The Last Shreds of Autumn

by merripestin

Summary

Frodo recovers in Rivendell, and Sam looks after him.
Chapter 1

The river had dropped low again, and now looked no more than a line of quicksilver, but for where the sun was hitting it and it flared up, all silver-white. Sam could see stones sticking up out of the water before them and supposed that must mean the Bruinen truly was shallow enough here to cross it, though Sam still thought the idea of a ford naught but madness. Surely folk as clever as the elves knew about bridges, or at least ferries?

Glorfindel had moved to the water's edge ahead, a bit beyond where they had stopped to light their torches and he had faced down the Black Riders. Just the elf standing there had meant more than three hobbits with torches, or even Strider's challenge, that was plain enough. And now Riders and horses and all were gone, and Sam could no longer see his master on the other side neither. Sam had dropped Bill's reins when they made their stand, and he did not take them up again now, but rushed down the shallow slope to the river's lowered edge -- all the ground here muddy enough, after that dreadful rush of water, to suck at the feet, and his torch, when he dropped it aside, hissed and sputtered out. All the riverside plants lay with their roots washed right out of the ground, and he squelched cattails and lilies into the mud as he went.

He saw the Elf stiffen and raise his chin, and, following the Elf's gaze, Sam saw the big white horse - not standing but half-lying down, at the top of a little crest where the far shore rose up toward the hilly land beyond. Even from here, Sam could see that the beast's sides were heaving after its terrible flight.

Not knowing or caring if the others followed -- in fact, only Glorfindel was running forward at once, while Aragorn moved slower to safeguard Merry and Pippin's wearily slow passing and to guide Bill -- Sam plunged down, right into the terrifying swift water, not taking the time to balance on stones and keep his feet dry, just running as fast as his legs would take him.

It really was quite shallow, but it ran so fast it nearly knocked him right off his feet, and he slipped this way and that as he went. Later he would find sharp bits of stone buried in the tough soles of both feet. He struggled on, wetting his breeches and his arms when he had to catch himself once, and then he was slogging up the muddy slope on the other side. Glorfindel had run ahead on legs that seemed to Sam quite as long as the horse's, and by the time Sam reached the top of the rise, the elf was already crouched by a little waterlogged heap dwarfed by the horse's heaving body.

Misery ripped its way up Sam's throat in a cry. His master lay facedown, soaked through and very still. If Glorfindel had not had an elf's grace, Sam's barreling run would have knocked him over. Gently Sam lifted Frodo's shoulders and turned him over. Tears of unbelieving grief made Frodo's pale, dirty face blur before Sam's eyes.

Sam clasped Frodo to him tenderly and pressed his cheek against his master's icy one, feeling damp grit between them. Frodo smelled of sickness and river-bottom, and even all Sam's well-learned distrust of water had never taught him that rivers could be so cruel, to take first the mum and dad, so many years ago, and now take the son too.

The weak breath against his neck was all Sam could have wished for in the world and he gasped shudderingly, holding Frodo tighter, shut his eyes and let himself have just one moment, unearned but so needed, of Frodo tight in his arms, Frodo against his chest, Frodo against his belly, Frodo against his neck and cheek and oh, even the cold dripping curls were a delight. He was vaguely aware of Merry and Pippin and Aragorn nearing and that Glorfindel was trying to calm the horse, whose eyes still rolled.
But what mattered was that Frodo was so cold, and Sam river-wet himself and not as warming as he ought to be. Against Sam's right side, Frodo's left side was bitter cold and strangely light, as if his arm and chest there were hollow.

After some time, Sam realized that Strider was trying to pull Frodo away from him, and that Pippin was kneeling at Sam's side, stroking Frodo's hair, while Merry pulled blankets out from among the baggage. Sam let the Ranger turn Frodo so that he was propped with his back against Sam.

"Strider, is he -- " Pippin began, and then turned away, leaving the question there like a fruit he'd begun to eat and found the first bite rotten. Pippin rose when Merry returned and together they wrapped the blankets around Frodo as best they could, still leaving the left shoulder uncovered for Strider to work at, though what anyone thought Strider could do now when he'd not been able to do a thing all the days and nights before, Sam couldn't think. Sam stroked his master's face, another a familiarity he'd once never have dared, especially with Frodo's Quality kin looking on, not to mention Man and Elf; but since the night those terrible riders had come, he'd been taking care of his master as best he knew how, with hardly a thought for propriety.

"He's alive," Sam said. He felt Striders eyes on him and found himself shouting, "He is! He's a-breathing! I've felt it!" He felt he would have liked to strike Strider, for that look that doubted the only thing Sam held to.

"He is very near death," Strider said, and he sounded sad, and tired.

"Or worse," said Glorfindel, and what it was an elf would think was worse than dying was more than Sam's heart could bear the wondering. He hid his face in Frodo's shoulder, trying to find the comfort of his master's heartbeat.

Sam heard Strider take a long thoughtful breath. "The nazgul will trouble us no more, at least not now, but Frodo's need has not changed and our path is the same. We must go on."

"Glorfindel, couldn't you take Frodo up on your horse again?" Merry asked. "Run him from here to Rivendell? We'll be moving so slowly . . . "

It was true, they were all tired, and horse strides were longer than hobbit strides, or even elf strides. But the white horse was lathered and still trembling. Sam thought if it ran five minutes more its heart would likely give out and it would fall over, riders and all. That could happen to ponies if you rode them too long and hard, he knew, and he didn't think even an elf's horse would be proof against it.

"I think it will be better for Frodo not to," said Strider. "A gallop might be more than he could take, and . . . " He stopped for so long that Sam finally raised his head again to look at him. Strider was looking back, and as Sam watched, he tugged the end of the blanket over Frodo's shoulder so that he was completely covered. "And I think there is no hope for Frodo's life if it not with his friends. He is in danger of becoming a wraith, and all that is between him and that fate is what holds him to life and heart and memory. Even an elf's company cannot do so much for Frodo now as that of fellow hobbits."

"I wonder if you are right," said Glorfindel, "I cannot say, for I know little of hobbit-kind. But whatever else, I fear Asfaloth cannot gallop further. He has broken a leg. It will take all I have of horsemaster to keep him calm enough to safely rest until I can return for him with one of the horsemasters of Imladris."

That was one blow too much for Merry, it seemed. He burst into tears. "Oh, but -- He saved Frodo!" The Brandybuck stables were the biggest in the Shire, and Merry would well know that a horse or pony whose leg was broken was best put out of its misery as soon as could be. Sam dropped his
head again. He'd never known a day like this, things just dark and getting darker. So many had been so terribly brave, even pony and horse, and still it was as likely Frodo would die and it would all be for naught.

"The elves have more knowledge of animal lore than other races," Strider explained, and for a wonder he was gentle instead of stern. "They can often mend a horse's leg, even if the break is very bad."

"It is," said Glorfindel, and Sam realized that the Elf loved the horse, and if things had been any less grim, he would have already have been seeing to Asfaloth's comfort rather than worrying about hobbits.

"Oh," said Merry, softly. "I am glad. I suppose it's back to Bill. We'll take the baggage again, and Frodo can sit on Bill's back with Sam holding him on."

The others agreed, and Sam let himself be lifted onto the pony and his master lifted into his arms. Slowly they moved up to the higher ground, leaving the white horse behind.

They passed scrubby gorse as the land rose, and there was a great deal of clover mixed in among the grasses under Bill's hooves, but Sam noticed little else about the land; he was more troubled with keeping himself and his master astride and adjusting the blankets, for soon enough, the one wrapped right around Frodo was wet through, and he unwound it and put the outer one closer about his master's body and the wet one, when he'd squeezed as much of the water out of the corners as he could manage, around them both.

"I have come this way many times," Strider said, after they had gone on for some time, none of them with heart enough to speak. "There was, not much further, a patch of athelas that grew at the edges of a small copse. Keep your eyes open for it. It does not grow well so far north, but any fresh leaves would be better -- "

Sam looked up to see why Strider had broken off. One more threat to his master, no doubt, for danger was all the wide world had to offer to hobbits.

But it was Elves, seven Elves on horseback like a party riding right out of Sam's oldest dreams. Hurriedly Aragorn lifted Frodo and Sam down from Bill's back, and as the Elves rode toward them, Merry and Pippin helped Sam to once more trade the wet blanket against Frodo's skin for a drier one. Sam looked up at the Elves from the ground, his master on his lap, and saw them high up on their horses, looking taller than any tree that ever grew in the Shire. Their hair was tangled as if with stormy wind and their horses sweated as if they'd just finished a sprint. One of them, an Elf-lady almost too beautiful to look at, jumped down quickly and bent over Frodo. Sam never would have thought such a creature could crouch -- she looked as if she ought to stand still forever like a beautiful statue over a girl-child's grave. But crouch she did, and made crouching lovely by it. When she spoke, it was like an evening breeze full of honeysuckle, and if Sam had thought Elvish could never be more beautiful than the moment he'd first heard it spoken in Elf-voices, in the Woody End, he learned better now. Even so, he could make out from her tone that she was speaking urgently, and her hands, though they looked fine as glass, moved sure and strong on Frodo's wounded shoulder.

Strider said something to her, and she put her hand just for a moment to the coarse-woven and dirty sleeve of his tunic, as if she meant to comfort him. Then she looked straight into Sam's eyes and despite himself he let her lift Frodo away from him. She carried Frodo as easily as a mother with a babe, and with Glorfindel's help took him with her up onto her horse again. She spoke one last time, and then the horse moved like an arrow from a bow and she and Sam's master were gone.

Strider had a few words with the other elves and before Sam knew what was happening, he and
Merry and Pippin were all perched together on one horse’s back -- like as not to fall off, and nothing like riding a pony, though Sam was glad to spare Bill more burdens. Surrounded by elves, they rode first farther up into the hills, then across a windy moor soft with heather. Then the ground dropped away all of a sudden and took Sam’s stomach with it, for the level ground they were on suddenly became the top of a terrible cliff, and Sam had a glimpse of green fields, and woods still fiery with changed leaves, so far below; and a river too, pale and choppy and gleaming like the edges of many sharp blades. After that, Sam kept his face buried against Pippin’s back with his eyes shut tight for a long time, terrified now for his own life as well as for his master’s.

At last Strider, walking beside, touched Sam’s leg and when Sam dared a glance, he found they had come down until they were no higher than the hills of the Shire, and still the horses followed the winding, dipping trail to Elrond’s house. The beauty of the valley eased Sam’s heart a bit, and the shocks of the journey had moved him past that despairing ache that had fettered him, made him unable to do more than hold his master close. He meant to take care of his poor dear Frodo and not leave his side; and he would, even if that fine elf-lady herself, and ten more like her, stood in his way and stared at him with those eyes that looked soft as a doe’s and old as the moon.

But when they reached the house -- pine on the air and late apples and pears on the trees by the door -- she was nowhere to be seen, and nor was Frodo. Soon Strider had gone off somewhere as well, leaving the hobbits just inside the door, with two elves, one in blue robes and one in a golden tunic, who stood there high and fine as could be and tried their best to offer hospitality to three stubborn guests who didn’t want it nohow.

"I ain’t having no bite nor no wash neither, thanking you," Sam said; he meant to be heard, though the fact that it was elves he was speaking to so cheeky made his voice weaker than he wished. "Not until I see my master."

"I'm with Sam," said Pippin.

"Take us to see Frodo, please," Merry said. Sam was glad of their support. He knew he'd been rude, paying no mind to either of them since they’d reached the river, though they'd been very kind to him -- Merry even saying he ought to be the one up on Bill’s back with Frodo!

"Very well, little masters. Come with me," the elf in blue said, and to Sam's relief he smiled a little. He led them out of the hall and down a curved path with a roof held up by stone pillars but open to a tangle of berry bushes on the one side and the orchard on the other -- inside and outside at once, and Sam would have loved to build such a place for his master to sit and have his tea and a book with garden all around but without worrying about rain on the pages nor sunburn on his nose. At the end of the path they went up a little stair, and through a curving hallway and they were indoors again, and it was quite warm. The Elf knocked on a door carved with an ash tree full of birds and flowers.

After a moment the door opened. A tall and very beautiful Elf stood there. His features were so finely drawn, and his gray robes so gracefully draped, that he truly looked like a stone statue gone a-walking. He smiled softly and said something to the elf who had led them. Sam could have sunk himself into the wonder of listening to elves speaking elvish, only all he could think of was hearing it in Frodo’s voice, and if he ever might again.

"I welcome you, hobbits of the Shire,” said the elf in grey, looking down at them. "I am Elrond. You may come in, but I will ask you to keep your voices low, for this is a sickroom."

They followed him into a room full of late afternoon light coming through a wide glass window, and full of wood carved in the finest shapes Sam had ever seen, but it was all no more than a pretty frame around a picture that tore at Sam's heart. Frodo lay in the middle of a great bed; they had bathed him,
and under the dirt of the long road he had been even paler that Sam had known.

Elrond walked to a chair that was like a throne, and like a tree of braided trunks at the same time, which was set next to the head of Frodo's bed. From a bowl on a small round table there, Elrond drew a damp cloth and began bathing Frodo's shoulder. Sam walked toward the bed, feeling as if, now he could see Frodo's face again, there was a string between them, hooked into Sam's heart, pulling him forward. The air smelted of that kingsfoil that Strider put so much trust in, like the garden did when you'd just weeded the stuff out from under the rosebushes -- a smell from home.

He stared at the tired lines of Frodo's face, the new thinness there, and the terrible wound, thin white scar closed over an awful blackness that showed right through Frodo's flesh. Behind him he thought he heard voices, and Merry saying something about Bilbo, but he could think of nothing but his master.

Elrond looked at him across the width of the bed, and his eyes too were grey, the color of a sky that had never known one day's sunshine, only gentle rain every day back to the beginning of the world. "You must be Sam," he said.

Sam wasn't surprised in the least that the elf knew his name. Elrond's eyes seemed able to go a-reading all his history and all his dreams too, just from his face. "Aye, sir. Samwise Gamgee, sir."

"He asks for you," Elrond told him gently.

Sam covered his face with his hands, not wanting to shame his sleeping master by how pitifully, how messily he wept, here in front of the elves.

"Now, now, he's no rosebush, so you needn't try to water him, my lad," said a voice behind him. "Here's my handkerchief. Dry your face, and then you can take his hand and tell him you're here."

Sam turned a little, wiping at his cheeks with the soft little square of cloth. "You . . . you are here, Mr. Bilbo sir! I'm . . . I'm right glad. Mr. Frodo has been longing for you so." His master near dying, and they had been chased by wraiths, and the river had risen up like a hungry demon thing, and it had felled wraiths and Frodo both, and now he stood in elf-country, before Elrond of the tales, and so it was hard to be the least surprised, after all that, that his old master should now appear after seventeen years gone.

Bilbo looked old, now, as Sam could never remember him looking, his hair gone a beautiful snowy white and his face netted with wrinkles. He was wearing a suit all of dark green, cut not quite Shire-fashion, and rather than buttons it had metal fastenings shaped like pairs of little birds; Sam, looking at him, suddenly knew that he'd been right here all these years, settled quite still, getting more elvish by the day and still never once taking an hour to write and tell poor Frodo as he was all right and didn't need following nor worrying over.

"Yes, lad, I'm here, and Gandalf is here too, and we all mean to look after Frodo."

Sam tucked the handkerchief into his weskit pocket, knowing he'd need to wash it before giving it back, and then he hesitantly reached forward and took Frodo's hand between his. The skin was cool, but not so cold as it had been by the river. His own dirty hand looked near black against Frodo's clean, bloodless paleness. "I'm here, Mr. Frodo. They say as you called for me, and I came just as quick as I could." Frodo did not so much as move in his sleep, and the hand Sam held remained heavy and limp. Sam's breathing tripped over another sob and with one hand he pulled Bilbo Baggins' handkerchief out again and squeezed it against his face, but he didn't let Frodo go, not now he could feel that little hum of life in Frodo's wrist.
Bilbo patted him on the back kindly. "You young fellows ought to eat and wash up now, and then you can come back. I'm afraid Frodo isn't going to wake any time soon."

"I ain't hungry, Mr. Bilbo, sir. Only place I'd like to be is right here." Behind him, he heard Merry and Pippin agreeing.

"No, lads, I won't have that," said Bilbo. "You'll all come with me, and have a bit of a meal with a lonely old hobbit, after you've bathed. I daresay Elrond will have managed to come up with fine things for you to wear, he always does for me. Come now, don't argue with me Samwise; if I'm willing to leave him for a bit, you can too. Gandalf will stay and watch over him, if any more watching than Elrond's is needed. Come along."

Sam trailed, unhappy but obedient, as the old hobbit led them out of the room. At the door Gandalf stopped him for a moment. "Hello Mr. Gandalf," he said dully.

"You have done well, Samwise," the wizard said. Sam thought that he looked more bent, somehow; he too was afraid for Frodo. "I am glad I choose so wisely, for Frodo's sake."

Sam could not think of anything to say, when the proof of what a poor job he'd done was right there in the room, so he only bowed his head, and followed Merry and Pippin out the door.

There were indeed clothes waiting for him once Sam had scrubbed himself down, grey trousers and a shirt the color of birch bark, all softer than anything he had ever owned, and even a new pair of braces that were all embroidered with little red and yellow leaves.

Sam came out of the little washroom to find Bilbo sitting by at a table covered in harvest fruit, and breads, and pale cheeses, and with a large omelette on a platter in the middle, from which Bilbo had already taken a slice. "Well, lad, you've grown up well," Bilbo said as Sam sat down. "You were still a bit skinny when I left, but you've filled out nicely. Your father still working on my garden?"

"Mostly been me, the past few years, Mr. Bilbo. My Gaffer's got the arthritis in his hands now, and his knees won't stand up to much." And how was the poor Gaffer doing now, only the girls to look after him and that Lobelia up on the Hill? But Sam couldn't think on that -- his master needed him here and now and there was naught Sam could do for folk back home but love them and hope.

"Poor fellow. I'm a fellow sufferer these days. I'm afraid it's made my writing even more spidery than it was before. Here, slow down, lad. There's enough for all."

Sam had been stuffing food into his face as fast as he could chew it up. "I want to get back to Mr. Frodo, sir, quick as may be."

Bilbo laid his hand over Sam's, and Sam stopped. He remembered being just a little lad, listening to endless stories at Bilbo's knee, and how he had thought Mr. Bilbo Baggins was the greatest person who had ever lived. And sometimes then Bilbo had put his hand on Sam's too, to guide him as he made his first halting letters -- Sam not knowing then that he was using a quill worth a week of his father's wages, writing on paper not from the Southfarthing but from far-off Gondor, and with ink from Rivendell itself. Bilbo's knuckles were indeed swollen and knobby, but his hand still carried the bitter smell of that good ink.

"I'm glad to know that my Frodo is so loved, Sam. But we must have breakfast with these other two young fellows, and then they will be made to go to bed for a time. Gandalf and I have persuaded the elves that it won't do any good to ask the same of you, so you'll be coming back with me to Frodo's room. Now, show a little patience, however hard it is."
"Yes, sir," Sam said. He felt terribly grateful, and yet he wondered how even elves would manage to send a slippery Took and a sly Brandybuck anywhere they didn't mean to go.

Merry emerged next, and attacked bread and cheese with gusto, and Pippin came out only a moment later. The elves had dressed Merry in the purple-red of old roses, and Pippin in green and blue, and they both looked quite high and proud, though their hair was wet.

"Now," said Bilbo, "Merry I remember well, for you've always been one of Frodo's lads, along with the other two F. B.'s -- dear young Folco and that fat Bolger with the handsome face and naught behind it. Of young Peregrine I mostly recall two big eyes looking out from behind Eglantine's skirts and two sticky hands making free with the pies. Very Tookish-looking you've grown up, my lad. But if I remember correctly, you were only about ten when I left, meaning you aren't even of age yet. Is Paladin likely to be riding out of the Tookland baying for the Bagginses to return his heir any time soon?"

Pippin smiled, a little uncomfortably. "Father's used to me going off for long whiles. I told him I was going to visit Merry and Frodo, and maybe take a journey with them."

"But didn't mention that the journey might be to someplace rather farther away than the Eastfarthing, mm?" Bilbo smiled. "Well, it seems your behavior's Tookish as well, and Paladin can hardly complain of that. Now, it's time you two young lads got some sleep. You'll be allowed to visit Frodo for a little while every day, but otherwise you must trust him to Elrond and Gandalf. You should do your best to explore Rivendell; it is really the most marvelous place. Sam is going to come with me to fetch and carry."

"But surely we all can help -- " Merry said.

"No one doubts your love or your loyalty, my lads. But you're a lively pair, that's plain, too lively too coop up all day in the sickroom. Sitting by doesn't suit you, and you'd soon have Gandalf glaring from under his eyebrows and Elrond surly. You've lived well if you've never been in the same room as a surly elf. Be good fellows and do as we ask, eh?"

To Sam's surprise, they nodded, and when Bilbo declared the meal done, they let an elf lead them off down another covered path while Sam followed Bilbo back to Frodo's room.

As soon as he saw the face on the pillow, Sam felt that string pulling him again to the side of the bed. Gandalf was sitting in the chair at the other side now, Elrond standing behind him. Gently Gandalf's long, knobby fingers pressed into Frodo's shoulder and it seemed to Sam that the blackness moved under the skin, shifting, maybe, away from the wizard's touch.

Suddenly Frodo thrashed, his head snapping from one side to another and the hand on Sam's side of the bed raising in a feeble gesture of warding off. "No," he moaned, and his voice was weak, almost all breath, "The king, the pale . . . their eyes! No, Strider, don't! I'll . . . Sam! Help me, I . . . They're coming. I think they can smell us. Sam, please! The king! He is coming for me!" Elrond hurriedly wrung out a cloth that had been steeping in a little bowl, and placed it on Frodo's forehead, holding it there until Frodo eased again, groaning wordlessly at first and then going still and quiet.

At the moment Frodo had called his name, Sam, without any thought to asking permission, had captured Frodo's hand again, stroking the fingers, holding it against his cheek. "I'm here, master," he whispered over and over, knowing Frodo could probably not even hear, but unable to let that cry go without an answer.

He held on for a long time, Bilbo silent beside him, both of them watching as one after another came steaming bowls, fresh herbs, and strange oils, and the wizard and the elf-lord labored. Those two
pairs of hands -- one knobby and wrinkled but supple, one long and thin and lighter-moving than air, both absurdly large to hobbit-eyes -- worked on Frodo's wound, busy as all the ants who ever marched. Sam was afraid at first that Bilbo, who had more claim, to be sure, would ask him to move aside and surrender Frodo's hand, but Bilbo just sat by, and sometimes touched Frodo's cheek or the curls at his forehead.

At last Gandalf sighed and he and Elrond stepped back from the bed, talking together in quiet voices. Sam heard ngwame, and megil, and those were two of the elf-words he could remember, for ngwame did sound just like the sound of some creature caught and hurting, and Mormegil was the Black Sword, what they called one of the elves in a tale Frodo had read out to him -- Frodo sitting in the garden with the book on his lap and sunburn peeling on his nose. Torment, and a blade.

Sam glanced at Bilbo and saw for the first time how tired the old hobbit was. Likely it was past his bed time. "Mr. Gandalf, have you found the way to stop that wraith-poison?" Sam asked. It was growing easier and easier to speak out of turn, it seemed, and he'd save his blush and stammer for when his master was up and pink in the cheeks himself again.

"It is no poison," Elrond said gravely. "There is . . ." he glanced at Gandalf.

"If you don't know it already from having me in your house all these years, Master Elrond," Bilbo said, and right testy he sounded on it too, "I'll tell you now, you'd do better to tell hobbits the whole story straight off, for they'll find some way to bother it out of you in the end."

Gandalf did not smile, and if there was one thing Sam remembered about the wizard from the times before The Party, it was that Gandalf near always smiled at Bilbo. So it was to be terrible bad, what they had to say. Sam found himself cuddling Frodo's hand against his cheek as if it were a coney kit.

"There is a shard of the wraith blade buried still in the flesh," Elrond said heavily.

Gandalf nodded. "Malevolent power moves it ever toward Frodo's heart. It must come out."

"But when Strider touched that knife, the blade all melted like it was an icicle," Sam protested, not wanting to believe that he'd lain by all those nights while some bit of that awful knife went on stabbing into Frodo's body.

Bilbo put a hand on his shoulder gently to quiet him. "You mean that you will have to reopen the wound."

Elrond nodded. Save for that he'd gone still and his eyes were looking off as if there was another world in the air in front of him, a dangerous world, and he'd got to step into it and do a terrible job.

"When?" Sam whispered.

"We will begin at dawn," said Elrond. "It would be well to allow the others of your company to visit again now. I have other preparations to attend to, forgive me." He turned and left the room, walking swiftly, and yet it seemed to Sam that wherever he was going he didn't want to get there in any hurry.

Gandalf was standing at the end of the bed and for the first time in Sam's memory -- and Sam had watched the wizard a deal more than anyone might think, every chance he'd got -- Gandalf was leaning heavily on his staff, not just holding it before him. In fact, he had both hands on it holding tight, as if he'd fall straight to the floor if he didn't hang on. There was no hope Sam could see on his face.

"Do you think you can find your way back to those rooms and fetch Merry and that young Took?"
Bilbo asked, startling Sam out of his fears.

"Aye, sir." Letting go his master's hand was the last thing in all the world he wished to do, but it wasn't in Sam to say Bilbo Baggins nay. And best do as he was told quick-like or likely they'd try to make him stay out of the room for good.

Sam brushed a quick kiss against Frodo's hand where Bilbo didn't see, and then laid it on the sheet. Frodo gave no sign that he missed Sam's touch, or had known Sam was there at all.

Merry and Pippin were sleeping in their rooms when Sam came to find them. He'd been expecting the rain of questions he got as he led them back down the hallways and paths, and he did his best to tell them what they needed to know without putting more of his own fear into the words than he could help.

"You mean they're going to cut poor Frodo open, just as soon as he'd healed?" Merry said.

Sam nodded, and didn't say naught about how the idea made a picture in his head of the elves laying poor Frodo out on Weathertop to be stabbed all over again.

While Merry and Pippin took places beside Bilbo, Sam walked over to Gandalf, who stood looking out the window onto starlit trees. "Mr Gandalf, sir?" Sam said, trying to keep his voice steady. He was asking as much for himself as for his master, now, and that made it harder to speak out.

"I cannot tell you if he will live, Samwise," Gandalf said sadly. "Frodo's future is hidden from me."

"I understand that, sir. It's just, well, Mr. Frodo's hand -- his left, I mean. On the road it seemed to be getting terrible cold, and I did my best to warm it. I daresay there's elvish medicine or magic or something else to warm it here, but . . . "

"Samwise, you may hold your master's hand," Gandalf murmured wearily, still staring outside. "In fact, that may be the best hope we have of getting some warmth into it for the moment."

"Thank you, sir. I'm much obliged. That ain't all, though, begging your pardon. I've been seeing how sometimes Mr Frodo moves about when you or Mr. Elrond works at him, and, well, I was wondering if I couldn't -- "

"I do not think you would like to be present for the surgery. You must trust us to do what we can for Frodo."

"Like it sir? I should say not. I never heard of nothing I'd like less than seeing his poor shoulder as was already so hurt get cut open all over again. But as it's got to be done, better close-to than wait and wonder. And I trust you, Mr. Gandalf, that's sure certain."

Gandalf turned at last and smiled a little. "I am glad of that. As for the other, we shall see. Go now and warm your master's hand.

Sam did, first taking it between his hands and standing there wide-eyed and shocked at the biting cold of it.

"Sam?" Pippin asked, worried.

"Only he's cold, Mr. Pippin, even in them blankets and all." His own hands already chilled through, Sam brought Frodo's hand to the side of his neck to put more of his body's warmth into it.

"What did you talk about with Gandalf, Sam?" Merry asked quietly. "You're still the ears of the
conspiracy, I'm afraid."

"Only if it was all right me holding his hand like this, sir. And if I could stay when they're doing their work. He didn't answer on that one."

"Oh, Sam, of course you must hold Frodo's hand," Merry said, brisk and breezy as ever despite the circles under his eyes. "And no need to ask or be shy. If Frodo could talk he'd likely ask you to crawl in with him."

Sam blushed and his hands tightened on Frodo's for a moment. What a thing to say! But if only he could -- take Frodo in his arms and warm him, protect him with his whole body, and feel the soft thud of Frodo's heart and the slow rise of Frodo's chest against his with every breath. If only the strength in his arms could serve his master for something better than hoisting a beer barrel or carrying a pack.

Pippin giggled nervously and Bilbo shot Merry a narrow glance. Tired he might be, and older, but Bilbo was still sharp as sharp.

"I only meant Frodo wouldn't mind Sam's touch any more than mine or Pippin's, and Sam's the warmest of us -- Frodo noticed himself when we were on the road -- he said sleeping beside Sam was as good as sleeping beside the fire."

Sam kept his eyes down on the coverlet. Had Frodo really said such a thing about him? Likely a Brandybuck exaggeration. It was true he always had been hot-blooded, going about in no more than a jacket until there was snow on the ground, and sweating through his clothes by ten in the morning all summer long.

"I can see our Samwise is as shy as ever he was," Bilbo said kindly. "We shan't be jealous of Frodo, Sam, don't trouble yourself on that account. It's you he's called for, and I'm happier with him knowing you're here."

By the time Merry and Pippin left, Bilbo was dozing in his chair again. Sam was sent to fetch another elf, who, slender as he was, managed to get Bilbo upright and took him away to his own bed. All that night Sam held his master's hand, sometimes to his cheek or his neck, sometimes in his hands. He tried breathing warm breath on it, but that made Frodo frown and twitch in his sleep.

There was misty light in the air outside the window when Gandalf sent Sam to fetch Elrond. Frodo always complained about the wizard talking in riddles, but he was as clear as you could ask in giving directions, and though all the sights -- every room seemed a page out of a different storybook -- he passed were distracting enough he might as easy have got turned around, Sam managed to find the elf-lord, sitting at a window overlooking the place where a little stream fell only a few feet to splash over round grey stones and then meander through the middle of a small lawn. Sam was sure Elrond knew he was there, but those sad grey eyes remained on the water.

"Sir, my lord?" Sam steeled himself to say, "Mister Gandalf's ready for you. I've had a word to ask him if I might stay, but he ain't settled on yea nor nay it seems, so I'm making bold, sir."

"Only once have I tried to heal one so near to fading from this shore, so shadowed by the arts of the enemy. She who bore those hurts was strong, of the elf-kind, and she had, at least, not been touched by wraith blade. And yet, I failed her and, in the end, she went over the sea."

Sam swallowed and set his shoulders. "If he -- If Mr. Frodo was to . . . die, sir, die and me not there with him . . ."
"You may remain, if that is your wish, little master." For the first time Elrond looked at Sam, and from that moment on Sam hadn't any hope nor despair neither, only enough will to go on doing what was needful.

While Elrond worked -- that dawn, and again on the dawn of the next day, and the next -- there was little he could do for his master. Mostly he saw to the small tasks of the sickroom. He made sure Bilbo was covered with a blanket when the old hobbit fell asleep in his chair at midday, and he carried away seemingly endless soiled bandages and fouled water. He helped the elves bathe his master, afterward, although the sight of the limbs so limply and pliantly moved made him feel ill. He made sure there were seats ready when Merry and Pippin came, and he lit the candles as darkness began.

Most of the day after the surgeries, it was only a matter of keeping vigil. He warmed Frodo's hand until his own hands were chilled, and when Frodo cried out in his sleep, Sam stroked his brow and tried to ease him with soft words. Sometimes Frodo called to Sam, and sometimes to Gandalf, or Strider, or Merry and Pippin, but whoever he called, Sam was there, and always meant to be.

Well-meaning folk tried to lead him off for an hour's sleep or a meal from time to time, but Sam wasn't having none of it. Bad enough the errands here and there that took him out of the room, every moment in terror that something might happen while he was away, but if he were to be off somewhere doing no more than sleeping when his master was in pain or needed him . . . If Frodo were to die without his Sam beside him, that would be too cruel. Sam was half convinced that, so long as he was there and ready, should Frodo's life slip away, Sam's would follow as easily as a golden leaf falling from an oak.

The third dawn, Elrond found the shard of wraith blade, and Sam saw Frodo's blood blacken and bubble on it as it burned away to nothing in the air, held up between Elrond's fingers. And yet Frodo did not wake.

Sam was standing at the bedside the morning of the fourth day, singing a foolish lullaby of his own invention softly, to ease Frodo's fearful murmurings, when he found himself slipping under a sudden tide of darkness, a grey mist flowing in from all around and taking away his master's face. Only for a moment he thought that it had come at last, that this must be what it was to share Frodo's death, and then he slipped under. He woke many hours later, in another room, where they told him Gandalf had said he must eat before they would take him back. That was how he missed it when Frodo woke. But only Gandalf was there at that time, and Sam always believed later that it was something the wizard had done, some last secret magic, that had woken Frodo.

It was only in that night, after Sam had come to lead Frodo off to bed after his long talk with Bilbo, that Sam felt he truly had his own reunion with Frodo. The rest of the day had been a blur of laughing hobbit reunions and fine elven celebrating. Along that garden passage that was open on both sides to the cool night, he and Frodo walked quietly together, heading for Frodo's room.

"Mr. Frodo," he ventured, "when you were so ill, you spoke sometimes in your sleep."

"So Gandalf tells me. Apparently he was able to put together all I'd done from that babble."

"I don't doubt he could have done. But he did have a few other folk to talk to as well. I only mention it, sir, as you called on me, sometimes, calling for help, mostly."

"I'm afraid I don't remember, Sam. What about it?"

"Oh, I . . ." Now he wasn't sure what it was he wanted to say. "I . . . It's only, sir, I wanted you to know as I was there as fast as I could, is all. And whenever they'd let me."
Frodo smiled, looking at Sam with his head tilted like a kitten who'd got curious about something. "Why, of course you were, Samwise. I'd never doubt it."

Sam blushed, as much at Frodo's soft smile as at the kind words. "Well," he paused to scratch at the back of his neck, "I'd like to know if you were to call out again, sir, that I could be there."

"Where is your room anyhow, Sam?"

"Well, I had one, off where Mr. Merry and Mr. Pippin are, sir, back that way. But I went and asked Mr. Elrond, see, and he said as I could have the room by yours." He hung his head, "I know I was speaking out of turn there, sir, but . . . if you wouldn't mind, there's a door between we might leave open, like."

They were on the covered path between the orchard and the berry bushes now and Frodo paused, looking away from Sam, looking at the trees as if they bore poisoned fruit. "You can't always be there, Sam, whenever I'm frightened by dreams."

True as true, that was, though it stung to hear it. "That's as maybe. I mean to try though, Mr. Frodo. I do mean to try."

"And when I cry out, what will you do then, Samwise? Will you hold me in your arms until I'm sleeping again?"

Sam flinched. Frodo was staring at him as if he were setting a challenge he did not expect Sam to overcome. "I'd do whatever would ease you, sir," Sam murmured.

Frodo kept looking at him for so long Sam thought he might blurt how he'd wished to hold Frodo close in his arms for years now -- and then Frodo might pitch him straight into that blackberry bramble and it would serve him right. But finally Frodo started walking again. "As you like, Samwise."
Chapter 2

Frodo was glad to have Sam within calling distance; he had got used to having Sam close by, on their journey, and it was a comfort not to be left alone. And yet he did not get to sleep easily that first night, tired though he was. Wonderful as Rivendell indeed proved -- and it lived up to everything Bilbo had ever said of it -- Frodo could not help but still feel haunted by what the wraiths had tried to do to him.

Bilbo had said, during their long conversation that evening, something about how nicely Sam had turned out, and Frodo had smiled, for the first time considering what a difference the years between made, and how he might feel to see those changes, if he had not been by to watch their gradual progress. Sam grown strapping and strong. Merry self-possessed and handsome. Pippin nearly of age now. And himself? What visible changes Bilbo might have seen, he had not mentioned, but Frodo was sure he must wear more marks on him than just the scar.

Sam was breathing slowly and heavily in the next room, which made Frodo smile a little. So much for watching over his sleep; although from what Bilbo and Gandalf had said, Sam had been short of sleep since he arrived. Feeling mischievous, Frodo breathed "Sam," very softly, just to check.

To his surprise, Sam appeared in the connecting doorway in a moment and hurried over to the bed in the dark. He fumbled for Frodo's hand and held it. "I'm here, Mr. Frodo, I'm here. Don't you worry none."

Too embarrassed to admit it had only been a joke, Frodo had quickly shut his eyes, and he moved his head a little on the pillow, pretending to be only shifting in his sleep. It seemed he had not learnt his lesson from their night in the Woody End after all. Sam either slept so lightly he could always catch any word Frodo said, or else his time as a conspirator had trained him to counterfeit more skillfully than Frodo ever would have thought possible.

He felt Sam's hand lightly stroke his face, and Sam said, "Just you rest easy, sir. Your old Sam will do his best for you," and Sam stayed there as long as Frodo was still awake, still holding Frodo's hand between his own warm palms. Frodo did sleep easy, and it seemed no true nightmares came to him that night.

As the gentle healing weeks in Rivendell passed, Frodo grew used to Sam's near-constant companionship (in or out of secret council meetings). Merry and Pippin also seemed to stay close by each other whenever possible, far more so than had been usual when the cousins lived on opposite sides of the Shire. It was partly comfort against the memory of past dangers, but partly only that their rooms, in fact all the rooms in this house, were so outlandishly big. Everything here was big, and they felt shrunken and weak and terribly small. Only Bilbo's room, which had been specially built for him by the elves with everything of a sensible size, was comfortable for a hobbit alone.

Frodo did have several bad nights, and it was indeed a comfort to have Sam there to wake him from his evil dreams, and to hold him while he calmed. Sam was charmingly shy about it afterward, but while Frodo was still in the grip of terror, Sam embraced and caressed him fearlessly, and spoke endearments Frodo was sure would never have escaped him at any other time. Twice, Frodo was woken by Sam's own nightmares, and that was a comfort too, to be able to give ease, though Sam usually looked as discomfited by Frodo's appearance at his bedside as by whatever dreams made him sob and cry out in his sleep.

They ate well, though as Sam pointed out, the delicious meals were, all the same, not particularly homely; the elves being fonder of subtle flavors and light foods than sturdy, filling Shire-portions of
potato and ham and cake. At first Frodo thought it was Bill, the pony, who Sam was sneaking treats to when he went off to the stables after meals, but before long he had the full version of the tale out of the hobbits and after that he often went with Sam to visit Asfaloth, who the elves supported in a sling hung from the stable ceiling most of the day, though they sometimes let him try his legs, held up by a strange sort of wheeled cart that took most of his weight. There was a metal brace on the horse's leg, but from what Frodo could tell, it was the calming presence of elves, keeping the horse from struggling and smashing his leg all over again, that made the difference between this and those ponies he had seen the Brandybuck stablemasters try and fail to save after such an injury.

Glorfindel assured them that the white horse would live many years, and likely even be able to take a rider again; but Frodo could see that the elf grieved that the horse would never again run like a white wind, and Asfaloth's large eyes seemed sad now, rather than proud. Frodo did not know how to thank a horse for trading the joy of its heart for his own life, and often he watched his friends, wondering whose sacrifice would come next, if they all accompanied him, as they all said they meant to.

Frodo found his heart most eased spending nights among singers and storytellers, Bilbo beside him, Sam sitting at Frodo's knee in a visible rapture at being able to listen to tales to his heart's content. Often at other times Frodo would hear Sam muttering to himself and catch snatches of verse as Sam worked at learning another song (he now realized that he had often seen Sam doing the same in the garden at Bag End, and imagined Sam was only talking to himself about potatoes and weeds). Even when Frodo was sure his own activities could not be of any interest to Sam, as when he simply sat reading on a lawn (which invariably led to a long nap), Sam seemed happy enough to stay by him, as long as he could look at elves, or at elvish things, or hear elvish voices. Frodo thought to himself that he could be assured of keeping Sam by him forever, as long as he slept uneasily and read out elvish poetry once a day.

Merry and Pippin spent much of their time on long walks, sometimes camping overnight in the lands surrounding Elrond's house. They also spent a great deal of time dogging Gandalf's footsteps, for they had never spent much time around him in the Shire, when he had been a mysterious visitor only to Bag End. They asked him constant questions until he tired of them and sent them off, and though they happily spent many afternoons with Frodo and Bilbo, they were usually back to following Gandalf soon again.

All the younger hobbits got to know Gimli a bit when he sat with them while his father and Bilbo talked over old times. Just as they had, Gimli had grown up on the story of the quest for Smaug's gold, and he regarded Bilbo with the awe of one who meets a character from a fairy tale living. They filled in bits of each other's knowledge in an undertone while the old dwarf and the old hobbit talked, Gimli describing Bombur on his carrying couch and explaining how during their wars with the orcs the number thirteen had become so monstrously unlucky for the dwarves that they refused to chance themselves with it again. The hobbits discovered that the dwarvish version of the story had several of the riddles wrong, seeming to regard them as entirely nonsensical poetry, and they explained the sense of the ones about eggs and daisies, which Gimli still regarded afterward as rather incomprehensible. They also attempted to explain why all the hobbit holes in the Shire were not linked up underground, though never to Gimli's satisfaction.

A few days later Merry and Pippin went for a long walk with Gimli and he came back crowned with a daisy chain, which he gave to his father delightedly. Neither of them had ever known which flowers daisies were before, these not being one of the usual motifs used by dwarves. Sam also showed the old dwarf how an egg might have its insides blown out through a pinhole, and be carefully cut in two to make a box -- a friend of Sam's grandmother had done this as a hobby -- and Gloin laughed uproariously and promised to send Bilbo such an egg box -- with jeweled hinges and a lock, and filled with gold besides.
Frodo found himself able to laugh, but never quite able to forget the meaning of the faint weight of the Ring against his chest. Some days he sat talking to Aragorn for hours, trying to understand battles and wars and spies and strongholds and power and strategy and the dangers in the lands they would cross. Sam often looked on the verge of tears after listening to these conversations, but the first time, when Frodo asked him if he had been frightened, he said, "No, sir, it's only I can't seem to keep much of all that business you and Mr. Strider were speaking of inside my head, and I know I'll have to, if I'm to look after you proper on this journey. You don't suppose Mr. Bilbo could find me a book on it so I could study up, taking it a bit slower?" If Sam asked Bilbo and he did provide such a book, Frodo never saw Sam reading it.

It was December, and their departure was in sight, when Frodo had the worst dream he knew in Rivendell. In the dream, he walked down some underground tunnel of terrible darkness, knowing that somewhere near lurked a foe of unspeakable malice. The tunnel began to slope downward and he heard the slap of water. It must be Gollum's cave, he thought, that Bilbo had gone into in his old story. But before he reached the water, the tunnel widened, and on either side stood low stone pedestals, and on each of these lay an elf. He saw Elrond laid on one, Gildor on the next. He saw the lady Arwen, and Glorfindel, and Legolas, and many others he knew, and more he did not. They looked to be dead, but Frodo knew that Elves did not truly die. He wanted to try and wake one of them, but his feet carried him past them all until the passage narrowed again, and now he could hear the slap of water louder, and he thought that his foe, who meant his death, was near at hand, monstrously huge, shaking the stone around him, but he could not see it. Finally the tunnel opened out and he came to the water's edge. The water was black and seemed to continue forever before him.

The cavern was damp and chill. As he stood there, he saw something being borne along towards the shore by the low waves, and then there it was, washed up at his feet. It was Bilbo, and his face was blue-pale, for he had drowned; there were waterweeds between his fingers. Frodo, whimpering, gently dragged Bilbo away from the water and laid him on the dry cold stones. When he turned again, it was Aragorn who was washed up, an arrow in his back like Isildur before him, but it was the water that had killed him. Frodo had to pull out the arrow first, and Aragorn was very heavy and difficult to move, as Frodo dragged him also away from the water, to lie by Bilbo. Next it was Pippin, and his fair Fallohide hair was water-dark and tangled with more waterweeds, and then there were more still twined into Gandalf's beard, and by the time Frodo managed to move the wizard to lie by Pippin, both Aunt Lobelia and Mr. Butterbur the innkeeper lay dripping onto the stones. Frodo sobbed in horror.

He stopped being careful how he laid them out then, dragging one after the other and laying them as close as he could, praying he would not have to begin piling bodies one on the other. Next came Gloin, wearing not the finery of today, but a torn and much-stained hood that was heavy with water, though his wet beard still was white. Wailing in misery and fear Frodo dragged one after another up onto the stones, Merry, and Lotho, and Boromir, and Gimli, and Fatty, and Folco, and cousin Saradoc, and Gaffer Gamgee, and cousin Paladin, and more, more, and then Sam, who so feared the water, his face hideously pale and all his warmth lost to the cold deeps. And then Frodo saw, not far from the shore, a little wooden boat bobbing gently, but upside-down, as if capsized. Frodo covered his mouth with his hand, and tasted that the water was not sweet, but seawater, which he had never tasted awake -- it tasted like tears. Two forms were about to be washed up now, two hobbit-sized figures, one in a sodden party dress. Frodo cried out in terror and turned to run back up the tunnel, but he slipped on a damp rock, fell, and there before him, just beside his hand, was a glint of gold --

Sam was holding Frodo's arms at his sides and calling to him, "Please, Mr. Frodo, please, it's over now. Oh wake up, sir, won't you wake? Mr. Frodo m'dear it's Sam here, and you're safe. Please wake up, sir. It's over with, it's done. Wake up." Sam sounded frightened and tearful.
Frodo eased a little and let his head fall against Sam's chest. He was panting with the nightmare's terror. Sam, seeing that he was awake, cradled him close, no longer trapping his arms, and murmured soothingly into Frodo's hair.

"I'm all right, Sam," Frodo managed at last. "It was an awful dream. Everyone was dead. Everyone, and I saw them all. I had to take care of them all."

"You were crying, sir, and yelling out, and you kept scratching at yourself, I thought you'd do yourself a damage."

"Scratching?" Frodo repeated, bewildered.

"Here, sir," Sam said, touching a shy finger to Frodo's chest, just where the ring usually lay, except that in his sleep the ring had slipped around on the chain so that it hung down his back. Here there was indeed a reddened place with a few visible welts and scratches, as if he had been trying to get hold of the ring and clawed through his own flesh to find it. "I couldn't wake you. And then you said my name right out, towards the end of it, and you made such an awful sound, I knew it must be a terrible dream, and I wanted you to know I was here, but I couldn't wake you."

Frodo nodded. "You were there."

"Dead, you mean."

"Yes, drowned. You were all drowned."

"Oh, sir," Sam said, and his voice held only sympathy, but he shuddered all the same. After another moment he uncurled his arms from around Frodo as he usually did when Frodo's night fears had been abated.

Instead of sitting up, thanking Sam, and going back to sleep, as he usually did, Frodo nestled his head again under Sam's chin and embraced him so that he could not leave the bed. Sam held very still.

"I can't bear it, Samwise," Frodo said. "Everyone who goes with me will be killed, and I know it. The quest is hopeless. I must go, but I must take none that I love with me. You must stay here. You and Merry and Pippin must all stay behind. I cannot bear ever to see you lying dead at my feet, to have to tend you in death."

"I won't be left, sir. I won't be, and I don't doubt Mr. Merry and Mr. Pippin will say the same. Better dead at your feet and you living to go on, than sitting here behind, doing naught but thinking how you might be dead yourself out there on the quest because I wasn't by to get between you and your danger."

"But there's no reason for you to go. You aren't a warrior. How could you hope to protect me?"

"I'll stop a sword or a spear or an arrow or two, if that's all I can do. And until then I'll look after you and see you don't have to think about meals nor carrying aught nor mending a torn shirt, nor nothing but the burden you've got already. And me and Mr. Merry and Mr. Pippin all, we'll keep you from being alone, for it would kill every one of us to think of you out alone without no hobbit to talk to, out among big folk who don't know aught about you, and mostly don't love you, though I know as Gandalf does."

"You should stay, Sam," Frodo said again.

"I can't nohow," Sam said firmly. "There's folk I hope to see again at home, and I'd like to stay here
and see more of the elves too, but it would be like a handful of dirt was in my mouth all the time, if I
did any of that, knowing you'd gone off to save it all and I hadn't come with you. I can't not go, just
like you couldn't not take the Ring, sir."

Frodo nodded sadly. "Hold me then, Samwise. You're right, it would be terrible to be alone, and I
shall have need of all the comfort I can get." It was more than he had meant to ask, but he was lonely
and afraid. "Hold me as you did those nights on the road, when I was ill."

"I wasn't but trying to keep you warm, sir," Sam said uncertainly, and as if to illustrate, his neck
grew warm against Frodo's face, so Frodo knew he was blushing.

"Then keep me warm, Samwise."

Sam shifted himself hesitantly to lie back along the edge of the bed, easing Frodo down so that he
was pillowed comfortably on Sam's chest, and drawing the blanket up to Frodo's shoulders. "Is that
all right, sir?"

"Yes, thank you, Sam." Frodo closed his eyes and at once saw Sam's drowned face, slack and
empty, and he winced and opened them again.

"Mr. Frodo?"

"Nothing. Remembering the dream."

"Would it ease you if . . . not meaning to bother you, sir, but if I was to say some poetry? Something
nice and soft, maybe?"

Frodo nodded and eventually was able to drift off while Sam's deep and gentle voice rolled out a
story of lost Gondolin. When he woke, Sam still held him, and often that next day he saw Sam
glancing at him with an odd look in his eye.

Four days after his nightmare, after spending the afternoon in a long walk with Merry and Pippin,
Frodo ate dinner with Bilbo. Sam did not insist on coming; he was willing to allow Frodo privacy
when he wanted it (especially with Bilbo, who he still seemed rather in awe of), and he had gone off
to listen to the storytellers again.

Bilbo, after demanding Frodo's opinion on some slightly lumpy octrails, settled them both into chairs
by the fire, each with a pipe. Bilbo seemed amused (and perhaps rather pleased) that Frodo was still
barely able to manage one smoke ring out of two tries, and happily listened to simple Shire-style
gossip about changes in the price of Southern Star, and the advancement of the rivalry between the
Thain and the Master of Buckland over who had the most magnificent pipe. (At Frodo's departure it
had been Saradoc's nearly floor-length wooden pipe carved with the names of the Masters of
Buckland back to the Bucca of the Marish -- some names conjectural, some downright imaginary --
and set with ten dozen garnets, over Paladin's ivory pipe with a double-twist in the stem and a band
of pearl around the bowl. But these things were apt to change on a weekly basis.)

They both laughed over this bit of typical hobbitry, and then for a long time both were quiet.

At last, Bilbo said, "Did I hurt you terribly, when I left, my boy?"

"I missed you terribly. I suppose when a year had passed and there had been no letter, then I felt a bit
hurt. But that was my own fault. I knew you had no intention of writing., I just kept hoping anyway.
I wanted to tell you how the garden was getting on, and what I'd been reading, and to ask your
advice on things. It was very sad, knowing I couldn't."
"And on top of the rest, I'd left you with the mess of this Ring."

Frodo could not help but fear, for a moment, that Bilbo was going to ask again to see the Ring. "You couldn't know what a mess it was, Bilbo dear. Even Gandalf didn't until April."

"I wish I could go on the quest, still. I know Gandalf thinks it is a matter of the Ring still working on me, but it isn't only that. I wish I could save you from this danger, my lad. You've been through enough just getting here. I love you, my boy, and I'd spare you this, if only I could."

"Oh, Bilbo, my dear hobbit, even if you could go, I wouldn't let you. My love for you would never allow it. You have had your quest, and faced down a dragon, and Gollum as well. That is enough to ask of any hobbit."

"I very much fear, my boy, that far more will be asked of you."

Frodo nodded sadly.

"You're heading, at the end, for a mountain lonelier than Erebor ever was, lad. Keep your friends close about you, however much you fear for them."

"I will. I've argued with them all, and got nowhere anyway."

"Your Sam will be good for a heavy pack anyhow. Good strapping lad. Now tell your old cousin Bilbo one last bit of gossip, if you will. Do you still watch that lad in the garden as if it's him and not the strawberries you want for your afters?" Bilbo smiled and winked.

Frodo stared at him. "Bilbo!"

"Now, my boy, I didn't say a word at the time. No one can blame a fellow for noticing when a child blooms all at once into a fine-looking hobbit, the way Sam did that one summer. But it seems to me your heart is lighter when he's near, and Samwise has followed you this far. He stood up to the elves, shy as he is, and he stayed by your side until he dropped -- and I mean he fell over and had to be carried off. And now he means to follow you again. So if you're still taking your glances . . . Well, it's worth knowing that lad's heart is full of your face."

"Bilbo, you are imagining things."

"Now don't you try to pull the wool over my eyes, Frodo my lad. I've known you all your life, and Samwise the same. I know what I've seen. Listen to a hobbit who's seen more years, and more young fools, pass by than any other you'll meet. You needn't be alone, unless you want to be."

Frodo sighed. "Whenever I try to tell Sam he's free to be so much as a friend to me, he blushes and looks like he's about to try hiding under the hearthrug."

Bilbo nodded, smiling. "You think about it anyhow, my boy. Now I'm ready to seek my bed." He stood up and tapped out his pipe into the hearth.

Frodo kissed Bilbo goodnight and wandered back to his own room in a state of complete bemusement. He had watched Sam in the garden often, and, sometimes, yes, with a little lust in his heart. But surely no more than he'd felt for any other good-looking lad or lass; he had certainly never looked at Sam so hungrily as Bilbo implied. And if Sam loved him so much as Bilbo seemed to think, why would he be so reluctant to be more intimate, as Frodo had tried to encourage him to be, often enough?

Then again, Bilbo was wise, and Frodo had always trusted his judgement. He had found lying in
Sam's warm, gentle arms not only comfort but pleasure. Sam, who had been a slightly distant friend who occasionally sparked Frodo's desire, back in Hobbiton, had become so much dearer since, revealed unknown depths and strengths, and an unexpectedly fervent devotion.

When Sam came back from the storytelling, full of a tale about the childhood of Luthien, Frodo watched him in quiet consideration as he tidied their things, put a glass of water by the side of Frodo's bed, stretched, washed his hands and face with a great deal of puffing and blowing, and all the time talked of the tale, of the words that told it and of the people in it and of the ways it fit into the other tales he knew. He had beautiful eyes, Frodo had always thought, wide and brown and liquid as a deer's, and Frodo now judged that his lips, particularly the full lower one, were very inviting. His brown curls tended to be unruly, and the way they stood up at the right temple, where Sam sometimes ran his hand through them, was thoroughly charming. His shoulders were wide and strong as they had been when he had first caught Frodo's eye, and he still had a fine round hobbit belly and a fine round hobbit rump though both were rather diminished by the short commons and the long road to Rivendell. Frodo found himself staring at Sam's hands; they were large, square, very strong. How could he so often have watched Sam cradle one of his wild foundlings -- Sam had a weakness for orphaned chicks and lost rabbit kits -- gently in those hands and not noticed how strong they were?

"Mr Frodo?" Now Sam was looking at him oddly.

"What is it, Sam?"

"Only, I asked you whether you wanted to go to sleep or stay up a bit, and you didn't seem to hear. I'm guessing you're tired, then."

"I am sleepy. But leave a candle lit by the bedside, will you, and sit and talk with me?" Frodo said it before he could think about what he was contemplating. He should speak to Sam lightly, try to see whether Bilbo was right. Better still, just invite Sam to the slightest bit more intimacy now, and work his way up slowly. He had never seduced anyone. Aside from four fumbling encounters with Dillilla Chubb in his late tweens (of which the memories were a blur of awkward tangling punctuated with brief moments of pleasure), he had never done more than kiss. Did he even truly want to seduce Sam?

Sam sat in a chair by the window and looked at him with a sunny smile. "I'm right glad you've had the chance to speak with Mr. Bilbo while we've been here, sir. I know how you have missed him."

"Yes," Frodo said, leaving his things on the desk and moving to wash up and change into his nightshirt. Outside his window he could see pines silvered with moonlight, and between them, in the black sky to the east, a star burning red. He hurriedly turned away from the glass. "Yes, that has been the best of all the pleasures here, for me." As he passed Sam on his way to the bed, he caught Sam's scent, partly a sort of fresh spiciness, from the way he went about touching plants wherever he saw them, as if unable to resist them, partly the newer scent of elvish soap (at home he used something with a bit of vanilla bean in it, vanilla being a favorite of all the Gamgees), and partly a soft personal musk that, as Frodo drew it in now, deliberately and consciously, was surprisingly appealing. He sat on the side of the bed facing Sam. "Were there any other good stories?" he asked, to put off going to sleep; he felt warm and vaguely aroused now.

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"Oh, they told that one about how there was a city of giants up above the sky, and a lad climbed up the tallest tree in the world and snuck about with a giant's wife, and the giant tried to climb down and kill the lad, but he chopped the tree down, and the giant fell into the sea. Only, the way they tell it, there was only the one giant, and it was the wife told him about the lad, after she found out he had
another sweetheart, down on the ground. Isn't it wonderful how there are so many different ways of
telling the same story? You could hear nothing but one story all your life, I think, and if it was one of
the good ones, you could hear it a different way every night, and never get a bit tired of it."

"Not the elvish stories, the ones about their true history. Those should only be told the way they
happened."

"Oh, I don't know, sir. I mean, think of even Beren's story. If you told it thinking from Luthien's old
father the king's point of view, it would still be true, but everything would be different all the same.
And the same for Queen Melian. And for that poor minstrel lad who loved Luthien and likely
thought he was doing his best by her and would likely say that Beren led her astray and only made
her miserable in the end. And, I don't think either Mr. Bilbo nor Gloin ever lied, meaning to, but
Gimli heard a different story about that quest than I ever did when I was a lad."

Frodo smiled. He couldn't help it, it was a huge smile and it just kept beaming out of him. Simple
Sam of Hobbiton had existed only in his own head. All the time this had been going on beneath, just
as under sweat and onions and vanilla had always been this tantalizing musky scent.

"I suppose my ideas are right silly, sir," Sam said peaceably. "You know best. It's only I do
times wish I could hear what that minstrel lad thought. He loved the best he could, but he ended
up being just a line or two in someone else's love story, if you follow me."

"Your ideas are lovely, Samwise. Have you asked about him?"

"Who, Mr. Frodo?"

"Why, the minstrel, of course. He might have been sitting in that very room with you. If he hasn't
gone across the sea for good, perhaps he's settled in Rivendell."

Sam chuckled, clearly delighted with the thought. "Mr. Frodo, if you aren't the cleverest who ever
lived! I'd've never thought of that. It's all so long ago, and yet elves do last straight through from long
ago right up to today."

"I never really understood it myself, until Elrond said what he did, about being there during the battle
of the Last Alliance."

"Isn't it wonderful? Can cause some funny things though."

"How's that, Samwise?"

"Well, remember that lady at the feast, and Mr. Bilbo saying as she's Elrond's daughter and hoping to
marry Strider? Well, if I understand things a-right, Strider being down from the line of Isildur and all,
that makes him and the lady first cousins, but a couple hundred times removed. And them getting
married!"

And there was Sam's unshakeable hobbit nature. Even looking at such a tale as Aragorn and
Arwen's, Sam could step aside and appreciate their genealogies right beside their love story.

Sam was looking curiously at Frodo's grin. "Whatever was it you talked about with Mr. Bilbo
tonight, sir? You're in a right high spirit, and glad I am to see it. Not meaning to pry."

"We talked about the Shire, and pipes, and adventures, and about you, Samwise," Frodo said
happily. He felt suddenly fearless. "We talked about how good looking I've always thought you are,
and about how much you must care for me, to agree to so dangerous a journey."
Sam stared at him, gaping. "Rightly I do," he said weakly, "I do care." He looked now almost suspiciously at Frodo, and Frodo realized Sam was afraid he was being made fun of. "I ain't but homely, sir, and I know it."

Frodo stood up. "Now, you're no Fatty Bolger, but I've just been watching you, Sam," Frodo said, walking slowly over to stand in front of Sam's chair, a little to the side so that none of his shadow would fall over Sam's face and take away that glow, "the way I've always liked to watch you when you're working in the garden. And in my considered opinion, you are quite a good looking young hobbit." The chair was high enough that their faces were nearly on the same level and he looked shamelessly up and down Sam's face and body.

Sam turned crimson. "Oh, Mr. Frodo. That's . . . you . . . I . . . That's kind of you to say, sir."

"Your eyes are very beautiful, just to start with," Frodo said, and happily watched Sam squirm at the compliment.

"You shouldn't ought to say such things, Mr. Frodo. I ain't nothing special, not in the eyes nor nothing else. Why, it's you as is handsome, even Gandalf says so. Fairer than most, he said."

"Perhaps he only meant I'm a bit pale, not tanned golden like you."

"You're just being contrary now, Mr. Frodo," Sam said chidingly, and Frodo wanted to laugh with delight.

"I'm glad you think me handsome anyway, Sam." He rested one hand on the arm of the chair and leaned just a little bit closer. "Can't think why, though."

"Why, you've the handsomest smile in all the Shire, Mr. Frodo, and the shape of your face, your cheeks and your chin . . . they're something fine."

"But not my mouth, Samwise?" Frodo asked daringly.

"You've a fine mouth, sir," Sam protested, and his voice was sounding strained.

"Ah, but you -- you've a mouth to try a fellow's restraint, Sam."

"Sir?" Sam squeaked out.

Frodo had had enough of teasing. He bent forward and kissed Sam's soft mouth; just to press their mouths together made all his skin come alive, ready for another touch anywhere, oh everywhere. When he stopped and straightened again, Sam whimpered. His eyes were huge. "Is that all right, Sam?" Frodo asked, finding his voice rather thick. "If you didn't like it, I won't do it any more, I promise."

Sam's mouth opened and then closed again soundlessly. He looked like a rabbit trapped by a cat, looking for some way to bolt.

"Is it all right?" Frodo asked again. "I never meant to offend you, Samwise. Or frighten you."

"W-whatever did you mean, sir?" Sam whispered.

"Why, to kiss my dear and quite good-looking friend Samwise."

"But, but why, sir?"

"For the same reason I'd pick up a strawberry from the bowl, or take a slice of honey cake. Because I
wanted to. Because you looked delicious. Is it all right? May I kiss you again?" He was pushing now, but following his instinct and his new understanding Sam's character. If Sam hadn't liked it, wasn't at least curious, Frodo was sure he would have gone very stiff and prim, and told Frodo straight off that he was disgracing himself.

"I . . . " Sam proved unable to speak it yet, but he nodded timidly.

Frodo braced his hands on the arms of the chair and pressed into another kiss. He found Sam this time hesitantly moving his mouth in counterpoint. Recklessly, Frodo tilted his head and sealed his mouth over Sam's, making the kiss deeper and wet. He wanted to taste Sam's mouth, was just beginning to nudge his tongue at Sam's lower lip, when Sam's tongue slipped, wet, smooth, hot, into his mouth and stroked the inside of his cheek, over his own tongue, for one unbearably ticklish moment against the roof of his mouth, and away again. Frodo shuddered and the kiss broke. "Oh, my Sam," Frodo breathed.

"Is that all right, sir?" Sam asked breathlessly.

"Bliss," Frodo said, smiling. This time he took Sam by the hands and tugged him out of the chair so that they stood chest to chest. He leaned into Sam again and this time they licked freely at each other. Sam's arms came softly around him and it was so slow and gentle and welcoming that Frodo no longer needed to feel daring; he knew, knew absolutely, that Sam loved and wanted him. Sam's taste was nothing he could have described, and yet he knew he wanted only more of it, and the more they kissed, the more he wanted.

They kissed for perhaps half an hour, perhaps more, and then Sam insisted (reluctantly, as Frodo could plainly read in his eyes) that Frodo needed to sleep. Frodo settled into bed, rather disappointed when Sam pointedly tucked him in rather than getting in with him. He was asleep a moment after Sam blew out the candle.

When Frodo woke, Sam was leaning on the frame of the connecting door, looking at him with a rather wistful, and very tender smile. Morning light showed him the same Sam Frodo had known so many years, and yet somehow so much more desirable; the muscles in Sam's forearms, bared where his sleeves were rolled up, kept drawing Frodo's eye, and had Sam's throat always had such a uniquely inviting curve to it? Frodo realized he was staring, and didn't care a bit. "Good morning Samwise," he said.

"Morning, Mr. Frodo." Sam seemed about to say more, but lost his nerve. Instead he started setting things out for Frodo's morning "Are you meaning to take another tramp with Mr. Merry and Mr. Pippin today, sir?"

Well, it seemed he was going to have to seduce Sam anew, day by day. Much as he would have liked to start by tugging Sam into bed with him this minute, that would have to wait for evening. "I think we'd best. My legs need all the training they'll take."

Ah, but just for now . . . He walked up to Sam and kissed one cheek, then the other, then Sam's lips, lightly. Then he got dressed, feeling Sam's eyes on him all the time.

All that day, Frodo watched Sam speculatively, and often caught himself being watched by shy brown eyes. Bilbo's amused and rather smug glance at him at lunch only made Frodo smile, but it was near the end of their long walk with Merry and Pippin, when Sam drifted over to a low rise and paused there looking down, that he really understood. He climbed up to join Sam and saw the view framed between two bushy pines -- a little pool into which a slow offshoot of the Bruinen poured, a grassy hill by it, crowned with three narrow beeches, a white cupola rising behind.
"This is lovely," Frodo said.

"Aye, just the sort of spot where the fellow in a tale would fall in love, ain't it sir?" Sam whispered dreamily, "just afore he's got to go off into the dark and fight a monster or aught, and right through it he'd carry that spot in his heart, that spot with the one he loved in it, smiling at him, and it would give him courage for the darkest days."

"Yes," Frodo whispered, a bit unsteadily, "just the sort of place."

"Or it might be the other's as brave as Luthien Tinuviel, and sets off too, the both of them carrying that spot in their hearts, remembering being together there, so even if they don't neither of them come back, they always . . . " He ducked his head, blushing, finally seeming to remember that he was speaking aloud. "Only my fancy, Mr. Frodo. Don't pay it no mind."

Frodo smiled, and he thought he might laugh, only, if he did, he'd surely cry too. Glancing aside, he saw that Merry and Pippin had gone ahead. Quickly he caught Sam's mouth in a soft kiss that he broke off too quickly, left unfinished through the rest of the afternoon, and the storytelling after.

And then when they were in Frodo's room that night, both in their nightshirts and one candle glowing, Sam looking at him with nervous expectation, he did finish it, kissing deeper and more freely than he had dared the night before. His whole body warmed with the kiss, and he was more than just a bit aroused now.

"You're the splendidest thing," Sam whispered, slipping the words into little breaks in the kiss as they moved their heads to discover new angles, to taste above and between and over. "Weren't no strawberry from the bowl ever tasted near so fine."

Sam's body felt so perfectly shaped to hold against him, and hot and strong and thrilling with heartbeat. He stroked his hands up and down Sam's back, not sure where he wanted to touch, only wanting more and more of Sam against palms and fingertips. "And you're sweeter, Samwise."

Sam's hand slid into his hair, cupping the back of his head, catching in a few tangled curls, and Sam's other hand caressed Frodo's side, an astonishingly sensual touch that made Frodo moan and sway on his feet. They pressed tighter together and now Frodo could feel unmistakably the way Sam's cock was stiffening beneath his night shirt. He froze with a gasp at the heat of it against his thigh.

Sam snatched his hands away and twitched back. "I'm right sorry, sir," he said, "I went right out of my head and forgot m'self."

Panting, Frodo took one of Sam's hands and brought it to his mouth. Staring into Sam's eyes, he kissed Sam's palm, then nipped the fleshy, callused pad of Sam's thumb. Sam swallowed audibly.

"I don't mind a bit, dear Sam." He stepped close, pressing himself up against Sam's chest and belly, and dragged Sam's hand now down between their bodies. Watching Sam's face with breathless hope and fear that felt like excitement, he pressed Sam's hand over his own swelling cock.

Sam's eyes went perfectly round and his mouth dropped open. The expression would have been delightfully comical, if Frodo had not been still rather nervous. Then, tentatively, Sam's hand moved, shaping Frodo's hardness through soft cloth. Frodo moaned and pushed forward into the gentle touch.

Frodo's head fell back as Sam's fondling grew more confident and firm, and then Sam's mouth was on his throat, kissing and nipping. "Oh, Sam, yes," he gasped, "good, that's so -- " He ran out of air for speaking with, slumped and let Sam support half his weight.
He was warm through, he was floating in sweet heated sensation, his hands stroking over Sam's hair, Sam's back, Sam's arms. Then in the space of a second the feelings turned urgent and he was squirming restlessly, pressing needily into Sam's hand, writhing and trying to get closer to Sam's warm soft body.

Sam's hand abruptly left his cock and Frodo groaned in disappointment. Sam stroked his side again, softly, calmingly. "Gently, sir, easy there, easy," Sam breathed until Frodo was still again.

"I'm sorry, Sam," Frodo said, a little hurt, but understanding Sam's hesitance, "I didn't mean to push you too far, or too fast."

"Well, it ain't that," Sam said, not quite looking at him, still too shy for that. "It's only, if you would like me to . . . to give you a bit of pleasure, sir, as it seems, well, it might be nicer if you was to lie down on your bed. Unless standing up is . . . is how you'd like it, Mr. Frodo." Sam's cheeks were bright and he was visibly chewing his lip.

Frodo cradled Sam's head between his hands and raised Sam's chin until they were looking at each other. He nodded silently and drew Sam with him across the room and to the bed. It seemed to take all the courage Sam had to climb up onto the bed beside him, and once he was up he sat still, eyes locked on his hands, which rested on his lap in a knot of fingers.

Frodo nestled himself close to Sam's body. "Gentle Samwise. Do you know how dear you are to me? I believe I've quite fallen in love with you."

Sam trembled silently for one moment, and then burst into tears. Once Frodo might have panicked at such a response, but he knew his Sam better now. Frodo gathered Sam in and buried his face in Sam's curls -- crisp and smelling somehow of sunlight -- until the brief storm had passed. Then he pressed Sam back and smiled at him, waiting.

"Oh, Mr. Frodo, I never did think to hear such a thing. You, loving poor Sam Gamgee who ain't fine nor book-learned, and a fool besides?"

Frodo smiled at this description that might have come straight from the Gaffer's mouth. It was time Sam heard some other opinions. "It's true, my wise, poetic Sam. My lovely, strong, young Sam. My sweetest, dearest Samwise."

"And me loving you years and years," Sam whimpered. "It don't seem hardly possible outside a storybook, me being here in elf-lands, and given all my heart's wanted."

Frodo nudged Sam's lips with his own until they opened for him, and kissed him warmly, lazily. "As for you giving me a bit of pleasure, Samwise Gamgee my very dearest love, I'd like that so much, but only if you'll take your pleasure from me at the same time." His hand stole down and he found Sam's cock thick and hard and so incredibly hot beneath Sam's nightshirt.

Sam gasped and bucked his hips twice, fast and hard, into Frodo grip before he calmed himself. "Oh, Mr. Frodo, m'dear, oh, you -- I never -- " Sam was gasping, looking overwhelmed and shocked with himself

Thrilled, Frodo squeezed a little more firmly and watched Sam arching, Sam moaning, Sam abandoned to his touch. He pulled at Sam's hand with his own free hand until it settled over his cock again, and once more he was aware of the blunt strength in Sam's fingers as they caressed him, and he buried his face against Sam's neck, sucking and biting there greedily.

Sam pulled back a bit and nudged his jaw against Frodo's cheek until Frodo raised his head and their
mouths were together again. Something in Frodo notched higher and he pressed closer, now only able to rub his cheek against Sam's while he gasped. His cock under Sam's hand ached for something more than this gentle touching.

"Oh, master, I want to feel you, please -- your skin," Sam groaned raggedly. With an effort, he tore himself away and struggled up to tug at his nightshirt. He was aware of Sam doing the same beside him, and then they came together again and there was no air or light, only Sam's skin, so hot, damp, smooth, sticky, alive with Sam's blood and breath. Frodo couldn't press close enough, and when their legs tangled and he felt Sam's cock burning his hip, and he could press himself against Sam's hip, it at once bought a momentary relief and yet wound the ache of desire higher. He laughed in delight and felt Sam's hands smoothing over his cheeks adoringly. "Oh," Sam groaned, "if you ain't the finest thing a-breathing."

Frodo needed more, a tighter, better way to move. He rolled them over until Sam lay under him and he ground himself down against Sam's body. Frodo thought he might swoon at the bolt of bliss that burned down his spine. He felt Sam's cock against his skin, which was suddenly slickened with a little new moisture. "Oh, Samwise, like this?"

"Oh yes, sir, anything, anything. So long as I can feel you." Sam's arms were tight around him and his thrust back was so perfect, so exactly what Frodo had needed -- nearly too much to bear. Then Sam gasped and his hands dropped lower, squeezing Frodo's rump firmly, and he moved in a slow flawless rhythm.

Frodo lost any thought of controlling his voice, he cried and moaned and gasped in delight, borne up, up, relentlessly up until a blazing liquid light filled him, out to the fingernails, out to the toenails, and his spine flexed, and then he was beaming out joy like a star through every pore as he thrust tightly over and over and he spilled in long stunning waves onto Sam's belly.

He felt he was sinking slowly down through a cloud of unspeakable softness as it eased from him, but Sam was still straining against him, motion now slippery with Frodo's spill, and then Sam arched hard beneath him and cried out, whimpering and clinging and spilling in hot surges, only slowly beginning to ease and calm. Frodo nipped fondly at Sam's neck and felt Sam shudder and another surge of warmth stream from him before he finally went still beneath Frodo.

Eyes drifting slowly open and closed, Sam gazed at Frodo dreamily. "I do love you. Oh I do," he breathed.


Sam fumbled down off the side of the bed with one hand and produced a cloth -- and that was Frodo's practical Sam who always looked after him. With some regret, Frodo pulled away, and they wiped themselves off. Nearly asleep already, Frodo pressed close again and drifted off with little twinges of pleasure still running through him.

That night, Frodo dreamt sweetly, that the quest was over and done, and he was standing someplace he had never been, in a gentle misting rain that washed all fear and pain away. Sam was in his arms, and Merry and Pippin were there too, and Gandalf, and even Elrond and Bilbo, and Sam was holding him so blissfully tight, as if he meant to say with his arms and his body that they could never be parted. And Frodo was permitted to float away, away, into joy and peace unending.
Epilogue

The river lay low in its bed, and it looked hardly more than a stream now, to a hobbit who had sailed down the Anduin twice, once in tiny elf-boats, and later in the great sailing ships of men, and between had taken a quick plunge into that swift deadly water himself. Sam nudged the pony forward and it picked its way across without a stumble.

He admired bright leaves as he went on, early October now, and with no reason to avoid the main road, they might reach home in only a few weeks from here. Might see the Shire's first snowfall. When he glanced back, he saw Frodo just past the ford, paused next to Gandalf, talking with his head bowed. For a moment Frodo looked pale, weak, shivering and Sam hopped down and dug a blanket out of his saddlebags. He wouldn't have his poor Frodo taking a chill now.

Glorfindel had ridden out with them and Sam could still see him up at the top of the far rise, riding on good old Asfaloth's back. Mr. Frodo ought to look to that, if he'd any more worries in his head. Asfaloth had learned to walk again, and if he couldn't run no more, well, what matter? Wasn't ever a horse Samwise had heard of had wasted away for want of running. He climbed astride his pony again and when Frodo reached him, Sam leaned over to wrap the blanket round his shoulders and kiss his cool cheek. Leaves the color of fire crunched under the hooves and ahead Merry and Pippin were singing a song of warm supper and home.

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