Waiting for Courage

by cimorene

Summary

Fromo worries about addiction and his own strength.

Notes

First published December 2001. All credited quotes are taken word-for-word from The Lord of the Rings. They are not the only quotes—at some places, particularly in the Mirror of Galadriel, Sarn Gebir, and last scenes, where my story overlapped with parts of canon, there are unaccredited quotes floating around (as well as extremely derivative scenes). Of course, you know that none of this belongs to me in the first place.

Gimli laughed suddenly. 'A merry troop of fools we shall look! Will Haldir lead us all on a string, like many blind beggars with one dog? But I will be content, if only Legolas here shares my blindness.'

'I am an Elf and a kinsman here,' said Legolas, becoming angry in his turn.

'Now let us cry: 'a plague on the stiff necks of Elves!' said Aragorn. 'But the company shall all fare alike. Come, bind our eyes, Haldir!'

-J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring
The path wound on through the Naith of Lorien; voices echoed back, Gimli's and Merry's, and Haldir, their guide's. The half-familiar fragrance of Forest rose around Frodo, from the great trees he could sense around them, the wildflowers and grass crushed under his feet. Even the sun, when it sought a perilous path through the shadows of the mallorn leaves to splash on his upturned face, seemed to have a slow, sweet smell, and the wind a gentler whispering song than anywhere else he'd been.

"Do you smell it, Mr. Frodo?" --Sweet as the whispers of the wind, and dearer: the awed whisper of Sam's voice, near his side. His eyes bound with soft Elven-cloth, Frodo's senses were sharpened, and his ears caught the rush of Aragorn's boots against the grass-stems yards behind him, and the slight creak of leather from Gimli's walking, yards ahead. Even Merry's and Pippin's movements weren't undetectable: there was the occasional slither of cloth on cloth, the noise of a flower stem breaking.

But Sam, who had been standing behind him when the blindfold descended to erase sight, had slipped closer and closer to him, from his place in Frodo's footsteps to a better place at his side, with no sound, no gust of moving air or heavy footfall or clink of shifting pack to betray him. Sam wasn't aware of being stealthy, Frodo knew, not under these silver and gold mallorn trees and the palpable smile of Nature and Elven magic; it was simply his way, to move as one with the flora around him, soothing the grass under his feet with his gardener's touch as he'd soothed and coaxed all the trees and flowers and bushes at Bag End to do his bidding.

"The Forest?" Frodo asked, taking in another breath of sun and wind and greenery, to which was now added a hint of hobbit. A bird trilled, somewhere far away, and he smiled.

"I sure wish I could see it, Mr. Frodo," Sam said fervently. "I don't rightly know how I know it, but it feels awfully beautiful. The smell of these here trees and grass and flowers--well it's like my beloved forests of the Shire, and yet not, quite." He breathed in so deeply that Frodo could hear the hiss of breath. "And I don't know that it's the smell of Forest, so much as the smell of Forest and some kind of queer Elvish magic, mixed together like, if you follow me."

It was when Sam said things like this, things that most clearly demonstrated his extraordinary perception, that he seemed the youngest. He had a peculiar talent for phrasing his insights. Frodo shook his head, as if in a dream, as the nothing behind his eyelids didn't change for it. "I do, Sam. The Forest is magic in the same way that the Elves are."

"Magic inside," said Sam, and Frodo smiled, even though of course Sam couldn't see it.

"Yes," he said.

"No, not home," Sam sighed at length, almost to himself, "yet very fair and welcoming all the same." Frodo chuckled: in Sam's estimation, any place would suffer by comparison with the Shire.

They walked in silence for some time, feeling the day and the ground pass beneath their feet in the long rhythm of walking, softened by the grass, and the peace of the Forest. It felt very safe there, as though Frodo had stepped away from his perilous quest and traveled instead a more restful path, for a time. What lay at the end of the day's journey he hardly considered. Only vague snatches of his companions' conversations ahead and behind registered, and the feel and smell and sound of the Forest, and, eventually, a melody that Sam hummed as he walked along, almost too quiet to make it out, so that it was some time before Frodo realized he had been singing. He listened for a time, soothed by the familiarity, until he could follow it exactly, and then realized with a start that he knew the words. Then he began to sing along, softly at first, only humming himself.
Night fell, another blindfold of deeper dark outside the first. The featureless blackness on which Frodo had gazed all day had not, after all, been so very black. They walked through an invisible land, a Forest whose gracious shapes they could only sense and smell, and they had left the ordinary world of sight so far behind that he could almost fancy that when the blindfold was removed, there would still be nothing. His mind conjured a landscape to replace what his eyes could not see. This vision was shadowy and indistinct in its majesty, made as much of imagination as of the impressions of his senses.

The only presence he was continually aware of was Sam's: his humming and singing and humming again, his questions and the inimitable style of his observations, and even, some, just the feel of his proximity, a knowledge based on no sound or sight. It was too hard to guess time, here, where a song might grow extra verses and turn into another, and a hobbit easily lost count of how many hundred steps he'd taken, and how many gentle curves his path had followed.

Frodo had started to wonder how long it had been since the light had gone, and whether the sun had set all the way, or it merely seemed darker in the shadows of the invisible trees, when Pippin spoke to them.

"We're going to stop soon, but the path's going to take a sharp turn or two, Haldir says. You in the back had better stay close."

The voice was relatively close. It was hard to tell how far apart they'd been walking. Frodo listened more attentively.

"What--here?" said Merry.
"Oh!"--and that was Pippin.
"Careful," Haldir said quickly.
"The turn must be just ahead," Frodo said.
"A bit more to your right," the guide called back to Frodo and Sam.
"Me?" said Frodo and Sam both, at the same time, slowing.
"You're alright, both of you; just...there..."

Frodo's hand met a sturdy elbow, and he felt his forearm clasped, before he had realized he was putting out his hand.

"I think we're right, Master," Sam muttered, "but it wouldn't be no trouble if it weren't so dark."
Sam's hand was warm through his sleeve; it had begun to chill, but so gradually he hadn't noticed. They were walking straight again now, and Haldir was speaking to Aragorn behind them.

It felt like they were all right, certainly. "I think we are, too..." Frodo said slowly to Sam, ",although he did say a turn or two. As for the blindfolds, it won't matter when we make camp."

Indeed, the path turned sharply again, and Frodo was glad of the steadiness of Sam's arm in his grip and the greater warmth as they walked closer together, though it meant some confusion when the path went suddenly down and Frodo stumbled. There was a moment of disorientation when he didn't know how far he was from the ground, and his foot had bumped either Sam's or a tree root. He hoped they weren't both going to fall. But then the world righted itself, and Sam moved to catch him, putting one hand quickly but accurately against the unbruised ribs through the mithril
mail, and with the other catching Frodo's near hand. The stumble became nothing more than a sway and a pause, and they were able to keep walking again, much more warily.

They didn't let go until they were at camp, and Sam was very certain there was no more chance of falling. "To go all that way through Moria," he said, "and fall and maybe be hurt in an Elvish Forest, just walking--!"

"But I haven't, thanks to you, Sam," Frodo said, "and I'm sure that thanks to you I won't. You needn't worry. I don't."

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'But odd things may happen to people that have such treasures--if they use them. Let it be a warning to you to be very careful with it. It may have other powers than just making you vanish when you wish to.'

'I don't understand,' said Frodo.

'Neither do I,' answered the wizard. 'I have merely begun to wonder about the ring, especially since last night. No need to worry. But if you take my advice you will use it very seldom, or not at all. At least I beg you not to use it in any way that will cause talk or rouse suspicion. I say again: keep it safe, and keep it secret!'

-J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring

When he lay under his blanket waiting for sleep to come, even on nights when he was so exhausted that he fell asleep almost immediately, Frodo's mind reached out anxiously for the feel of the Ring's cold weight on his chest under his shirt. He could feel its magic slowly working on him: there had been his unwillingness to cast it into the fire, at Bag End, before he'd known what it was, what seemed like a thousand years ago. He thought that now, though he knew it was nearly impossible to hurt it, and though he feared it, he couldn't bear the thought of anyone trying to take it from him.

Many mornings, he woke with his hand cupped over it. Since he'd been stabbed by the chief of the Nazgul, he had had nightmares regularly about the strange half-spirit world he was transported to when he put it on. When he thought of it in full daylight, he still shivered, regardless of the safety of Lothlorien and Sam's invisible warmth at his side. All his caution, all his fear, and all his bitterness couldn't restrain him from reaching for it in danger: only a great exercise of will could do it, and he often found himself sweating. He remembered Bilbo's habit of constantly patting his pocket with the Ring in it, and was uneasy.

Just the Ring's proximity was a danger, he understood from Gandalf, even to the other members of the Fellowship, not just to him. Carrying it was a further burden to him--Frodo couldn't stop thinking he was peculiarly unqualified to carry something so powerful and dangerous, completely incapable of protecting it from others, barely able to resist it himself--.

He had accepted the burden long ago, and of course he must carry it still, he knew. His strength would have to be enough. All he could do to make it safer was keep himself from wearing it. If its pull was frighteningly powerful when he simply carried it, he was beginning to realize that wearing it would be tens of times worse. Numerous times he had caught himself on the verge of slipping it onto his finger unaware, and each time he'd worn it had seemed to double and treble its control over him.
Frodo walked a while with his hands in his pockets, to prevent them from going near the Ring. He resolved to be very careful of putting it on, from now on. Once he had started to wear it, he didn't know if he'd ever be able to get out of the habit again. "It's a real pleasure to walk through these woods," Sam said, around mid-morning.

"Yes," Frodo said, "I could walk happily all day, if we never got there."

"Once you get used to walking blindfolded," Sam confided thoughtfully, "you don't hardly notice that you've got it on anymore. I feel I could almost see the Forest through it."

Frodo laughed. "Oh, Sam."

"What's funny, Master?" Came the puzzled, good-natured inquiry from near his ear. Turning his face instinctively towards the sound, Frodo answered,

"Why, only that you're right."

A protracted silence was so eloquent as to set him laughing again, and for a moment Frodo forgot the Ring, forgot the death of Gandalf, forgot everything but the briefest kiss of sun on his upturned face, the cool grass underfoot, and the warmth of Sam's laughter, when he joined in.

When Sam began singing in a soft murmur later, Frodo, still recklessly carefree, linked their arms at once and took up the melody in a clear voice, tilting up his chin and shaking his hair off his face. He could feel it in the motion of Sam's arm as their feet gradually fell into step together, and their steps fell into the rhythm of the song. He thought even his heartbeat was on the verge of matching, by the time they stopped at noon.

They came out of the shade of trees, wading into a brightness that warmed them and turned the insides of Frodo's eyelids white. Sam dropped his arm to his side, and Frodo could hear a noise as he set down his pack that showed he had moved at least several feet away. Frodo's hand stretched reflexively towards the noise, and frowning he clutched it in a fist against his side and turned his head away. He kept his feet on the spot where he stood, not following the soft sounds he could hear and not, not reaching for the neck of his shirt, where his consciousness of the Ring was like a burning on his skin no matter how he tried not to think of it.

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When his eyes were in turn uncovered, Frodo looked up and caught his breath. ...It seemed to him that he had stepped through a high window that looked on a vanished world. A light was upon it for which his language had no name. All that he saw was shapely, but the shapes seemed at once clear cut, as if they had been first conceived and drawn at the uncovering of his eyes, and ancient as if they had endured for ever. He saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful. In winter here no heart could mourn for summer or for spring. No blemish or sickness or deformity could be seen in anything that grew upon the earth. On the land of Lorien there was no stain.

He turned and saw that Sam was now standing beside him, looking round with a puzzled expression, and rubbing his eyes as if he was not sure that he was awake. 'It's sunlight and bright day, right enough,' he said. 'I thought that Elves were all for moon and stars; but this is more elvish than anything I ever heard tell of. I feel as if I was inside a song, if you take my meaning.'
Haldir had named this verdant refuge Cerin Amroth, where the white branches overlaid the captured sunlight of mallorn crowns like lace in a circle below their feet, and beyond that grass like velvet swept down the slope. There were Merry and Pippin and Gimli and Boromir, lying in the grass before the edge of the Forest they'd just left, where more gold and green sparkled. Sunbeams cut the cloud-misted sky into great swaths of paler and darker blue, and a breeze danced over the high flet where Sam and Frodo stood, chilling Frodo’s eyelashes, catching up Haldir’s pale hair like a banner, tugging dark chocolate curls into Sam’s eyes and tossing them in the air.

Frodo's eyes returned again and again to the little city lying like a jewel in the midst of the forest, green on green. From where he stood, it looked like a piece of exquisite craftsmanship, perhaps a miniature model of a city, lying just a few feet away from him, and the gold and white on it might easily have been paint or precious metal, rather than reflected sun.

Movement caught his eye: Sam had taken a step involuntarily forward, closer to the edge, though (Frodo quickly looked) not too close. "I feel as if I could reach out," he said quietly, "and take it in the palm of my hand--" his hand stirred at his side, possibly without his knowledge, as he said it. Another step forward. "It's beautiful," he said, shaking his head, seeming unaware of the edge of the flet or their height, or the distance. Frodo was reminded of the first night they'd spent in the Forest high in a tree, when only Sam had been able to sleep untroubled. "It doesn't seem to have been built at all, but looks as if it had just grown there--or perhaps it did. From one minute to the next I can't tell if it's a city, or just a peculiar grove of trees..."

Frodo was looking at the Forest now as it framed Sam, who stood there gazing out with his dark eyes wide and wondering, and the same sun that set the sky alive with magical Elvish blue gilding the planes of his face all from one side and pooling on his lower lip. He blinked, once, twice, and the long shadows of his eyelashes dipped onto his cheekbones. "Oh...," Sam breathed. "And doesn't it look just perfect like that, with the Forest spread around it...? It almost hurts."

Frodo agreed before he was consciously aware of making any reply, but the "Yes" that came from his mouth was innocuous enough, and he couldn’t have stopped it if he'd tried. Sam was still looking at the city. "It does, doesn't it?" He continued inexorably, looking at the curls blowing on Sam’s brow that he didn’t bother to brush away, and thinking there was nothing he would rather see framed by the magnificence of Lothlorien.

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He followed more slowly behind Sam and Haldir, and met Aragorn almost at once, standing at the foot of the great tree with a slender flower in his hand. Nothing about him stirred but the loose strands of his hair, and he gazed at the flower or just beyond it at some sweet memory, with a smile hovering over his lips and a bloom of past youth on his face, in place of hard years that seemed to have fallen away.

Frodo wondered when Aragorn might have visited the land of Lorien, for his stance and his face, everything about him, testified that he had stood on this spot before, holding an elanor like this, and whispered these same words: "Arwen vanimelda, namarie!"

Arwen. Frodo looked contemplatively at Aragorn, remembering a few notable glimpses of the two of them together from the house of Elrond. Speculation, until then only a seed, blossomed. Taking a deep breath, the man came out of his dream, his eyes focusing again on the present, and some of the glow going away. Frodo met his eyes and looked a question, level-eyed; for answer, he got only an acknowledging smile.
Aragorn turned after Haldir and Sam, and said cryptically, "Here is the heart of Elvendom on Earth, and here my heart dwells ever, unless there be a light beyond the dark roads that we still must tread, you and I." Frodo blinked slowly, his mind racing through the speech again: was it an answer to his question, or had Strider been misdirecting him, or turning the subject? The smile turned a trifle wry, in awareness, and the human reached down for the hobbit's hand. "Come with me!"

They walked down the hill in the slowly-lowering sun, into the clearing filled like a bowl with rich orange-amber light. Merry and Pippin dozed on the ground beneath their cloaks; Boromir leaned against the bole of a gnarled tree; Legolas and Gimli were seated in the sun. Sam had been standing, evidently waiting, because when Frodo had returned he sank to the ground, and when Frodo sat nearby, showing no sign of leaving, he curled up in the soft, plush grass with his head pillowed on one folded arm.

"Are you going to sleep, Sam?" Frodo said, when he had been looking at him for long enough to feel he must say something. "I'm sure we're going to go on soon."

He smiled slightly on a yawn, and murmured, "Just a bit of rest--. You'll wake me." Frodo looked up when Sam's eyes drifted shut, wrapping his arms around his drawn-up knees, and gazed up at Cerin Amroth again, now lit brilliantly from behind with the fiery light. His hands itched, and he clasped them tightly together so the short, dirty stubs of his fingernails bit into his palms. He desperately ignored the coldness on his chest until the silhouettes of the trees against the orange sky couldn't fill his mind anymore.

Frodo glanced down, blinking against the gathering dusk, searching for other distraction, but Sam still slept, though his eyelids twitched when his master gave a slightly-too-audible little sigh. Then, feeling guilty, Frodo looked away, at the rest of the company, and hummed quietly to himself.

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'Your quest is known to us,' said Galadriel, looking at Frodo. 'But we will not here speak of it more openly. Yet not in vain will it prove, maybe, that you came to this land seeking aid, as Gandalf himself plainly purposed. ...I will not give you counsel, saying do this, or do that. For not in doing or contriving, nor in choosing between this course and another, can I avail; but only in knowing what was and is, and in part also what shall be.'

- J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring

When he closed his eyes, he could have been blindfolded again, and his featherbed, except for being exceptionally soft, could have been a bed of grass and leaves. He lay on his back still, folding his hands behind his head, but opened his eyes, as he could hear still the murmur of voices, and his ear had picked out his name.

"And what passed to Frodo from the Lady of the Galadrim, I wonder?" Boromir said, and Frodo, still gazing up at the gold mallorn leaves far overhead, made no response, idly thinking that perhaps he wouldn't have to have heard yet.

"What did she say to you?" He asked, raising his voice. Frodo could feel his gaze, but he could see nothing but the distant canopy of the trees and, from the corner of his eye, Sam's sturdy back and curly head, where he sat on his couch between his master and the rest of the room.

"The Lady is wise," Frodo said slowly.

"Won't you share with us what wisdom she imparted, that we may take it into our counsels and all have its benefit? Will you trust yourself to judge its worth alone?" Boromir pressed.
Frodo rolled his head wearily towards the sound, but he saw only the human's breeches-covered knee beyond Sam's linen-covered elbow. "I think so," said Frodo at length.

"She held you long in her gaze, Ring-bearer."

"Yes." Frodo propped himself up on one elbow so he could just see Boromir's craggy face. "But whatever came into my mind then I will keep there." Sam glanced anxiously over his shoulder at Frodo, who gave him a small smile before lying down again. When Sam looked away and at last reclined on his couch, Frodo closed his eyes.

He had been for so long with his eyes covered that, with his eyes closed, wrapped in the darkness of night and the softness of blankets, he could conjure the breeze, the blindfold, and the cool damp grass. Every detail of the long walk drifted gradually back, from the flowers tickling his ankles to the stirring of his hair to the murmur of Sam's humming-singing at his side. He slipped easily from memory into dream.

He saw again Galadriel's enigmatic gaze, and he knew his troubled thoughts were laid bare for her, but was easy in the knowledge. He sensed a benevolence from her that was not so simple as sympathy or approval. His anxiety for the Ring faded gradually as his awareness centered on her eyes and the invisible prickle of the dream-grass. It is a burden you accepted willingly, she had said to him clearly, and you bear it well.

No more guidance had the Lady offered. He trusted her instinctively, so that he allowed her trust to momentarily quiet his doubt and slip him into a more restful sleep; but still he wished for something more. Any word would have been welcome, anything but carrying its whole weight, all his decisions and the fate of the world, by himself.

No word came.

Even without one, the shreds of the dream finally left him to the first deep, untroubled sleep he had enjoyed since Rivendell.

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"Master." A soft breeze of a voice, that would have fitted seamlessly into Frodo's dream, if not followed by the equally soft, "It's time to wake up, Mr. Frodo."

The image of Sam faded on the verge of saying something else as the dream fled and he realized his eyes were still closed. Gradually awareness seeped in: cool shade and the clear illumination of sunlight, his hands lying curled in the blanket, his face pressed sideways into a pillow. He wondered what cause there could be to wake him before he would have woken here, but he could not resent that voice.

And it had sounded near his ear.

He opened his eyes to see Sam bending over him, his face masked in shadow as the sun streamed around him and tangled in the edges of his hair. Frodo blinked at the light, and said, "Good morning, Sam."

"You see," said Sam apologetically, "that's why I woke you. You were very tired, Mr. Frodo, and slept right through the morning, and a lunch has been served for us. I thought you'd want to wake for it, rather than miss two good meals of the day. Of course you can go right back to sleep if you prefer, and there's no telling but what these Elves might give you another meal later, but I'm not too sure of their Elvish ways."
It was noon already, evidently, and that made sense from the brightness of the light that was making it so hard for him to distinguish Sam's features: in fact, it was unusually bright for winter, though it didn't seem at all surprising in Lothlorien. Probably everyone else had been up for some time. Merry and Pippin wouldn't have missed breakfast for anything, and Sam only would have if going would have meant leaving Frodo alone where they had slept. Frodo's mind could have been made up from that alone, even if his stomach hadn't been suddenly making its presence known, and even if he hadn't slept a decadently long while. He realized, now, after his peculiar mental conversation with the Lady Galadriel, that his excessive weariness was partly due to the Ring he carried.

At any rate, he shouldn't miss an opportunity to eat. He had been lying, his thoughts moving sluggishly with sleep, for so long that his eyes had begun to adjust and he could see Sam's face in much greater detail, the brows slightly knit with confusion or worry, the lips just parted, the eyes reflecting no light, positively black at that angle. Sam was just as still as if he had been frozen, and Frodo only gradually was able to make himself stop staring and answer him: "Thank you for waking me. I'll come to eat. What is the time?"

"It's some time after eleven o'clock," said Sam, his brow clearing, "but not yet midday."

"Mm," Frodo murmured, and sat up, rubbing his eyes. Sam was still seated on the edge of the sleeping-couch, his gaze even and solemn and now much closer than it had been. Frodo closed his eyes for a moment and turned his face away before he could be spellbound again in his sleepy, defenseless state. "Shall we go, then?" He said, disconcerted that when he looked up, their eyes met once more.

Sam stood perfectly naturally and offered him a hand. Pulled smoothly to his feet, Frodo followed at Sam's right shoulder out of the shade of that tree and onto a lawn, and from there, up a ladder to a relatively low flet where Aragorn, Boromir, Merry and Pippin were already seated. His friends greeted him eagerly with descriptions of the fine breakfast they had already eaten, while Aragorn seemed quietly introspective and Boromir perhaps more reserved than usual.

After lunch they parted again, and Frodo even walked some distance away from Sam for a short time in a large and magnificent garden. His steps quickened when he was alone, unencumbered by Sam's childlike wonder at the cultivated and wild flowers, though certainly he had never seen their like. He was not entirely surprised to emerge from a narrow twisting path between hedges and find Aragorn in the pocket-sized clearing that was revealed, pacing its edges with his hands behind his back as though he had nothing better to do than fall into step next to Frodo, drawing out the silence before he would begin to speak.

"You have never been to a place like Lothlorien before."

"Rivendell," said Frodo, shaking his head, "is not its equal; yet before I had seen Rivendell, I had no basis to even imagine such beauty."

"The Elves account the mallorn tree of great value. Many of them have sailed for the Farmost West, yet many more of the Galadrim stay here, unwilling to leave the Forest."

"I cannot believe it would be so beautiful without the Elves in it," Frodo protested, meaning to stress the subtle magical effects of Elves on their environments which he thought he perceived; but the faraway look came to Strider's eye again, and he said quietly, smiling as if unaware,

"No, it would not." This expression was not like the other, but curiously bittersweet, as though he looked on memories filled with both loneliness and regret.

Frodo looked sharply at him. "You have spent time here in the past."
"Oh yes." He seemed amused by the expression on Frodo's face, and laughed aloud, "Go ahead, ask if you like: I give you leave."

"Yet you do not promise to answer," Frodo returned, smiling too.

"I am not so foolish," said Aragorn. "But I do promise that before we leave the land of Lorien, you shall know more of it, if I guess your question correctly."

"At the bottom of Cerin Amroth yesterday," Frodo said, "you spoke some words in the Elvish tongue, as to an absent companion out of memory."

"That I did," and the human bowed his head. "It is a very precious memory to me, and a sacred place."

Frodo walked for some time in silence, letting his thoughts meander. He decided not to ask all his questions, and chose the simplest and the most certain: "To whom were you speaking?"

Aragorn, too, took some paces before he chose to speak. Finally he sighed, "Ah, Frodo. It was to the Lady Arwen Undomiel that I spoke."

He looked down at his companion, but Frodo shook his head. "I will ask you no more today. I hope that I may learn soon; but I will not ask."

Aragorn seemed to look at him with a spark of respect. "You are wise, perhaps," he murmured, "though I thought I meant to tell you." They had walked down a short length of path to a part of the garden where Frodo could see over all the hedges in nearly every direction, and from where he was he could easily see Sam.

He hadn't known that he was looking for him until he relaxed then, and he said silently to himself, "You will make it much easier for him to keep an eye on you, if you are always keeping him in your sight as well." He turned his steps slightly in that direction, and had walked some way away before Aragorn's voice called him back.

"Frodo." He turned, and Strider stood there behind him with his cloak cast behind his shoulders, looking very kingly. "We will speak tomorrow." Frodo nodded, and turned away again.

He walked near Sam, but deliberately leaving some space between them. He couldn't go elsewhere (for if he did, Sam would find him soon enough in any case), yet he thought he shouldn't stay too close, as he was growing troublesomely dependent on Sam's voice, Sam's face, his help and his mere presence, which was a help in itself. He told himself that such a habit was dangerous, told himself that it wasn't fair to lean on Sam in that way, and reminded himself again and again that he had no right to expect or ask Sam to have come this far, that he had meant to go alone, and that he could hardly expect Sam to finish his quest with him, at the heart of Mount Doom.

It wasn't Sam he feared, but himself. He determined he needed distance, and he would have to find it somewhere.

Sam stopped suddenly in the path and leaned forward to gently cup a large and delicate bloom and draw it towards his face. "Look," he murmured, discounting his own advice by closing his eyes as he inhaled its scent. Frodo, who had been walking lost in thought and had to stop rather abruptly only a foot or so behind, felt his hands itching to reach out and thrust them into his pockets, curling his fingernails to bite warningly into his palms.

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It was Frodo who first put something of his sorrow into halting words. He was seldom moved to make song or rhyme; even in Rivendell he had listened and had not sung himself, though his memory was stored with many things that others had made before him. But now as he sat beside the fountain in Lorien and heard about him the voices of the Elves, his thought took shape in a song that seemed fair to him; yet when he tried to repeat it to Sam only snatches remained, faded as a handful of withered leaves.

-J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring

Everyone in the Shire had at least known of Gandalf, and most had known him. Sam, who had run about Bag End after his Gaffer or after Frodo since he was a very small hobbit, had a far better claim than most; but he had not been Gandalf's friend as Frodo had been. And his grief took a different form, too. He was rarely speechless, except with rage, as at a threat to Frodo, and never simply chose to be silent to gain control of himself. When Frodo begged to speak of Gandalf no more after singing Sam his song, it was with an odd mixture of thoughts.

Meaning to distance himself emotionally from Sam, he still kept track of him constantly, sought him out when he had something to share, and let himself become as open and emotional with him as he would with no one else. Perhaps he was the most dangerous audience for Frodo's near-tears, with his eyes clear brown in the open sun and wide and troubled with his concern, his whole face dearly familiar and comforting but startling and new to look at all the same.

"If you wouldn't like to talk of it," said Sam almost at once, "then perhaps you'd like to talk of something else? And I suppose it's for me to think of it, only that's hard to do so sudden. --Well, perhaps of the evening meal to come, for I haven't seen Merry nor Pippin since breakfast, and so have hardly had no word of it."

Frodo gave a watery chuckle at that, and when he looked up to see Sam's eyes dancing forgot some more of his grief. "I suppose you'll force yourself to if I ask you, Sam?"

Sam's native earnestness took over there, and he answered at once, "Oh no, Mr. Frodo, for it's not that I have no inclination for it; indeed, I'm very fond of food, as I'm sure you know."

"As any self-respecting hobbit is," he said in teasing approbation, but Sam nodded his head in self-satisfaction, and Frodo couldn't judge his seriousness from the top of his curly head, no matter how charming the curls.

"Not as fond of talking about it as of eating it, to be sure..." he continued, "but I like food very much all the same, and I'm happy to talk about it, especially if you wish."

"And if I don't? You seem to have used your only idea."

Sam said stoutly at once, "Then, I'll think of something different."

Frodo laughed again, "No, Sam, it's alright. Dinner was delicious yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that..."

"Yes," Sam answered eagerly, "and I swear I could eat the same meal here for weeks and weeks, yet I don't think they've served us the same thing twice, unless it's that soft Elvish bread, and even then I fancy there are a bit of spices different about it from meal to meal."

"We may yet stay long enough to see a meal we've already had again," Frodo said, still smiling a little and staring off into the middle distance.

Sam seemed to detect the signs of a pensive mood descending which could quickly turn black,
and said with hasty good cheer, "I hope we may, Mr. Frodo. I could stay here happily for so long, for their gardens are more lovely every time I walk in them."

"And their dinners more savory?"

"As to that, it would be an insult to the dinner we were served the first night to say so."

Frodo repented at once. "Oh, of course." He paused. "And isn't it a bit insulting to the gardens, too, to say they were less lovely when you first walked in them than they are today?"

Sam frowned, "Perhaps," looking considerably around them at the elanor-swept slopes, the hedges fairly glittering with flowers on glossy light and dark leaves, the mallorns ringed with carpets of red and white blossoms, the sun dying on the bare white arms of other trees, turning them gold and fuchsia. Finally he turned to Frodo, with his head still tilted to one side, and said seriously: "But it really seems more beautiful now."

Frodo glanced around over the same vista, and returning his gaze to Sam said "I may agree with you, after all: I think it does."

Sam wasn't looking at him any longer, and the shadow of a great tree they passed under, along with the fading day, conspired to make it nearly impossible to detect the quick quirk of his lips and the faint crinkling of the corners of his eyes. "Perhaps they'll serve that very creamy dish again tonight," he said.

"You mean the one with a rather lemony seasoning?"

"It had a sharp tang to it that stopped just short of 'too much,'" Sam agreed.

Frodo nodded. "I'd like that. Or that clear soup--"

"Oh," Sam sighed, "Or both together. That would be a combination worthy of a fine feast."

"I think they were both main dishes," Frodo protested, "they can't serve both at once."

"If they were," Sam said stubbornly, "they could; but at any rate, the cream dish was the largest course, but that soup was merely an accessory, so to speak."

"I think not."

"It was. It came before that dish of white fish, sliced very thin-like, which they served with leaves of mint over it like scales--"

"Ah," Frodo said, "I remember. You're right," and struggled first not to smile, then not to show it.

Sam burst out laughing, though, and he joined in. "Now, Mr. Frodo, if you've recovered yourself somewhat and it would be no bother, could you just sing that little rhyme of yours again? I don't believe I've quite got it all."

And to his surprise Frodo found that he was able to do so with a light heart.

* *

Another day passed before Frodo was approached by Aragorn on a mid-level flet near the heart of the city of the Galadrim. "The Lady knew I would find you here," he said.

Frodo turned with a start. "You were looking for me?"
"I thought you might be looking for the rest of those answers I promised you now," he said with a crooked grin.

Frodo, who was far too polite to come even that close to asking, said cautiously, "I don't have any right or need to know."

"Perhaps I have a need to speak, Ring-bearer. My principal difficulty has been that the story is not fully mine to tell."

"Then..." Frodo said nervously.

"But I have persuaded myself that the Lady Arwen would have no objection to this, and indeed, might smile upon it, for she holds you in great esteem, and you are my friend." Frodo bowed his head. "And finally, I believe the Lady Galadriel feels it would be right in me to speak to you, though it is not her way to ask or advise me so."

"Tell if you will," said Frodo.

* 

For Aragorn had been singing a part of the Lay of Luthien which tells of the meeting of Luthien and Beren in the forest of Neldoreth. And behold! there Luthien walked before his eyes in Rivendell, clad in a mantle of silver and blue, fair as the twilight in Elven-home; her dark hair strayed in a sudden wind, and her brows were bound with gems like stars.

-J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings, Appendix A

"I have loved Arwen since I first saw her, when I was but twenty years of age, long before you were born. At Rivendell, Elrond had just given to me the heirlooms of the House of Isildur, and I was walking in the forest when I saw her like a vision--I thought I beheld Luthien Tinuviel out of legend, conjured by my own imaginings." He smiled. "I was but a boy, and she was an Elven lady of beauty and wisdom; she did not love me then. Many years later, when I had been much strengthened and wizened by the hardships of life, we met again here in Lothlorien and began--a courtship.

"Arwen loved me when she saw me again with new eyes. My feelings for her had never changed. We walked together quietly here in Lothlorien for many days, speaking of inconsequentialities and matters too heavy for words alike, singing and flower-gazing and laughing. It was long that Arwen loved me, knowing beyond doubt of my love for her, before the whispering of her heart overcame the doubt that she would have called 'wisdom' before, and she accepted what I offered her. Long and long we knew and did not speak of it, while she could not be easy with any course to take.

"But at Midsummer, on Cerin Amroth, we plighted our troth."

Frodo was silent for a moment. "But you are not wed."

"And we may never be," said Aragorn, "For I wed her only when I am king of Gondor and Arnor, if I ever am that, and I have played my part in defeating the darkness."

"You knew she loved you when you met again," Frodo said contemplatively, "after so long a time."

Aragorn's eyes were alight again, his gaze far, far away. "Though she said nothing, I knew."

"But you had only met once, years before, and you had loved her since your eyes met her beauty?
And yet you think she loved you at once, as you loved her, except the second time that you met."

Aragorn looked amused. "Yes."

"I don't believe it," Frodo said positively. "She loved you from the beginning, as long as you loved her."

"But," said Aragorn, "I know she did not."

"You only know that she does not know she did," Frodo pointed out. "I think she loved you at once, and for all of those years, she only did not know it. If you fall in love at first sight, that's one thing, almost, well, magical. And if you don't do that, and you fall in love normally, then it grows, slowly, and only slowly comes to life in you. You cannot fall magically in love at once the second time you see someone."

"But I beg to differ, Ring-bearer, for it is not you who writes the rules of how one may love."

Frodo flushed, "I meant no disrespect. But I stand by what I have said. Arwen may have felt as you did on first seeing her, at once arrested, only at your second meeting; but loving at once and knowing at once that you love are not the same."

His companion said skeptically, "That much I grant you. If you are right for the rest, of course, we will never know it. Even whether Arwen felt as I did is not known to me, for you can rarely know what another feels."

*

He did not know it, but Arwen Undomiel was also there, dwelling for a time with the kin of her mother. She was little changed, for the mortal years had passed her by; yet her face was more grave, and her laughter now seldom was heard. But Aragorn was grown to full stature of body and mind, and Galadriel bade him cast aside his wayworn raiment, and she clothed him in silver and white, with a cloak of elven-gray and a bright gem on his brow. Then more than any kind of Man he appeared, and seemed rather an Elf-lord from the Isles of the West. And thus it was that Arwen first beheld him again after their long parting; and as he came walking towards her under the trees of Caras Galadon laden with flowers of gold, her choice was made and her doom appointed.

-J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings, Appendix A

"You knew she loved you," Frodo murmured, looking out of the flet, down through the mallorn branches.

"Yes, I knew, but I did not know how she felt."

"Sometimes," Frodo said, in the same tone and without looking up, "You do know what another feels--as it happens, it can simply come to you, rather--if you're both there together and it's just right. It may go away again, and you may never know again; but just for a while, you know it as surely as you know what you feel yourself."

The silence lengthened, Man and hobbit both looking out at the City. "You're right, Frodo," Aragorn said, after a while. "At the time, I did know what Arwen felt, as you say; but if I ever did know whether it was just the same as the feeling I knew, later I could not remember."

Frodo nodded.

He sighed. "And we have been waiting, and waiting, and we wait still. Perhaps we will finish our
quest and perhaps not. I will follow you to the bitterest end of it in any case, and fight as hard as I might to turn back the darkness. Arwen said to me on that long ago Midsummer that we should prevail, and that I should have a part in it. I told her then that I had little hope. Our strength is small, and the task and our enemy are great; but I do not believe we are unequal to it. You are not, Frodo.” Aragorn knelt, putting their faces nearly level. "At the end of all, I may emerge King; for now, our fate rests with you, and it is you I follow."

Frodo was struck momentarily speechless, but he managed to say numbly, "I thank you."

Aragorn smiled suddenly, his mood seeming to lighten all at once from deep solemnity. "And I will help you however I can," he said. "I want you to know."

"I know," Frodo said, rather bewildered, as Aragorn nodded once and left him alone on the flet again.

He felt as if they had been speaking towards some particular purpose all along, both of them, and he didn't quite know what it was. "Why did I argue with him like that?" Frodo murmured to himself. And why had Strider chosen to tell him all this--and why now, his curiosity notwithstanding?

Of course he would help Frodo in any way he could, just as he had so kindly done from the very beginning. They would have been many times lost without him. Surely Aragorn knew how he trusted him? Then why tell him now that he would help him in any way he could--did he feel that Frodo needed his help?

A cool wind slid down between the branches overhead and twirled around the flet, chilling him so that Frodo wrapped his arms around his stomach against the sudden temperature change. Now, in the cold, the Ring was warm on his chest, but when he concentrated on the coldness and hugging his shirt and mail closer to his body, he didn't feel the familiar twitches of his hands longing to reach for it.

"The danger is great," he told himself quietly, "but not unmanageable: for I am not alone." Just before he turned to climb down he saw a flash of white on the grass below that could have been a gown, and a fall of gold that could have been the Lady's hair.

* * *

At that moment there was a knock on the door, and Sam came in. He ran to Frodo and took his left hand, awkwardly and shyly. He stroked it gently and then he blushed and turned hastily away.

'Hullo, Sam!' said Frodo.

'It's warm!' said Sam. 'Meaning your hand, Mr. Frodo. It has felt so cold through the long nights. But glory and trumpets!' He cried, turning round again with shining eyes and dancing on the floor. 'It's fine to see you up and yourself again, sir! Gandalf asked me to come and see if you were ready to come down, and I thought he was joking.'

-J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring

Frodo, over the course of their stay in Lothlorien, had come to so markedly prefer the sunsets there that Sam had come to expect him to walk then, if he was not already out. He was reading a book of archaic Elvish poetry brought him by one of the Elves one evening by the side of the fountain
when Sam came to find him.

"Mr. Frodo! I had thought to find you in the garden," he said with a hint of scolding. "There's hardly any light remaining outside for reading: there are lamps in our little pavilion, if you'd like to go there. You've been reading awfully long now, and put me in mind of Bag End, with me in the gardens all day and yourself studying, although of course here I daren't do anything to them."

Frodo put aside the book, laughing, and rose to take Sam's arm and draw him away from the garden, towards the edge of the city. "I'll study no more today, then, since it worries you, and since if I wait much longer for walking, I'll miss the sunset."

"Though," said Sam, clutching at Frodo's forearm and hurrying his steps to catch up, "You're going in the wrong direction to see it in the garden."

"I think the garden will last without you for a few hours, Sam."

"But we're not leaving the city," he protested.

"Just a bit," Frodo soothed. "I'd like to walk through the woods, just over here. Strider was telling me of a glade..."

"Alright, Mr. Frodo. Though it pains me to miss a sunset in these Elvish gardens."

"We'll watch the sunset there tomorrow, Sam," said Frodo. Then he added, "At least, I hope to." He didn't mention the growing, oppressive feeling that they might be leaving soon, but fell to brooding on the question as they walked with quick steps among the trees of the city and out among the trees of the forest. As the shadows lengthened and the spaces between the branches of the trees filled with deepening color like paint, amber, crimson, fuchsia, indigo, they spoke of Elves and magic. The customary slight chill of night descended, and the first tentative moonbeams clustered in the mallorn leaves like an echo of sunlight, actually bright enough to light the curve of Sam's cheek when he paused and looked up at them.

"I don't reckon," he was saying, along the uneasy line of Frodo's silent thoughts, "that these folk can do much more to help us, magic or no. It's when we leave this land that we shall miss Gandalf worse, I'm thinking."

Frodo nodded, "I am afraid that's only too true, Sam. Yet--" his gaze returned to his companion's face, dark-tinted and moonlit, and his thoughts strayed a little way from their departure again, to the mysterious words of Aragorn. "I hope very much that before we leave we shall see the Lady of the Elves again."

And as if conjured by their own imaginings, there she was, glowing white in the gathering darkness, beckoning with what might have been a secretive smile and turning again to lead them away before they could speak to her. She took Frodo and Sam to a small enclosed garden bordered with hedges at the southern foot of Caras Galadon. A narrow flight of stairs wound down among ferns and mossy rocks to a tiny, intimate bowl-shaped valley, where the silver ribbon of the fountain's stream twinkled.

Galadriel filled a low silver basin on a carven pedestal with water from the stream in a silver ewer. She bent close to the dark water and breathed on it as Frodo stepped cautiously off the last stair and approached her with Sam at his heels. She stood without turning to see them, still as if carven of the same white magic as the moon, the water, and the silver ewer. Even her hair was more white than gold in the light, long and fair, not stirred in the least by the breeze that shivered up Frodo's arms and the back of his neck.
"Here is the Mirror of Galadriel. I have brought you here so that you may look in it if you will," she said, only then looking at him.

Frodo seemed to shrink under her gaze, and felt himself small and dark and hopelessly flawed. "What shall we look for, and what shall we see?" He trembled to ask.

She pinned him in place with her eyes, perfectly solemn. Again, he felt no censure from her, only mercy, but even her mercy was too much. "Many things I can command the Mirror to reveal, and to some I can show what they desire to see." With a subtle emphasis she said this, which might have all been added in Frodo's mind by the force of her will, and he almost thought she would smile again, but she did not. Happily, she did not turn her eyes to Sam as he half-feared. "But the Mirror will also show things unbidden, and those are often stranger and more profitable than things which we wish to behold. What you will see, if you leave the Mirror free to work, I cannot tell. For it shows things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be. But which it is that he sees, even the wisest cannot always tell. Do you wish to look?"

When Frodo did not answer, she turned to ask Sam, whose curiosity was able to overcome his fear, and he assented. He said to Frodo, as he climbed onto the foot of the pedestal, that he'd like to see the Shire: "It seems a terrible long time that I've been away." Then the water seized his attention and he gazed down with parted lips, speaking in a low voice, then making a little gasp. Frodo watched him, feeling rather detached, fully aware of the Lady's eye on him as he noted Sam's eyes darting back and forth over whatever images the magic brought, the tiny movements of his head, the quick tensing of the powerful muscles in his forearms.

The magic worked, then--what was Sam seeing, that so upset him? He felt a painful tightening inside, whether of sympathy or visceral appreciation of the silver light reflected in Sam's face, he did not know. He looked up, and Galadriel was watching him openly, her face smoothly expressionless, but he heard her voice in his head again, as on their first night there: You fear the power of the Ring, Ring-bearer, and rightly. But do not let fear rule you--you are wise. Now Sam spoke in a low, angry voice, to the water, and Frodo looked to him quickly. Then, with an inarticulate noise of panicked grief, he was off the pedestal, staring up out of the little valley into the sky. "I can't stay here," he cried, "I must go home! They've dug up Bagshot Row, and there's the poor old gaffer going down the Hill with his bits of things on a barrow. I must go home!" His gaze at last fell pleadingly on Frodo, wild with an anguish that pierced him. His mouth opened, but no breath or words came in answer as he gazed helplessly back at Sam.

Frodo was miserably guilty. Hadn't he just been thinking that he meant to let Sam go, and then in the next breath, how much he needed him? What right had he to bring Sam at all, let alone to keep him here against his will, far from where he belonged and he was needed? "You cannot go home alone," Galadriel told Sam sternly. "You did not wish to go home without your master before you looked in the Mirror, and yet you knew that evil things might well be happening in the Shire. Remember that the Mirror shows many things, and not all have yet come to pass. Some never come to be, unless those that behold the visions turn aside from their path to prevent them. The Mirror is dangerous as a guide of deeds."

Poor Sam sank to the ground with his face hidden in his hands, and folded himself up protectively next to Frodo's feet as if by instinct, since he could not see. A tremor ran through him, from the crown of his head and over his strong back and arms and folded legs. "I wish I had never come here," he said, "And I don't want to see no more magic." Frodo looked wide-eyed down at him, his hands hovering helplessly, fighting the impulse to fall to the ground next to him. At last he spoke again, in a voice thick and choked. "No, I'll go home by the long road with Mr. Frodo, or not at all. But I hope I do get back someday. If what I've seen turns out true, somebody's going to catch it hot!"
Before any one course of action could win out over the others struggling desperately for precedence in Frodo's mind, the Lady claimed his attention again. "Do you now wish to look, Frodo? You did not wish to see Elf-magic and were content." She would not advise him to look or not, rejecting the office of counselor; but she assured him gently that he had "courage and wisdom enough for the venture."

"I will look."

*

Galadriel stood, tall and majestic, between him and the darkness of the vision, between him and the Dark Lord, with Nenya, one of the Three, glittering like the fallen Evening Star on her finger. Frodo offered the Ring to her, where she stood in sad glory, lamenting the fate of her people: "If you fail, then we are laid bare to the Enemy. Yet if you succeed, then our power is diminished, and Lothlorien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away. We must depart into the West, or dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and to be forgotten."

But she refused, at last. She grew to a towering height, holding her hand high so that the brilliance of the ring fell only on her, casting a long, dark shadow but illumining nothing else. She was a vision of hurtful, terrible beauty, her eyes flashing, her voice silken and low and wicked-edged, cutting the night.

"You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!" She put her hand down with a laugh, and shrank to merely herself. "I pass the test," she said sadly, "I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel."

Frodo could breathe again, and he had never felt the weight of the Ring so terribly before. It wove its spell on him even now, and in time it would make him like Bilbo, or like Gollum. It could even poison the sweet power of Galadriel of the Elves—yet it was for him to carry it? The ring that Gandalf had not trusted himself to carry, Frodo was to guard? And—

He looked down. Sam's arm was draped around the knee he had drawn up to his chest, his head lifted somewhat.

And he was to keep Sam with him, endangering him with the Ring's foul magic, even as the Ring endangered Frodo—to say nothing of the danger he was in from Sam. They stood in silence, Galadriel looking at Frodo, and Frodo, conscious of her gaze, looking stalwartly down at Sam's bent head. His cheeks were dry, but the starlight picked out salty smears under glistening eyelashes. He wanted to say a word of comfort, but none would come.

"Let us return!" The Lady said. "In the morning you must depart, for now we have chosen, and the tides of fate are flowing."

Frodo looked up to see her watching him expectantly. The ring which he had never seen before the moment she had held it up was still visible to him, but it had now begun to hide itself again, and he had to look at her finger with a consciousness of its presence to discern it. Frodo stopped her. "I would ask one thing before we go, a thing which I often meant to ask Gandalf in Rivendell. I am permitted to wear the One Ring: why cannot I see the others and know the thoughts of those that wear them?"

She said evenly, "You have not tried. Only thrice have you set the Ring upon your finger since you knew what you possessed. Do not try! It would destroy you."
Frodo listened to her thoughtfully. So the power of the Ring was not barred to him, and could become a terrible weapon in his hands as well as in hers, though perhaps not one so terrible, as it gave power according to the measure of the possessor. Then he was not even so safe from it, though she sought to shield him by warning him of its evil again. Well he knew: it would destroy him, just as it would have destroyed Galadriel or Gandalf, had they taken it from him.

Even now it worked on him, giving him some of its power. The Lady continued, "You have perceived my thought more clearly than many that are accounted wise. You saw the Eye of him that holds the Seven and the Nine. And did you not see and recognize the ring upon my finger?"

She turned to ask Sam, "Did you see my ring?"

He looked up at her, his chin lifted high and his throat stretched out in a long white line. "No, Lady. To tell you the truth," he admitted, "I wondered what you were talking about. I saw a star through your finger. But if you'll pardon my speaking out, I think my master was right. I wish you'd take his Ring. You'd put things to rights. You'd stop them digging up the gaffer and turning him adrift. You'd make some folk pay for their dirty work."

Sam remained sitting on the ground with his arms wrapped around his knees, looking very small. The bent line of his back alone made Frodo ache with guilt and regret, and a shiftless protectiveness which was utterly hopeless: he could not protect Sam from anything.

Galadriel answered gently: "I would. That is how it would begin. But it would not stop with that, alas! We will not speak more of it. Let us go!" As Sam stood reluctantly, her swift glance captured Frodo's as if to say that she knew his thoughts, and to remind him of her earlier words.

They climbed the stone stairs up out of the little green hollow and passed out through the high hedge, back into the trees, and followed the Lady among them. At nearly the place where they had first seen her, she paused and turned to face them. "You will be well," she said, before she turned and left, vanishing quickly. Frodo could not tell if she had addressed himself or Sam, or perhaps both.

He blinked, then, with a sigh, let his eyes stray to Sam at his side. "It's gotten late," he said into the quiet. "And we are not going to see another sunset in your garden here, Sam."

Sam returned his regard steadily, meeting him eye-for-eye. "Master," he said in a voice not yet untroubled, "Begging your pardon, you know this is not my garden. And as long as I'm from home, I suppose one garden, or even no garden, might be as good as any other. And I wouldn't, I wouldn't go back alone, Mr. Frodo," he continued, "And I don't wish I had never gone, unless it was that both of us had never left, nor Mr. Bilbo had never found the cursed Ring."

Frodo bit his lip, and had some difficulty speaking when he wished to reply. "I know, Sam," he said a bit hoarsely, feeling more wretchedly guilty than ever, even as he found it necessary to blink again rapidly to keep his eyes dry.

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'As you go down the water,' he said, 'you will find that the trees will fail, and you will come to a barren country. There the River flows in stony vales amid high moors, until at last after many leagues it comes to the tall island of the Tindrock, that we call Tol Brandir. There it casts its arms about the steep shores of the isle, and falls then with a great noise and smoke over the cataracts of Rauros down into the Nindalf, the Wetwang as it is called in your tongue. That is a wide region of sluggish fen where the stream becomes tortuous and much divided. There the Entwash flows in by many mouths from the Forest of Fangorn in the west. About that stream, on this side of the Great River, lies Rohan. On the further side are the bleak hills of the Emyn Muil. The
wind blows from the East there, for they look out, over the Dead Marshes and the Noman-lands to Cirith Gorgor and the black gates of Mordor.'

...A yellow noon lay on the green land of the Tongue, and the water glittered with silver. All at last was made ready. The Company took their places in the boats as before. Crying farewell, the Elves of Lorien with long grey poles thrust them out into the flowing stream, and the rippling waters bore them slowly away. The travellers sat still without moving or speaking. On the green bank near to the very point of the Tongue the Lady Galadriel stood alone and silent. As they passed her they turned and their eyes watched her slowly floating away from them.

-J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

Eight gray days passed with the slow, gray water under their boats. All the while Sam huddled miserably in the boat with Frodo and Aragorn, shuddering and opening and shutting his eyes, and complaining of the damp just infrequently enough that Frodo could tell he withheld similar complaints constantly. Frodo and Aragorn wielded the oars, when they were necessary. For much of the day they simply drifted, letting the Great River Anduin carry them.

That night they continued to travel, and unexpectedly reached the dangerous rapids of Sarn Gebir early. Sam, watching in the lead boat, did not see the black teeth of the rocks looming before them until they were nearly upon them, at just a few yards. He gave a terrified shout, almost too late, as the boats clustered together just where the dark water broke into white spray and foam.

"Back, back! Turn if you can!" Aragorn shouted, as a swift current sucked the boats towards the eastern shoals.

They turned laboriously, working against the current and still moving in the wrong direction. Boromir called, "All together, paddle! Paddle! Or we shall be driven on the shoals--"

A sharp twang, and a high whistle. An arrow pierced Frodo’s cloak and shirt and stopped against the mithril mail between his shoulder blades just as another, black-feathered, sped through Aragorn's hood, and a third lodged quivering in the wood next to Merry’s hand in the second boat.

Straining at the paddles, they bent low in the boats. Frodo grasped after the paddle he had dropped, and even Sam took one up to work, stroke after slow, painful stroke. The light Elven-craft were surrounded by darkness with a deeper looming blackness on the left, where loomed the eastern bank. Frodo could hear the loud rushing of their breathing over the roar of the water and the whine of arrows overhead, but they had little other indication that they had moved at all before they turned midstream and headed directly for the western bank.

When the boats were pulled up under a trailing curtain of greenery, Legolas sprang out at once, the bow of Lorien in his hand. A great winged creature, blotting all the starlight in the shadows of its wings, came from the south, to a roaring welcome from the Orcs on the far shore. Legolas's bow sang, and it fell with an angry, jagged scream.

They took the boats upstream to a small bay to spend the remainder of the night. Frodo could not row, as the wound in his shoulder still sent cold twinges up his neck and down his arm when he tried to flex it. When the oars had been laid aside and they prepared to sleep there in their boats, Sam moved hesitantly closer to him with a soft sigh of cloth on cloth.

"Master?" He said. "Your shoulder."

Frodo made a wry face and rotated it experimentally: he had not moved it for some time, and it
had only been bothering him with a clammy chill. Now he winced, though, as sharp pain radiated from it again. "Ah--yes," he said, "I think it will be alright, though."

"Whatever that horrible thing was," Sam muttered, gently reaching to touch it through the fabric, "I couldn't be happier that it's dead. If Legolas hadn't got it, I'd have died trying."

Frodo, who implicitly believed all such fervent indirect advisements of Sam's devotion, would have been far more worried by the question if not for the distraction of Sam's hand on his shoulder. As it was, he'd been worrying ceaselessly about it for weeks, and had never been easy with it since their departure from the Shire; there was no worrying to be done now that he had not done before.

And while the little hitch in his breath that Sam seemed to have the power to summon was not new, this particular touch, the pad of the thumb brushing Frodo's neck above the cloak, the warmth of four fingers palpable even through cloak and mail and shirt, was as novel as the scanty starlight illumining Sam's face through the willow branches from just that angle.

At the other end of the boat, Aragorn had been asleep for some time, and they were nearly soundless. Sam was moving now, pulling Frodo to lean against him so that he could protect the shoulder from unnecessary movement. The air was warming gradually and the Ring was too cold. Frodo had one panicked thought about Rings of power, and seductive habits of closeness being reinforced, as if you actually put the Ring on, you would never be able to part from it.

But the lassitude in his limbs from the vanished rush of adrenaline, the lingering pain, the long emotional weariness, and a faint scent of Sam overcame any will he might have had to resist. He allowed himself to relax into the curve of Sam's body, folded in one of Sam's arms, in the cramped space of the boat. It was surprisingly easy, and his head lolled over to a solid shoulder, his eyelids already shut, before he could think anything about it at all. There the scent was more noticeable, and it started a new flush of heat all through Frodo's body. Even that, though, couldn't keep him awake long.

* * *

Just before dawn, the first hints of wan gray light crept under the willow branches on the almost-still surface of the water. Not for the first time was Frodo the first to wake, when night was still around them and he was still heavy, drugged with sleep. This was the first morning, however, that he woke slightly cramped but exceedingly comfortable, damp but thoroughly warm, frightened but filled with lingering content. He lay on Sam's body as if it were nothing more than a large, lumpy pillow--one which rose and fell softly under him in the steady rhythm of Sam's breath. The weight he first felt on his chest was that of an arm pressing close about his ribcage, pinned in place by his own arm hugging it tightly to him. The Ring was slight next to it.

Without moving, he gave a slow blink, and then another. Then he turned his head slightly until his nose collided, only partly unexpectedly, with the strong column of Sam's neck, followed immediately by his lips. Shocked to stillness, he let his eyes close again and simply breathed in and out, feeling the slight quiver of life under his mouth, smelling earth and hobbit and damp Elven-cloth.

After he found he could bear it no longer, Frodo lifted his head, trying not to stir otherwise for fear of waking Sam. As he'd thought, when he shifted slightly and turned his head, if he also raised his chin a few degrees, that brought his mouth up above the level of the strong point of Sam's chin. If Sam sneezed or shifted, or if Frodo's neck became too tired to bear the weight of his head, or the delicate balance of their arrangement were otherwise disturbed, like as not they'd end--with
Frodo's mouth on the sweet pink curve of Sam's.

For several moments the world was motionless around him, and Frodo didn't breathe. "Should he?" was not quite it; obviously he had no right. But "Would he?"--that was a provocative question.

The black water under the willows was turning to silver, lightening with the slow dawn outside their shelter, and tendrils of mist clung to it, colored like mother-of-pearl. Tatters of white cloud blanketing the shore showed through the dense dusk of branches around them. A leaf fell, spinning, and created a series of fine concentric waves next to the stern of the boat where Legolas and Gimli still slept.

Frodo took a soundless breath, still hesitating, and bit his lip. Aragorn's nose wrinkled, and his eyes squeezed shut. Then a luxurious stretch rippled through him, neck and arms and shoulders--Frodo sat up in a sudden scramble, pushing himself away from Sam with his hands braced in the bottom of the boat. The final result was him sitting mostly next to Sam with only their ankles tangled, the cover of their overlapping cloaks disturbed so Sam frowned in his sleep and Frodo shivered with the chill. His shoulder no longer troubled him.

He watched one of Aragorn's eyes open only when the noise had ceased. If there was a hint of amusement in the Man's face, it was immediately banished. "Sleep well?" He asked in a whisper that shattered the remaining silence like the herald of day.

"Yes, thank you," answered Frodo, who was yet leaning in the loosened circle of Sam's arm.

* 

That night they made camp early after the strenuous climb up the banks and the long walk carrying all their goods over the portage-way, and Aragorn decided that two at once must watch, and said he would take the first himself. Frodo said he would stay awake with him, and Sam rolled himself in his blanket close by Frodo's side and pulled the corner over his face.

"But just give me a shake when your watch is up, Master," Sam whispered, "for I don't fancy both of us being asleep, as strange as some folks have been acting lately." Frodo put one hand on Sam's shoulder, nodding, and blinked at the odd backwards echo of the last night's episode. Sam closed his eyes, and Frodo shook himself and looked up.

Aragorn moved about the camp on his watch as soundlessly as a hobbit--nearly as soundlessly as Sam. Frodo sat cross-legged, watching Aragorn and Sam occasionally, but mostly frowning at the slender black columns of the trees.

Earlier in the day, when they had pulled the boats up to the shore and Aragorn and Legolas had gone together to scout, he had really feared for their lives. There had been the real possibility of greater danger there than they had been so lucky as to encounter. If Aragorn had died, they would have been lost, their Fellowship twice leaderless, more subject to the will of Boromir (which Frodo could not entirely trust), less well protected from the forces of darkness. Would they survive the trip to Mordor without him--could they survive the further strife Frodo was sure the Ring would eventually cause, without his influence?

Probably not.

But even if against all odds Frodo somehow managed to circumvent these difficulties and finish his quest, Aragorn would not have succeeded. He would have perished bravely in the fight against darkness, but left it without his aid, and Gondor without a King, Isildur without an heir. He would have denied himself happiness for all time, and he would have condemned his lover to
a long, barren life without him. If the Lady Arwen truly loved him--how could she bear it, knowing that at any time he might be lost, while she waited far behind? How for her if he died, the cup of matrimony as yet untasted--how bitter?

"What ails you?" Aragorn whispered, crouching before him.

Frodo turned his troubled gaze on the Man. "You wait to be wed for a day that in all likelihood will never come."

Aragorn nodded solemnly, and settled to the ground before him. "We do."

Frodo said: "Why do you make such a choice?"

"King Elrond," he whispered, "will not suffer the Lady's honor to be diminished in any but the highest union, and the purest of circumstances; and neither do I desire anything of the kind, to be unworthy of her, or to leave her bereft of love, her immortality spent for a dead man and a failure."

"Surely she would not consider it such. If you wait, and you die, you will have had nothing, but if you marry her, and you do not die, you will have won much. If you marry, and then die soon, you will have had a small measure of the joy that you would have had; and she will not have nearly so much regret."

"Better that she live," Aragorn said roughly, a bit louder than he had intended, then cleared his throat. "Better that she regret and live, than that she regret and die."

"The regret would be less, surely?" said Frodo.

"Not enough less," said Aragorn, his gaze distant. "Not nearly enough."

Frodo had to look away, but he shook his head. "Not enough," he murmured, "but better than nothing." He looked, his gaze unfocused, deep into himself, where courage wavered behind caution and custom. His thoughtful, regretful gaze fell on Sam's face, relaxed in slumber. "I might have kissed him this morning," he thought, as clearly as if he had said it out loud, and shivered.

* 

'But where shall I find courage?' asked Frodo. That is what I chiefly need.'

'Courage is found in unlikely places,' said Gildor.

-J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring

The next day's journey took them between the Pillars of the Kings, Anarion and Isildur, their great graven countenances frowning and towering tall above the boats. They took the western arm of the river beyond them at the far end of a long oval mirror of lake, and made camp at the grassy feet of Amon Hen, the Hill of Sight, in the shadow of Tol Brandir.

Sam turned around to say excitedly, "Look at that little stream, Mr. Frodo! It puts me in mind of that little garden of the Elf Lady." Frodo followed Sam's pointing finger. Indeed, a stream dashed and curled down the side of Amon Hen, snaking about on the undulating lower slopes among the sparser trees, than scampering through the grass with winking flashes of sunshine and disappearing with a gurgle into the flat water of the lake.

Frodo found himself smiling and leaned forward over Sam's shoulder. "Oh, I don't know, Sam: this stream is not nearly as dignified as the Lady Galadriel's."
Sam turned his head with a quicksilver dimple. "It has a sort of... merry dignity about it."

"Just look at how it leaps and dances. And see there, where it tumbles under that tree root, and splashes up again. A stream would never get tangled with a tree root in the Glade of Galadriel."

"It might not tangle with it, no, Mr. Frodo, but a tree root might dangle ever so naturally into the stream, and the stream would just flow as gracefully as ever around and under it. It would even jump, if you'll pardon my saying so, as long as the jump was so pretty as that one." The boat's bottom grated on the sand and they clambered out and helped Aragorn to drag it up on the shore.

Frodo turned to look at the stream again at once. "Well, it is very pretty and graceful, but it hasn't the feel of... age and weight that go with the magic and grace of the Elves."

"Oh no, Mr. Frodo, now don't go making the Elves less than they are: some of them are as grave as if they carried the cares of the world on their shoulders, but some of them as carefree and laughing as little children!"

Laughing and shaking his head, Aragorn came up behind them and clapped one hand around Frodo's shoulder and one around Sam's. "Here we will rest tonight," he called to the company. "This is the lawn of Parth Galen: a fair place in the summer days of old. Let us hope that no evil has yet come here." The advisement was hardly necessary. All the boats and all the Company were ashore already. Boromir stood surveying the trees, and Merry and Pippin were already lying flat on their backs in the bed of grass. Gimli took the rest of the packs from the last boat, and Legolas stood next to him, his eyes roving over the far shore.

Frodo looked back at Sam, smiling. "You may have a point, Sam. Perhaps my scholarly studying of them has colored my view of the Elves too much."

Sam blushed. "Not to say that you misunderstand them, Master, at all. I'm sure you know them better than I do."

"No, Sam, I insist you can't take it back now that you've corrected me and I've accepted it! Come, we'll look more closely at the stream where it sprays against the tree root, and see if we can agree about that as well."

They couldn't, but it was only a short walk from the shore to the root they'd seen, and it made an excellent seat, thick and gnarled, from which to dangle feet in the bracing cool water. Frodo watched it coating his feet as clear as glass and felt the sweep of its swift-rushing current against their soles. "Aren't you tired of water yet, Mr. Frodo?" Sam said doubtfully, sitting cross-legged a fastidious six inches from the bank.

"Sam, I know you said you'd never come near a pool of rainwater again, but this stream is as sweet and harmless as the streams of the Shire. Here, it feels wonderful." Frodo crawled back onto the bank and gave Sam a gentle shove.

"My feet have been as wet as I want them to be in my life," Sam said stubbornly, "excepting only in good hot bath water."

"Now, now, Sam. I promise you you'll like it. You can see for yourself how--merrily dignified it feels on your feet! Just like a nice cold bath."

Rather than uncrossing his legs, Sam crossed his arms as well. "I never heard of no nice cold bath."

Frodo trembled with unspent laughter. "Sam, honestly! Just for a moment. Just your toes. You can
sit on the branch where I was sitting."

Sam's expression was so rife with suspicion that Frodo might have fallen into the stream, if he hadn't already gotten back up on the bank. If he had laughed so hard he'd fallen in, Frodo reflected, Sam would have gotten in to fish him out, even though the bottom was clearly visible and it was not dangerous. That was the only way he was at all likely to get Sam wet. "That branch don't look too sturdy, neither," Sam said, edging further away. He kept his eyes fixed on Frodo's face, as if he expected to be dragged into the water—a wholly unjust suspicion, since the worst Frodo had sincerely contemplated was falling in himself to trick Sam!

Frodo smiled, but he couldn't stop himself anymore: he laughed helplessly. "Oh, Sam."

For a moment more Sam looked at him. Then the expression broke and a smile took slow hold of his face, stretching it gradually into a grin as he ducked his head a little and looked up, completely innocently, from under his eyelashes. Then he was laughing too, and he uncrossed his arms and braced his hands on the ground beside him. "Mr. Frodo," he finally said, still breathless with laughter, still leaning on his hands, but now tilting his face and looking directly and earnestly at Frodo: "I will--the water I mean--if you're dead set on it."

It was nearly the last thing Frodo had expected him to say, and he found himself speechless in response, his mouth open in a little "o" of utterly surprised, sudden comprehension. The first question he asked himself, automatically and before he had any time to quiet his speculations, had been: "Why?"

And with his mouth still open, his eyes full of Sam's trusting face, his body weak with laughter, the part of him that had nearly pushed his caution aside and won a kiss two mornings ago answered him: "Of course he would do anything I ask; he loves me above everything."

Astonishing that he had known it all along, and never quite thought it before. He had thought he should not kiss Sam, that he had no right. That he was--stealing something from Sam already, by accepting his service, his devotion. That Sam, like the One Ring, would become a habit he had need to break one day, and that on that day he would find himself unable to break it.

"But you can't," Frodo told himself now, sitting at the foot of the Hill of Sight, in the grass beside the exuberant bubbling of the stream, "censure yourself for accepting what is freely given." Sam was not a danger or a dark magic like the Ring; there was no need to fear him, because he did not want to be given up. Sam had been offering him--the kiss, this smile and that dimple, his warmth, his silent presence and his soft, quiet songs and the sun in his hair--for years. All Frodo had to do was reach out and take it.

Frodo could not sleep for thinking of it that night long after dark. Aragorn had said to him, in fair Lothlorien, "It was long that Arwen loved me, knowing beyond doubt of my love for her, before the whispering of her heart overcame the doubt that she would have called 'wisdom' before, and she accepted what I offered her." And yet, Frodo had argued with Strider that they should have married long ago, and Strider had defended their decision to wait for the defeat of the Dark Lord.

No, he still thought that he had been right and Strider wrong. Frodo opened his eyes and looked up at the star-studded sky. Then, all at once, he sat up. Sam turned quickly to look at him, from his spot a few feet away. It was his watch. In an instant he was at Frodo's side. "My turn isn't over," he whispered, "And I swear I wasn't asleep, Master."

Frodo nodded silently.
"Is something wrong?" Sam asked.

Obviously he asked because he feared some fault in himself in leaving a need of Frodo's unattended, in which case the answer at once was "no"; Frodo had not even awoken for any problem. But then again, all was not right. Frodo opened his mouth, but no sound emerged. He closed it again.

"Master?" Sam was becoming more seriously concerned. He had moved closer, too, from merely kneeling next to Frodo to hovering close enough to catch him if Frodo had happened to suddenly fall forward or back. Frodo could feel the heat from his body, could catch his scent, and, when he turned his head a trifle uncertainly, was close enough to count the stars reflected in his eyes.

"No--I'm really alright," Frodo said.

Sam said, "Can't you sleep?"

Frodo shook his head, finding himself still unable to shape words.

"Oh, Mr. Frodo. But you must! Perhaps if you lean on me? Or you can take my cloak." As he spoke Sam swayed closer, and touched his arm and back fleetingly.

How long would it be before he could summon a real answer? "Sam," he managed to whisper, anxiously seeking to meet Sam's eyes. Sam gazed back gravely, his brows slightly knit with worry and perplexity, the faint moonlight casting his upper lip in shadow and drawing his lower in white and silver. Frodo's hand fumbled in the edge of his cloak and the hem of the blanket, now loose around his waist, on its way from where it had been to the side of Sam's face. He was hardly aware of it until it showed in relief, highlighted and pale against the velvet-soft shadow of Sam's cheek.

Sam's lips parted, and his dark eyes widened, unwavering between tears and disbelief and laughter and fear, when Frodo's fingers threaded trembling into his hair. When he turned his hand, his palm slid until it was filled with Sam's cheekbone, and Sam's eyelashes brushed his thumb when he blinked. Now the heat from Sam's proximity was palpable, and answering heat blazed until Frodo wasn't in the least cold. He leaned forward another slight exhalation, and his mouth settled over Sam's as easily as that. "Oh, I..." Sam murmured, just before the words were sealed off in the kiss.

His lips were very, very soft. There was no answering move but a little sigh against Frodo's mouth at first, but he had no doubt of his welcome an instant later, when the chin tipped hesitantly up, noses bumping awkwardly, eyes flying open, gazes tangling--the wells of Sam's eyes clear brown, his eyelashes glossy enough to reflect moonlight, the smooth oval shadows falling in the hollows of his eyes. Those eyelashes dipped shyly, once, twice; the eyes fluttered closed again, and Frodo felt the warm bracelet of Sam's hand creeping around his wrist.

He tried for more of the elusive taste of that kiss, turning his head a little, pushing closer to Sam. Their mouths fell open in a mutual gasp when his importunate slide caused him to fall against Sam's chest, and his free arm wrapped tightly around Sam's waist under the cloak. His right hand had strayed from Sam's cheek and was thoroughly tangled in his hair, holding his head in place. The kiss continued now open-mouthed as Frodo crawled closer, between Sam's bent knees, trying to draw him into a tighter embrace. His long thirstiness couldn't be satisfied with these sweet, poignant sighs or the simple fire of Sam's breathless, helpless whimperings in his mouth.

Tracing the delicate arch of Sam's upper lip, the full curve of the one below it, mapping the strong line of his jaw where it joined his smooth neck, following it up to the exquisite point of his ear--none of this could have been equaled in the dreams Frodo would never have allowed himself to
have, or would not have allowed himself to remember if he had. He could not have imagined the
tremor that coursed through Sam's body when he tumbled him down to the ground. Fantasies and
hopes could not have hoped to conjure the hesitant caresses of Sam's blunt fingertips on his
forehead and his ears, the shiver or the tears when Frodo kissed his eyelids, or the possessive
strength with which he at last clutched Frodo, hands smoothing up his back as if their bodies
might melt together.

Forgotten cloaks and a blanket were pushed almost-soundlessly out of the way to allow them to lie
pressed together, their legs tangled, exchanging breath through parted lips, but no words. "You
have to watch," Frodo finally whispered, and opened his eyes. He didn't sit up or loosen the arm
twined low around Sam's waist.

Sam's eyes were open already. He nodded, his lips still seeming darkened, almost bruised. Even in
the moonlight Frodo could see the color in his cheeks.

When he sat up, though, Sam saw that his watch was over. "I must wake Gimli," he said to Frodo,
his eyes still wide. "And you must sleep."

Frodo nodded and reached for the blanket before reclining again in his customary spot, with Sam
between him and everyone else. "And you must sleep too, Sam," he said seriously, consciously
keeping back the hand that wanted to reach out and catch him where he now crouched almost a
yard away, to caress his hand or his dear flushed face.

"Yes, Master," he whispered. "I will try."

* 

And suddenly he felt the Eye. There was an eye in the Dark Tower that did not sleep.
He knew that it had become aware of his gaze. A fierce eager will was there. It
leaped towards him; almost like a finger he felt it, searching for him. Very soon it
would nail him down, know just exactly where he was. Amon Lhaw it touched. It
glanced upon Tol Brandir--he threw himself from the seat, crouching, covering his
head with his grey hood.

He heard himself crying out:

Never, never! Or was it: Verily I come, I come to you? He could not tell. Then as a
flash from some other point of power there came to his mind another thought: Take it
off! Take it off! Fool, take it off! Take off the Ring!

The two powers strove in him. For a moment, perfectly balanced between their
piercing points, he withered, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again.
Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant
in which to do so. He took the Ring off his finger. He was kneeling in clear sunlight
before the high seat. A black shadow seemed to pass like an arm above him; it
missed Amon Hen and groped out west, and faded. Then all the sky was clean and
blue and birds sang in every tree.

-J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring

So it had begun: the evil influence of the Ring reached beyond Boromir and burned in him as
well. Frozen immobile with fear of it, it still commanded his limbs to move to its will and
prevented him from removing it from his finger for long, crucial moments there at the peak of the
hill. Frodo gasped, clutching his hands tightly together, scoring red half-moons on their backs with
his torn and broken fingernails, the same skin that had felt the brush of Sam's eyelashes and lips just hours before--hours too long ago, and far too short to last him as he now thought they must.

The longer he held it, the stronger its hold on him; and the longer it was near the others, the stronger its hold on them. Further, the closer he came to its black birthplace and the power of its creator, the more danger it posed him. The Ring felt Sauron's presence, and wished to return to him.

Sam would follow him to death, and even Merry and Pippin would never turn back from their terror if it meant Frodo continuing without them; but there was no question in his mind remaining that they could not come. And what would he do to Sam under the corroding power of the Ring? For, like Sam, it was nothing temporary, no illness that might leave him later; even if the quest, against all odds, ended "successfully" in its destruction, Frodo would remain as wounded as it left him.

He must have the strength to go. He heaved himself to his feet and stood there, clutching his hands in the edges of the cloak, looking down the steep slope of Amon Hen. Frodo said out loud, "I will do now what I must. This at least is plain: the evil of the Ring is already at work even in the Company, and the Ring must leave them before it does more harm. I will go alone. Some I cannot trust, and those I can trust are too dear to me: poor old Sam, and Merry and Pippin. Strider, too: his heart yearns for Minas Tirith, and he will be needed there, now Boromir has fallen into evil. I will go alone. At once."

Frodo scrambled back down the path and came, a little short of breath, into the clearing where he had left Boromir. There he hesitated, hearing voices raised high from below him. "They'll be hunting for me. I wonder how long I have been away--hours, I should think. What can I do?" His courage was screwed to the point now. "I must go now or I shall never go. I shan't get a chance again. I hate leaving them, and like this without any explanation." No word--no look. Perhaps it was better, though, without the look he imagined, which he feared would sorely test his resolve. "But surely they will understand." They must. "Sam will." Unquestionably--and Sam would forgive him, at once, if he ever blamed him at all. "And what else can I do?" Nothing.

He blinked furiously, trying to rid his eyelashes of the crystal caught in them, and finally raised his hand to dash them clean before slipping the Ring onto his finger and continuing silently down the hill. He passed through the trees as if he had never been, as Sam might have in his place, and more invisibly.

The place of their camp was deserted, as he had feared it would not be, their packs lying undisturbed neatly in the boats. His own was filled and neatly fastened and brushed clean of dirt, thanks, no doubt, to Sam. Frodo picked up Sam's and Aragorn's in either hand without hesitating, though it nearly cost drops of blood as he bit his lip too hard. They seemed to levitate, and he smiled bemusedly at them and set them on the ground. The boat he had traveled in for the past ten days, seated between Sam in the bow and Strider in the stern, now empty of all but his goods, lay nearest the south.

Now he would borrow it for the short trip to the Emyn Muil, on the east bank of the Anduin. He lost a few precious seconds standing beside it, tracing the path he would take with his eyes: down that bit of shore where they had pulled up yesterday, around behind Tol Brandir and back up east, away from the falls.

It could be delayed no longer. With a soft sigh, Frodo straightened his shoulders in resolution, and began shoving the boat down the bank just as the slight crack of a breaking twig registered in his mind. He bent his head between his shoulders and pushed as a shout of dismay rang out, unmistakably Sam's voice.
Frodo leapt lightly into the boat as the water bore it up: he could not look back. His oar touched the water.

"Coming, Mr. Frodo! Coming!" Frodo turned in horror, dipped the paddle in the water again and pushed to escape. Sam launched himself from the shore and landed with a splash just a few short feet from the end of the boat, his arms stretching out and grasping at the air. A swift swirl of water swallowed him and closed greedily over his strong hands, his pleading eyes, his curly head. He vanished with a little gurgle.

"No!" Frodo cried so suddenly he surprised himself, and so harshly it made his throat ache. "Sam!" He pushed the paddle back into the water the other way, sending the boat back towards Sam. He dropped it then, peering anxiously over the side: there!

Sam surfaced, thrashing in panic, with a plume of bubbles, and Frodo threaded his fingers firmly through the bedraggled wet curls, slippery silk water-darkened. His eyes were wide with fear.

"Up you come, Sam my lad!" He said soothingly, trying to be calm: "Now take my hand."

A gulp of air. "Save me, Mr. Frodo! I'm drowned!" Frodo, who judged that the danger of that was now principally past, was able to smile an invisible smile. "I can't see your hand."

"Here it is." He leaned over the edge of the boat precariously and caught Sam's hand in his free one. The hand, clammy with cold water but still warm underneath, turned and clasped his tightly. "Don't pinch, lad!" Frodo winced. "I won't let you go. Tread water and don't flounder, or you'll upset the boat." Then they would both end in the water, much darker and faster-moving than the stream where he had envisioned this scene. It was no real test of Sam's loyalty, he mused absently: there was no question that Sam would dive into the stream, though he detested cold water, and no question that he would jump into the deep river, though he couldn't swim. "There now," Frodo said gently, "Get hold of the side, and let me use the paddle."

Sam clung there, water from his hair streaming down his face, for the few seconds and the few paddle strokes it took to reach the shore. Then he pulled himself back up on the bank, thoroughly drenched, and trickling water from the end of his nose and his fingertips and every corner and fold of his jacket and waistcoat and thin linen shirt. Frodo slipped the ring off his finger and stepped to the shore rather too hastily, without looking.

Luckily, he didn't stumble or fall, and stood there in front of his miserably shivering Sam, his hands helpless at his sides and his eyes greedily drinking the sight of him. Oh, if he could have denied himself this--. "Of all the confounded nuisances," Frodo said, much less sharply than he should have, "you are the worst, Sam!"

Sam's eyes widened, glistening with hurt, and he could almost count last night's stars in them in the instant before the kiss—there was the same deep vulnerability, disbelief, tears, all hinted at in that one frozen instant. "Oh, Mr. Frodo," he said softly, "that's hard! That's hard—trying to go without me and all." Another shiver wracked him: his wet clothes clung to his body, making it painfully obvious how much thinner he was than he should have been.

A spasm gripped Frodo, and the space between them was gone, his arms wrapped tightly around Sam's wet arms and back, his nose and mouth buried in the slick hair behind Sam's ear.

"If I hadn't a guessed right, where would you be now?" Sam added.

Frodo smiled, again invisibly, since his mouth curved against the soft skin of Sam's neck. "Safely on my way."
"Safely! All alone and without me--" his voice wavered "--to help you? I couldn't have borne it. It'd have been the death of me." Frodo felt the brush of his lips on the edge of Frodo's ear as he spoke.

He pulled back a little to meet Sam's eyes again and say heavily, "But it would be the death of you to come with me." He had thought Sam would understand. Surely he had not been wrong? "And I could not have borne that."

Cold and understanding with it shivered through Sam, and his strong arms came up at last to wrap around Frodo as well. He clutched him at least as tightly as he had gripped Frodo's hand from the water. "Not as certain as being left behind," came the whisper.

"But I am going to Mordor," Frodo said weakly.

"I know that well enough, Mr. Frodo." The voice, much stronger than Frodo's, was slightly affronted and slightly muffled in Frodo's (dry) hair. "Of course you are. And I'm coming with you."

He had to make one last attempt, though Sam had already answered the question he had not known he was asking. "Now, Sam, don't hinder me," he said, almost sounding as stern as he'd intended. "The others will be coming back at any minute. If they catch me here, I shall have to argue and explain, and I shall never have the heart or the chance to get off. But I must go at once. It's the only way." He couldn't protect Sam from anything, not even from himself, and perhaps he could no longer even try to.

"Of course it is," Sam answered with a kind of confident triumph. They both knew he had won. "But not alone. I'm coming too, or neither of us isn't going. I'll knock holes in all the boats first."

He surprised a laugh out of Frodo, who felt as if a rope binding him up had been suddenly untied, and despite his armful of cold Sam, he was warm and glad. "Leave one!" he said, and pressed his lips briefly to the very corner of Sam's cool ones before releasing him. "We'll need it. But you can't come like this without your gear or food or anything."

He smiled after Sam, who scampered to the piles of bags at once. "Just hold on a moment, and I'll get my stuff! It's all ready! I thought we should be off today." He took with it a blanket and some food, then ran back eagerly.

"So all my plan is spoilt!" said Frodo fondly, unable to stop smiling now. He received a shy smile from Sam in return--and another little dip of the eyelashes decorated with water drops against his rosy cheeks. "It is no good trying to escape you. But I'm glad, Sam--I cannot tell you how glad. Come along!" They pushed the boat back into the water again. "It is plain that we were meant to go together. We will go, and may the others find a safe road! Strider will look after them. I don't suppose we shall see them again."

If he had gone alone, his mind finished the thought inexorably, he would never again have seen Sam: and that he truly could not have borne. Would he have had the strength to finish without his Sam? It was unlikely. At any rate, Sam had gone beyond freely offering himself, and had practically given Frodo no means to resist.

And he was very glad, for he might have had the courage to accept if Sam had not forced his hand, but he would not try his strength without Sam to support it if he must not. Sam had always seen that. Sam took up the other paddles now. "Yet we may, Mr. Frodo," he said softly. "We may." He looked at Frodo with an amazingly carefree smile and a hopeful light in his eyes bright enough for them both.
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