to that."

Bilbo repacked the scarves. "You will. And I shall expect you to maintain the Baggins reputation. You must do at least one strange thing every week after I am gone. I'll not have the Baggins name fall back into anonymity." He winked. "Come along now. Help me put these in the back bedroom for the moment."

That evening they sat at the parlour table, pen and paper before them as they discussed gifts. Bilbo drew upon his pipe, blowing a smoke ring out of the round window. "The scarves and hankies solve most of the presents, but we should give something special to one or two people, don't you agree?"

"I do." Frodo finished ruling lines on the sheet of paper before him. "Should we start with a list of names?"

"Indeed. We must start with Bagshot Row. You will be their new landlord, and I've always thought
it best to get off on the right foot when entering into any business agreement. Besides, they are all very dear to me."

"Alright. Let's start with Number One. Arty Sedgebury. Have we time to get a muffler knitted for him? He had that awful chest cold last winter."

"Excellent idea. Widow Grub would be more than willing, and would also welcome the coin. Or how about asking Tom Buckleby to make him a new milking stool? Tom said that the last time he repaired Arty's current one it had become more repair than stool."

"Oh, that's a much better idea. Will Tom be able to keep the secret, do you think?" Frodo asked, even as he made a note beside Arty's name.

"Oh yes. I've commissioned him to make presents before. Now for Daddy Twofoot and Number Two, how about a month's supply of Southern Cross? He does enjoy his pipe of an evening, and Southern Cross is his favourite."

Frodo made another note. "That's easy to arrange at least. That leaves us with Number Three and the Gamgees. I would like to give them something each."

"A capital idea. For Hamfast, I think a new spade and a bottle of Doctor Brockleby's joint ointment. Ham is feeling the damp weather nowadays."

"How about a couple of sacks of seed potatoes? They have a new early growing strain in Buckland, so Merry tells me. I think Mister Gamgee would be proud to be digging the first crop in Hobbiton next year."

"Perfect, lad. You must write to Saradoc tomorrow. Don't bother Old Rory. Sara has been running the farming side of the Hall for years now. That just leaves us with Bell and Marigold. If I know Bell, she will not accept anything too grand, although she certainly deserves it."

Frodo inscribed her name on the next line. "I noticed that her best apron is getting a little worn. What about a new one? Marigold may like one too."

Bilbo frowned in consideration. "I'm not sure. I wouldn't want her to think that we had noticed. Bell is a proud lady."

"What about a length of white linen for both Mistress Gamgee and Marigold. They can decide between them what to make of it."

"Perfect, lad. I'll throw in a few yards of ribbon to turn Bell's thoughts away from pillowcases." Bilbo set his pipe aside and rubbed his hands in glee. "And now we come to the mathoms."

"But we don't need mathoms, Uncle. Everyone will have a present."

Bilbo's eyes widened. "What? A birthday without mathoms? Whatever are you thinking of? And you a Baggins. Shame on you. The giving of mathoms is half the fun of a birthday…if you do it properly."

Frodo noted a wicked gleam in his uncle's eyes. "Bilbo, what are you up to?"

"Never you mind. Just write down, 'Lobelia Sackville-Baggins'. "
"Good morning, Frodo. Where are you off to so early?" Bartimus Brockbank fell into step with his friend as they crossed the market square, where folk were still setting out their wares.

A light breeze carried with it the rich scent of yeast from Olin Baker's kitchens, so Frodo only had to follow his nose. "Bilbo has sent me to place the bakery order for our party."

"Ah, the party of parties. I hope we'll be eating more than bread."

"Don't worry. There will be a cake as well," Frodo replied with a grin. "A very big cake we hope. Mistress Gamgee usually bakes our birthday cake but this one will need to be so big that it won't fit in her oven."

Bartimus' face took on an expression of near ecstasy. "Aye. Daisy was only telling me last night about the cakes her Ma has made in past years. She says that sometimes the flour and butter came from outside the Shire, and made cakes so light they were ready to float away."

Frodo gave his friend's bicep a playful punch. "I rather think the lightness had as much to do with Mistress Gamgee's skill, as the ingredients. What brings you to Master Baker's door, anyway? I can't believe that Daisy has not baked this week."

"No indeed! Daisy's been fattening me up nicely." Bartimus patted his stomach, which certainly looked a little rounder than it had before his new wife had started feeding him. "Daisy wants some yeast so that she can bake extra bread today. Pennyfoil Grubb was out helping the midwife yesterday and hasn't had time to bake for her family."

By now they stood at the bakery door. The shop was closed so Frodo rang a bell, and the door was opened by one of Olin Baker's assistants. The lad was all over flour but gave a good-natured grin when he saw Frodo. "We ain't proper open yet but the Master said to send ye through to the bakehouse, Master Baggins."

He let Frodo slip by, but when Bartimus would have followed, he threw out an arm to block his way. Bartimus stumbled to a halt. "And what do ye want, Barti?"

"Just a half ounce of yeast, Bert. Daisy's a mind to do some baking and has run out."

"We've ten minutes yet, to openin'." Bert folded his arms but there was a twinkle in his eye. "I should keep ye waitin'."

Bartimus gave his most winning smile. "Awww, have a heart, Bert. You know what a temper Daisy can have if she's put out."

"I do. And mayhap I'd like seein' ye on the sharp end of her tongue, after ye ran out the Ivy Bush without buying me that half the other night."

Bartimus shrugged. "Well, it seems it's either the sharp edge of her tongue for being late home that night, or the sharp edge this morning for being late with the yeast." He slapped his chest dramatically. "I'm doomed."
"Looks like 'tis up to me to rescue ye, then. I'll fetch that yeast if ye promise me that half next time we're in the Ivy."

"Bert, I'll do you one better than that. If you get me that yeast, double quick, I'll leave two coppers behind the bar for you to have a half on me the next time you call in at the Ivy Bush."

Bert grinned. "Done."

Frodo loosened his waistcoat as soon as he stepped into the bakehouse. It was a hive of activity, with loaves being hauled out of the ovens at one end of the huge room and cakes and buns being filled and iced at the other. Olin spotted him at once and led Frodo into his small office. Once there, noting his customer's discomfort, he opened a window and offered him a glass of water and a seat.

"You've come with the final order, I take it, Master Baggins."
Frodo handed over a folded sheet of paper and Olin held it to the light of the window in order to read. "That's pretty much as I talked of with your uncle. Do you have the coin?" He spread his hands apologetically. "I'd usually take cash on delivery, but this is such a large order. I'll have to buy in extra flour and other ingredients."

"Oh yes. Uncle Bilbo has sent me with the money." Frodo reached into his breeches pocket and held out a small purse of coins. Olin's examination was only cursory, for Bilbo Baggins had never been known to short-change anyone.

"It's a pleasure doing business with you, Master Baggins. I shall be taking charge of the cake myself. It will be layered with buttercream and jam and dressed with a thick icing. I doubt Hobbiton will have seen its like before, especially once it gets all the candles atop."

Frodo stood. "I look forward to sampling it on the day."

"Of course, if you need us to do any other baking we'll do our best to accommodate."

"We wouldn't dream of imposing upon you further, Master Baker. Uncle Bilbo has the local ladies baking buns, pies and flans for the afternoon tea, and appointed Mistress Gamgee to marshal them all."

Olin chuckled. "I wish her joy of that. It'll be like herding cats." He escorted Frodo out himself, but not before pressing upon him two fat buns, filled with raspberries and whipped cream. "For your tea, with my compliments," he insisted.

Once outside, Frodo paused to refasten his waistcoat, groaning inwardly as he spotted Orton Sandyman sauntering toward him. Straightening, Frodo pasted on a polite smile. "Good morning, Orton. If you've come to buy bread I think Master Baker will be opening the shop in a moment."

Frodo was beginning to think that a sneer was Orton's normal resting face, for it was pinned in place even this early in the day. "I see you got served alright. Trust a Baggins to find the back door."

Taking a deep, supposedly cleansing, breath, Frodo replied firmly. "I had party business with Master Baker, and you will note that I went through the front door in order to conduct it."

"Party business, is it? If you're catering for so many, no doubt the baker will be needing extra supplies." Frodo could almost see the calculations being made in Orton Sandyman's eyes. Extra flour would be needed, and the nearest flour mill was that owned by the Sandyman family.

"I assume so. I'll leave that up to the baker. Good morning, Orton." Frodo strode away before Orton could prepare any more snide remarks.
Less than a week later, Frodo opened Bag End's large round door one evening, to find a no less round but florid and rather distressed-looking Olin, mopping his brow as he stood upon the step. Before either could speak Bilbo appeared from the kitchen.

"Well, here's a surprise. Don't keep our guest standing on the doorstep Frodo. It's a long haul up the Hill from Hobbiton. Come in Olin." As he continued to speak, Bilbo led Olin toward the kitchen. "Frodo and I were just about to have a snack. You can sample someone else's baking for once. I've given my nephew the Baggins family fruit scone recipe. It's won prizes you know … a big family secret."

By this time Olin was being pressed into a chair and Frodo had set a cup of tea in front of him. "I thank you for the tea, Mister Baggins. It's a warm evening and a steep hill. But let me tell you why I've come before I accept more of your hospitality. I'm afraid I've got bad news."

"Oh dear. Whatever is the matter, Olin? And we've been friends for long enough for you to call me Bilbo, surely."

"I thank you for the honour but you may want to withdraw it when you hear what I've got to say."

Olin fished in his jacket pocket and laid Bilbo's purse of coins on the kitchen table. "I'm afraid I can't bake your bread and party cake. I've not enough flour for the job."

Bilbo dropped into a seat opposite. "I thought you were going to purchase more?"

Olin threw up his plump white hands. "I was, but it's going to cost twice what I expected. Ted Sandyman says it's something to do with…now what was it? Ah, yes. It's to do with supply and demand. Seems the more people want something, the more it costs. I don't understand such flummery myself. If flour costs one silver penny a sack on Tuesday I don't see how the same sack can cost two silver pennies on Wednesday. The flour hasn't gone and done anything overnight now, has it?"

"Ahhhh." Bilbo calmly placed a scone on Olin's plate and pushed the butter dish toward him. "I should have guessed that Ted Sandyman would be behind it." Sensing Frodo seething at his side, Bilbo patted the lad's hand as he continued to address the worried baker. "Not to fret, my dear chap. I've ordered extra flour from Buckland for the other baking. I shall just send another letter to Old Rory and increase the order. If necessary, I'm sure that the Thain will be able to send some too. Most of his family are invited, after all." Bilbo pushed the coin purse back toward Orin. "There now. The problem is solved. Do tell me what you think of Frodo's scones. Speaking for myself, I think he added just a touch too much soda."

It was no surprise to either Baggins when, a few days later, they were accosted by Ted Sandyman. They were crossing the Market Square, having completed their grocery shopping, and had decided upon a half at the Ivy Bush before returning home for their lunch. They met Orton's father, coming out of the door of the establishment, and looking a little unsteady, despite the early hour.

Ted lurched forward, poking a finger into Bilbo's sternum. "You think you're so high and mighty, don't you? Well, you'll not put me out of business by buying your flour from away. The Sandyman mill has been going since the Shire was founded."

Frodo would have stepped forward to protect his older uncle but Bilbo laid a restraining hand on his arm, calmly standing his ground to meet Ted, toe to toe. "As someone who has made an extensive study of Shire history, I can tell you that your mill was actually constructed by your great, great grandfather, who was born long after the Shire was settled. As for your accusation…my actions were merely a matter of what I believe you coined, "supply and demand". I had a demand for flour, which you advised you could not supply at the price I wished to pay. I therefore approached other millers, who were happy to supply my needs at the price offered." Bilbo offered a thin smile to the now
spluttering Ted Sandyman. "After all, I would not wish to impose upon your supplies by making unfair demands upon them."

Frodo had to turn away to hide his grin, as the inebriated Ted struggled to make sense of Bilbo’s words. In the end, he gave up, and Bilbo stepped nimbly aside as Ted tried to push past him. "Bloody Baggins," was all Ted shouted as he wove his way, rather unsteadily, through the market crowds.

The two Bagginses exchanged a chuckle as they stepped into the crowded tap room of the Ivy Bush, to be greeted by a round of applause and cries of, "That told him!" and, "'bout time someone put the bugger in his place."

It was the very next week that two sturdy ponies drew a neatly appointed cart, bearing the crest of the Master of Buckland, up the Hill. A pair of tidily dressed hobbits jumped down outside the gate to Bag End, and one began stripping off the canvas while the other knocked on the door. It was Frodo who opened it, and his face beamed as he jumped forward to wrap the rather rotund lad in a strong hug, before leaning back to hold him at arm's length.

"Fredy! What are you doing here? If you've come for the party you're a bit early, although you're no less welcome!" He looked beyond his friend, to where the contents of the cart were being revealed. "Has Merry come with you?"

Fredy grinned. "No, that's Berilac. Shame on you! Have you been so long from the Hall that you don't recognise your cousins now? Never mind. I suppose we've all changed since we were running around, stealing mushrooms and dodging our tutors. I have brought a load of party acceptances with me, however, including one from Mister Saradoc, Mistress Esmeralda and young Merry." He trotted off down the garden path. "Come on, Frodo. Don't just stand there. All this flour needs to be under cover before nightfall. We don't want it getting damp."

Frodo ran after his childhood friend, and began helping Berilac and Fredegar with the disposition of flour, butter and an assortment of other comestibles. Bilbo directed from the hallway. "Will you be staying, lads? There's beds for you if you need them, and we can put up your ponies in Arty's barn at the bottom of the lane."

"Thank you, Mister Baggins, but Mister Saradoc said we were not to impose, and booked a room and stabling at the Green Dragon in Bywater," Berilac replied as he dumped a sack of flour in the large pantry.

Fredegar called out from the smaller, where he was making room for some butter and a large box of straw-packed eggs. "We met a sullen kind of chap in Bywater. He sent us completely the wrong way and we had to turn about to cross the stone bridge, or we'd have been here earlier."

Bilbo grimaced. "Did you ask at the Mill by any chance?"

"Yes. A scruffy looking fellow was leaning on the wall. He had a face as sour as three quarts of week-old milk." Fredy leaned out from the pantry, where he was struggling to stack the sacks neatly. "I hope he's not a friend of yours."

Bilbo snorted. "Oh, he's no friend of mine, although why he's taken so against me I'm sure I don't know. Everyone knows how polite I am."

Frodo hooted with laughter. "Uncle! You have the greatest gift for saying the most impolite things, politely, that I have ever encountered." He studied the ponies, who were dozing, legshot, in the lane. "Have you at least time for a cup of tea before you return to Bywater? Your ponies look content
enough for the moment but I can ask Sam Gamgee to water and keep an eye on them for you, if you like."

"Alright. Some tea, and perhaps a bite?" Fredy asked hopefully.

"Good. You can sample my latest batch of scones. Bilbo says I've added too much fruit but I disagree."

"Lead on, my friend. I shall sample several and give you my expert opinion," Fredegar announced with mock sincerity.

As September arrived Frodo found himself in a strange state that hovered between excitement and dread. Bilbo had shown no inclination to change his mind about leaving, and yet Frodo still clung to some hope that his beloved uncle would change his mind at the last minute. Even the arrival of visitors at the end of the first week of September failed to stamp upon that hope.

The first that Frodo knew of said visitors was the sound of singing, in voices far too deep to come from a hobbit throat. Bilbo's head whipped up and he almost ran to the door and down the garden path. Frodo followed with a little more caution, for it was already dark. All down the lane and even below, in the village, he could see light spilling from open doors as the curious residents stepped into their gardens to watch the arrival of a cart, with four dwarven occupants.

Oh, Hobbiton had seen dwarves before. They traded regularly at markets throughout the Shire, but they had never arrived in the middle of the night and there was something different about these. Mail glinted openly in the moonlight and axes hung at their broad belts. The sides of the cart were hung with several strange shields and the cart itself was piled high with assorted packages.

When they reached the gate of Bag End the dwarves dismounted as one and bowed to Bilbo, with a chorus of, "At your service."

Bilbo bowed in return, replying with the traditional, "Bilbo Baggins at yours."

When all had straightened Bilbo came forward to embrace one with a white beard, plaited and so long that he had to tuck it into his belt. "My dear Lofar, welcome. I had not dared to hope you would come. It is good to see you again."

Lofar threw back his green hood, to reveal that he was balding, although not so much that what hair he had on his head could not be seen to match the beard. "How could I miss the opportunity to go travelling with my dear friend, before old age makes invalids of us both?" Even as he said the words his eyes narrowed as he took in Bilbo's robust appearance.

"Invalids? Nonsense." Bilbo cleared his throat, before turning to Lofar's companions. "I don't believe I recognise your friends?"

"Ack. My apologies. This is Nar, Anar, and Hannar. You did not meet them in Erebor but they have heard so many tales about Burglar Baggins that they wanted to meet you."

Bilbo gave his broadest grin. "And I am very pleased to meet you." Behind him, Frodo cleared his throat. "Oh dear. Now I am become remiss in my introductions." Bilbo threw an arm about his nephew. "Gentle sirs, this is my nephew and heir, Frodo Baggins. It is his coming of age that you are here to help celebrate." If he noticed his nephew's enquiring glance he did not acknowledge it.

"Frodo, Lofar is a friend from my final days in Erebor. He ensured that Gandalf and I were safely escorted, at least to the borders of Mirkwood."

"Good evening to you, Master Baggins, and may I offer my early congratulations?"
Frodo smiled. "Thank you, sir, although this is a joint birthday. Would you like some help unloading your cart, then I can show you where to stable your ponies."

"Thank ye, laddie," Nar replied. "We can handle the unpacking, but I would appreciate an introduction to yer stable. I saw a cart track away at the bottom of the hill."

"Yes. I'll take you down the lane and introduce you to Arty Sedgebury. He has been told to expect you."

"We'll only need stabling for the one night. I'll be driving the cart home tomorrow." As Frodo led Nar down the lane, the other dwarves began unpacking various boxes and bags, and by the time they started back up the hill they met the empty cart being drawn down.

Whilst dwarves were not as tall as men they were, on the whole, a good foot or more taller than most hobbits. Bag End had higher ceilings than many a cottage or smial but, it seemed to Frodo that they had shrunk considerably in the past hour. Lofar and Anar were already setting the dining table for supper and Bilbo was handing dishes of food to Hannar. Frodo stepped in to help, and by the time Nar returned, most of the food was on the table and several flagons of ale drawn from the keg in the lower cellar. As they began to seat themselves Bilbo clapped his hands for attention.

"My dear guests. Thank you very much for providing your help in the party preparations. We shall endeavour to make you comfortable in Bag End, but if there is anything missing in your accommodations please let me know."

Lofar looked about the cosy little dining room, with its laden table and fine china. "Mister Baggins, if you keep feeding us like this I think we'll be hard pressed to find any fault."

Bilbo chuckled. "I believe hobbits and dwarves share much in common when it comes to the pleasures of the table, and I made sure to lay in an extra keg of beer. Now, please help yourselves. You've had a long journey on travel rations."

Nar chuckled. "Now I see why hobbits go in fer round doors."

All laughed, and soon dishes and platters were being passed too and fro across the snowy linen tablecloth. Ale flowed freely, talk even more so, and Frodo found himself deep in conversation with Anar who, at forty years old, was the youngest of the guests. As every good guest should, all the dwarves helped with the clearing away afterwards and then everyone adjourned to the parlour. Pipes were lit and tales were spun into the wee small hours, and it was not until Frodo started nodding off in his chair that anyone considered taking to their beds.

Over the next few days, Frodo took sole responsibility for opening party acceptances, while Bilbo and the three remaining dwarves locked themselves away in the study. Bilbo said that they were labelling mathoms and, from the raucous laughter, Frodo decided he was better off not knowing what, precisely, was being written on those labels. Bilbo had a keen sense of humour when allowed free rein and Frodo suspected the dwarves were inciting him to extend those reins daily.

On the thirteenth of the month Gandalf the Wizard arrived and all of Hobbiton was abuzz with the prospect of a firework display by the legendary artist of pyrotechnics.

On the evening of his arrival, Frodo and the three dwarves left Bilbo and Gandalf to get reacquainted. Much as Frodo wanted to find out what the wizard had been up to since their last meeting, he sensed that Bilbo wished to share a pipe with his old friend.
Breakfast the next day was a merry affair, however, with Bag End's kitchen filled almost to overflowing. Gandalf helped himself to a third slice of toast and Frodo marvelled anew at how small it looked in that large, calloused hand. "Well, Master Frodo, what have you been up to since our last meeting?"

Frodo grinned. "Not much. We live a very quiet life here, in the Shire. I would be more interested to hear what you have been doing…aside from making your excellent fireworks that is."

"Not much? I heard tell that, upon at least one occasion, you hared off after cattle thieves…and beyond your borders, too."

The dwarves fell silent, listening intently.

"How?" Frodo closed his mouth, which had dropped open in astonishment. "Oh. Bilbo told you. It was not very far beyond our borders after all. And whilst it is true to say that we chased them, we did not chase them off. That was done for us, although we had no opportunity to thank our benefactors. Beyond the fact that they appeared to be some of the Big Folk, we have no way of guessing just who they were or why they helped us."

"Oh, Bilbo told me nothing of it." The wizard fixed Bilbo with a keen gaze and the older hobbit squirmed a little uncomfortably. "But we wizards have ways of gathering news."

Lofar shook his head. "Bilbo told us that the Shire was a peaceful place. We thought that the world would grow brighter with the destruction of the Necromancer, but instead it seems to have grown darker of late. My people have taken to wearing mail when travelling, even this far north."

"Oh, the Necromancer was not destroyed. Only weakened for a while and banished." Gandalf smiled. "But that is not a topic of conversation suitable for this merry occasion. Frodo, are you looking forward to coming of age?"

Frodo chuckled. "I don't think it will make much difference to my life." Then he sobered. "Although I shall miss Bilbo very much."

Bilbo reached across to pat his hand. "You will do very well, lad. It's time you struck out on your own and I have no fears for you."

"But I'm not striking out on my own. You are. Are you really certain you want to be tramping about…out there?" He waved vaguely at the world beyond the kitchen window. "Especially in light of what Lofar just said."

"Frodo Baggins, you sound like some old mother hen. I shall be perfectly safe with Lofar and his friends."

"Aye, Master Frodo. There's few who would survive an encounter with three armed dwarves, even these strange men you tell of. Burglar Baggins could probably take care of himself, but he'll be safe enough with us. Don't you worry."

Bilbo sniffed. "I do wish you would stop calling me that, Lofar. It is not strictly burglary when one is simply taking back what was stolen from one."

Lofar's beard parted in a broad grin. "Now, now, Bilbo. You know well that I speak only in jest. Your name is held in high esteem in the Iron Hills and beyond."

Bilbo subsided, somewhat mollified. "Yes, well. The title has been bandied about in the Shire with a lot less esteem, I'm afraid. My little adventure has gained me a reputation for eccentricity, and
eccentricity is rather frowned upon here."

Frodo chuckled. "Stop playing the martyr, Uncle. It's a trait you have played upon shamelessly. I believe you rather enjoy scandalising people."

Now Bilbo grinned. "It can be rather fun, pricking the pomposity of folk like the Sackville-Baggins'."

Folk in Hobbiton had hardly time to draw breath when more carts arrived, driven by yet more dwarves, and containing many large and unwieldy bundles. Both carts and dwarves did not stay once they had unloaded their packages, although it was common knowledge that at least three of the first party and one wizard were staying at Bag End.

The following morning, Bilbo sat at the scrubbed kitchen table of number three, Bagshot Row. "How are things going, Bell?"

Bell Gamgee pushed a newly poured mug of tea across to her guest. "I think me and Marigold have all settled. Ye've sorted lunch and the main dinner, so me and the ladies don't need to fret on those. And Master Baker has the birthday cake and the breads well in hand. So there's only cakes and sandwiches and the like to be done for afternoon tea."

"Will Orin be delivering the bread here?"

"Bless you, no. We've no room for such numbers in this little kitchen. We'd be trippin' over each other. I hope ye don't mind, but I sent Marigold to speak to one of yer dwarf guests, yesterday."

"Did you, indeed? She seemed rather wary of them when she called at the back door a few of days ago."

Bell sat down, placing a dish of butter beside the cheese scones already set out, and signalled for Bilbo to help himself. "Well, I don't want ye to take no offence, but dwarves is all well and good out in the open. In a smial there seems all together too much of them."

Bilbo frowned as he sliced a scone and spread butter. "There are only three of them, Bell. You've seen more than that at market over the years."

"'Tis not the numbers that gives pause, but the size. They look bigger indoors somehow, and they've altogether more hair than a body has a right to grow. 'Tis alright atop a head or foot, but all that stuff on their faces hides what they're thinkin', if ye take my meanin'." She winced. "I wouldn't want to get stood on by one of them boots neither."

Her neighbour chuckled. "Dwarves do take a great pride in their beards." He leaned in with a conspiratorial wink. "Even the ladies have them, you know."

As he knew she would be, Bell was scandalised. "The poor lasses! Have they no knives? I've heard tell that big folk use them to scrape hair off their faces."

"Oh, they don't shave. A well turned-out beard is source of great pride to lady dwarves, and they decorate them with all manner of beads and ornament."

"Well, I never did." Bell took a deep swallow of fortifying tea.

"But we have become distracted. What was the purpose of young Marigold's visit?"

"Oh, aye. Well, ye said as how ye was goin' to have big tents put up, and it seemed to us that if ye
could put one up a bit early, we could use that for all the sandwich makin' and the like. Marigold said she spoke to someone called Lofar, and he seemed happy enough to do it. He said all the tents would be up by the night afore anyhow, and we could choose whatever one we fancied, exceptin' the big one."

"Well, the party itself won't start until eleven in the morning, so you and the ladies will have plenty of time to prepare. Have you all the ingredients you need? I don't want anyone out of pocket."

"Bless ye, Mister Bilbo, we've more than enough. In fact, it pains me to say it, but I reckon one or two have taken more than they need." Bell's sniff declared her low opinion of anyone who would take such a liberty.

Bilbo only waved his hand dismissively. "No need to worry about that. There will be plenty, I am sure. And if someone gets to keep a few eggs or a pound of flour for their efforts I won't begrudge it."

Bell shook her head. "There's some in the Shire as call ye mean with yer treasure, Bilbo Baggins, but those of us who've had the pleasure of gettin' to know ye, know that's not nearly true. I reckon ye've, long ago, given away more than ye ever brought back from yer adventurin'."

Bilbo surprised her by blushing. "Wealth is no good sitting in a box. I'm no dragon, after all."

The final days before the big one became a blur to Frodo, and he would remember little of them. Relatives began arriving from all across the Shire. Some stayed with family, others at the local inns and yet others set up tents in one of Tom Cotton's pastures, loaned for the occasion.

On the sixteenth of September Bilbo called together all the children of Hobbiton, provided buckets and offered one farthing for every bucket of dung they collected from the Party Field. In truth, the youngsters would have done it for free, for it was a regular task whenever the field was appropriated for events. It was a fine arrangement. Tom had his pasture for most of the year and his sheep kept the grass cropped for any parties or events. As for the collected dung…well…that enriched many a compost heap.

Like the rest of Hobbiton Frodo went to bed on the seventeenth with no intimation that he would awaken the next morning, to discover that Lofar and his companions had marked out the Party Field, and already laid some of the ropes for the pavilions, recently delivered. By the evening of the eighteenth the pavilions were raised and a new entrance dug to the field, consisting of a white gate and several fine stone steps.

Along with all of Bagshot Row, most of the Hobbiton children, and several other interested parties, Frodo stood before the fine new entrance.

"'Tis a bit grand for a sheep pasture," Ham Gamgee declared with a frown.

Tom Cotton climbed the new steps to check the latch on the sturdy white gate, opening and closing it several times. "All I'm interested in is whether it will keep my sheep off the lane, and it looks to be more than fit for that."

Frodo laughed. "Your sheep will grow so proud of such a well appointed pasture that they'll refuse to go anywhere else, Farmer Cotton. I suspect you'll have more problems trying to get them to leave, than you will have keeping them in."

There was a chorus of chuckles as Frodo strolled back up the lane to Bag End. Sam dropped into step. "Will Mister Gandalf be setting off his fireworks at the start of the party, do you think?"
"Well, as we shall be starting at eleven in the morning, I don't think so. It would be too light to do them justice. I believe he and Bilbo were talking of having them after sunset, just before we sit down to supper."

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that. I'd like to thank you, Master Frodo, for inviting us Gamgees to sit in the big tent with your family. We wasn't expectin' such an honour."

Frodo clapped him on the back. "Dear Sam, we wanted friends with us, as well as family. And, anyway, I count you and all at Number Three as family. Bilbo and I had all of you at the top of our list."

"Thank you, sir." Sam began to whistle a merry tune as they parted ways outside the garden shed, and Frodo smiled. As Sam grew older he was becoming a good companion.

On the twentieth a huge fire-pit was dug at the north end of the field and a couple of spits set up. It was rumoured that they would be roasting not just a pig, but a whole cow. A pig was roasted for every Harvest Reel but nobody in Hobbiton had ever attempted a cow.

"It'll not be cooked through, even if they start this minute," Ted Sandyman declared. "We shall all die of the food poisoning."

Others were more optimistic and soon bets were being laid on how long it would take, and whether it would be cooked in time for the birthday dinner. They would discover the next day, which dawned cloudy. A fire was lit and dwarves began taking turns at the spit handle whilst, around them, cooks from establishments across the Shire began to set up their own kitchens. The owners of the Ivy Bush were particularly busy, having all their bedrooms filled to capacity, as well as serving food to those folk who had not thought to provide their own, when camping in the nearby field. Some locals, noting the opportunity, set up tables in the market square, where they sold pastries, pies and other comestibles. None of the usual sellers took exception, for there was trade enough for all.

Bilbo and Frodo were kept busy, answering callers, who seemed to want to advise them in person that, yes, they would definitely be attending on the morrow, and at what time should they arrive? The notice Bilbo had Frodo tack to the gate had not slowed the stream one jot. Most were only hoping to get a glimpse of a dwarf or wizard. It was even rumoured that Mad Baggins had invited a troll or two, and Sam chased away several children caught trying to peep through the parlour window.

Frodo chuckled at the thought of accommodating trolls, for Bag End would surely burst at the seams with just one more guest. He could not begin to imagine how Bilbo had coped with thirteen dwarves and a wizard, even if only for one night. As it was, he kept tripping over stray boots, almost sitting upon assorted musical instruments and, on more than one occasion, had been hit upon the head when Gandalf's staff toppled out of the umbrella stand in the hall.

Frodo was sure that he would not sleep a wink on the evening of the twenty-first, but he was wrong. After Gandalf had wished him a goodnight he fell into bed, and did not stir until he smelled first breakfast.

Bell Gamgee arrived at the field directly after second breakfast and marvelled at the sight. There were tents and pavilions of various kinds. Some were just big enough to hold a few beer barrels and a makeshift plank bar. Others had been set with tables and benches for eating. The biggest was so huge that it enclosed the field's one tree, and many tables were arranged within. One stood beneath the lantern hung tree, with two high-backed, ribbon bedecked chairs, from Bag End's parlour. Indeed, one of the dwarves was just tying on the last ribbon when he spotted the lady. Finishing the bow, he swept off his cap and bowed low. "Good morning, Mistress. Would you like me to show
you to the tent we've set aside for you and your ladies?"

A little flustered at such courtesy from a dwarf, Bell gave a quick bob in reply. "If ye please." She fell into step as Lofar shortened his own and led the way, weaving between guy ropes and tables. "Ye've done a grand job. I've not seen the like of this, even at the Lithe Fair in Michel Delvin'. And with just the three of ye I hear."

Lofar grinned. "Well, we may have had a bit of help from a wizard." When they reached the north corner, where kitchens were still being set up by inn keepers from far and wide, he drew aside the flap to a fair sized tent. "Here we are. I think this should be big enough, but we can lift the sides if not. There'll be no rain today."

Several scrubbed trestle tables had been arranged down the centre and Bell nodded approval. "'Twill do very well, thank ye. Did Mister Bilbo say where he wanted us to set out the food when we've finished?"

Lofar shrugged. "You could leave it here. I'll set Hannar to keep an eye on it, so you and your ladies can enjoy the party. When it's time for tea we'll just lift the sides of the tent for you."

Bell beamed. "That's good of ye, Mister Lofar." She wagged a finger. "Tell him to watch out for the tweens. If they get in here they'll strip it faster than a score of rats in a barn. Ye've not seen eatin' 'till ye've seen hobbit tweens. I do swear they grow hollow legs."

Lofar laughed as he departed. "Don't you worry, Mistress Gamgee. In that, they've much in common with dwarves. Hannar will have their measure."

The occupants of Bag End had awoken very early that morning. A great many people called with presents, for it was not considered polite to do so in public. As Frodo was coming of age, there were many more than usual.

Bilbo handed over his gift before Frodo had even got out of bed, being a highly polished copy of the front door key. The first caller was Hamfast Gamgee, however, bringing a gift from the entire Gamgee household, and soon Frodo's new front door key was hanging from a sturdy silver chain, finished with a fob of polished amber. Frodo was touched, for it must have cost a large proportion of their combined incomes. Others had followed quickly and Bilbo smiled on fondly as he noted the number of folk who considered his nephew worthy of such fine tokens of their affection. It seemed a great many people were willing to see beyond the fact that Frodo was Mad Baggins' nephew after all.

Bilbo received his own presents, of course, although many were mathoms. He was not disappointed for he did not intend to take much with him upon the road, and the carved and brass-topped walking stave, a present from Frodo, was one of the few that would be going with him.

Once the flood of callers died down, Frodo and Bilbo retired to their respective bedrooms to prepare, and half an hour later Bilbo rapped smartly upon his nephew's bedroom door. "Are you decent, Frodo?"

When Frodo answered the door he had yet to don waistcoat and jacket and, from the comb in his hand, it was apparent he had been caught tidying his foot hair. "Did you need me for something, Uncle?"

"Just a word, if you don't mind, before things grow any more hectic." He stepped into the bedroom, closing the door behind him.
Unlike the rest of Bag End, Frodo's room was always tidy. Bilbo surmised it was a result of his upbringing in Brandy Hall, where space was at a premium. Jacket and waistcoat were spread upon the neatly made bed and the nightstand held only a glass and a small pile of books. It was a haven of peace, and Bilbo was suddenly aware of how untidy the rest of Bag End had become in recent years. Perhaps Frodo would clear things away after Bilbo left. Would Bag End once more look as it had before Bilbo went upon his first adventure? He hoped, for his nephew's sake, that it would not.

The youngster waved to a seat by the window and dropped down upon the edge of his bed to continue combing his feet. "Have you changed your mind about leaving after all?" Although he sounded nonchalant, his face was lowered so Bilbo could not see the hope written there.

"No, indeed. I shall be leaving directly after supper. It is the manner of my leaving that I came to discuss."

Frodo set his comb upon the washstand and took a moment to check his teeth in the mirror. "The manner?"

His uncle shifted a little uncomfortably. "There will be so many people there, you see."

Now Frodo grinned. "I'm afraid I don't see, Uncle. You were the one who invited them, after all."

"Yes. But when I announce my departure I know that everyone will want to know why I am going, where I'm going, how I am going, and who I am going with. If I stay to answer every question I shall still be here next week."

Frodo slipped on his fine silk waistcoat. "I expect they will, but I don't see any way around that, unless you don't announce your departure at all, and just slip away after the party."

Bilbo shook his head. "No. That would never do. There may be some unscrupulous folk who will say that you have done away with your poor elderly uncle, in order to get his money."

In the process of fastening fine silver buttons, his nephew froze. "Surely not! Nobody could believe that, could they?"

"I'm afraid they could. Otho will try to winkle you out of Bag End if he can find only half a reason, and others will back him up, just from a perverse need to create mischief. No. We must make it very clear to all that I intend to leave and I am doing so of my own accord."

Frodo sat down again. "So we are back to you making your announcement at the party. I'm afraid you may just have to put up with all the questions although, if you wish, I shall try to distract some of them for you."

Bilbo's hand strayed to his pocket and now he drew out his ring, holding it in his palm so that it glinted in the sunlight of the open window. "I have decided that I am going to use my ring," he announced. "I shall simply disappear. It will be one in the eye for all those who have doubted my story all these years."

"Is that wise? Gandalf once told you not to use it too much, and you said yourself that you did not feel comfortable doing so of late."

Bilbo shrugged, lifting the ring between finger and thumb to study the warm glow of the metal. "Well, it is my ring, after all. I won it fairly and I don't see that Gandalf has much say in how I use my own property. It will only be for a short while, anyway; just long enough to slip back here and collect my pack and my travelling companions."
Frodo shrugged. "Well, if you think it will be alright. You will find me to say goodbye, won't you? Before you make your little speech."

Bilbo slipped the ring back in his pocket. "Of course I will, lad. Come along, now. Put that jacket on. We must be at the gate to greet the first of our guests. Sam and his father will have carried all the presents down by now, and if we don't get there in time, people will start helping themselves."

Eyes narrowed, Frodo shrugged into his jacket. "No indeed. It would not do to hand out the wrong mathom."

"Mathom?" Bilbo slapped a hand over his heart. "You wound me, lad. No. I shall leave the distribution of mathoms to you, after I have gone."

"I was afraid of that," murmured Frodo as he closed the bedroom door.

As Bilbo had suspected, a line of guests had already formed at the new gate when the birthday celebrants arrived, and Bilbo paused to talk to one or two. Frodo ran ahead and, at his signal, dwarves unfurled the many flags. They ranged in size from the largest, which was more of a banner, strung between two poles outside the largest pavilion, and announcing, "Happy Birthday Bilbo and Frodo", down to long, slender pennants of fine green and yellow silk, which snapped and danced in the slightest breeze.

Snacks were set out under an awning, and the ale was flowing freely by noon. Children ran in and out of the many tents, their shrieks of excitement combined with the rattle of tin drums and discordant shrill of whistles. Frodo grinned, suspecting that many a mother was cursing Bilbo beneath her breath. Hobbiton and its environs were going to be a very noisy, until the novelty wore off or the instruments were discreetly confiscated.

In an attempt to channel all that excitement half a dozen tweens organised games and, for a while, musical instruments were set aside as children of all ages joined the egg and spoon, sack, or wheelbarrow races. Others had set up a football match in an empty corner of the field and several adults stood around, cheering on the mismatched teams. If some of the younger children forgot which team they were supposed to be in, nobody was too upset.

Only the act of sitting at table distinguished lunch from snacks, and many guests just browsed their way through the entire day. There were piles of cold pies and pasties, cold meats, wheels of ripe cheese, huge bowls overflowing with salads greens, and dishes filled with pickles of every imaginable type. Apple and blackberry tart, served almost floating in thick cream, finished off the meal. Of course, it was not really the finish, for there were still snacks to be found, along with apples, pears, blackberries, and nuts.

As the afternoon progressed the laughter grew louder, fuelled by the ever flowing cider and beer. Someone made a decision to slow the drinking by collecting a group of musicians, who began to play a merry jig. Little persuading was required and dancers, young and old, took to the large square of grass set aside for their use. Frodo grinned, as he watched a usually poised Esmeralda Brandybuck laugh wildly as she was thrown into a dizzy spin by Hobbiton's beefy blacksmith, Bert Fennelly. In another group Saradoc Brandybuck, the next in line to be Master of Buckland, expertly guided the dance steps of an outrageously flirting Ruby Brockbank, and Frodo chuckled at the wink exchanged between husband and wife, as they spun past each other.

Tea time was announced by the cessation of dancing and the lifting of the sides of one of the larger tents, revealing the hard work of all the ladies of Hobbiton and Bywater. Besides the previously arranged cakes and pastries, many poorer families had supplied sandwiches and other food stuffs, as their birthday present, so tables fairly groaned under the weight.
By the time Frodo came to fill his plate half the guests had already taken their turn, and yet there was hardly a dint made in the bounty. Bell Gamgee and several of Hobbiton's matrons presided, and they ensured that everyone's plate was piled high, even those who were returning for a second or third time.

"Here ye go, Mister Baggins," Bell announced, as she placed a large piece of a particularly fine cheese and bacon flan on Frodo's plate.

"Thank you Mistress Gamgee. I think it is going to take me some time to get used to being addressed as 'Mister'," Frodo replied with a grin, as Caly Berrydown added a thick ham sandwich to the already teetering pile on his plate.

"Aye," Bell replied. "We'll have to think on a way to mark the difference between ye and yer uncle."

Frodo's smile faltered but, fortunately, Bell and Caly had moved on to serve the next in line. Half an hour earlier Frodo had encountered Bilbo, perched upon a stool and surrounded by spellbound faunts, as he recounted his adventure with three trolls. He wondered if Burglar Baggins would soon be telling the same tale to a group of dwarflings. For several minutes Frodo had studied the shining faunling faces. Did they know that this could be the last time they would hear the story from the old adventurer's very lips? Even if they did, Frodo doubted they could be any more attentive than they were already.

Now Bilbo appeared at his side and the two strolled back to the main pavilion together, fielding good wishes from everyone they met. Frodo spied Ted and Orton Sandyman propping up one of the bars, and wondered if either of them had eaten anything since their arrival. They certainly looked as though they had taken full advantage of the alcoholic beverages.

Bilbo noticed the direction of his gaze. "Don't worry, Frodo. They will not cause any trouble today. All the bar tenders are keeping at least one eye on them."

Frodo's frown did not fade, however. "Why do they hate us, Bilbo?"

"The Sandymans? It is a long story and not one for such a pleasant day. Suffice it to say that if Ted Sandyman landed in a barrel of gold coins, he would only complain that it was not soft enough. Now, come along. We have lots of friends and family who are more than willing to help us celebrate." Bilbo winked as he added, "And the majority of them are still relatively sober."

After tea there was more dancing, although it was not as enthusiastic, as everyone looked from the wizard to the lowering sun. Would there really be fireworks? Although several youngsters had noted the wizard's cart behind the main pavilion, Sam Gamgee and one or two other tweens had been standing guard in turns, so people could only guess at the nature of the strange shapes, shrouded beneath a thick cover.

At half past six Gandalf leaned in to whisper something to Bilbo and then slipped from the tent. Bilbo climbed onto his chair, lifting his arms to shout, but nothing could be heard above the general hubbub. Frodo snatched up a small trumpet, no doubt forgotten by one of the children, and blew a long, loud, toot at his uncle's side. It had the desired effect, and Bilbo grinned. "Dear friends, if you would all like to step outside, we are about to have a treat not seen in the Shire for many a year. The wizard, Gandalf, has kindly offered to give a display of his most excellent fireworks."

The guests did not need to be invited a second time and soon, as word travelled, all the tents and pavilions emptied. A large crowd of faunts gathered about Gandalf's cart and he handed out sparklers. These were no ordinary sparklers however, for they ignited at a word and burned with no perceptible heat. Not that this concerned the faunts at all, but several parents drew a relieved breath.
Gandalf appointed Sam Gamgee and the other guards as his official helpers and Frodo noted Sam standing particularly tall, as he ferried the larger fireworks from cart to wizard. The sky was filled with light, matched equally by the light in upturned faces.

As each firework was handed to the wizard, he touched the fuse with the tip of his staff and it shot heavenward in a shower of sparks. Far above them, in the darkening sky, bloomed green trees whose golden blossoms dropped sweet perfume. Clouds of bright butterflies danced above the heads of excited fauns, pillars of fire turned into eagles so huge that some buried their faces in their mama's skirts, and a fleet of nine grand sailing ships dissolved into a phalanx of elegant swans. There was a loud crash of thunder and blood red clouds appeared, only to release sparkling golden rain, and a forest of silver spears exploded upward, to fall back to earth and land in the Water with a loud hiss.

Suddenly, the many lanterns strung from tent and tree were extinguished, and an expectant hush fell. It took two hobbit tweens to carry the last firework to Gandalf, who stuck it firmly into the ground. All eyes were drawn to the strange red shape as Gandalf's staff touched the dangling fuse. At first there was only a little wisp of pale smoke and, just when Frodo began to think that the flame had died, the fuse sprang to life with a fizz. In the next breath the rocket shot upward in a cloud of smoke, that shaped itself into a distant mountain. As everyone watched a faint glow grew about the summit, there was a gout of green and scarlet flame and out flew a huge red-gold dragon. So lifelike was it that many cried out in consternation. It bore down upon them with a mighty roar, flew three times around their heads and, finally, turned a somersault and burst over Bywater with a deafening crash.

Bilbo leapt onto one of the tables with an alacrity that belied his age, to announce, "That is the signal for supper!"

Supper was a very grand affair, which would be discussed by the worthies of the entire Shire for many a year. Even the Old Took had never given such a repast. There was pork or beef, roasted to perfection despite Ted Sandyman's dire predictions, vegetables dripping in butter or glazed in honey, potatoes mashed to such a creamy consistency that they melted in the mouth, and rich brown gravy to pour over all.

For desert there was the biggest birthday cake the Shire had ever seen and, had Gandalf not lent a hand, it was likely that all the candles would never have been lit at one time. As it was, it cost Frodo and Bilbo some considerable breath to blow them all out again. There was cake for all, even those beyond the one hundred and forty four friends and family in the main pavilion.

As Frodo swallowed the last crumbs of his piece, Bilbo laid a warm hand upon his and leaned in to whisper, "It is time, lad." He squeezed Frodo's suddenly chilled fingers. "You'll be alright." Then he climbed onto his chair, beneath the party tree. Lantern light fell softly upon his beaming face, winked on the golden buttons of his waistcoat and gleamed on the silk of his embroidered waistcoat. In common with many, Bilbo had discarded his jacket hours ago. "My dear people…"

Frodo hardly heard his uncle's words, instead concentrating upon memorising every inch of his Bilbo's dear face. He noted that he kept one hand in his pocket and wondered precisely when he would perform his vanishing trick. Even as focused as he was, when Bilbo finally did wink out of sight, he was as shocked as everyone else, particularly when the act was accompanied by a flash and a very loud bang. Frodo glanced at Gandalf, who winked before slipping away.

There was a moment of complete silence, during which Frodo felt invisible fingers brush across his back, then everyone started talking at once. Feeling more alone than he had been in many years, Bilbo Baggins' heir drained his wine in a silent toast to his health. He smiled, as the Sackville-
Bagginses stormed out, then forced himself to pay attention as questions flew at him from all quarters. He had hoped to slip away and wave Bilbo on his way, but that was not to be.

Master Baggins was now Mister Baggins, of Bag End, with all the prestige, notoriety and responsibilities that entailed. Would he ever see Bilbo again? He drew a deep breath. It was time for Mister Frodo Baggins to hoist his sails and chart a course through adult life. Who knew where the wind would take him?

END

Chapter End Notes

I hope you have enjoyed reading this story. Frodo's life in Hobbiton will continue in a new story soon. Many thanks to Fallingleaves271 for undertaking to beta the final chapters.

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