Twists of Fate

by lovethosehobbits (tree1110)

Summary

After Bilbo's departure an increasingly lonely Frodo is injured. Only with the help of new friends and old will he find true healing, mentally as well as physically.

Notes

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Chapter One

Twists of Fate (Formerly called Elwen's Challenge Fic) Chapter One

Author: Elwen, with subsequent chapters by Lovethosehobbits

A/N: This first chapter was written by the very talented Elwen. She called it her 'graveyard' fic as she had gone no further with it after the initial chapter. She issued a challenge to any writer who would take up the story and continue. I so loved this first chapter I decided to take up the challenge. So all subsequent chapters will be written by me. I just wanted to take a moment and give credit where it was due.

Frodo fastened the top button of his jacket and pulled his cloak more closely about him as he settled his pack higher upon his back.

What had possessed him to go hiking at this time of year? He looked down at his legs. They were splattered in mud from his toes to his knees, the hair on his feet caked with it. He let his eyes drift up to the surrounding trees and took a deep breath, inhaling the richness of damp loam, the musty smell of rotting leaves, and feeling the prickle of frosty air in his nostrils.

Bag End was big...but after two weeks of being shut in by constant rain it was not big enough. It was only his second winter without Bilbo and he was going mad with only his own company. The first winter had been easier for, although he missed his uncle, Merry and Pippin had made a point of visiting him often. But as the year spun around and it looked as though Frodo was settling down to his new role of Master of Bag End the visits had become less frequent.

Sam was a wonderful fellow but he was more at home discussing the merits of runner beans than the subtle nuances of Sindarin grammar, not that Merry and Pippin were much interested in that particular topic of conversation either. Frodo just had to admit that he missed Bilbo.

So as soon as the rain had let up, Frodo had packed a bag and set out for a walk. With the ground so wet he had stayed on the road rather than cutting across country. But now he wasn't so sure that he would not have been better on the lanes, for the constant traffic had churned the road surface to deep mud that squelched between his toes and splattered the backs of his legs. It was also quite slippery in places, where patches of yellow clay were exposed, and there were times when Frodo felt more like a skater than a walker.

He sat upon a large boulder to eat a sandwich but had not the heart to finish it. The day was turning quite cold and he finally admitted defeat and turned for home, preceded by the steaming plume of his own breath on the chill November air.

The road began to climb slowly about the rim of a low hill and the going became more slippery as the gentle gradient added to the problems of clay and water. Frodo found himself lurching from tree trunk to tree trunk eyeing the, at times quite steep, drop to his left with some trepidation. He paused as he came to a particularly large and sticky patch of yellow clay that seemed to cover the whole of the road ahead.

Frodo remembered having difficulty with this section on the way down, only just managing to navigate it without falling. Now it seemed to be worse. The only way across appeared to be to walk along the very edge of the steep drop, where the ground had not been churned up by pony and cart. It was not going to be easy but hobbits are sure footed and so Frodo simply hitched his pack higher on his back once more and began to pick his way across.
Just as he was about to reach the relative safety of the far side Frodo encountered a low hanging branch from one of the trees planted on the slope below. He ducked almost double to move beneath it, thankful that he was a hobbit and not a man but gasped as something pulled him back. He tugged experimentally but whatever held him would not let go. Turning to look over his shoulder, Frodo finally found the source of his difficulties. The buckle on his backpack was caught on a twig. He tried to reach back, feeling his way with his fingers, but the action unbalanced him and he put out his right foot instinctively. It landed in a patch of slick yellow clay and began to slide sideways, unbalancing him further . . .

The twig snapped and the world lurched sideways, spinning out of control, a kaleidoscope of tree branches and ground whirling past him. His vision was suddenly filled with a dark shape, there was a loud crack, an instant of sharp pain in his head and then . . . nothing.

Pain. Sharp slivers of pain lancing through his head with each heartbeat, spearing all coherent thought. He had no inkling of where he was and no memory of how he got there. Frodo's whole world focused on the slicing agony in his head. This was worse than the morning after an extended evening with Merry and Pippin at the Green Dragon.

Over an indeterminate period of time, the pain grew familiar and Frodo was able to think past it. Where was he? Perhaps he should try to look around. He tried issuing a command to his distant body.

"Open your eyes, Frodo Baggins."

The body of Frodo Baggins considered for some time, finally dredging up from memory the necessary sequence of muscle movement to open eyes. The necessary instructions for closing them were recalled much more quickly as he was assailed by a brightness that further intensified the white-hot needles piercing his head. Frodo Baggins was nothing, if not determined however and he pried his eyelids open once more, narrowing them to reduce the light level.

A field of dark brown, with a pale splodge in the centre. He concentrated and the splodge slowly coalesced into a hand, resting upon leaf mould. Perhaps it was his hand? If he tried to move it he would find out.

"Move your hand, Frodo."

The fingers twitched. He tried again and moaned as pain flared in his wrist. It was his hand then. And it hurt. His mind was attached to a head that hurt and a hand that hurt. Frodo swallowed in a dry throat as panic began to take over. What if everything else hurt too? The thought intensified the sharp daggers of pain in his head and his vision began to blur to a vague brown and beige mist that grew darker and darker . . .

Cold. Wave upon wave of shivers shook him and the chattering of his teeth ran in swift counterpoint to the sharp stab of pain in his head. At least the daylight was not making his eyes hurt as much. It was then that Frodo realized that the reason for this was that the light was fading. How long had he lain here? He could not spend the night out here.

"You have to get up, Frodo."

He was surprised to hear a faint chuckle and for a moment he thought he had been found. Then he realized that the sound had come from his own throat. A part of his mind had obviously found it amusing that he should want to get up when so far all the body he had been able to find…a head and a hand…had both been very painful. Was he even sure that there was any more body and, if so, whether it hurt or not? He did not want to discover that it hurt.
"You can't stay here after dark, Frodo Baggins. Come on now. Get up. You need legs to get up. Try finding a leg."

He was quite pleased that he had managed to form such a clever thought. Yes. Legs were what he needed. Frodo sorted through the various signals and finally found the correct one to move a leg...his left leg. It twitched, and it did not hurt. That was good.

Heartened by this success he found the signals to move the other leg.

He screamed and the world went black again.

Were his eyes open? It was dark but he was almost sure that his eyes were open. It was nice to just lie here. He was not cold any more. The shivering had stopped and even the pain had faded. Had someone given him a blanket? It was very nice of them if they had. He tried to concentrate on sensations. No. There was no blanket. Maybe it had just got warmer.

Frodo smiled. It was nice lying here, all drowsy. Perhaps he should go back to sleep and try to move again in the morning. It must be night if it was dark. A distant part of his mind screamed that this was not safe but he ignored it and closed his eyes. The world drifted away from him and he waved bemusedly from the shore of sleep.

"Goodbye."

There was a voice. In fact, there was a voice shouting at him. Frodo tried shutting it out and returning to the soothing blankness. He did not want to be shouted at.

"Come along, Frodo. Wake up. You can't go to sleep."

Frodo tried to tell the voice to go away but all that came out was a whimper.

"That's it. Come on now. All the way. Open your eyes."

Frodo clenched them tighter shut. He was comfortable and very sleepy. But the voice grew louder and developed a very hard edge.

"Frodo Baggins. You open your eyes this instant or you will find out what it is like to be on the wrong side of Gandalf the Grey. Believe me. You do not wish to see me uncloaked."

He prised open reluctant eyelids and light and sound and pain flooded in. Frodo cried out in agony as his mind registered so many pain signals that he could not tell where they came from....only that there were too many of them.

Through the sound of his own cries he heard the gruff voice of the wizard once more. This time it was soothing and low.

"I know. I know. It hurts. Shhhhhhh. It's all right. I can help you. But you must stay awake."

The little hobbit became aware at last of other sensations. A large hand rubbing his back and warmth seeping from it. The sudden weight of something draped over him and a little more warmth as the cold air was shut off from his body and always the now soothing, familiar voice. Slowly, Frodo's cries died down and he clung to Gandalf's voice. It was calming and the warmth was nice. The gentle rubbing of his back was soothing and Frodo began to drift once more, his eyelids drooping.

"No, young hobbit. Open your eyes. Speak to me. Come on. You cannot go back to sleep. Tell me your name."
"You know my name," Frodo mumbled testily.

"I may have it wrong. All hobbits look alike to a wizard. Tell me your name so I can be sure." As he spoke Frodo could feel the large hands moving over his body gently.

"Frodo Baggins. Please. Let me sleep. So sleepy."

"Keep those eyes open. Come on, now. Where do you live? This is the Shire. There are lots of Baggins'. How do I know you're the right Frodo Baggins?"

Frodo sighed and then cried out as the hands found his right leg.

"I am sorry, Frodo. Where did you say you lived?"

"Hobbiton," he cried. "Bag End, Hobbiton."

"Ahh. Then you must be the nephew of a friend of mine. What was his name, now?" The hands found Frodo's right wrist and the little hobbit winced. It was obvious that Gandalf was not going to leave him alone so he decided the easiest course of action was to answer the questions. Maybe when he ran out of questions he would let Frodo sleep again.

"Bilbo. Bilbo Baggins. You know all this."

"Nonsense. A wizard has far too many other important things to think about than to remember the names of every silly hobbit that crosses his path." Pain flared in Frodo's left arm as the big hands moved on. All this talking was making his headache worse. Why couldn't the wizard just leave him alone? He would be much better if he were just allowed to sleep. The very thought made Frodo's eyelids droop again.

"Frodo Baggins. You stay awake." The voice held a tone of command that left no room for refusal and Frodo's eyes flew open again. All he could see of Gandalf was a grey homespun covered knee, splattered with mud.

"Well now, Frodo Baggins. You have got yourself in a mess. You have a broken leg, a sprained wrist, a gash on your arm and a nasty bump on your head. Whatever were you doing?"

The knee moved away and Frodo listened to the big person stomping around in the undergrowth. Why did big people always move so noisily?

"Walking."

"Walking indeed. More like rolling, from the state of you." The footsteps drew nearer again and the edge of a gray robe crossed Frodo's limited line of vision.

"I slipped," Frodo mumbled crossly. He was getting fed up of all this and just wanted to be left alone. His head ached and he had been poked and prodded far too much. And now the wizard was insisting on holding the silliest of conversations.

Frodo felt large hands grip his right knee and ankle. "This is going to hurt a bit, I'm afraid. But I can't move you until it is splinted." That was the only warning he got before Gandalf began to stretch and twist the leg. Frodo howled in anguish and a big gray cloud rolled in and swept him away into merciful oblivion.

The voice was back. Cajoling, wheedling, commanding. Frodo opened his eyes, knowing that ignoring it was not an option. He found himself looking up into Gandalf's kindly face and beyond him the naked branches of winter trees against a grey sky. It was as though the whole world had
turned gray and colorless.

"That's better. Try a sip of this." Frodo whimpered as his head was raised, increasing the painful throbbing but it was worth it when his mouth was filled with liquid. He had not realized how parched his throat was until then and he swallowed greedily. It was not water but it seemed to spread tendrils of comfort through his body from his stomach. His lips tried to follow it when the flask was pulled away and Gandalf chuckled.

"Not too much of it. Here, have some water now." Another flask was put to Frodo's lips and the hobbit accepted the water thankfully. "Good. Now let's get you home to a nice comfortable bed."

Bed. Oh now that sounded wonderful. The reality, however, was not so wonderful. Gandalf slipped an arm beneath Frodo's knees and another beneath his shoulders and gathered the hobbit to his chest as gently as he could but Frodo cried out nonetheless at the jostling of his injuries.

"I am sorry, Frodo. I will be as gentle as I can." For the first time, Frodo noticed that he was wrapped warmly in Gandalf's mantle as the wizard drew it closer, pulling a fold up to shade the hobbit's eyes from the watery sunlight. Once over the initial shock of movement Frodo nestled against the warm chest, breathing in the comfortable scent of Gandalf. The scent he had come to associate with the kindly wizard... wood smoke, pipe weed, and herbs. He let his eyes drift shut.

"No, no, Frodo. You cannot go to sleep yet. Stay awake."

Frodo sighed and opened his eyes. More silly conversation.

The walk back to Bag End had been interminable. Gandalf had talked on and on and insisted that Frodo answer him. The initial relief at being warm and not having to make his own way back was soon buried by the agonizing jolt of Gandalf's every step.

All Frodo could see of the world, with the folds of the wizard's mantle close about his face was Gandalf's face and the trees and sky beyond. After a while the swaying movement and constant pain began to take its toll and the young hobbit clenched shut his eyes and lips as he tried to bring his rebellious stomach under control. The wizard would not let him close his eyes however and kept demanding that he open them.

Frodo began to feel angry. It would just serve Gandalf right if Frodo threw up all over him. No. He would not be sick. He could control his body better than that. A wave of heat rolled through his body, followed by a shivering chill that started his teeth chattering again. The wizard's face filled with concern and he drew the mantle closer about his charge.

"Not long now, Frodo. Hold on just a little longer and then you can have a nice soft bed."

Frodo swallowed hard as he felt a small hot surge of liquid bubble up from his stomach. It burned but he managed to control it. Something in the hobbit's face must have alerted Gandalf however and he stopped, looking down into the pain filled eyes.

"What is it, Frodo?"

Another wave of heat flooded his body and Frodo swallowed again as he felt his stomach clench.

"Sick," was all he had time to say before his stomach gripped more firmly and he could no longer control it with a swallow. Forewarned, the wizard managed to turn him just enough to ensure that the contents of his stomach landed on the ground, rather than on wizard or hobbit.

When the retching had finished Gandalf resettled Frodo and stepped away, before sitting on a fallen log and offering a swallow of cool water. From one of the many pockets hidden within the
folds of his tattered robe the wizard produced a surprisingly clean handkerchief and blotted Frodo's face gently. The hobbit sighed in relief at the release from the feeling of nausea and the stillness, closing his eyes.

"Not yet, my young hobbit. Open your eyes." The instruction was accompanied by a very gentle shaking and Frodo whimpered as pain flared in various places. He opened his eyes to find them captured by Gandalf's ice blue ones. The wizard seemed to look long and hard, moving his hand to shade first one then the other of Frodo's eyes. "I'm sorry, Frodo. You need to stay awake a little longer."

It was too much. The hobbit just wanted to sleep. He wanted to run away from the pain and the cold and the heat. If he could sleep it would go away.

"Please, Gandalf." He could feel the heat of tears flooding his eyes and rolling down the sides of his face into his hair.

"I know," came the soft reply and the handkerchief returned to dab the tears away. "But you have had a nasty knock on the head and you were very cold. It is not safe for you to sleep yet. I am sorry." He pulled Frodo closer to him again and rose slowly. "Come on, now. Just a little further and you can have that bed."

"You keep saying that," Frodo murmured. He felt Gandalf's chuckle through his chest.

"And I meant it," the wizard replied. There was a pause and then the young master of Bag End saw his own door lintel above him and the round ceiling of his hallway. There was another lintel and then Frodo was being lowered onto something soft. He sighed and looked around. He was in his own bedroom. The journey was over.

Frodo closed his eyes and felt himself drift away. Gandalf's voice followed him for a short distance but eventually even he was left behind as Frodo sank down and down and down…….

TBC
An Urgent Summons

Chapter Summary

A fast horseman is sent to retrieve Aragorn, to care for a badly injured Frodo Baggins,

This story was a graveyard fic of the talented and wonderful Elwen. After her one glorious chapter she issued a challenge to see if anyone could continue the story. Although I do not feel I am a writer anyway near the caliber of Elwen, I wanted to give it a try, and so here is Chapter 2 of Twists of Fate formerly known as Elwen's Challenge Fic. Thanks to Elwen for doing the hard part...starting the story and for acting as proofreader to my ideas.

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Chapter: 2

Further and further down Frodo fell into sweet oblivion. It was dark but, instead of being afraid, a wonderful peace emanated all about him. He could faintly hear Gandalf calling to him, but chose to ignore the wizard in favor of the pain free world he now floated in. He wasn't cold any more, feeling more like he had sunk into a soft featherbed with heavenly smelling quilts tucked in about him. Glimmers of distant memories passed languidly through his head. His mother spinning him on a rope swing, his father tossing him high into the sky as he squealed in delight, walking through endless fields of flowers with Bilbo; moments of inexplicable joy with none of the heartache that he had sometimes experienced in his real life. He saw his mum and da sitting on a high grassy hillock and slowly, began walking towards them. Everything in this world moved slowly, like molasses being poured into a bowl. Finally, he arrived next to his parents. They were having a picnic and Frodo noticed they had set a place for him on the gingham tablecloth. He sat down, smiling widely, "I have missed you so much. And while this should feel odd, I feel sitting here with you now is the most natural thing in the world to be doing."

"We have missed you too, dearest one. We have watched you from afar, enough to know how special you are to those around you," said his mother. She looked exactly as she had the last time Frodo had seen her, right down to the dress she had been wearing on that fateful day, so long ago. She smiled adoringly at him.

"You may visit for awhile, Frodo, but you cannot stay," said his Father as he reached out and tousled Frodo's curls. His father also had a serene look on his face, and frequently looked over at his wife with love in his eyes.

"But I want to stay here with you," Frodo cried. "Bag End is so empty now with Bilbo gone. I am so lonely. Why can't I be with you instead?" he whispered.

"It's not your time, son. You are only allowed to visit, for now. You have been hurt badly, but you
still could heal and recover. Someday, we shall all be a family once again, but not just yet, Frodo,” Drogo murmured. His mother pulled him into her lap. She combed his hair gently back with her fingers and began to hum a tune she had always sung to him when he was upset, as a lad. She began rocking him gently as if he were a small hobbit child, and Frodo felt a blissful warmth flood over him.

They ate the light meal of scones and cheese and drank the wine, and when they were sated, they lay on the tablecloth and watched the clouds, imagining different shapes and animals. His mother’s tinkling laughter and his father’s robust chuckle made Frodo feel safe and more loved than he had felt in a long time. He reveled in the time they had, allowing the warmth of their love to fill him with unimaginable happiness. He knew he wanted to stay here forever.

Gandalf had tried everything to awaken Frodo and now there was a note of desperation in his voice as he continued to call out the hobbit's name. It had only been a few moments, but he could sense Frodo slipping away from him. He went to the bathing room and set coppers on the fire to heat water for the tub. Then he rushed to the front door, banging his head in his haste on a ceiling beam, and bolted outside. Immediately he spied what he sought. The Gamgee lad was working in one of the garden beds, mulching the potatoes and onions. In three or four quick strides Gandalf was upon him. He grasped the small shoulder and whirled the startled gardener around. Sam let out a high squeak as he was spun around to look up into the frightened countenance of the old wizard. The wizard's eyes held a glint of sheer panic, which caused Sam to gasp. He had never seen or even thought, that Gandalf the Grey could be frightened by anything.

"Ahh! Mr. ...Ga...Gandalf...sir?" he stuttered and, wondering what he might have done to irritate the wizard, backed away in a panic. Gandalf knelt so he was eye to eye with Samwise.

"Frodo has been badly hurt and I need you to fetch a healer without delay!" he commanded in a rush into Samwise's confused face.

"Mr. Frodo? What happened? Where is he? " Sam looked about excitedly.

"I have no time for this, my dear hobbit! He is inside. He took a rather nasty tumble. Sam...It is Sam, is it not?" Gandalf asked impatiently while trying desperately to calm himself so as not to frighten the lad. Sam nodded a quick nod. "He needs a healer, and quickly," the wizard urged.

"But, Mr. Gandalf, sir, the only healer we got is Mistress Burrows and she's been in Straddle helpin' with the wet lung sickness they got o'er there. There aint none other. Oh, me poor Master. I need to see him," Sam made to go, but Gandalf grabbed him by the collar and pulled him back.

"Samwise, Frodo could die if he's not cared for properly," Gandalf was immediately sorry he had said this, for Sam gasped and tears began to flow down his cheeks. Sam tried to go to Frodo again, and again Gandalf caught him by the collar and pulled him back. "Is there a fast rider in Hobbiton for emergency post or messages?" Sam was staring worriedly towards the entrance to Bag End and did not hear the wizard. Gandalf grabbed him and gave him a shake. "Samwise, pay attention. Is there anyone with a fast horse?" he spoke firmly and this time Sam responded.

"Oh...Aye, Otto Singleburrow has a horse; not a pony, mind ya, but a horse. 'Got it from Tuckbourough and he races it. He can ride hard and fast almost anywhere in the Shire and be there right quick, or so he says." Sam replied.

"Do you know where he is right now?" Gandalf pressed.

"Aye, he's most likely at the Green Dragon waitin' for customers. He gets quite a few who need
packages or post delivered quick like." Sam offered.

Gandalf reached into his robes and pulled out a velvet purse filled with gold coin. "Tell him to come at once. I will have a letter that needs delivery to Bree in all haste. I am prepared to pay him extra, plus a night's room and board at the Prancing Pony. Do you understand, Samwise?"

Gandalf forced a weak smile onto his lips and looked deep into the gardener's eyes.

"Yessir, Mr. Gandalf, sir. I'll fetch 'em right quick." Before Gandalf could say more, Sam had hopped the fence and was running down the hill to Hobbiton.

Gandalf walked quickly back into the hobbit hole. The water was boiling. Frodo was still unconscious, his body shook as cold chills wracked his frame. Gandalf covered him in another thick quilt, gently brushed his gnarled hand across the sweaty forehead, and went to pen his letter. He had no trouble finding parchment and a quill and hurriedly wrote his note.

Aragorn

It is urgent you ride to Hobbiton in all due haste. An unfortunate accident has occurred and Bilbo's nephew, Frodo Baggins is in dire need of your healing skills. He has a broken leg that I have endeavored to splint for now, a sprained wrist and a gash on his left arm. Most alarming to me, however, is he has sustained a head injury coupled with hypothermia. He has lost consciousness and I have been unable to rouse him. Please, ride now to Bag End, Bagshot Row, Hobbiton. I await your arrival.

G (this was written in the Elvish rune)

He folded the parchment, placed it in an envelope and sealed it with his seal. On the envelope he wrote

Strider, Ranger of the North

Prancing Pony

Bree

He heard the approach of a galloping horse and ran to the porch to witness the arrival of a magnificent chestnut horse. Astride the horse were two small hobbits, one being Samwise and the other, Gandalf assumed, Otto Singleburrow. If the situation had not been so dire, Gandalf would have burst into laughter at the sight of the hobbits sitting astride the huge animal. The hobbits legs only came to the shoulder of the horse. Singleburrow had had a saddle specially made so that his legs fit into large hobbit sized stirrups, and hung high on the shoulders of the animal to accommodate a hobbit's short legs. The saddle was perched higher than usual so the legs could hang down into the shoulder stirrups instead of the uncomfortable position of across the wide back of the beast. Otto smiled over at Gandalf while the wizard helped Samwise down. Samwise looked flushed and windswept from his ride.

"Me name's Otto Singleburrow and I hear tell from Sam here you need a fast rider to deliver a post?" he asked looking at the wizard quizzically.

"Indeed. How fast can you get to Bree, my good fellow?" Gandalf asked with a grin.

"I've made it in one day and a night afore. I kin do it agin' for da right price," he smiled and gave a look of avarice to the wizard.

"Here are three gold coins, and I will give you two more if you bring the recipient of the letter back with you," Gandalf said. Singleburrow's mouth dropped open at this. It was a lot of gold for
this run, it must be right important, he thought to himself.

"Done," he said. Wondering if he should’ve bartered for more. 'No sense bein’ greedy, Otto' he
thought to himself. 'Sides it don' pay to get dim wizards all riled up', or so he'd heard.

"Here, my good hobbit," Gandalf said as he handed the coins to Otto. "And here is the post. Make
sure to deliver it directly to the Ranger known as Strider. I do not want it simply left with
Butterbur...he can be...ummmm, forgetful, I have found," Gandalf spoke with urgency.

"Aye, that he is, sir. What if dis Ranger ain't about?" Otto asked.

"Then you are to wait for him, Master Singleburrow. He frequents the 'Pony' and usually prefers
to sit in a corner. He is usually there in the early evening until the common room is closed,"
Gandalf instructed.

"Very well. If there's naught else sir, I'll be off then," Otto said. Gandalf nodded and stepped
away as the horse and its small occupant sprinted down the road in the direction of Bree. Sam and
Gandalf walked briskly back to the hobbit hole and into where Frodo lay huddled on the bed. Sam
gasped at the sight of the muddy, bloodied body of his Master.

"Me poor Mr. Frodo. I shoulda' gone with ya'," he lamented as he gently stroked Frodo's face.

"Come, Samwise. We must wash away the mud to see if there are any further injuries. He will
need to be kept warm, and we need to try and wake him. I have had no success. When I found
him, he was very cold and quarrelsome. I had to keep him awake asking a lot of inane questions,"
Gandalf chuckled. "He was quite perturbed that I would not allow him to go to sleep. He has a
bad concussion and hypothermia in addition to his other injuries. Gandalf pulled back the lids of
Frodo's eyes and checked the pupils. The wizard's face reflected deepening concern. "Samwise,
do you have anything we could use to rouse him?" the wizard looked hopefully into the gardener's
frightened eyes.

"Me mum makes a concoction that she uses on da's shirts to get them white. It smells somethin'
awful, makes yer eyes water, it does. It might work." he looked at Gandalf hopefully.

"I will get Frodo bathed and tucked into his bed, you run along and get Mistress Gamgee's 'cure',
my boy. Samwise, if we can't get Frodo awake..." the wizard hesitated, not wishing to frighten the
servant, but wanting Sam to know what they were up against. "Er...concussions are very serious,
is what I meant to say, Samwise..." Gandalf wondered if he should not elaborate further when he
saw the panicked look flowing into Sam's face.

"What are you sayin', Mr. Gandalf, sir?" Sam's voice was quavering, and he spoke slowly.

Gandalf placed his hand on Sam's shoulder and looked at Sam with sympathy. "If we can't rouse
him, Sam, he may never wake," the wizard said as gently as he could.

Sam's eyes grew large, but his face held a look of grim determination. He rose suddenly and
rushed out the door heading towards #3 Bagshot Row.

"Mr. Frodo's not dyin' if I've got anything to say about it," he muttered to himself breathlessly.
Master Singleburrow and the Ranger

Chapter Summary

Singleburrow meets up with the ranger known as Strider.

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Chapter: 3

Otto Singleburrow had made good time on his treasured horse for the first few hours of his journey from BagEnd, but then the rains had come making the roads a sticky quagmire that sucked at the horse's hooves as he tried to keep his pace. With a sigh he slowed the horse to a trot. Even then the horse lost traction frequently on the slimy clay. Otto knew that the promised record speed of one day and one night was becoming more and more unlikely. After six hours of slipping, sliding and general discomfort, he rode the horse to a small glade near the road and jumped down from her back. He took a cleaning tool and began prying the clay and pebbles from her shoes, fed her some oats and carrots, gave her some water and prepared a light meal for himself. He ran a dry cloth lovingly over her flanks, speaking softly to her as he did so. He had named her Daffodil after the only hobbit he had ever loved, his late wife. She remained his closest companion, as his wife had been before her untimely demise. She nuzzled him lightly and large brown eyes looked over his pockets for an extra treat. He produced another carrot with a chuckle. She then slowly knelt down on her forelegs so that Otto could climb back into the saddle. He continued to wipe her back and sides that he could not reach from the ground. When he was done he gave her a light pat on the neck and told her again what a beauty she was and received a knicker at this as if in agreement. Otto grasped the reins and they were off again.

Otto was a fairly typical hobbit. He liked his ale and food and he had a good heart. He knew from the urgency he had seen in the wizard's eyes and demeanor, as well as Samwise's hurried explanation, that something was amiss at BagEnd. The young Mr. Frodo had been injured badly. This was mostly an assumption on Otto's part as Sam hadn't said as much, but Otto knew how devoted Sam was to his Master and when Mr. Frodo hadn't been present when Otto rode up, he knew he had guessed right. Mr. Frodo had always been right kind to him, quiet and a bit odd looking for a hobbit, but Otto had always thought well of him and been respectful. He didn't listen to the drunken chatter at the Green Dragon about him being 'cracked', 'Mad' or 'part Elvish', which always made Otto laugh. He knew the lad was just a bit quiet and reserved from time to time.

Otto continued to think about the new Master of BagEnd and old Bilbo as well as he pushed Daffodil as fast as was safe towards Bree. He was muddy and exhausted when he finally came to the gates of the city. It had taken him two full days and one and into the second night to reach his destination. 'Deplorable time', he thought to himself. He gained access without a problem and went directly to the stable. He gave the currier an extra coin to make sure Daffodil got properly cared for including a nice blanket, then made his way to the Prancing Pony.
Otto had never felt comfortable in Bree. The mix of hobbits and rough looking men living in the same village had always unnerved him. He had always felt tense and on his guard whenever he had to travel to the small city. The exception to all of this was old Butterbur. He truly liked the inn owner and enjoyed their time together at the bar swapping tales from the Shire with those of the other goings on in Bree, or even Middle Earth.

Butterbur saw him come in and quickly took his cloak and helped him up to the bar. "Otto, my dear hobbit, how have you been? What news do you bring me today, Little Master?" he asked jovially.

"I'm lookin' for a ranger named of "Strider". 'Was told he took his ale and meals here in the evenin'. 'Got me an important post for 'em. Is 'e 'er?" Otto asked, wanting to be relieved of the parcel as soon as he could.

"Aye, he's here. But you be careful about him. He's a strange one. 'Over in that corner yonder," Butterbur said with a nod of his head.

Otto swiveled around to look and a shudder ran up his spine. The man Butterbur indicated was very tall and dressed in tattered, dirty clothing. His hair hung down in a lank mop to his shoulders and his eyes... they scared Otto the most...they glinted as they looked directly at Otto. He was casually smoking his pipe and had an ale on the table in front of him. He seemed to be aware of everything in the room at once but with little, or no, effort.

"Well, guess I'd best give him his post then," Otto said with a tremor in his voice. He hopped down from the bar stool and walked slowly towards the imposing figure. As he drew closer he became more and more apprehensive. 'Butterbur must be mistaken', he thought to himself. 'This couldn't be the friend of the wizard'. He swallowed tightly and spoke. "Your pardon, sir, but would you be the ranger known as Strider?" he asked quietly.

The figure barely acknowledged being addressed. He turned slowly to scrutinize Otto. It took so long for the man to answer that Otto was sure he had not been heard. The man continued to smoke his pipe. Otto began to feel decidedly uneasy. The man was heavily armed with a sword and a wicked looking knife lay on the table. Otto fully expected to be run through for disturbing the man's peace. He started to back away, when a very fast and very strong hand shot out, capturing Otto's arm. Otto involuntarily let out a very undignified squeak, at this.

"Why do you seek him...this ranger?" he whispered gruffly.

A terrified Otto stammered, "I have an urgent post for him from the wizard Gandalf," his eyes round with fear.

"Give it to me," the man said menacingly.

"Are you he? I cannot give it to anyone but this ranger," Otto said with more bravura than he actually felt.

The man smiled then, a real smile and Otto relaxed slightly. "I am he, known as Strider, hereabouts, Ranger of the North," he said. "Sit. Eat and drink while I read my letter." Otto knew by the tone it was not a request and signaled Butterbur who brought him an ale along with a dish of thick lamb stew with vegetables, a loaf of crusty bread, some fresh fruit and a large slice of blueberry pie. The Ranger's eyebrows rose in amusement at the large meal, but he knew hobbits well, by observation only, and knew there would be little or nothing left when this halfling was done.

After Otto was comfortable he handed the letter to the Ranger and began to eat. He watched the
man discreetly over his ale. Strider, after noting the seal to be Gandalf's, quickly opened the letter and read the brief message. He sat his pipe down and looked across the table at the hobbit.

"Tell me all you know. Leave nothing out," he demanded.

Otto swallowed slowly, caught by the fierce look in the Ranger's eyes. He felt very much like a mouse trapped by a cat and wanted badly to be done with this whole business, and quick. Taking a rather large gulp of his ale he said, "I was summoned to BagEnd two days and nights ago..."

"Two days and nights?" The Ranger said anxiously.

"Aye. The roads slowed me and Daffodil down to nothin'..." Otto continued.

"Your wife?" asked the Ranger.

"Me horse," said Otto with a smile that made the Ranger smile back. "She's a beauty and real fast. But the roads were slippery and rutted, so's we had to move a bit slower than usual," he explained. The Ranger nodded. "Well, Sam came and fetched me and that wizard...Gandalf, he said to ride to Bree and bring you back wid me and he'd give me two gold coins," Otto explained. "We rode almost straight through. Daffodil, she's right tired, as am I, so's if you want, I can take you back in the mornin'," he volunteered.

"No...ummm, Master?" Strider stopped, not knowing the hobbit's name.

"Singleburrow...Otto Singleburrow, at your service and your family's," he said springing lightly to his feet and giving the traditional Shire greeting.


"It's naught to concern you, Mr. Strider," Otto began.

"Tell me," the Ranger insisted. Since the man still made Otto a bit nervous he decided he'd better say what was on his mind.

"Mr. Gandalf promised me two gold pieces if I brought you with me to BagEnd is all, and I couldn't go tonight because Daffodil needs her rest," he said sadly. Strider couldn't help but smile widely. This hobbit was more concerned for his dear Daffodil than his own comforts and Strider had an instant respect for him. He pulled out his purse and placed two gold coins on the table.

"But sir, it were Mr. Gandalf who was to pay, not yourself. That jus' wouldn't be right." Singleburrow exclaimed.

"It is a pleasure for me to pay the promised fee," Strider smiled. "I feel much the same about my horse Galest as you do about your Daffodil. Stay and rest and be at ease. I will inform Gandalf that the transaction has been completed and well done, as well," he said.

Otto looked at the Ranger with new eyes. He wasn't really so scary looking when he smiled. He was a little worse for the wear, but Singleburrow began to think that perhaps he was this way from long years of living in the wild. He had heard tales that the Ranger's protected the borders of the Shire from ruffians and other evils, and now when he looked into this man's face, he saw gentleness behind the toughened exterior. "Thank you kindly, Mr. Strider," he said. The Ranger nodded. Singleburrow rose and although the Ranger was across the room in three strides, Otto ran and caught up with him.
Strider looked down at Otto, "Are you following me, Master Hobbit?" he inquired.

"Nay, sir. But since I know you'll be goin' to the stables, I wanted to show you my Daffodil," he grinned up at Strider.

Strider laughed at this and opened the door, stepping outside into the cold night. They walked in quiet, well... Strider walked, Otto ran. When they reached the stables Strider grabbed his gear and saddle and approached a lovely gray horse. "This is Galest," he said proudly as he stroked the neck of the horse.

"This here is me Daffodil," said Otto proudly. Strider had been expecting a pony, the kind most hobbits rode, but this was a very large roan horse.

"She's a fine horse, Master Singleburrow. If we meet again, we should discuss the merits of a union between our horses. It would yield some fine colts," he said with a smile.

Otto beamed at the praise. He watched as Strider quickly saddled the horse. The Ranger then whispered something in the horse's ear and, with a wave to Singleburrow, galloped down the muddy street to the gate. Strider tried to bring to mind everything he knew about Bilbo and his nephew. He had only met the old hobbit once or twice, and never the nephew. Bilbo did mention him frequently, as he was quite proud of the lad. He shook his head to dispel the dread he felt rising within himself. He murmured something low and sweet to Galest. Immediately the animal quickened its pace until they were fairly flying over the road towards Hobbiton. Strider prayed they would not be too late.
Love Conquers All Barriers

Chapter Summary

Bell, Sam and Gandalf tend to an injured Frodo while awaiting Strider's arrival.

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Twists of Fate Chapter 4

After Sam had gone, Gandalf methodically stripped Frodo and placed him into the warm bath. Immediately the water turned a sick, yellowish, brown as the clay dissolved. Gently, he sponged away as much of the mud and grime as possible, all the while speaking quietly to Frodo. When the water was too dirty and cloudy to be of much use, he lifted the hobbit gently out, wrapping him in a thick quilt, and laid him by the fire. He then emptied the tub, refilled it with clean, warm water, and returned the hobbit to the bath. Frodo's body trembled violently during both washings and Gandalf noted the hobbit was now sporting a fever to add to his list of maladies. He soaped and washed the tiny body, rinsing him thoroughly and removed him, for the last time, from the tub. Gandalf had seen no additional injuries and was thankful for that, but the head wound continued to ooze blood, as did the gash on his arm. As he dressed and bundled Frodo in warmed blankets and transferred him to the bed, he felt gently at the head wound.

"Oh Frodo, my dearest boy, I wish I had listened and watched more closely while Elrond was tending the injured. If you should die because of my negligence, I should never forgive myself," the wizard whispered. A small gasp came from behind the wizard, and he whirled to see Sam looking pale and shaken, a hobbit matron was with him holding a small bottle of some sort of liquid and a black bag.

"Die? Mr. Gandalf, … you said he's goin' ta die?" sobbed Sam.

"No Sam, at least we will do all in our power to avoid that fate. I am sorry. I did not realize you were there or I would have chosen my words more carefully," the wizard apologized.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, but I don't want 'careful' words, I want the truth, if you take my meaning?" Sam said vehemently.

Gandalf smiled, "Very well, Samwise, but first, please introduce me to this lovely hobbitess that has accompanied you," he smiled as he tried to change the subject, and beamed at the charmingly plump hobbit matron standing slightly behind Sam. She blushed a deep crimson at the complement.

"Oh go on with you, sir, I'm Sam's mother 'tis all. When I heard Mr. Frodo was injured I came straight away. I've had some small bit 'o healin' trainin'…nothin' major, mind you, but I think I can be of help with the poor dear. Me name's Bell Gamgee, but it'll be just Bell to you, Mr. Gandalf,"
sir." Gandalf's eyebrows shot up. Bell laughed at this, reading his expression, "Yes, I knows ya, sir, what with all the stories Mr. Bilbo and Mr. Frodo have told us, I feel like we've already met, and all. Now, if you two will help me get the dear boy up on these pillows, we'll make him comfy, then we'll see if we can't wake him," she said, sweeping in and taking over Frodo's care with authority as she would one of her own.

Gandalf smiled. He felt remarkably better knowing the young matron was more in her element than he. He nodded to Sam and gently they moved Frodo so his head was raised a bit and cushioned on two feather pillows. Gandalf had placed a loose bandage over the back of Frodo's head and now the blood began to seep into the pillow.

"Dear me, that won't do," tsked Bell as she raised Frodo slightly by the neck and shoulders and placed a thick bandage on the back of his head, and covered the pillow with a thick towel. Slowly she lowered him back into place. She went to her bag and retrieved more pads and wrappings then asked Gandalf to pull Frodo up so she could see the wound. He pulled Frodo to his chest, his large hands supporting the small body like a babe. He moved his right hand in slow circles over the tiny hobbit's back. Bell saw tears in the wizard's eyes and she gently laid her hand on his arm. She then turned to look at the damage done to Frodo's head. Her face paled and a small gasp escaped her lips. Her eyes met Gandalf's over Frodo's head and he nodded sadly. She turned to Sam, "Samwise, go fetch Mr. Frodo's clipping shears for me, dear," she said in a tremulous voice.

Sam's eyes grew round. "Shears, what would ya' be needin' them for, mum?" he asked hesitantly.

"I need a closer look at Mr. Frodo's head wound dear, so please do as I say and bring them to me," she said gently.

"Aye mum," Sam said, thinking how displeased Frodo would be when he woke up and a chunk of his hair was gone. He ran and fetched the shears and Bell set to carefully clipping the hair from the area of the wound. When she was finished she gently cleaned the area with warm water and placed another heavy pad across the back of Frodo's skull. She then began winding rolls of gauze around his head to hold it in place. Next, she arranged the pillows so that Frodo's head was cradled between them but not touching overmuch on the wound. Additional pillows were placed behind these so that he was lying at a slight incline. She secured his head in place, not wishing him to move suddenly and further open the wound, with additional lashings of cotton strips. Sam watched in consternation, trying to understand the strange arrangement. Bell then placed two pillows under the broken leg, one under the knee, to elevate the damaged limb slightly. She placed hot bricks, wrapped in cloths, around the shivering form. Finally she stood back and surveyed her efforts and deemed them acceptable with a nod and a grim smile.

"That should slow the swelling of that bump on his head and keep him as comfortable as possible. Thank goodness you found him when you did, Mr. Gandalf, and you got him bathed as well." She made a weak attempt to sound cheerful, but her face was pinched with worry. Gandalf smiled at her wanly.

"I would do anything for this dear boy," he said quietly as he stroked Frodo's curls back from his clammy forehead.

"Mayhap we can bring down his fever with a cup o' ginger tea. I'll just go put the kettle on," she said tremulously.

"I can do that, mum," Sam volunteered with a smile. He very much wanted to help do something for his Master. "You jes' stay here and watch 'oer the Mr. Frodo." He rose quickly and headed towards the kitchen.

Once Sam was out of the room, Bell collapsed into the closest chair, and buried her face in her
hands. She had tried so hard to appear positive, holding her emotions in check in front of Sam, but the damage to Frodo's head was extensive, and she felt a deep loss already. Gandalf reached over and pulled her to him. He patted her back softly as he spoke soothingly, "Mistress Gamgee, we must remain strong for both Frodo and Sam. I have sent for a Ranger friend of mine who knows much in the art of healing, there may still be hope for Frodo. I asked Sam to bring something to try and rouse him. He said you had some mixture that might be of use, did you bring it?" Gandalf asked gently, trying to momentarily distract Bell.

Bell looked up at Gandalf, and drew her apron across her face trying to compose herself. "Thank you, sir. Yes, I brought it, but it is only what I use on my Hamfast's shirts. I don't know what good it will do here, for this young one," she said hesitantly as she watched the slow rise and fall of Frodo's chest.

"If it is what I think it is from Sam's description, it could well be worth our time. We must try, my dear lady. For if Frodo does not wake we may truly lose him," he said gently.

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Frodo could not remember being as happy as he was right now, at least not since before the tragic death of his parents. Here they were, together again, a real family. He smiled widely and laughed as they strolled along the small creek.

"Popkin, why do you smile so widely? And what *are* you laughing at?" Primula asked, with a smile of her own.

"I am just so very happy, I suppose. I can't seem to stop smiling," he gave her a kiss on her cheek.

"Frodo, you are so beautiful to my eyes. I wish, I truly *wish* you could stay here with us. I have missed you so very much," Primula turned a sad smile to him and then to Drogo.

Frodo's face fell. "I am not planning on leaving, mum. My life has been so lonely. First, I lost you," he grasped their hands tightly in his and his eyes glistened with moisture, "then Bilbo left. I cannot go back to a life of such utter solitude when I have all that I want here before me now," he sucked in a shaky breath and pulled them both to him in a tight embrace.

Drogo pulled back and gently let his finger trace the outline of Frodo's face. "You were so young when we were taken. We would love to be with you, lad, but it is not your time. We have been granted these few days and the miracle of your presence, but it shall not last. You will have to return and live your own life. Great things will happen in your lifetime, Frodo, great things. If you are not there, if you died before your time, a great evil would overcome Middle Earth and all would be laid to ruin. Each living thing has a destiny in this world. You still have not fulfilled yours, my dear boy," he said gently. Primula moved to Drogo, and he pulled her close to him. Frodo clutched their hands convulsively.

"What could I do, that would be so important? How could my solitary existence make a difference? Surely, you exaggerate. I was but a single, simple hobbit of the Shire. I had nothing but my books and Bag End, and I would have lived a long life alone and then died with nothing to show for it, unlike most hobbits," he asked, tears filling his eyes. "I wish to stay with you. Please do not leave me again," he cried.

"Oh Frodo, we love you so, but surely you know we are ever with you," exclaimed Primula. "My dearest love, for a time you may still visit with us, but that time will end. Those whom you left behind cry out for you even now, can you not hear them?" she asked.

Faintly, Frodo could hear whispers of voices. People he had loved and cared for, but he resisted.
*Here* was where he belonged, so he fought them, trying to add permanence to his time with his parents. He shook his head, struggling to rid them from his mind.

"They love you so, Frodo. You must return to them eventually. Do not fight it, dear one," whispered Primula. She smiled lovingly at him. As if her words were a prophecy, Frodo watched in grief as Drogo and Primula began to diminish in appearance, before his eyes. Their voices became mere whispers, and although Frodo tried desperately to hold onto their hands, they gently were pulled from him, until at last they were gone. At the very last, as the tenuous threads of that existence retreated, Frodo heard his mother say "I love you, Popkin. Don't be afraid, we will see one another again," and then they were gone.

Bell Gamgee removed the stopper on the small glass bottle. Immediately the room was filled with the bitter smell of ammonia. She and Gandalf drew back instinctively at the sharp odor, their eyes watering.

"I can see now that Sam was correct in his description of your …er…cleaner," he rasped, as he covered his nose with his robe.

"It's me mum's recipe. Hamfast has the whitest shirts in the Shire and that's sayin' somethin', him bein' a gardener and all. But, aye, it's an awful stench," gasped Bell. She took a small rag and added just the slightest amount of the liquid to it, then quickly stoppered the small bottle. "Mr. Gandalf, sir, you might want to hold him steady, this may be a shock to his poor body," she warned.

Gandalf nodded and pulled Frodo upright against his chest. A pillow was placed behind his head as a precaution, if he moved. Bell took the rag and placed it against Frodo's nose. The reaction was immediate as Frodo began twisting and struggling against the rag. His body convulsed and lurched against Gandalf's chest, a single sob escaped his lips.

"Nooo," he cried. The anguish and despair uttered in that single word caused Bell to immediately remove the rag and whisper comforting endearments to the poor soul. Now Frodo was openly weeping, "Gone," he said, "They are gone and I am alone," he cried softly.

Gandalf gently lowered him back into his nest of pillows, softly stroking the tangled curls. "There, there, my boy. Open your eyes, Frodo." Nothing happened as Frodo struggled to stay on that other plane of existence. "Frodo Baggins, open your eyes. You will do as I say, young hobbit, for it is unwise to irritate a wizard," Gandalf strove to sound demanding, but his voice trembled and quavered with concern.

Sam had entered with the asked for tea but upon hearing his Master's call of distress, almost dropping the tray in his haste to be at his side.

Frodo slowly opened his eyes. Gandalf, Bell and Sam were each struck with the look of loss in the deep blue depths. "They…were…wi'…me," Frodo mumbled. "But...now....I ...have...los'...them...all...o'er...again. I...am...alone. Bilbo? Bilbo? Where ess Bilbo? Don' leave...don' ...leave, me...again. I ...am ...so. Lonely. Please, pleas...don' ...leave...me," and then he wept.

Sam's mouth dropped open. He rushed to Frodo's side, kneeling down by his Master. He took his hand and softly, he caressed it. "I'm here, Mr. Frodo. It's your Sam. I ain't gonna leave ya, Mr. Frodo, an' you won't be lonely no more, sir. Forgive me; I didn't know how it was. I always thought you liked bein' alone, sir, but never again. I couldn't bear the thought of you bein' lonely, sir," he cried, tears running down his face.

"The poor child," gasped Bell. "He musta' felt like everyone was abandoning him," she whispered.
"I am certain Bilbo never meant to make him feel so," murmured Gandalf. "What with Peregrine Took and Meriadoc Brandybuck always underfoot, who would have thought he would still feel the separation from Bilbo so keenly."

"Aye, Mr. Gandalf, sir, they were here a bit. But they thought he was better and had to return to their homes and duties. It's my fault. He never said ought to me about bein' lonely. He's had no one like Mr. Bilbo to read to or listen to stories or just have a simple pipe with after supper. I *am* a ninny hammer, jes' as me Gaffer always says! He mentioned once or twice, how quiet it had been at Bag End. I shoulda' seen how he weren't himself lately, noticed the looks on his face when he asked me ta stay and sup with him," Sam berated himself. Bell softly patted Sam on the shoulder.

Frodo's blue eyes had locked onto Sam's face. "Sam," he said quietly, his body trembling violently, "tell Bilbo I am goin' to sleep a bit more; I 'ave a frightfa' hea'ache. An' tha' I'll join 'im fo' second brea'fast, would you, ma frien'? But, Sam, don' tell 'im I don' feel well, you know 'ow he worries so." Frodo slurred, and smiled weakly up at Sam's worried face. Sam looked quickly over at Gandalf and then his mum, confusion and worry evident on his face. Gandalf gave him a quick nod, and Sam gulped.

"'Course, Mr. Frodo. I'll let 'em know right quick, sir," he stammered.

"Dear, dear Sam," Frodo sighed and smiled slowly. His eyes began to drift shut. "So…tire'd…. so…cold, Bilbo. I am so col', Uncle," he murmured as he felt the last vestiges of consciousness leaving his body, and a comforting, soothing darkness slowly cradle him. He was slipping, slipping away slowly and he was so drowsy. So comfortably warm and at peace, he smiled slowly as he was gently engulfed by oblivion.
First Impressions

Chapter Summary

Strider arrives at Bag End, but can he heal Frodo?

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Chapter 5: First Impressions

Strider was covered in the thick golden clay of the Shire. Many times he had been forced to dismount and clean the goo from Galest's hooves as it first coated and then clung like an overshoe to the horse's ankles and feet. For the last hour he had been forced to walk, the horse plodding along obediently behind him, for the roads had become more and more treacherous as they slipped along. He was feeling a deep sense of foreboding and an urgency to reach Hobbiton quickly, which only furthered his frustration. At last, as they came upon Bywater, the road seemed less perilous and he once again, mounted the horse and began galloping hard towards Bag End. Two days and two nights had passed, and he had rested little. And so it was that the bedraggled and filthy form of a tall, dark and imposing stranger, a Man no less, arrived on the stoop of the hobbit hole called Bag End. He was weary beyond reckoning as he raised his fist and knocked loudly on the round, green door, not knowing what to expect or if he had even arrived in time to aid the injured lad.

Bell dabbed a cool cloth over Frodo’s perspiring face. Gandalf sat slumped in a large chair that seemed made for the wizard. Bell remembered that Bilbo often had strange visitors at Bag End and always at odd hours. He had had special furniture built for just such an occasion. There was rumored to be a long, large bed as well as another large, overstuffed chair in one of the back bedrooms, but she had never seen them. Sam lay curled on the rug by the fire. He had insisted he could stay awake, but had fallen off almost immediately after lying down. Bell watched Frodo's face, pale and covered in a sheen of sweat, as he dealt with some dream evidenced by the puckering and furrowing eyebrows. It had been almost five dark days since Otto had left for Bree. She sighed, knowing there was scant hope that help would arrive in time now to save the young Master. She felt near to tears from exhaustion and worry over this sweet lad. How he had lived this long was a wonder to her. The head wound was one she had seen before. Always with the same results, fever then seizures then death. A large tear slowly tracked down her cheek at the thought of this small one dying in such agony.

A loud thumping forced her from her reverie and she looked first at Gandalf then Sam who both were so exhausted they slept right through the racket. Slowly, she rose and made her way towards the front door. She lit a lamp along the way, as it was quite late for a visitor of any kind, and she became more and more angry as she padded down the hallway, determined to give this intruder a
Words of reprimand died on her lips as she was confronted with the visage of a tall man completely covered in a black cloak. She gasped, letting out a small scream and dropping the lamp with a surprised crash. She was immediately engulfed in inky darkness and the silhouette of the stranger stood tall and black, framed within the doorway, against the encroaching starlight. She stood frozen with terror and was about to turn and run when a husky yet gentle voice spoke from the shadowy form.

"Are you injured, Mistress?" he asked with genuine concern.

"Nnoo, I don't believe so, sir," Bell answered in a shaky whisper.

"Do not move. There will be glass everywhere and you could be cut. I will fetch another taper. He walked into the hole, bending low to avoid hitting his head, and went to the fireplace. He bent, lighting a taper from the embers, and touched it to the wick of another lamp. He then proceeded to light two more lamps until the room was almost cheery with the light. Bell still stood very still, watching the stranger, and frozen in place. Even if she had wanted to run she was simply too frightened to do so. Strider turned towards her and pulled the hood back from his cloak. Bell was surprised to see a handsome man with gray eyes, eyes that seemed to be laughing lightly at her now, and a face that was not cruel but concerned for her welfare.

"I am terribly sorry if I have frightened you." He bent down and began picking up the broken glass. Bell soon realized her place and seemed to wake from her daze.

"No, no sir...Jes' let me, you'll be cuttin' yerself, you will " and off she went for a broom and pan. Once she had swept up all remnants of the lamp, she turned around and openly ogled the man. She was about to ask him who he was when a roaring blur of blond hair and furry feet catapulted itself across the room, landing squarely in the middle of the stranger's large back, knocking him to the floor with a surprised 'oomph'.

"Be off with you, you mangy scoundrel or I'll have you, I will. No one's gonna hurt the one's I love and that'll be includin' me mum!" shouted Sam, who had the man pinned under him, arms over his head.

Strider could have easily over-powered the hobbit, and was close to laughter just picturing how ridiculous he must look now, with the small gardener upon his back, but thought it best to lie still so as not to further alarm the family. Still, a slow smile crept over his face.

"Samwise!! Where are your manners? It's not right you cappin' one of the Big Folk, an all. He hasn't laid one finger on me and there's been no harm done other than bein' near scart to death, that is!" scolded Bell.

"Mum, he's too scraggily and, well....fell to be one of Mr. Gandalf's healer friends. He could be a thief or hobbitnapper, I heard them Big Folk likes ta steal hobbits and work 'em near ta death," Sam said resolutely. "Best go fetch Mr. Gandalf and we'll see what's what, eh Mister?" Sam concluded with a little jab at Strider's back. He was feeling quite proud of his capture and subsequent subduing of a potential ruffian.

Bell shook her head, but turned to retrieve the wizard, nonetheless. When she turned she spied the old man leaning on his staff and chuckling quietly to himself.

"Well, well...Sam, you've caught yourself a ruffian, I see," Gandalf said with a smirk. Strider began to say something in his defense, but a hard poke to the ribs stopped him mid sentence.

"Not one word outta you, you slimy, disgusting creature," Sam said to the bearded man, then he
turned to Gandalf and proudly said, "Yes sir, Mr. Gandalf sir, caught him 'bout to hurt me mum, I did. 'Stopped him cold," he smiled smugly up at the wizard.

Strider had had about enough of going along with this charade and decided to end it once and for all. Quick as a cat he twisted sideways, grasping Sam deftly by his hands, Sam let out a surprised yelp at this, and soon found himself easily pinned beneath the man.

The Stranger quickly wedged the furry feet beneath his legs, knowing first hand how quick and hard a hobbit could kick. He then held Sam's hands with one of his large ones, over Sam's head. He leaned down until he was very close to the frightened and very flustered face. He smiled widely into the large hazel eyes.

"I am no ruffian, although I understand your confusing me as one," the ranger spoke in a husky, low voice. "I mean you, nor any hobbit, harm, as I was sent for. You see...Samwise was it?" a trembling nod from Sam at the scruffy stranger."...Samwise, this wizard over here," he gestured with his free hand to Gandalf," who is so enjoying our first meeting, is a friend of mine," he turned to look at Gandalf, "and I his." He turned back to Sam. "I am here to help one Frodo Baggins."

At the mention of his Master's name Sam's eyes grew even larger. "You came to help Mr. Frodo?" he asked with urgency. Strider smiled at the obvious devotion of this hobbit for the other, evidenced by the simple question.

"Yes. Now, I will release you if you promise not to kick me with those rather large feet of yours," Strider grinned. He reached down and tickled one of the furry feet, causing Sam to giggle and squirm.

"Yes sir, Mr...Mr. Ranger, sir. I'm awful sorry 'bout the name callin' an' all, but you don't look like any healer I've ever seen. Not that I've seen all that many other than Mistress Burrows, and there was an old hobbit by the name of Tendervine a long while back..."

"Samwise, stop your goin' on and let the healer be about his business," Bell said as she scrambled to Strider's side. Together they pulled Sam up. "I must be makin' my apologies as well, kind sir. You jes' gave me a start, you did was all," Bell said with a smile.

"I often have that effect on people, I've found," Strider said with a grimace. "I am equally sorry that I frightened you so," he continued as he slowly rose from his knees to his full height. Sam gasped and stepped back, his mother showing equal amazement at the sheer height of the man.

"Quickly Strider, you must see to young Baggins," said Gandalf. "Sam, why don't you and Mistress Gamgee see if there's some of those fine cakes and some tea to be had for our traveler," he added with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes, and a knowing glance at Bell.

"Yes sir, Mr. Gandalf, sir," Sam scurried away towards the kitchen.

Bell placed her hand on Strider's arm, he looked down to her tear filled eyes.

"Bless us that you've come, sir. I hope you can help the Master better than I, my own skills bein' lessen' yer ow, in these matters," she said in a whisper.

Strider knelt once again so that they were looking eye to eye. "I will do my best, Madame. Could you please boil some water and bring it to his room, for me?" he asked gently.

"Aye, sir," she turned and proceeded towards the kitchen, dabbing at her eyes with her apron.

"Now, let us see to our patient," Strider said as he rose and they entered Frodo's room. Strider
looked down at the small form swaddled in bandages and winced at the sight of all the blood weeping out onto the pillowcase. Frodo was drenched in perspiration, ragged gasps issued from his chapped lips. Strider pulled a small stool up to the bed. He nodded to Gandalf who gently pulled the lax form of the hobbit to his chest. Slowly, the ranger began unwinding the gauze until thick chestnut curls appeared, glistening with sweat. He examined the wound with a concerned frown on his face.

"Gandalf, this is most serious. It may be beyond my skills to heal such an injury. Lord Elrond has had some small success with wounds of this sort, and has taught me well. Still, even he is successful in saving the patient little more than half the time," he turned somber eyes in Gandalf's direction.

"I know, Strider. But you were our last, best hope at aiding him. Please do whatever you can," he gently caressed the soft curls. "This boy is quite dear to me and all those who truly know him."

Strider smiled grimly. He gently pressed around the wound and noted that the area had an extreme amount of swelling. "His skull has received a compression fracture which is pressing on his brain. This causes a fluid to build up around the brain, causing further injury. What you ask of me, to relieve the pressure, is exceedingly delicate work," he looked up at Gandalf sadly. "I could kill him just as easily as the wound."

"I realize this, my friend, but I would not see him suffer the fever, convulsions and death of this injury without at least attempting to bring him back to us," Gandalf said slowly. "Frodo is still with us. I sense his presence within," he gently touched the small forehead.

"And although he currently travels on a different plain than ours, he is aware of us. We must convince him to return. I detect a stubborn resolve to remain where he is, but once the physical wound is attended to, I believe he will come back to us willingly." Strider nodded. He had long ago discovered that asking how or why Gandalf could detect such things, would yield only cryptic answers. Elrond was much the same. Elves and wizards were a mystery that Strider accepted without question.

To be continued…
Chapter Summary

Strider sets about doing his best to save Frodo's life, while Gandalf tries to reach the unconscious hobbit.

Disclaimers: None of the characters or places in this story is owned by me, all rights belong to the Tolkien Estate. No financial compensation was received, only the joy of writing this AU story. Hope you enjoy.

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To those of you reading Phantasm, please be very patient with me over the next few weeks. Real life has become extremely stressful, but I will try to update after next week, I promise. I also promise that I would leave a fic unfinished, but you will need to trust me that I will update as soon as possible. Thanks so much for reading!!!!

Chapter 6 The Ranger and the Gentlehobbit

Sam and Bell entered Frodo's room, Bell bearing a pot of hot water and Sam tea with cakes. Strider smiled and thanked them. He reached into his pack and withdrew his herbal pouch. After rummaging for a few moments, he withdrew the athelas leaves and sprinkled them on the hot water. The room filled with the fresh fragrance of new growth, dispelling the sour aroma of a sick room. Everyone inhaled deeply, enjoying the bouquet. "Sam, this is kings foil, thought of as a weed in these parts. Have you seen it growing about the gardens of Bag End?" he looked into the worried face of the gardener.

"Yes sir, Mr. Strider, but I've made sure naught of it stayed for long, if you take my meaning sir," he said proudly.

"It is a great curative. If you could find some fresh leaves, I would be most thankful," said the ranger with a smile.

"A healin' herb, ya say. Well, I'll be slapped silly. I'll do me best, sir." Sam left in great haste, heading for the meadow behind the hole.

"Mistress Gamgee...?" Aragorn began.

"Jes' Bell, sir, if 'n you don't mind," Bell said shyly.

"Bell. Could you fetch me a razor so I can shave around the wound?" he asked with a small grin.

Bell exchanged worried looks with Gandalf. "I'm sorry, Master Strider but we don't have much use for razors here in these parts," she said.
"Of course, how forgetful of me. Well, I will use my knife then. It should be sufficiently sharp to do the task," he withdrew what appeared to Bell, to be a small sword from a sheath on his hip. Bell's eyes grew wide with worry.

"Pardon my askin' but are you sure you won't hurt him none?" She asked looking at the blade that gleamed over Frodo's head. It was easily the length of a hobbit's arm and looked to be very sharp indeed.

"If you will assist me, Mis...Bell I'm sure all will be well. He handed her a cloth and after whispering a few low words over the steaming bowl, instructed her to dip the cloth, wring it and wash the site of the wound. She did this with a mother's gentle touch. Frodo sighed, causing all three to look up at each other.

"Frodo? Frodo, wake up, lad," Gandalf called gently. Frodo's eyes slowly opened and Strider was stunned to see that they were a deep indigo blue, unlike the brown or hazel eyes that he knew were so common to most hobbits. "Good to see you, my boy," Gandalf smiled.

"Gandalf, are we still on the hill...side?" Frodo asked hesitantly.

"No, that was three days past. We are treating your wounds. This is Strider, a healer from Rivendell and you know Mistress Gamgee, I believe."

Frodo smiled up at Bell, who smiled back, tears on her cheeks. He then turned slowly and studied the face of the man. He looked long and searchingly at the scraggily face of the ranger.

"You are not an elf, sir. Yet you are from Rivendell?" Frodo whispered.

"Yes, little one. Elrond HalfElven is my adopted Father and I have lived there most of my life. Now I am a ranger and patrol the Shire's borders," Strider said gently.

Frodo smiled slowly. "You look weary from your travels. Please enjoy the hospitality of my home and refresh your...self," his eyes slowly closed as he once again slipped into the netherworld of unconsciousness.

Strider was touched that this small one would be so immediately trusting and concerned for his own well-being. "He is still lucid. And very much the host," Strider said with a smile.

"He has his moments. The last time we woke him with the salts, he thought Sam was Bilbo," Gandalf said worriedly.

"It could have been the salts themselves, but I'm sure you're correct and it was the concussion. We must move quickly to relieve the pressure or I fear he may not regain consciousness again," Strider bent to begin shaving the wound area, but suddenly a small arm reached out and firmly grasped his wrist, halting it over Frodo's head. He turned and looked up into the steely gaze of Samwise Gamgee. In one hand he grasped a great bundle of kings foil, his face was very red, his eyes locked with Strider's.

"What do ya think yer doin' to my Mister Frodo, sir?" he said in a low, threatening voice.

Strider could tell by the fixed look of the servant that this little one was not to be trifled with. Had he been the size of a man, he would have been an adversary to be reckoned with. Had the situation not been so dire, he would have laughed. But he could tell by the look on Sam's face that this was no laughing matter, and he kept his face neutral. Gandalf began to chuckle. It painted quite the picture, the large Ranger with a very large, very sharp knife, being held at bay by a small blond hobbit with a fistful of flowers.
"Sam, Strider needs to shave the area, and since hobbits do not shave, HE will need to do it," said the wizard gently.

Sam swallowed thickly. "You'll be careful?" he asked tremulously.

"Of course, Sam. You have to remember that men are used to shaving," Strider said with a smile.

"Beggin' yer pardon, sir, but *you* don't really look like you *are*, if you take my meanin', and meanin' no disrespect". Sam said, indicating Strider's fairly heavy growth of beard from living in the wild.

Gandalf chuckled at the astuteness of the gardener. "He *does* have a point there, Ara...Strider."

Strider gave the wizard a stern look. "Nevertheless Sam, I am more practiced at it than Gandalf," indicating the wizard's long, white beard. He grinned, to which the wizard harrumphed. Sam slowly released his hold on the ranger's arm, but he would not leave his Master's side, preferring instead to peer over Strider's shoulder as the ranger worked. The ranger took the blade and gently removed the hair from around the wound without cutting Frodo's delicate scalp.

"I will need a small tube from my pack, Sam. Could you get it for me and boil it with the athelas you have collected? Not *all* of it, a single branch should suffice," asked Strider gently. He prepared a needle and silken thread along with a few other delicate instruments; they were placed on a tray, which Sam took.

Strider rubbed his eyes and leaned back to wait for his supplies. He sipped some of the tea and ate cakes slowly as he and Gandalf discussed how they would position Frodo. At long last the instruments were returned. After washing his hands thoroughly, he turned and looked at the two worried hobbits. "It would perhaps be best if you went and rested while we conduct the procedure," he said gently.

"I think I should stay, in case Mr. Frodo needs me," Sam said firmly.

"All right Sam, but there is much at risk here. If I am not successful or if something goes wrong, Frodo will die. You should be aware of that. Once I begin, you will *not* interfere in any way. This is very delicate surgery, and the slightest slip could result in the death of your Master." Sam's eyes filled with tears. They were impossibly large, and Strider felt a deep and overwhelming pity for the gardener and friend of his small patient. "What I am about to do, Elrond has done with some success, but not always," Strider cautioned gently.

"Die? I don't understand why he could die, it's just a wee bump on the head, isn't it?" Sam asked worriedly.

"No Sam, it is not just a 'wee bump'. Frodo has broken his skull and we are going to insert a small tube to drain some of the fluid that is pressing down on his brain, so that the damage can heal," Strider murmured softly.

"I didn't want to upset you, Sam, so I didn't tell you how serious it was," Bell added gently.

"What if we just leave it be...wouldn't it heal on it's own?" Sam asked with a note of desperation in his voice.

"He will probably die if we do nothing," Strider knelt down and looked into Sam's eyes. "I will do all that is in my power to save your Master, Sam, you must trust me."

Sam nodded shakily. Strider dipped his hands in the hot athelas water, quietly asking the blessings of the Valar to guide his hands to heal the hobbit, as he did so. He washed the shaved area gently...
and took up the knife once again. He looked up into Gandalf's eyes "You will try to reach him?" he asked.

"Yes, I will meditate and try to place myself beside him in whatever plain he is traveling on," Gandalf murmured. He began to whisper lightly to himself. His gray eyes became unfocused, and he became very still. The wizard appeared to be barely breathing.

Frodo was walking through a grove of trees. "Everything is so green here," he thought. He looked to his right and, emerging from the trees, was a white, robed man with a long staff. "Who are you, sir? Have you come to see my parents?" Frodo asked cordially.

"No, Frodo Baggins, I have come to see you," the visage said.

"Me? But I know you not," answered the confused hobbit.

"Ahh, my dear hobbit, you know me well. I am Gandalf the Grey as he appears in this realm," answered the man.

"Gandalf! Whatever are you doing here? Surely you have not died," exclaimed Frodo.

"No, my boy, I have not...and neither have you. Your family has passed into this existence but you yet cling to life. I have come to bring you back to where you truly belong," Gandalf said gently.

Primula and Drogo stepped out of the grove behind Gandalf. "You must go, Frodo," said Drogo.

"We love you, Poppet, but you have already traveled too long on this plain. It is time for you to return to your life...a life that must be lived, then we will meet once again, when the time is right," said Primula.

"But I want to stay here with you. I am happy here, where I'm not just an orphan being passed off here and there; I have a place here. I do not want to be alone anymore, please don't send me away," Frodo pleaded.

"Frodo Baggins, your Uncle would never forgive me, not to mention Sam, Merry and Pippin, if you should depart," Gandalf said with authority. "Listen to your parents. They will still be here when you are finished doing what you must do, on the mortal plain, my boy," he added.

Frodo stepped back, "No, I won't leave. I'm not ready. Leave me be, please," he whispered. With that, the white vision that was Gandalf gradually faded into the dusk of the trees. But as he faded Frodo heard him call his name until the voice slowly passed into the wind.

Strider had cut the flap of skin, and slowly pulled it back. He had placed the knife along the side of the crack and slowly opened the small skull. It was a very small hole, but it was sufficient for his needs. Fluid and blood dribbled out and down upon the toweling. He took the tube and placed it barely inside the widened crack. A small whimper of distress escaped Frodo's lips. Strider stopped and looked into the sweaty and pale face. He felt great sorrow at the look frozen there, a look of loss and grief. The athelas had a very small amount of pain killing properties, but the ranger still worried that the surgery would cause Frodo discomfort. He quickly padded the small glass tube that now lay barely inside Frodo's skull and protruded slightly to allow the drainage. He sutured it in place and then wrapped the head, leaving the tube in a padded ring so nothing could block or bump it. He looked at Gandalf. The wizard's eyes were sad and distant.
"He will not come, not yet," he murmured. "I must rest. It has been long since I have rested."

Bell helped the wizard to a man sized bed and he collapsed into an exhausted heap.

Strider next examined the broken leg. The splint was crude, but seemed to be the perfect size for the diminutive leg. He carefully removed it, washed the leg in the athelas water then re-bandaged it with the same splint and clean gauze. The sprained wrist was wrapped tightly, and after checking the circulation and deeming it sufficient, he resumed his examination. He roamed over the rest of the small body searching for possible fractures that might have been missed. The gash on the arm would need several stitches and he prepared his needle and silk thread. Carefully, he placed the stitches, after washing the wound completely, and then he applied a healing balm. He motioned to Bell to bring some tea and set about, teaspoon by teaspoon, to feed it into the shivering patient. Bell had already placed more heated bricks, wrapped in thick towels, around Frodo's frigid body. Strider lay the hobbit on his side so that the drain would be unobstructed and placed pillows behind Frodo so that he could not roll over by accident. He then washed his hands and face and, finding a comfortable chair, stretched out his long legs, putting his feet up. He tipped the chair back and immediately fell into a deep sleep. Bell smiled at the image of the huge man next to his small charge. She too, sat and pulled out her darning. Sam sat besides her, dozing, and it wasn't long before the rhythmic sounds of snoring lulled her to sleep as well.
Chapter 7: There and Back Again

Frodo was in pain. His head throbbed to the rhythm of his heartbeat and not only did he hurt; he was suddenly seized with the realization that he could not move. Every part of him was restrained and, filled with sudden panic. He lay panting as his eyes darted around the room.

"There's a good lad," came the soft lilt of a familiar voice on his left. He couldn't see who it was because his head was immobilized. Someone placed a cool cloth on his forehead and he relaxed slightly at the blissful caress. "We've been right worried about you, Master Frodo," Bell Gamgee's face swam into view as Frodo blinked, trying to focus. She smiled down at him and ran a finger lightly down the right side of his face. Frodo grimaced and a small gasp escaped his lips as a sudden spasm of pain took him. "There, there Poppet, you're safe here with Mr. Gandalf, Mr. Strider, my Sam and me. We won't let nothin' happen to you," she cooed lightly.

"Momma?" Frodo murmured. Bell, Sam and Strider exchanged confused, then worried glances. Frodo's eyes began to close at the soothing voice.

"No, no not yet, Mr. Frodo. You jes' let us check you out a bit before you go a driftin' on us," Sam's face came into view.

"She...called...me...Poppet," murmured Frodo. "My mother calls me Poppet," he slurred.

"Calls, Mr. Frodo? No offence, sir, but yer mum and da have been, well, er, gone, sir, fer quite some time. Pardon my bein' so bold and all. You must be rememberin' when you was a youngen there, Mr. Frodo," Sam said worriedly. He glanced at Gandalf and Strider.

"But Bilbo, I saw them. They're alive. I was there, and I'm going to go back and live with them. We're going to be together all the time, just like before, and I won't ever be alone again, because they said they'd never leave me again. I felt true happiness I thought I'd never feel that again after you left, but now I do. They're waiting for me." He moved to get up, "I can't keep them waiting, Uncle, I must leave," Frodo finished excitedly.

Sam was stunned into temporary inaction. When he saw that Frodo was trying to rise, he reached out and gently pushed his master back onto the pillows. "Mr.... er, Frodo, dear, you must stay in bed and listen to this good healer or you won't get well. We can't have that, now, can we lad? You just listen to your Uncle, now." Sam said in his best Bilbo imitation. He wept softly as he said the
words, frustrated at the fact that his master did not recognize him and wished to leave. "I need you. I won't let you be alone no more. I plan on stayin' by your side until you decide you're sick of me. But you can't go anywhere if you're ill, my boy... I simply won't allow it," Sam said with urgency. Frodo looked up into the wet face of his "Uncle".

"Why are you crying, Uncle? Have I done something wrong?" he asked breathlessly.

"No, no of course not, dear boy. I've just missed you so very much, is all. So you must get well right away so we can go on one of our long walks together," Sam whispered.

"Oh Bilbo," Frodo's voice hitched, "I've been so lost, so empty. I thought I could go on without you, but I've found I need company. Now that my parents are back ..." the sentence drifted off into the quiet room. Frodo looked around him at all of the concerned faces. "They're not here, are they?" he said in a hushed whisper.

"No, Frodo, I'm right sorry, but they aint," Sam murmured. Frodo tried to turn his head so that the tears that fell could go unseen. A small sob escaped his lips. "Oh, I'm so lonely, Bilbo. I thought I would enjoy my peace and solitude, but it's become a burden to me now."

"No more, Frodo. Your Uncle is here now and it's gonna be hard to get rid of 'em," Sam rewet the cloth and placed it over the feverish forehead. "Mr. Strider's here to look after you now. I'll 'jes move over and let him do his examinin', but I'm not goin' far, 'jes over here," he gestured across the bed.

Strider's face came into view. Although the ranger was in need of a shave and a bath, his eyes twinkled with a soft peace. Frodo drew back a little when the large man bent over him. "There, there little one, they call me Strider and I have come from afar to help you. We met earlier, and you were very much the host to offer to let me stay while I attend you. Gandalf and I are old, dear friends. I have relieved the pressure from your head, but you are fighting a bad infection along with your other injuries. I do not believe you will be up and about for sometime yet," he smiled grimly. He reached for the bandaged arm and began to unwind the bloody bandages. The cut was a livid red with streaks running towards Frodo's chest. Frodo hissed in a breath as the gauze caught on the stitches. "I am sorry, Frodo," Strider apologized. He reached for a cloth, dipped it in the sweet smelling athelas and then wrapped the steaming rag around the wound. Frodo sighed. "Mistress Gamgee, would you be so kind to brew some willow tea and let's see if we can lower this fever a bit." His face was a mask of concern as he continued to sponge the cut until the ickor stopped seeping between its edges. Sam brought another pan of cool water and began soaking another cloth for Frodo's forehead. Strider thanked him and placed the rung cloth over the hobbit's eyes and forehead. "Frodo, we are going to bathe you in cool water to try and break your fever."

As the tub filled, Frodo's expression turned to one of alarm and he clutched at his sweaty nightshirt. Strider smiled at the obvious embarrassment of the hobbit. "I am sorry, Frodo, but it is necessary to undress you so that we can bath you. If you prefer, er..Bilbo can assist you and I will step out," he grinned. Frodo gulped and nodded slightly. Strider scooped up some of the athelas leaves Sam had lay by the bedside, walked to the copper tub, and after a few quiet words, crushed the leaves and sprinkled them over the water. The bath gave off the same heady aroma of the water from the basin, and Frodo felt himself begin to relax once again. The ranger came back to the bed and began to loosen the restraints that held Frodo firmly in place. Bell left the room to fix a bite to eat for the men while Sam saw to his Master. Sam placed warm towels by the fire, and wrapped one around the waist of his master to preserve his privacy. Strider then picked up the slight form and brought him to the tub. He held up a towel as Sam helped Frodo to disrobe and slowly lower himself into the water, towel and all. Frodo let out a low, shaky sigh. The simple act of removing his clothing and getting into the bath had exhausted him and he shook violently as chill after chill took him. Strider left Sam to care for Frodo and began stripping the bed. Bell
brought clean sheets and soon the bed was remade with fluffy pillows and thick comforters. One of the pillows was cut so that the middle was missing, the sides formed a circle around the middle and were sewn together, leaving a circular opening in the middle to allow Frodo to lie on his back without danger of the tube being touched or jostled. Next, bricks were heated in the coals, wrapped in toweling and placed between the sheets. Sam finished washing Frodo, and with Frodo leaning heavily against him, helped him out of the tub and began drying him. He wrapped him in fluffy towels and a clean nightshirt was lowered over his head. Strider gently picked him up and bore him back to the bed. He laid him down, causing Frodo's face to pale to a pasty yellow. Knowing what was coming he quickly retrieved a basin, which Frodo threw up in, then slowly lowered him to the pillows.

"I am sorry, little one, I should not have moved you so suddenly," he whispered, as he gently wiped perspiration from the hobbit's face.

"Mr. Frodo, I've brought you some soup and tea with biscuits, sir. You haven't eaten naught all day. Perhaps this will settle your stomach some," said Bell encouragingly. At the mention of food Frodo blanched, once again. Large blue eyes moved desperately to the ranger, who again, placed the basin under his chin. He vomited repeatedly, until he was reduced to dry heaves, his whole body shuddered uncontrollably. Strider carefully eased him back down and washed his face with the cool athelas water. He brought a cup of cool water to the hobbit's mouth. Frodo grasped the cup with shaking hands and began to gulp the cool liquid.

"Easy, Frodo. No gulping, little one," said the ranger murmured, as he pulled the cup away. He was met with a pathetic whimper, and gently pressed the cup back to the small one's mouth. Frodo slowly sipped the water until the cup was empty, and then Strider gently lowered him back onto the specially made pillow. Frodo sighed contentedly.

Undeterred, Bell slowly began spooning a trickle of the tea between his lips. Every other spoonful was chicken broth. Frodo moaned in discomfort at the taste, but managed to keep the food down. "There, there sir. You need your nourishment to keep up your strength. 'Just a little more," but after only half a cup of broth, Frodo had had enough and turned away. Bell tsked lightly. She had slightly better luck with the willow tea, which was heavily sweetened with honey, managing to get most of it down the sick lad.

Gandalf came slowly into the room. "Well, well, Master Baggins, it is so good to see you up and about," the wizard said. Frodo slowly turned his head, and smiled up at the wizard.

"Gandalf! What a pleasant surprise. How long have you been here?" Frodo smiled. But the smile began to slowly fade as the blue eyes glazed over and rolled up into his head. He arched his back violently and his body began to buck up and down, his arms flailing. Strider grabbed to secure his head, making sure the tube was not pushed further in. He held Frodo's head in his lap, firmly, while Bell, Sam and Gandalf placed pillows about the writhing hobbit. They knew they could not stop the seizure, but sought only to prevent any further harm the lad might do to himself. Slowly, the tremors subsided until Frodo was spent and sagged with a last gasp, down into the bedding.

He had been speaking with Gandalf, but now he was sitting next to his mother as she chided softly at him for not eating.

"You really are too thin, Frodo dear. This Bell seems nice enough and could surely help fatten you up a bit," she said worriedly.

"Now Prim, you know he's from Fallohide stock and it's not the least bit unnatural for him to be a bit willowy. I was that way myself when I was but a lad and you loved me all the more, as I
"Frodo, Frodo Baggins. Come back to us. You do not belong there. You belong with the living."

It was Gandalf. Frodo could just make him out sitting on the other side of his mother.

"Gandalf? Why are you here?" Frodo whispered.

"To bring you home, dear boy, to those who love you and who would miss you desperately. You are needed at Bag End, Frodo. Come home, lad, come home to all of us," the wizard pleaded.

"He's right, Frodo. You can no longer journey between the plains of existence. You must choose where you will alight. And you belong in the world of the living, not here, not yet, my boy," Drogo said. "I love you, son, but now is not the time for you to join your mother and me. You must leave," he said forcefully.

Suddenly Frodo found that he and Gandalf were standing on one side of a small stream, his parents on the other side. His mother and father waved slowly at him, then turned and walked away. He had no recollection of how he had got there or of where the stream had come from; he only knew that now he was separated from those he loved. The stream gradually became wider and wider until a roaring river now took its place. He raced up and down the bank; looking for a place he could cross, while Gandalf stood watching him in pity.

"No, I want to be with them. It's not fair. I am ready to go. There is nothing back there for me now, please wait for me, please," Frodo begged, tears flowing down his face.

"I'm sorry, my sweet lad, but it's for your own good," he heard Drogo say in a far away voice. A sharp pain began to resonate through Frodo's forehead. He clutched his head and cried out in surprise. He fell beside the river, weeping both in loss and pain, finally losing consciousness. When next he opened his eyes, he lay on a bed, surrounded by the concerned faces of Sam, Bell, Strider and Gandalf. Their faces were grim as they tried to stop his thrashing arms and legs as the last tremors of the convulsion wracked his body. Strider turned him to the side as he retched violently. At last the seizure ended and he was eased over onto his back. His face was pale as alabaster and cold sweat sat upon his upper lip.

"What happened?" he croaked out.

"You had a seizure, Frodo. You have a very high fever, and I fear the tube may be pressing against your brain. I will adjust it now; perhaps that will prevent this from happening again," Strider said gently. He unwound the gauze and gently moved the tube out of the opening in the skull a fraction of an inch. It continued to drain a thick, viscous fluid. He cleaned around the wound with warm athelas water, packed it with bandages soaked in the athelas mixture, placing these as he would a poultice to absorb and draw out the extra fluid. Then he packed the wound once again in dry bandages. He placed pillows all around Frodo's body in case there was another seizure. "We must break this fever. Bell we will need another bath, this one with water that is just warm enough to keep Frodo from going into shock. Is there ice to be found anywhere in Hobbiton?" he asked.

"Mr. Bilbo always had ice in his cellar for his meats. Sam, go see if Mr. Bilbo's got ice downstairs. If he does, see if you can't bring a brick of it up to cool Mr. Frodo," Bell said with a note of urgency.

"Yes 'um," Sam said as he ran from the room. There was ice, two large bricks. He grabbed the metal tongs hanging by the doorway and hefted a block over his shoulder. He then quickly made his way back up the stairs and into Frodo's sick room. A bath had been drawn in his absence.
When Sam arrived, Gandalf and he began to chip away at the block, creating a small pile of smaller chunks of ice for the bath. Strider quickly stripped Frodo, not standing on ceremony this time. He lifted the small, quivering body and placed him in the tub. Frodo gasped as the lukewarm water engulfed him. "We musn't let him become too chilled, but we have to lower his temperature or he could have more seizures," Strider ordered. The ice was added gradually to the bath water, surrounding the injured hobbit. Frodo's teeth began to chatter as he was layered in the ice. It felt incredibly wonderful to the fevered hobbit, and Frodo began to drift as drowsiness overcame him.

"Please...just let me go. I want to be with my mum and da. Bilbo, I'm sorry, but I don't want to live anymore...just let me go," he murmured.

"That is *not* an option, young hobbit. I will not let you die on me and you will *not* give up, do you hear me?" Strider grasped Frodo's shoulders and looked deep into the large, blue eyes. Frodo began to cry.

"I am so tired. They are all gone and I am alone. Please...please, let me sleep..sleep my last sleep," he slurred and began to drift off.

"He's had enough. He's becoming hypothermic," said the ranger. He lifted the hobbit from the tub and bore him to the bed. They redressed him in a clean nightshirt and covered him in a light quilt. "You will not give up on me," Strider said forcefully. "I will not let you, Frodo Baggins," he said with a light shake. "Stay with us, little one," he said as padded the slight form with pillows. The ranger was a bit scary to the diminutive Sam, and he feared he would throttle his master, listening to the tone of Strider's voice. "Mr. Strider. Please don't hurt him, please," Sam was crying.

Strider smiled at the small gardener. "You must tell him how much you care for him, Sam or he will give up. Do not let my size and the way I speak frighten you as my bark is far worse than my bite," the ranger smiled encouragingly at the hobbit.

Sam allowed a small, worried smile at the man, and then turned to his master. "Mr. Frodo, if you was to die I don't think I'd want to live no more, sir. Please try for your Sam. I'll stay with you. You won't be lonely no more, Master, not with your Sam to do for ya. I'll fix your meals and keep the house clean as a pin, I will, only please don't leave me, Mr. Frodo, sir, please!" Sam broke down and lay his head on Frodo's bedside. Frodo slipped his hand into Sam's curly hair. "There, there Ssam. Don' cry. I dinnt... mean it. I'll try to stay, but Ssam... I don' wan' to be a burren to you. You're my dea' frenn. You half your own liffe to think of downn the roaa'... you donn wann' to half to see affer an ol' bach'lor li' me awl your dayss, do you?" Frodo slurred.

"Yes, Mr. Frodo, that's jes' what I wants. To sit here and listen to your stories while we smoke our pipes. To take care of the garden that my father taught me on and make sure you aint lonely, sir," Sam whispered back. It was not lost on the small gardener that Frodo had called him Sam for the first time that day and not Bilbo. This cheered the hobbit greatly.

"Oh, Ssam,... you arre... a marvel. Wha' would I do... withou' my... Ssam?" The pale face broke into a weak grin and Sam smiled back.

"Probably starve to death, I reckon," he grinned.

"Yess, probbly. Awl righ',... Ssam, I'll try... my bess'... to stay pu'. I am... a verr' lucky hobbit... to half ssush a frenn... ass you,... Ssamwiss Gamshe," Frodo slurred as he slowly closed his eyes. A small smile played over his lips as he lost consciousness.

To be continued…
A Visit to Mistress Bogs

Chapter Summary

Blossom Bogs helps and old friend tend to Frodo.

First, I cannot say how terribly sorry I am for the huge delay in posting this chapter. I have no excuse accept the overwhelming demands and twists of fate of real life issues. I hope I can continue to dodge the rotten tomatoes and assorted other vegetables thrown my way for my tardiness.

Disclaimers: None of the characters or places in this story are mine, all rights belong to the Tolkien Estate. No financial compensation was received, only the joy of writing this AU story. Hope you enjoy.

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Chapter: 8

"A Visit To Mistress Bogs"

Strider had unwound the gauze on the forearm and sat studying the gash that he had so carefully stitched. He wore a concerned look upon his face as Gandalf entered the room.

"He sleeps," Strider said, in answer to the unspoken question. "When I arrived and saw the head wound, I thought my skills would be in short use, that he would perish before the night was through. Odd that what vexes me more is this simple gash on his arm," He looked up at Gandalf, worry evident on his handsome features. "The skull pressure has been relieved and I was able to pull the bone back into place when I placed the tube. I will be able to remove the tube perhaps tomorrow and close the wound. The arm, however, is another matter." He sat back and continued to study the small, inflamed limb. "He is so small," he murmured.

"True, but he has a mighty spirit and matching stubbornness," said the wizard. "What do you need, Aragorn? What can I do to help you cure him?" asked Gandalf.

At the mention of his given name gray eyes darted quickly towards the door then back to the wizard. "Do not address me so when we are unsure of who may be listening," he hissed.

Gandalf smiled. "These fine folk are of no threat to you, my friend. Nevertheless, I will abide by your wishes," he bowed his head slightly. Aragorn could not help but grin at the gesture.

"In answer to your query, I need herbs and plants that I do not have in my healers pouch. Without them I fear the infection will soon reach Frodo's heart and claim his life," he said sadly. A crash from the doorway caused both to jump up and spin around. A very frightened looking Samwise stood looking at the broken crockery at his feet.

"Die?" he whispered.
"Sam, we did not hear your approach," said Strider as he bent to help pick up the sharp fragments, and cursing himself mentally for forgetting how quiet hobbits could be if they wished it.

"I'm not some small child that you need to be protectin', sir," he said indignantly. "I wish only to be told the truth about my master, no holds barred, if you take my meanin'," he said angrily, as he swatted Strider's hands away and abruptly removed the remaining shards and scones onto the tray. Strider sat back on his haunches.

"Very well, Samwise. I am in need of many curative plants that are not in my healers pouch. I need them very soon or the infection from the cut on your master's arm will claim his life," he said rather clinically.

"Now, that weren't so hard were it?" Sam's voice quavered.

"Sam? Oh, I thought I'd heard a crash. What happened dear? Oh, never mind. Run and fetch the dustpan and broom. At least it weren't the fine china or Mr. Bilbo'd have me then," Bell continued to cluck. With a last angry glance at Strider, Sam rose and hurried to get the dustpan, a towel and broom. After the shattered tea set was cleaned up, the floor wiped clean and more tea and scones brought, Strider beckoned to Sam and Bell to join he and Gandalf at the small table within sight of Frodo's bed.

"First, we will have to remove the stitches and reopen the wound. Then we will soak it and try to drain as much of the infection as possible," Strider said, knowing what reaction was forthcoming.

"That'll be mighty painful, won't it, sir?" asked Sam, his eyes wide.

"Yes Sam, it will be *very* painful. It will be your job to hold Frodo steady as I do this. He must not move his arm, or we could cause further damage to the delicate tissue and inflict even further pain on him," Strider instructed.

"Aye, I understand Mr. Strider," Sam said in a resigned voice. They moved to the bed and pulled the arm from beneath the covers. Bell and Sam gave a gasp upon seeing the wound. The arm was swollen three times its normal size and bright red lines crawled up the arm towards the shoulder. A thick yellow puss was leaking between the neat stitches that Strider had placed earlier. Frodo was drenched in sweat and Sam could feel the heat radiating off of his Master as he fought the fever that consumed him.

Carefully, toweling was placed beneath the limb. A small whimper escaped Frodo's chapped lips at the movement of the arm. Small instruments had been scalded in water and soaked in athelas and lay by the bed on another towel. Strider gave a nod to Sam, Gandalf who was holding Frodo's legs down, and Bell, who sat at the head of the bed murmuring quiet reassurances into the unconscious hobbit. Strider expertly cut and removed the stitches causing a gasp of pain to escape from Frodo as he instinctively tried to move away from the instigator. The wound had tried to knit and would have to be reopened. Strider grimaced as he saw this and selected a small, very sharp knife from his instruments. He looked up at Sam, Bell and Gandalf, his eyes full of pain at what he was about to subject Frodo to. "This will be the most painful part. Be prepared, he will struggle violently but you must hold him steady," he warned. Sam gulped but nodded to the healer that he was ready. He would do anything to save his Master's life, even if it meant causing him more pain to do it. Strider washed the wound with the athelas water and then bent over the small limb. He quickly sliced into the gash, reopening the wound. Frodo released a blood-curdling scream and began fighting with all his remaining strength to withdraw his arm. His huge blue eyes opened and locked with Sam's. Sam was crying so hard he could barely focus on the task at hand. Frodo continued to cry out begging them to stop. His face was covered in sweat and tears tracked down his flushed features to rest on the pillow. At last he took one last gasp and lost consciousness.
Strider reached down and gently felt for a pulse on Frodo's wrist. The beat was fast, but steady and he resumed his previous task. The wound had made a popping sound as he had cut into it, and now a thick, viscous ickor soaked the toweling beneath it. Sam gagged at the sight and thought he might throw up, but swallowed convulsively and looked away. Strider flooded the wound with the athelas water, flushing as much of the exudates as he could from the cut. Gandalf brought a low chair to the bedside and the arm was then laid into the athelas bath. Strider sighed as he rose to wash his hands. "The arm must stay in the bath so as much of the infection can be washed out of Frodo's system," he said wearily. "Do you know of anyone from whom I could acquire medicinal botanicals necessary to treat Frodo?" he asked. They looked at him with puzzled expressions. He frowned slightly.

"What Strider means to ask is if there is anyone who grows herbs around Hobbiton that he might buy some from," explained Gandalf who winked at the confused Strider.

"Oh, well there's the Widow Bogs," volunteered Bell. "I'm sorry Mr. Strider, we weren't bein' rude or nonesuch. It's jes' that sometimes you speak...well, a might above us, is all," she blushed and Sam nodded.

"No apologies are necessary, Bell. In fact, it is I who owes you and Sam the apology. Especially Sam," he turned to the confused gardener. "Sam, sometimes I forget you are a full grown hobbit and wish to protect you about certain aspects of Frodo's care. It is not my intent to belittle you. I know how much you love your Master, and I will try to be more forthright...uh, up front about his health," he smiled.

Sam smiled back. "Thankee sir."

"Now how do I find this Widow Bogs?" Strider asked Bell.

"Well sir, you could send my Samwise to fetch what ya need or I could go," she offered.

"While I am loathe to leave Frodo alone...uh, I mean, right now, I will need to go as I alone truly know what I need. Plus she may have some things I have yet to think of but will see at her shop," he explained.

"There aint no shop to speak of, Mr. Strider, it's just her smial. She's a bit odd and don't cotton to company much, but she's got a right soft spot, she does, for Mr. Frodo. Always has had and afore that, Mr. Bilbo. I could take you there if'n you think it'd be safe to be leavin' Mr. Frodo, an all," Sam offered.

"I've taken care o' plenty who've had the fits afore, Mr. Strider. Me cousin Darcy's had 'em since she was a wee lass, and Mr. Frodo would be looked after right proper whilese you was gone. The arm's a soakin' and I'll keep a keen eye on 'em so's he don't move none. Mr. Gandalf can help me if'n there's any holdin' down to be done, aint that right sir?" Bell offered. Gandalf nodded. "Of course. I would be most happy to spend some time with Miss Bell." Bell blushed furiously, and Gandalf chuckled. "We will look after Frodo while you retrieve the necessary medical supplies."

"We bes' be goin', Mr. Strider. Widow Bogs lives a bit out a' the way and sooner we we're gone, sooner we're back, as me Da always says," Sam urged.

"All right, Sam. Let me check Frodo one last time and we'll be on our way." He crossed to the bed and gently placed his hand on Frodo's forehead, although there was little need. He could tell before he touched him that Frodo's body burned with fever. His curls lay damp across his heavily perspiring face and twin blooms of color disturbed an otherwise pale complexion. The poor hobbit
was panting lightly, his brows pulled into a perpetual frown, as his small tongue would occasionally swipe at the parched lips. Strider wrung out a cool cloth and washed the sweat from the cherubic countenance, which caused Frodo to sigh in contentment. Next, he poured a cup of cool water and reached under his shoulders, slowly raising him, and brought it to the dry lips. Frodo instinctively swallowed, drinking greedily and whimpering when the cup was withdrawn. "Bell, if you would soak some towels in cool water and lay them over his body. And see that he drinks as many fluids as he can take," he said worriedly.

"Aye, sir," she said with a smile and raised eyebrow. "Don't you worry none, I'll take good care of 'em," she said sensing Strider's indecision about leaving his charge in the care of anyone other than himself.

Strider smiled ruefully. "I guess I've become quite the mother hen myself haven't I?" he chuckled. "I have grown quite fond and not just a little protective, of this young one," he murmured as his hand reached out and pushed a sweaty lock from the forehead, "Very well," he said abruptly, "We should go, Sam."

"Aye," Sam said, although he too, seemed to be fighting a battle of his own about leaving his Master. He walked to the bedside and gently took the hot hand in his own. Carefully, he bent and kissed it as he whispered, "Back soon, Master. You mind me Mum and Mr. Gandalf, now sir," he fisted tears from his eyes, turned quickly and left the room before he could change his mind.

As Sam led Strider through to the back of Bag End he stopped and looked up at the ranger. "Um, Mr. Strider sir, if it'd be all right I think we should cut across country a bit, if 'n you don't mind," Sam said uneasily.

Strider smiled down at the hobbit's obvious discomfort. "Sam, is there a problem?" he asked gently.

"Well sir, it's like this. Shire folk are a bit, urm, wary o' the Big Folk, no offense to you and yours, o' course," Sam said hurriedly.

"None taken, Sam. You think it might be easier if we avoid the townspeople altogether," he stated.

"Yessir, if'n that'd be all right, that is. Widow Bogs lives out aways from town anyway so's we would still need to do some hikin' if'n we was to go through Hobbiton. But it would make things a might less..." he hesitated.

"Less scandalous," Strider volunteered.

"Yessir. I mean them ol' harpies don't need no more fodder for the gossip wheel, if ya take my meanin'," Sam smiled.

"I prefer cutting across country anyway, Sam. I enjoy a hike and I do live in the wilds most of the time. I avoid villages whenever possible," Strider smiled. Sam seemed happy with this and they set off across the many rolling grass hills that surrounded Hobbiton. Sam set a very fast pace, wanting to get to the Widow Bogs smial quickly and back to his Master. Strider could see that the hobbit would quickly exhaust himself and tried to think of something that could be used as a distraction to slow Sam down to a more normal walk. Although he knew how the hierarchy of hobbit society worked and about the intricacies of the family trees that hobbits prided themselves on, he thought this would be a pleasant distraction that Sam would have a vast knowledge of.

"Sam, tell me about this Widow Bogs," he said after a few moments of contemplation.
"Well, she's right odd but nice. She used to be a Banks, ya know," Sam whispered conspiratorially.

Strider raised his eyebrows. "A Banks? Why is that important?"

Sam gave him a strange look. "The Thain's wife was a Banks, Mistress Eglantine was. That's Master Pippin's Mum," Sam said, as if this explained everything.

Strider noted that Sam's pace had slackened a bit as the hobbit warmed to his subject, and placed a look of total confusion on his face. "Sam, you must remember I am not a hobbit so I do not understand about hobbit society. And what is a Thain? And who is this Pippin, you speak of?" he asked with a chuckle.

Dawning filled Sam's eyes. "Sorry, Mr. Strider, I near forgot you didn't know how hobbits are, so ta speak. You bein' here almost made me forget you didn't know nothin'...uh, I mean...know..." Sam stuttered, his face turning bright red.

"It's alright, Sam. Please explain. It sounds interesting," he smiled again watching the little hobbit squirm.

"Well, genealogy is the life blood of hobbit society, so ta speak. Hobbits are learned from the very start about all their family trees and how everyone else in the Shire is related to everyone else. The family Banks, if you was ta' listen to gossip, which, o' course I would never do, is known for fraternizin' with Elves and Men," he huffed then looked up at Strider. As if realizing his blunder his eyes grew very wide and his face paled noticeably which only caused Strider to laugh harder.

Strider held up his hand to ward off the inevitable apologies and said "Continue."

"Well...Mistress Bogs is a relation of them Banks and Mistress Eglantine. Mistress Eglantine is married to the Thain, Master Paladin Took. Master Pippin, or Peregrine is his birth name, is his son and Mr. Frodo's cousin." Strider nodded to indicate he still followed the thread of the narrative. "The Tooks, and I mean no disrespect o' course, are more likely to be adventurous, which most hobbits find odd or strange, as they aint, if you take my meanin'," Sam concluded.

"And the Thain?"

"Oh, well he's the one that holds authority oer all the lands, properties and hobbits of the Shire. There's been a Thain since the North Kingdom fell at Fornost."

"Ah, I see. Thank you, Sam. Very interesting. Now, let's talk more about Mistress Bogs," he prompted.

"Well, she came from out about Waymoot, which is near Tuckburough. So she was already looked at as odd, bein' as she weren't from these parts, but then she sets off to learn herself more about herb lore than she could get from the Shire. She was 'bout my age and she buys herself a nice pony and breeches. *Breeches*, and on a female, at that. She, all alone mind you, leaves the Shire in search of knowledge. A young lass leavin' like that, with no one to accompany her and dressed like a lad ta boot. Well, you can imagine what a ruckus that caused in Hobbiton," Sam snorted. "Well, it made her even more of an outsider, if you see what I'm sayin'. She was gone a long time, almost six months, then returns with all these books and scrolls and starts growin' her garden. It's well known around these parts that she's the best there is in all o' the Shire when it comes to her herbs and medicines. Even the healers and midwives all go to her for advice and what not."

"It sounds like she was greatly rewarded by her journey," Strider mused.
"Oh, aye. And no one knows where it was she went. Mistress Bogs is an odd one, but she's friendly and generous as can be. I've always liked her but she has a way o' always sayin' everything on her mind, which can be a little unnervin' and embarrassin'," Sam grinned.

"She sounds fascinating and most unusual for a hobbit," smiled Strider.

"We'll be there in no time. Now, let me tell you a little 'bout them Tookes..." Sam began. They walked, unobserved, over the deep verdant hillside. Occasionally a loud laugh could be heard that was decidedly unhobbit like.

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'Frodo's late,' Blossom Bogs thought, as she checked the window for the fourth time that hour. 'He's never late. Every Mersday 2:00 for afternoon tea. It was Mersday, wasn't it? Her quick mind checked off the days. Yes, it was Mersday.' For fifty years she had had tea at 2:00, first with Bilbo and then Frodo, when he had come to live with her old friend. She smiled fondly at the recollection. Bilbo had been so nervous inviting Frodo to come and live with him, but the lad had taken immediately to the old scholar, they being cut of the same cloth. She and Bosco, her late husband, had felt some easing of the heartbreak of their inability to have their own children by watching Bilbo's joy at adopting the dear boy. Later, they had grown so close that he had become like their own child that Bilbo shared with them. And Frodo loved them, as he would have his own parents. Not once had he not walked up the dusty path with a huge grin, twinkling eyes, and a cheery hello and embraced her and her husband, before he had died, every Mersday promptly at 2:00 pm. She looked one last time through the window and sighed. It had never been out of a sense of obligation that Frodo had continued to tea with the old hobbitess; they had always looked forward to their teas, even down to the planning of the menu they would have the following week. She left the tea things on the table in case Frodo still showed, and curled up on the settee, with a quilt, in front of the fire.

As she watched the flicker of the flames dance along the edge of the wood she remembered back to when she and Bilbo had become friends, and how it had, inexorably, changed her life forever. She had been in her tweens, about twenty summers, she recalled, and had just moved to Hobbiton from Waymoot. Of course, she was an outsider, and was treated as all newcomers were to a small, tight knit community; she was ignored. This never bothered Blossom because she was a reclusive bookworm. She preferred her books to hobbit companionship and had no interest in Hobbiton society. She indulged her passion of reading all she could about herb lore and gardening, in general. But she quickly exhausted the Shire's meager supply of books and, after being told of Bilbo Baggins and his vast library, had sought him out. They had become immediate friends and Bilbo had loaned her many of his texts on not only herb lore and gardening, but books on Elves and the ancient stories and prose of the Numenorians. She had learned Sindarin and Quenya and finally, had exhausted even Bilbo's seemingly endless supply of texts. She had decided she needed more information and formulated a plan to go to Rivendell. Bilbo had said he would take her, but had become ill with pneumonia. So she proposed to go alone, an idea that upset the older hobbit to no end. She had finally resorted to lying to the invalid so that he wouldn't worry. She had gone into Hobbiton and purchased a wondrous pony, she had named Pansy. Pansy had been her dear companion up until the poor animal had finally succumbed not but a year ago, a memory that still brought tears to Blossom's eyes. She had donned breeches, easier for riding than skirts and surprisingly comfortable, and all the accoutrements necessary for a very long trip, including one of Bilbo's maps to the Last Homely House. When she had reached the Fords of Bruinen, she had camped and waited for the border guards to find her and ask what her business was with the Elves.

She had contentedly camped for two days knowing she was being watched and studied, before being approached by three handsome, dark haired elves. They had asked her if they could be of
service in any way and she had asked for an audience with Lord Elrond Halfelven. She smiled as she recalled the raised eyebrows and curious glances this had elicited. They had ridden off, returning that evening to retrieve her, and taken her to Rivendell. There she had been warmly welcomed perhaps for the first time in her life. The irony had not been lost on the hobbitess that she was more accepted by these ethereal beings than by her own kind. She had stayed for six months and learned all there was to learn about herb lore and the elven healing arts, and then, regretfully, left and returned to the Shire to practice what she had so excelled at. If she had been thought odd or strange before it was nothing compared to how she was received after her journey. First, she had been welcomed and then chastised soundly, by a very irate, yet relieved, Bilbo. After he had finished his scolding he had asked for every detail of her journey and had sat smoking his pipe, totally entranced. While Bilbo had always been a kindred spirit, he was more like a brother to Blossom that anything else. Blossom had met her darling Bosco completely unexpectedly and unlooked for.

While Blossom was beautiful by hobbit standards, with black hair and blue eyes that constantly sparkled with intelligence, she was reclusive, scholarly and outspoken; all qualities not looked for in a wife by the hobbit gentry. She had long since known that she would never marry but that thought had never bothered her. She had yet to find anyone, other than Bilbo, that she could carry on a meaningful conversation with, let alone tolerate for the rest of her life. She enjoyed her seclusion, choosing to live outside of Hobbiton, where she could grow her plants and read her books to the exclusion of all else. Her smial was proof enough of this, showing no housekeeping abilities whatsoever and, at its best, resembling nothing short of a well-ordered mess. But fate had had other plans for Blossom Banks. One eve, Overlithe, she thought, Bilbo had told her of a great dance that was to be had at the Party Tree. Blossom had tried to beg off, but Bilbo had been unrelenting, stating that Blossom needed some form of distraction and fun other than her gardening and books. Finally, he wore her down and she had agreed to meet him at the festivities. Once there, she had to admit, she had had a wonderful time. She met many residents who were curious about her and she them, and had made a positive impression on many of the Hobbiton townsfolk.

Bilbo had danced with her three or four times before being swept away by some of the more marriage minded lasses, and she had found a nice, quiet corner where she sat and watched the lovers in their various courtship rituals. While many of the gentle hobbits admired her beauty, few wanted to ask her to dance deeming her just to different for their tastes. Then she had been approached by a handsome lad who had asked her if she would like to dance. At first, she thought he had spoken to someone behind her, even going so far as to look around to see to whom he was speaking. When she spun back around, an embarrassed blush on her cheeks, he had been grinning at her with a most impish twinkle in his eyes. She had been escorted to the floor and after the initial awkwardness and niceties, had found him to be a delightful conversationalist. They had danced the rest of the dances with each other and then he had walked her home along the flower-lined pathway. She had thought never to see him again, deciding it had only been one very enjoyable evening that she would otherwise never have had. But he had called on her the very next day and soon they were seeing each other most every week. Bilbo was thrilled for his good friend and had them over often for dinner or just quiet evenings of story telling. When they had finally married, Bilbo had been the best man at their wedding. They had shared forty-five wonderful years together. Bosco had been the perfect complement to her bookish, quiet persona.

He was outgoing and well accepted by all of Hobbiton, always a gentlehobbit but also able to down a few ales and tell a few jokes at the Green Dragon with the other hobbits. She smiled again. She missed him desperately. Even after three years she still expected him to come up behind her and kiss her on the cheek while stealing fruit or vegetables with the other hand.

A loud knocking broke her reverie and she jumped excitedly to her feet.

"Frodo Baggins, you should be ashamed of yourself, keeping an old woman waiting!" she
laughed as she swung the door open. But it wasn't her dearest Frodo but his good friend and gardener Samwise Gamgee that greeted her startled gray eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry, Sam. I thought you were Frodo," she smiled but her smile froze at the frightened look in his eyes. "What's happened, Sam? Is he all right? Oh dear, come in, come in. I have tea ready. Le me just get you some...” she stopped. "Please, Sam, I'm ever so worried. Frodo never misses tea on Mersday. What's happened?" she whispered.

"Mistress Bogs, there's been an accident and Mr. Frodo, well, he's hurt right bad." Sam could no longer hold back his tears and now great gasping sobs wracked his body.

"Oh Sam," she said as she pulled him tightly to her. So grief stricken was Sam that he did not even think about his 'place' or how embarrassed he should feel being comforted by this gentle old hobbitess. She nestled him to her and crooned in his ear as she would a child who had been frightened by a passing thunderstorm.

Sam wiped his eyes and pulled back. "I'm so sorry, Mistress Bogs. You must think me terribly outta line, oversteppin' like that," he sniffed as he tried to compose himself.

"Nonsense, Sam. You're Frodo's best friend, surely you know that. And as to the 'overstepping', when have I ever paid any heed to 'class' or the other silly rules of Hobbiton society?" She smiled shakily. "But, you mustn't keep me in the dark any longer, dear, dear Sam. Where's my Frodo?" Her voice broke and tears formed in her eyes.

"Well, he fell and we've been takin' care o' him, but he's got a infection and oh, I plumb forgot..." Sam bounded towards the front door then stopped short of opening it. "Urm, Mistress Bogs I brought with me a healer who needs your help. He's been takin' right good care o' Mr. Frodo, but needs some o' your herbs to help him out," Sam hesitated.

"Well, Sam, why did you leave him outside? I would be more than happy to give him anything I have, but I'm coming with you," she looked at Sam in confusion.

"Well, Mam, he aint a Hobbiton healer, I jes thought you otta know," Sam tried to explain.

"Sam, this is ridiculous. I don't care where he's from, just let him in." She crossed to the door pushing Sam aside and swung it open. There, on the porch, Strider sat smoking his pipe and waiting to be introduced to the mysterious Widow Bogs. He looked up at the sound of the door opening.

Blossom broke into a huge smile, "A! Ed' i'ear ar' elenea! Cormamin lindua ele lle! Nae saian luume', Du'nedain," she said happily as she rushed to him and circled her small arms around his neck in a tight embrace.

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Translation:

A! Ed' i'ear ar' elenea! Cormamin lindua ele lle! Nae saian luume', Du'nedain.

Ah! By the sea and stars! My heart sings to see thee! It has been too long, Dunedain.

To be continued…
Remember Me

Chapter Summary

Blossom to the rescue.

Disclaimer: The characters and places depicted are all the creation of JRR Tolkien, and I am only trying to emulate him in my own small way. *sigh*.

Medical disclaimers: Methods of treatment and medicines used have been researched for validity, however are used in this story simply for fictional purposes. In other words, don't try this at home, seek a professional-- yadda, yadda, yadda.

A/N: I have decided to place translations of the elvish phrases next to the phrases in brackets so that you don't have to skip to the bottom of the page to see what they are saying. Hope this isn't too confusing. I apologize for my long absence, but have been unable to deal with RL issues and writing. Oh, that I could just write all the time, but unfortunately, it seems not to be. So, accept my profound apologies. I'll try to do better, I promise. tree

Twists of Fate (formerly Elwen's Challenge Fic)

Chapter 9

"Remember Me"

Arwen en amin, Amin sint a lle? (My Lady do I know you?) A confused Strider asked as he gently held the over exuberant hobbitess to him.

"Of course you know me, you silly man. Although it has been many long years since I have laid eyes upon you. I have also aged quite a bit from the child that I was when we last met," Blossom said with a youthful giggle. Sam stood transfixed at the interchange between the two. Although he could not understand most of what they said he still enjoyed hearing the beautiful language of the elves spoken. He had had no inkling that Mistress Bogs knew or spoke, the lyrical speech, and to hear it roll off anyone's tongue other than Mr. Frodo's, amazed him to the point of speechlessness. Aragorn gently disentangled himself from the small herbalist and studied her face more closely. Sudden recognition lit his face and he broke into a delighted smile.

Sam realized he had never seen the ranger truly smile and grinned at the sight of the huge man holding the small lady at arms length.

"Blossom? Cormamin lindua ele lle! (My heart sings to see thee!) Lle maa quel. (You look good) Sut an nae saian, mellonamin? (How long has it been, my friend?) Exclaimed Strider in amazement.

"Luume', Dunedain, (Too long, Dunedain)" the mistress replied as she dabbed at her eyes. "Oio naa elealla alasse', "(Ever is thy sight a joy) she said as she studied his rugged face. "Osa a, Osa a. Creoso a'baramin," (Come in, come in. Welcome to my home) she said as she pulled the ranger to his feet with a smile. "Oh Sam, I am so sorry. How rude of us to speak in a language you do not know," she apologized as she took his hand and guided them into the smial. She left Strider hunched over in the front room, and hustled Sam back into a small bedroom at the back of the
smial. They emerged with a large, overstuffed chair Blossom had thought would never be used. Gandalf, periodically, would drop by and sit with her, catching her up on news of the world outside of the Shire. But it had been too long since the wizard had come by to visit. Strider saw how they struggled with their burden and rushed to relieve them of it. He placed the chair near the fire and turned again to look at the hobbitess.

"Arwen (My Lady), I cannot believe it is you. When you left Rivendell I thought never to see you again, not knowing where you lived in the Shire. It is most fortunate that we meet again on this grave occasion," Strider said sadly.

Blossom's face clouded. "You must sit and tell me all that has transpired, Heru enamin (My Lord)," Blossom said worriedly. "Sam, would you mind terribly retrieving the tea and dainties from the kitchen while we discuss Frodo's care?" She said turning to the gardener.

"Not at all, Mistress. You just set yourself down with Mr. Strider there and I'll fetch us the tea," Sam said as he turned and trotted towards the kitchen. He wanted desperately to hear all that was discussed about Mr. Frodo, but his upbringing of ones proper station caused him to comply, without question, to his betters.

"Strider, Estel?" Blossom chuckled. "When did you acquire such a descriptive title?"

Strider grinned. "It is what they call me in Bree. I suppose it is because of my long legs and how I move about with purpose…in long strides, if you will," he chuckled. "I suppose it fits. These little ones do not know my true name, Blossom, I would be most grateful if, you too, would address me as 'Strider'," he said more seriously.

Blossom smiled," Then I will do so, my friend," she said as she patted his knee.

The old friends settled themselves as Strider pulled out his pipe. With a nod of approval from Blossom he extracted the pipe weed and slowly filled and tamped the pipe. Only after he lit it and took a long inhalation of its sweet smoke, did he begin to tell the hobbitess of all that had transpired with Frodo.

Sam entered and poured the tea. He arranged the food so it was easily within reach of all and then sat himself amongst them. He lit his own pipe and inhaled deeply realizing, as his head began to spin, that it had been several long days since he had sat with the comfort of a simple smoke. He listened as Strider quickly compressed all that had transpired not skimping on any health related details but skimming over everything else. Strider sounded strangely detached, referring to Frodo frequently as the 'hobbit', and Blossom leaned towards the man as she listened in a purely clinical fashion. As he finished the accounting she sat back and contemplatively, sipped her tea. Sam squirmed, ever aware of the time ticking by while his master lay ill and wanting. Strider puffed slowly on his pipe and stared into the fire.

Finally, Sam could contain himself no longer and blurted, "So what are we waitin' for, if you'll pardon me askin'? Shouldn't we be headin' back to Mr. Frodo?" he asked as he shifted impatiently in his chair.

Blossom eyed Sam over her tea cup as a slow smile crept over her face. Strider continued to stare into the fire but grinned around his pipe.

"It is how I was trained, I'm afraid, Samwise. Seeing the Dunedain again, I fear, has made me remember how Lord Elrond taught me so many years ago," she smiled at Sam's confused look. "Elrond taught us never to approach treatment of a patient without careful thought. But you are correct in the fact that we should pack all that we will need and hasten to Frodo's side. Dunedain, would you care if I accompanied you and examined Frodo?" she asked. Elrond had always
instructed them to extend the age-old request, out of courtesy to the attending healer. It was more a formality than anything else; to defer to the Master Healer, but the gesture was seldom refused.

"I would be honored to have your assistance," Strider said, offering the traditional response. They rose as one and left Sam sitting, stunned, at the sudden activity about him.

"Well, don't just sit there, Samwise, go hitch my ponies to the wagon!" Blossom said, her eyes twinkling.

"Yes 'em. Uh...what are their names, Mistress?" Sam asked with a smile.

"Goldenrod and Pansy's Girl," she replied with a laugh, and turned with a rustle of skirt. She hurried to her bedroom and quickly changed into breeches and a cotton shirt. When she appeared Sam was gone and Strider was bent over a small table, selecting an assortment of medicinal balms. He turned upon hearing her approach and chuckled merrily at the site.

"Now *that* is the Blossom I remember so well," he laughed.

She smiled and began collecting first her treasured surgical implements, a gift from Elrond, and pouches of dried herbs. She mumbled to herself, running down a mental list of any and all curatives that might be needed. With Strider's help, she pulled bouquets of dried plants from the rafters. She looked quickly about her, grabbing her healers satchel lastly, and left the smial, closing the round door behind her. They approached the low wagon that Sam stood beside, Strider walking in the wake of the hobbit dynamo.

"I apologize, Hallaer (tall one), but I fear my wagon is hobbit sized and would prove uncomfortable for your long legs," she said, scrutinizing her tall companion.

Strider smiled, "No apologies are necessary, arwen en amin (my lady). I will walk alongside. I am sure my 'long legs' will easily keep pace with your ponies." Sam laughed and helped the hobbitess up into the wagon. He then climbed up beside her and with a click of his tongue; they began to move along the narrow roadway. They rode in silence for a while, Strider keeping pace easily alongside the wagon. They had to go through Hobbiton as they had the wagon, and the locals stopped and stared at the strange procession. By the time they reached the road to Bag End a gaggle of small hobbit children had gathered, following behind the wagon. Strider smiled widely at the diminutive group as they ducked shyly from his sight each time he looked their way. Giggles abounded from the fauntlings as he began to make a game of it, a version of hide and seek, of sorts.

When they arrived at Bag End and had unloaded the wagon, Sam taking the ponies to the barn, Blossom clucked at each child telling them to scoot along and play. They ran off, a flurry of ribbons and curly hair, giggling playfully as they went.

Strider smiled, "They are so tiny to my eyes," he said softly.

Blossom smiled and then she and Strider quickly entered the home. She rushed ahead, anxious to see her friend, and entered the bedroom in a breathless rush. Gandalf rose in alarm at the commotion, bumping his head on the rafter, in his hurry. Bell hustled in from the kitchen upon hearing the door open and close and finding no one in the front parlor.

"Oh, Mistress Bogs, you startled me so," she exclaimed, patting her chest.

"I am sorry, Bell, but I needed to see my dear friend after hearing of his predicament," she said with a smile. She rushed over to the, now composed, wizard and flung herself about his waist.

"Gandalf, you old scoundrel, you never visit anymore. Don't tell me you've not been about
because even I hear rumors of your visits, as it's usually an event in and of itself. I believe you've grown tired of visiting with this old hobbit," she smiled as she drew away. Throughout the conversations her eyes never left the broken body that lay on the overlarge bed.

"Not at all, Blossom. I apologize for my inattentiveness and will rectify the situation in the future, I assure you," Gandalf smiled, but his eyes too, drifted to Bilbo's young nephew.

She approached the bed slowly and sat on its edge. Her quick eyes had taken in the head wound and she smiled up at Strider in approval of the bolster that supported, yet did not touch, the draining tube.

"Most ingenious, Dunedain," she said with a warm smile. Strider bowed his head at the compliment. Next, she examined the broken leg and, again, nodded her approval, only this time, to Gandalf. "I did not realize you had healing skills, my friend," she praised.

Gandalf, too, bowed his head upon receiving the compliment. "I do not, fair lady. Alas, that I could not help him further," he sighed heavily.

"Nonsense Gandalf, you splinted his leg so well that it needs no further attention. You commandeered Sam to assist you and Master Singleburrow to take a message to the Dunedain, and you have sat by his side with my dear friend, Bell in Est...Strider's absence," she said with a quick look at the smiling Strider.

"It was the least I could do for this dear boy," Gandalf said huskily as he touched the feverish brow.

"Yes, he is a dear one, Mellon; dear to all his short life has touched. He is most fortunate to have such loyal friends by his side," she said softly.

"Not the least of who is you, Mistress," Bell whispered.

"Now Bell, I count you as a dear friend and I won't tolerate any 'Mistress's or other silly class-conscious formalities from you or Samwise," Blossom said sternly.

Sam and Bell blushed and smiled at the gentle chiding. "Now let us see what else we can do for this dear one, although from what I've seen already, he has been well cared for and my services seem hardly necessary," she smiled at Strider.

"Mr. Frodo is slightly better, Blossom. He, at first, seemed lost in a dream world, o' sorts, but now is more mindful o' his surroundins' when he's awake, that is," Bell said softly.

"That is good news indeed, Bell." She took Frodo's hand and brushing back sweaty curls from his forehead, spoke gently to him. "Frodo lad, wake up and talk with your Aunt Blossom," she murmured. "Come on, lad, it is unlike you to be so rude to guests in your home. Even Lobelia receives a warm, albeit stilted, greeting, I'm sure," she chided gently. Sam snorted at this, unable to quell the image of his master when the abrasive matron paid her frequently unannounced, and unwanted, visits. Everyone in the room smiled as well, save Strider who looked on with a puzzled look on his face.

Frodo's feverish brow wrinkled as he struggled to open his eyes. At last the blue eyes fluttered open and he gazed up at the hobbitess. "Blossom?" he croaked. "Creoso, mellon amin (welcome, my friend). You'll forgive me if I don't get up, I hope," Frodo whispered, and Blossom smiled at the light jest.

"Of course, lad, although I was quite annoyed at you earlier, I will admit," she said. Frodo looked confused. "It is Mersday, Frodo, and to leave an old hobbitess without your charming
companionship to tea alone, is most unlike you," she scolded softly and smiled.

Frodo grinned wanly, "I fear I was detained, Arwen en amin (My Lady)," he whispered.

"You are forgiven, but I expect you all the earlier, next Mersday," she said smiling, but her smile seemed forced and her eyes creased in worry. Frodo smiled weakly as his eyes slowly closed and he, once again, slipped from consciousness.

"How long is he usually awake at a time, Bell?" Blossom asked, looking up at the hobbitess.

"Not long, Missus. He will wake and speak one or two sentences and then he seems spent and goes back to sleep," Bell said as she placed a damp cloth on the too hot forehead. Blossom rose and moved to the other side of the bed to examine the infected arm that was immersed in the warm athelas water. She sucked in a breath when she saw the angry red lines twisting their way up Frodo's arm towards his heart. The arm was greatly distended and the opened cut looked not unlike the maw of some rabid animal with its blood red lips and yellow pus leaking into the pink water. The odor from the wound was that of rotting meat. It took all of her long remembered training to reign in her panic and try to view Frodo as just another patient and not as someone she dearly loved and cared for. She was partially successful. She was able to remember her healer's skills, quell the feelings of dread, and look at the situation with a more clinical eye. She was not able, however, to view Frodo as just a patient that needed healing; he was simply so much more than that to her old heart. She gulped and turned to face Strider who shared her look of dread.

"A wise choice, Dunedain, athelas is a wondrous curative for wounds such as this, especially when the leaves are bruised by the few who control their virtues so keenly," she murmured shakily.

"Tira ten' rashwe (Be careful)," he chastised. "I thank you for your approval of the leaf I have selected," he bowed his head slightly with a smile.

She smiled and turned to Bell, "Bell, be a dear and help me change this water," she said smiling.

"O' Course, mum," Bell said reaching for the basin with the polluted water as Blossom carefully lifted the arm out and placed it on a fluffy towel.

"No Bell, it's not 'mum', it's Blossom. I'm afraid I must insist, dear," she said without even looking up at the retreating hobbit. Bell turned and blushed a deep red.

"Uhmm...yes, mu...urm, Blossom," she stammered. "I'll jes' go fetch some more clean, warm water and mayhap some tea," she said quietly.

"Tea sounds marvelous, Bell. Thank you so much for all of your help," Blossom's eyes twinkled as Bell scurried away.

"Sam, would you mind terribly, taking some extra carrots to Goldenrod and Pansy. I am afraid they are ever so spoiled and it would do my heart good to see your gentle touch bestowed upon them," she smiled over at the blushing gardener.

"O' course, mam, 'twood be an honor, it would," Sam said with a short little bow and left the room.

Gandalf chuckled. "You've lost none of your winsome ways I see, my dear. The boy will be totally infatuated with you in short order, I'll warrant."

"He is wonderful, but this lad here has already claimed my heart I fear, my good friend," she smiled wistfully as she brushed back sweaty curls from the burning crown. "Estel, the situation is
more grim than you led me to believe." She looked up at him accusingly. "If we are unsuccessful at both lowering his fever and purging the infection, we will then be forced to choose between saving his life by amputating the limb or leaving it as it is and letting Frodo decide the end result. I believe what he would say were he awake. He would choose to see what would happen without losing the limb." Strider looked at her questioningly. "He would rather die than sacrifice his arm, Estel. He has been so despondent of late. First his parents died and left him an orphan and it took him such a long time to adjust to life in Hobbiton with someone who genuinely loved, cared and had the time for him. But then there was Bilbo's departure, leaving him alone once again. And now the possibility of losing his right hand..." She lifted the right hand to make her point, pointing to the writer's calluses and ink stains on the fingers.

"Surely Frodo would not choose death over the loss of a limb? That would be suicide," Strider exclaimed.

"Yes, Mellon, it would," she replied softly.

"I cannot accept that this, an obviously well read, educated hobbit would rather choose to die than to live. He could quickly learn to write with his left hand! He could not be ignorant enough to choose the other," he cried, his voice rising.

Blossom rose and closed the door. She returned and placed a hand on the seated ranger's shoulder. "You must remember that many times it is the very intelligent and talented individuals in this world that tend to over think, over analyze and separate themselves from their fellow beings. Sometimes it is love of their work or studies that make them secrete themselves from others, as in my case, but other times it is a combination of this and the fact that they are misunderstood and thought of as odd. I believe Frodo is like this latter example. He craves companionship but is an outcast because of his worldly, at least by hobbit standards, ideas. So he has been forced, and now believes, has chosen, to live in loneliness with his books and papers. If you take his arm and, mark my words, I feel very sure of this, he will languish because he will be all too aware of his isolation. I know what you would say to that, that he has *many* who not only love, but "hero" worship him, such as his kin and Sam, but he would still be alone to over-think and wallow in self recrimination and, eventually, he would become bitter. Bitter at us for taking his arm and bitter that fate had robbed him of his true love, writing, and any chance of marrying."

"Surely, hobbits would not be so cold as to judge his worth by his appearance," Strider said harshly.

"We are still mortal and have mortal failings like all other human species, Estel. Frodo is a great treasure and has much more to offer than he will ever realize, but he is also a "deep thinker" and prone to melancholia, especially since Bilbo left. I fear for him," she said softly. The room went silent. Strider stared at the floor, shaking his head, and Gandalf sat smoking, his thoughts turned inward and his eyes distant.

"Well...since we only have the two options I believe we should create a third...be very aggressive in our treatment and annihilation of the infection, so that there are no choices to be made by anyone else." She beamed a huge smile, rose and opened the door, leaving the room. Watching her retreating form were two stunned, yet grinning, men.

"What just happened, Gandalf?" Strider asked as he stared after the whirlwind hobbitess.

"I do not know, my friend. But, I believe, we are about to find out," Gandalf murmured with a small smile.

To be continued…
The Scouring of Frodo

Chapter Summary

Caution!! Pain and suffering ahead in this chapter. Blossom and Strider work to destroy the infection.

Disclaimer: The characters and places depicted are all the creation of JRR Tolkien, and I am only trying to emulate him in my own small way. *sigh*.

Medical disclaimers: Methods of treatment and medicines used have been researched for validity, however are used in this story simply for fictional purposes. In other words, don't try this at home; seek a professional-- yadda, yadda, yadda.

This chapter contains some graphic medical situations. This was necessary to describe the full scope of Frodo's wound and the subsequent debriding of the wound that will lead to his eventual healing. Just wanted to warn you ahead of time....

A/N: I apologize for my long absence, but have been unable to deal with RL issues and writing. Oh, that I could just write all the time, but unfortunately, it seems not to be. So, accept my profound apologies. I'll try to do better, I promise. Tree

Chapter 10

"The Scouring of Frodo"

Gandalf smirked and Strider grinned as Blossom rushed to retrieve Bell then ushered her back into the room along with the tea service. She carried toweling, more bedding, a small length of rope and, most importantly, her healer's bag, which bulged with any and all manner of medicinal supplies.

They heard Sam come in through the kitchen. Blossom went and retrieved him as well, sitting him beside Strider in her former chair. Next she took Bell's shoulders and pressed her into another seat next to Sam. They all looked up at her with a mix of curiosity, amusement and apprehension as she began to pace in front of the four chairs.

"All right. We need to get a few things clear before we begin. First," and she stopped her pacing and gazed into each waiting face, "we are going to be doing some things that may seem brutal and even look like torture, to Frodo," she looked hard now at Samwise Gamgee. He gulped as her gaze fell on him and frowned worriedly. She knelt down in front of Sam's chair. She took his hands in hers and spoke softly. "You must realize that we do these things because if we do not, Frodo will surely die." She softly rubbed the backs of Sam's hands with her thumbs. "He cannot save himself. He needs our help. And it will seem a hard thing but it is vital, vital Sam that you understand that we are doing what we do because we must, so that he will survive. We all love him very, very much and that is why, although he will scream, beg and cry for us to stop, we cannot. Can you do this Sam, for your Mr. Frodo? If you cannot, you should leave and not one person in this room would think you a coward or doubt your loyalties. But, before we start, we must know. You will have to trust us that we truly are trying to save his life, no questions asked once he begins to suffer." Her old gray eyes looked into young damp hazel and she waited for the answer she knew he would give.
Sam gulped convulsively. "Yes Miss Blossom, I would like to stay, but your words have made me mightily scared, they have. I would do anything, even hurtin' him so, if it'll make him come back to us and live," he whispered, his voice shaking.

"We are all scared, Sam, but I know you would rather be here with him than with your sisters," Blossom smiled into Sam's young face. "First Dunedain, we will need to remove that draining tube in his head that you so artfully placed." Strider smiled and nodded.

"Shall I assist you, or would you rather assist me?" He asked as he rose and moved towards the bed.

"I would be honored to assist you, Hallaer," she replied with a grin. She gently pulled Frodo up and held him to her chest while Strider maneuvered himself to sit facing her with Frodo between them. He unwrapped the gauze slowly until the chestnut curls sprang forth from beneath. He washed the head wound with athelas water and gently clipped the sutures that held the tube in place. He slowly began to pull the tube from between the cracked bones with steady, even pressure. Frodo mewled weakly but otherwise, showed very little resistance. Blossom's blouse was damp with sweat from the burning body by the time Strider had finished. He coated the wound with an oily balm and then bound fresh gauze and padding over the incision before lowering Frodo back onto his pillows.

"Next, we will need to try and lower his fever, once again, before beginning further treatments. I fear that if we do not we will increase the risk of seizure with his temperature as high as it is," the hobbitess murmured to herself rather than anyone else. "Bell, Sam would you be so kind as to refill the tub with lukewarm water? No doubt it will feel very cold to Frodo but I do not want it to be any hotter than that." Bell and Sam left, Sam to haul the water into the kitchen and Bell to heat it on the stove. After it was hot, Sam hauled it to the tub where it was mixed with cold. Strider gently disrobed the hobbit and bore him to the bath, gradually lowering him into the tepid water. Frodo's eyes fluttered weakly open and a small gasp escaped his parched lips. Blossom permitted Frodo what last remaining dignity he possessed by allowing Strider, with Gandalf's assistance, to bath the boy while she laid out all that would be needed on a small tray. Bell quickly changed the bedding while Sam prepared more hot water for the bathing of the arm and for medicinal teas.

Blossom mumbled quietly to herself as she set out tinctures, tonics and herbs that were relevant to Frodo's care. When she was satisfied, she rose and carried her treasures with her, relocating to the kitchen. She instructed Sam to make various teas in different pots and to keep them warm by the fire.

"Dittany is a very good herb for fever, as is yellowherb," she passed these packets to him. "Bittertea is a superb treatment for purifying the blood as is calendula, or marigold as you know it. This is important in ridding Frodo's body of the infection that is so aggressively attacking him. The boneset will help his bones to knit faster," she murmured as she pressed all of these into the gardener's hands and chuckled at the look of confusion on his face.

"Mistress, how many teas would you be wantin' then?" he asked astounded.

"The best thing, I think, would be to make a nice stew first. Make it full of vegetables, very heavy on the garlic, Sam," she looked at him as she said this to make sure he understood. He nodded, and then she continued. "Use beef stock. He won't be able to chew much, so we'll probably just concentrate on the broth, so make it rich. Add the marigold, leaves and flowers, boneset, yellow herb, some cabbage, Echinacea root, ginseng root and astragalas root, chopped finely, mind you, cayenne and maybe some yarrow," she listed, ticking off the ingredients on her fingers.

"Mistress, will he, umm, like the taste or will we be havin' to force it down 'em?" Sam asked, knowing how picky his master could be.
"Sam, it will be delicious, in fact make enough for all of us." Sam looked skeptical. "It's good for you and it'll put hair on your chest," she said this last with a thump to Sam's chest and turned and walked briskly back towards Frodo's room.

"Ma'am?" Sam asked, wondering why anyone would want hair on his or her chest.

"Oh, and Sam?"

Sam whipped his head around and saw Blossom had stuck her head around the corner of the kitchen.

"Ma'am?"

"The tea. Use the dittany, willow bark and Echinacea for those. We'll need to sweeten that, of course. You could make a tea using all three," she turned introspective. "Yes, yes, I see no reason why that should not work." She came out of her reverie, "Well, snap to it, Sam. Times a wastin'. I'll send Strider or Bell in to help you," she smiled and disappeared once again.

Sam stood staring at the space formerly occupied by the healer/herbalist, his mouth hanging open. Bell rounded the corner and laughed at her son.

"Sam, dear, close your mouth. You look tetched," she said with a chuckle. Strider was following the matron slowly, bent nearly double to avoid hitting his head.

"Mr. Strider, sir, what are all of these pouches and how are we to know which is which?" Bell asked worriedly. Strider smiled as he pulled the bench out to accommodate his long legs, relieved to not have to bend over any longer.

"I believe that is why I was told to assist you, Bell. Lets see," he pulled each pouch to him and read the labels written in the crisp even script of the herbalist. "Ah, dittany, excellent choice. Makes a somewhat bitter tea that is very good at lowering fevers, as is this one, yellowherb. Here we have the willow bark that is also for fevers, but also for pain. You probably use that here, don't you?" Bell nodded.

"What about this one? I'm right sorry sir, but I'm fair poor at my letters. What is it?"

"Echinacea or purple cone flower..." Strider began.

"Oh, Aye, we have that in Mr. Frodo's flowerbed," chimed in Sam, from the counter by the stove.

"Very good, Sam. A very attractive flower but, more importantly, a powerful healing herb. The roots have the miraculous curative powers against all manner of infection," Strider said.

"A good thing to be knowin'," Sam said quietly.

"We will steep the roots first then add them to the stew. We can use the flowers and leaves, along with the other herbs, to make Frodo's tea. I suggest liberal amounts of honey for this part," Strider said with a grimace.

"Here is some more, sir. Miss Blossom said we was to chop them up real fine like and add them to the stew." Sam looked warily over his shoulder, "Miss Blossom said I was to make enough for everyone and that it would put 'hair' on me chest," he said seriously.

Strider exploded into laughter causing both hobbits to jump back in alarm. He held up his hand, using the other to cover his mouth and quell, somewhat, the chuckles that still issued forth. Smiling, he looked at the various pouches. "All of these things are very healthy, even for hobbits
who are not ill. Plus they are quite tasty. The garlic, which you already use, and the cabbage are very potent curatives for infection, as are onions."

"That must be why she instructed me to put a lot of garlic in the stew," Sam said to himself.

"I am sure. The marigold leaves and flowers work along the same line as does the cayenne, Echinacea, ginseng, and astragalas roots. The yarrow and boneset are not ones I would have thought of, though they are excellent additions. The yarrow will help staunch the blood flow while the boneset will help Frodo's bones to knit faster."

"Staunch what blood flow, Mr. Strider?" Sam asked, uneasily.

Strider shifted uncomfortably on the bench and took a deep breath. Finally he looked at Sam. He glanced at Bell but by the look in her eyes he could see she already knew what was to come. She began gathering the herbs and roots for the stew and slipped over to the counter with the cook pot to chop them up. Strider cleared his throat and said," We are going to vigorously scrub Frodo's wound, Sam. It will be painful and bloody, I'm afraid. Blossom is trying to create with all of this," he motioned to all of the pouches, "a powerful cure for the infection, as well as the fever, pain and loss of blood," he said quietly, his eyes sad.

"I understand, sir. I know you are all tryin' to help 'em. It's just hard is all, to hurt him so," Sam whispered. Strider nodded his understanding as he pulled the small gardener to him.

"I know, Sam," he whispered. He gently pushed the hobbit away and glanced over at Bell who was wiping her eyes with her apron. When she saw them looking at her, she pointed to the stewpot.

"Onions," she said quietly. Strider smiled, as did Sam. He organized the pouches into two piles-- one for tea and one for stew and then rose into his bent position, leaving the Gamgee's with the preparations.

When Blossom came back into Frodo's room she smiled in satisfaction at seeing her young friend clean and, apparently, resting easier. His fever was still very high but Frodo looked more relaxed and restful against the newly changed linens. Gandalf was on the other side of the bed contemplatively puffing his pipe; one hand loosely held Frodo's left. Blossom smiled a brief, cheerless smile at him before directing all of her attention to Frodo.

"Frodo. Frodo, I need you to wake now so that we may talk, dear one." She repeated this perhaps two more times until Frodo's eyelids fluttered and fever glazed eyes cracked open. While his face was generally pale his cheeks were a bright red. He licked dryly at his lips and Blossom poured him a cup of water, tilting him towards her as she brought it to his lips. He drank thirstily then she lowered him slowly back down onto the pillow.

"Who am I, Frodo?" she asked as she mopped his face with a cool cloth. The question seemed to stymie the hobbit. His eyebrows knit in confusion and he blinked several times trying to bring her face into focus.

"You are...you are Blossom. Did I miss tea, Blossom?" he rasped worriedly.

"Yes Frodo, but it is of no matter. I have something we need to discuss with you, my boy, and I need you to concentrate very hard so that you understand what we are about to do. Do you think you can do that for me, Frodo?" Blossom's voice shook with emotion even though she had tried, and failed repeatedly, to think of Frodo as just another patient. Strider entered the room at that moment and smiled grimly at Frodo. Frodo returned the smile weakly. The ranger began layering cloth about the rope and tying it off on the sides of the bed. Frodo returned his gaze to Blossom.
"Blossom, tell me, what has you so upset?" he asked weakly, worried for his friend.

"You, Frodo. You have me so upset," she replied quietly.

"What have I done to cause you such pain? I would never hurt you, Blossom, surely you know this," he said, his voice breaking.

"Shush. There, there my dear. It was nothing you did. I am just worried about your health, my boy," she said soothingly. Frodo closed his eyes in relief, a sigh escaped him as his body relaxed slightly. The eyes slowly crept back open and he lay watching her, knowing there was more to come. She smiled as she gave him another swallow of cool water. "Frodo, your arm has a very bad infection in it. If we do not try to removed as much of it as is possible you will die." Frodo showed little or no reaction to this statement, reflecting back to his parents. "We can try to stop the infection by scouring the area and then soaking it or applying poultices or..." Blossom looked away quickly then back into Frodo's eyes, "we can remove the arm." Gandalf and Strider watched as Frodo's face contorted in fear and anger.

"No. I cannot allow you to do that, Blossom. Let me go if you must, but I cannot, will not, live without my arm." His breaths came in shallow pants and he tried to weakly shrink away from the hobbitess and Gandalf. Strider watched in shocked confusion, still not able to fathom how anyone of intellect could choose no life at all versus the sacrifice of a limb. Tears slid silently down his face.

"Frodo. Frodo Baggins! You will calm yourself this instant or I will sedate you," Blossom said brusquely. Frodo stilled his movements and fell back, exhausted, against the pillows. He eyed her warily. "Why do you think I am sitting here telling you all of this? Don't you understand, I am merely stating how things are? I did not say I was going to amputate, did I, young man?" Frodo shook his head weakly. "Of course not. I would never do such a think without consulting you first. I know how you feel about your abilities to use your arm and hand to write. I know how, without it, you would be lost. But I had to tell you what we were going to do instead, to prepare you." Frodo swallowed thickly and sighed in relief. "Frodo. We are going to scour the cut and flush it repeatedly to try and rid your body of the infection. It will be very painful and though we would do anything to spare you this agony, it is necessary if we are to save your life." She wiped tears from her eyes as she spoke. Frodo smiled weakly up at her. "I trust you, Blossom. I know you always have my best interests at heart and know how I feel about matters such as these," he whispered hoarsely.

Blossom smiled wanly in return. "I would gladly take this pain upon myself, if I could, Frodo." She sponged his face again. "I love you dearly, lad. I just wanted you to know," she whispered.

"Blossom, you have been my mother in every sense of the word except for biology. I love you as well, I always have," Frodo murmured. Blossom sobbed as she pulled Frodo to her in a quick embrace. She released him slowly and laid him back on to the pillows. He smiled encouragingly up at her.

"Sam, Bell, Gandalf and Strider are all here, my boy, to try and make this as quick and easy as is at all possible," she said.

"No, not Sam. I could not subject him to that, Blossom. He is very sensitive and ..." Frodo rushed to articulate.

"And will not leave you, no matter what you would say, Mr. Frodo," came the heated retort from the doorway. Sam crossed to the bed and took Frodo's good hand in his. "I will not be sent from you when you need me most, Master," Sam said, his stance and expression one of stubbornness.
and determination beyond reasoning.

"Sam..."

"No, I say. I here by willfully disobey you, Master. I'll not leave and that's final," he said firmly.

"Sam, you realize I will have to dock your wages for this act of mutiny," Frodo said with a deadpan face.

Sam smiled, "Aye sir, I do, and with no complaints from the likes of me either." He squeezed the feverish hand and turned to Blossom.

"Stew's ready as is the tea, Mistress," he said firmly.

"Thank you, Sam. Will you bring a cup of the tea please, for Frodo?" Blossom said as she pulled her satchel out and began searching through it. Sam left to retrieve the tea as Blossom turned to Strider. "Is he strong enough, in your opinion Estel, to be sedated?" Strider could tell how tense Blossom was by her use of his name 'Estel' but chose to ignore the slip.

"Yes, his head wound is all but healed. I do worry about the high fever and, with what we are about to do, the likelihood of a seizure," he said quietly. Frodo seemed unaware of their presence, the long conversation and forced concentration to the subject matter having robbed him of his strength.

"I know. He will be pushed to his absolute limits tonight, that is why I wish to dull as much of it as is possible," the healer said. She pulled forth four packets from the bag and laid them on the tray. "I have four very potent painkillers available. One I would only use if absolutely necessary. I have ground valerian root, arnica or I could make a paste from poppy seeds. She hesitated, looking up into Strider's eyes. "I also have ground mandrake root." Strider's eyes darted quickly to hers.

"I know, Dunedain. I know the correct dosage for a hobbit is but a few grains. But with Frodo being significantly weakened by his other injuries plus his lack of appetite, I am unsure of its effects on him. All of these herbs have the same problem but not as severe as mandrake," she said contemplatively. She chose a small packet filled with a black dust. "The poppy, I think. I will give him a fairly large dose and hope he will lose consciousness within a few minutes time," she looked up at Strider who nodded his agreement. She rose and moved to the dresser. Carefully she measured out the black dust into a small wooden spoon she carried in her bag. She went to the kitchen and returned moments later with a jar of Bell's strawberry preserves. She spooned some of the preserves into a bowl adding the ground poppy seeds to it and mixed it thoroughly. At last she turned and crossed to Frodo who had fallen back into a fevered doze. She gently shook him until his eyelids crept half open. "Frodo, I need you to take this medicine. All of it," she said. When Frodo groaned, she smiled. "It tastes very good, my dear, I promise." Frodo still looked disinclined to believe the healer, but Blossom firmly began spooning the concoction between his lips. Frodo had always loved strawberries. Blossom had even planted a special strawberry patch besides her house just for Frodo. She never ate them as they made her deathly ill, but made luscious pies, jams and other desserts which she would serve on their tea days, just for Frodo. He swallowed timidly at first, but after tasting his favored fruit, willingly accepted each spoonful until the medicine was gone.

"Good Frodo. Good. Now rest a moment while I see to some last details and then we can begin," she whispered soothingly.

"Wish all medicine tasted that good," Frodo mumbled.
Hot water was brought to the bedside and more cold placed on the fire to heat. Pouches of powders and strange looking implements were boiled and then placed on pristine cloth on the tray. Blossom and Strider gently tied Frodo's left hand, upper body and legs, mindful of the broken one, to the bed. Sam brought the tea and Blossom once again tried to wake Frodo. After three tries Frodo's eyes slit open.

"Tea, Frodo," she said bringing the cup to his mouth.

"No...no, than' you, Blossom. No' thir's'y," Frodo mumbled, his eyes rolling up into his head.

"I'm sorry, Frodo, but I must insist." She nodded to Gandalf who slipped behind Frodo raising the very relaxed hobbit up against his chest. Frodo's head lolled precariously to the right. Frodo moaned grumpily as he was forced to semi-wakefulness.

"Nooo...so sleepy. Don' wan' tea," he grumped.

"Just a little, dear." Blossom looked up at all who were now assembled about the bed. "He *must* receive the tea every hour until his fever has broken," she said fervently. All nodded their understanding. Gently she spooned the tea into Frodo's mouth and watched as he swallowed each spoonful. Finally after about half a cup was gone she set the cup aside and allowed Frodo to rest against the pillows.

Strider smiled encouragingly at her. He tied the wounded limb firmly at the wrist and with a nod; Blossom indicated they were ready to begin. The basin with the polluted water was removed and the arm tenderly patted dry. Thick yellow pus continued to ooze from the gash and Blossom grimaced at the swelling above the cut that had yet to be dealt with. She took the tincture of iodine and flooded the arm until it was stained a sickly orange. She then sprinkled the powdered arnica over the area she planned to concentrate her efforts on. She chose a sharp blade and spoke briefly to her assistants.

"Hold him steady, both his shoulders and thighs. Strider, if you would be good enough to hold his right arm for me," she said. The only outward sign of emotion from the healer was a slight tremor of her voice as she poised to deliver the cut. After everyone was in place she bent to her task, inserting the blade above the cut and slicing across the top, down and then across the bottom, including the original gash, forming a large letter 'I'.

Frodo's reaction was immediate. His eyes flew open in surprise and his back arched upward trying to escape the assault on this all to tender area of his body. A high shrill scream escaped his lips as he swung his head violently back and forth. Sam increased the pressure on Frodo's shoulders effectively immobilizing his upper body. Silent tears coursed down his face as he watched his Master struggle with the last of his strength. Blossom continued as if unaffected by her patient's cries. Slowly she pulled the center part of the 'I' open revealing the frothy core of the infection above the cut. The underlying tissue was almost black but, thankfully, the top part of the incision's under layer was a bright and healthy pink. Blood and yellow exudates erupted and ran down the quivering limb. Blossom smiled and looked up at Strider. "We are indeed in luck, Dunedain, the infection has yet to progress past this point." She sounded hopeful as she pointed to the top of the incision. Strider returned her hopeful smile.

"Are you ready for the coarse cloth, Blossom?" he asked.

"Not yet. I wish to flush this area first with the tincture." So saying, she proceeded. The sweet, sickening smell of decaying flesh accosted them, filling the room. Sam gagged, as his gorge rose and he was afraid he would vomit at any moment. He turned away, as did Bell and Gandalf at the sight of the gushing wound.
"Now I am ready, Estel," Blossom said in a hushed voice. "This will be the most painful part for Frodo but you must continue to hold him steady," she said quietly, her eyes moist. She gulped and then began to apply even, steady pressure above the incision, milking downwards to push out any infection possibly hidden beneath the skin's lip. Blood gushed over the outstretched arm as Frodo's screams, and the bucking of his body, increased. His broken leg strained against the bindings and, with a glance, Strider could tell it would need to be reset. Frodo's pain was of such intensity that he had refractured the limb, but was oblivious to the lesser of the two pains.

Blossom, satisfied that the area above the incision had yet to be affected, staunched the bleeding with a pure, white cloth, which she then tossed, unceremoniously, to the floor. Her concentration now fixed on the necrotic tissue as she took up the coarse cloth and began to scrub the area of both infection and blackened tissue alike.

Frodo refilled his bruised chest and screeched in agony. His eyes flew open and fastened on Sam's hazel ones.

"Sam," he wailed. "Help me. Make them stop. Please!!!!" he screamed.

His Master's cries knifed directly into Sam's heart and he sobbed knowing he was utterly helpless to rescue Frodo from his pain. Sam was struck with the similarity of one scrubbing a particularly difficult spot on a cook pot. He turned suddenly to his right and vomited onto the floor. He spit and Bell brought a cup to his lips to help him rinse the bile from his mouth.

"Alright there, Samwise?" Blossom asked in concern. Sam nodded weakly, but did not release his hold on his Master's shoulders.

Frodo thrashed like a wild man, thrumming his feet against the mattress, oblivious of the broken leg and testing the strength of the restraints. Then, suddenly, he became perfectly still. All heads shot up as one and watched as his impossibly wide blue eyes glazed over and rolled up into his head. His body bucked uncontrollably as his brain fired impulse after impulse to his already taut muscles. His bowels and bladder evacuated, his body losing all ability to control itself.

"Sam! Remove the pillow under his head and place the bolster under his neck!" Strider yelled. Sam quickly obeyed causing Frodo's head to tip backwards.

"Now that rag over there...quickly roll it and place it between his teeth," Blossom barked. Sam moved to comply but this was hampered by Frodo's jaw being tightly clenched as his teeth ground together. Finally, the rag was in place and they all stood helplessly watching until, at last, the fit passed. Frodo's body was eerily calm and then he began to gag. Blossom, with Strider's help, swiftly released the restraints on Frodo's left side and rolled him to the edge of the bed. A fountain seemed to erupt from the hobbit's mouth as he projectile vomited across the room. Finally he was reduced to dry heaves and Bell washed his face of the residue. They slowly rolled him back onto his back and reattached the bindings. Blossom's head dropped to her chest as she swiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of one bloody hand. The pause only lasted a heartbeat and then she turned back to her task.

"Let's finish this for I could not bear to do it again," she murmured tiredly.

Strider touched her arm and she looked up at him, her eyes deep pools of misery. "Blossom, allow me to finish for you. You are near collapse from worry and exhaustion," he whispered.

She hesitated then nodded and slowly rose. She crossed to the basin and washed the gore from her hands and forearms. The wastewater was discarded and the basin refilled with near scalding water. Strider briskly lathered and washed before retaking Blossom's spot then he picked up a new cloth and resumed debriding the wound. Frodo was, thankfully, unconscious but still moaned and...
wept as he swung his head back and forth on the newly replaced pillow. At long last Strider gave a relieved sigh and, taking a pitcher of very hot water, flushed the arm and wound into a deep basin. Blood and putrefied tissue filled the basin, which Bell took and discarded. Strider immersed the arm in clean, warm water as he scrutinized the wound. Finally satisfied that, at least visually, the wound looked clean, he removed the arm and laid it gently on a stack of pure white toweling. It continued to bleed as he sprinkled powdered goldenrod, calendula and rue onto the incision. He loosely packed the wound with a cotton cloth then turned to Blossom who sat in the corner watching him work.

"Blossom, did you prepare a poultice for the wound?" he asked gently, noting the slump of the healer's shoulders and drawn look of her face.

"Of course, Estel. It is in the kitchen. I wanted it to warm a bit before applying it," she whispered, her eyes never leaving the patient before her. "I shall retrieve it and then we can let him rest," she said and rose. As she left the room she ran two fingers softly down the side of Frodo's face, a look of tender care upon her face. She returned with a small pan and gently spread the contents over the cotton until it was caked with the mixture.

"Beggin' you pardon, Mistress, but what is that?" Sam asked quietly.

"It is a mixture of bearsweed and rhubarb root, Sam," she answered clinically. "It will draw out the rest of the infection in the arm." She finished and then backed away allowing Strider the room he needed to suture the wound.

"Are you just gonna leave that in his arm then?" Sam asked in alarm as he watched Strider make the delicate stitches, closing the wound with the poultice inside.

"Yes Sam. See how Strider has left a small opening at the bottom? That will act as a drain for the wound and, when the cotton is no longer needed, we will remove it from the opening and stitch the rest of the wound closed," she said as they watched the ranger finish his work.

"I think, after we've reset the leg, that we should dose and feed Frodo. Then we need to eat as well. He will need to be bathed again before allowing him to rest for a time." Sam looked up at her noting how she swayed from fatigue as she slowly spoke. He rose, offered her a chair, which she gratefully took, then went to get the stew for Frodo and his caregivers. Strider was washing the broken leg when Sam returned. The arm had been splinted and heavily bandaged and lay on a large pillow. Strider slowly began to pull the bones back into place. Frodo cried out and Sam rushed to his side. He took his Master's hand and squeezed it reassuringly as he spoke words of love and encouragement. Strider was now resplinting the leg and wrapping it in long, canvas strips to hold the bones in place.

Bell appeared at the bedside with a basin of warm water, a flannel and soap. She gently lathered and rinsed Frodo's face, chest, arm, legs, hands and feet, drying each area as she went. Strider washed Frodo's back, groin and backside of the excrement and held him aloft as Bell changed the bedding.

"Bell, burn all of the bedding and surgical rags and then we will help you scrub the floors, bedrails and tables with strong soap," Blossom said.

"Destroy the linens? Why Mistress?" Bell asked in surprise.

"We do not know what causes infection in one person and yet another will be spared, only that if areas where patients are kept appear clean but have not been scrubbed with strong soaps and the linens destroyed after surgery, the patients usually do not recover."
"Do you think it could be an evil that lives in the wound, or some such, Mistress?" Bell asked, looking embarrassed.

Blossom smiled. "I find it hard to fathom that it is that, exactly. I do not, generally, hold with superstition. No one really knows what causes the sickness there is only supposition. I prefer to believe it is a simple matter of cleanliness." She picked up the debris from the surgery off of the floor and began mopping up the vomit from both Sam and Frodo. Bell fetched very hot water, adding her home cleaning liquid that soon caused everyone to tear and cover their mouths in order to breath easier. Strider carried his bundled patient from the room to avoid the fumes. After wiping all the surfaces, they mopped the floor. When the room was declared clean they built up the fire. Frodo was then nestled into a cocoon of sheets, pillows and comforters. Blossom checked him one last time, examining the arm and leg specifically. After Frodo was covered snuggly, everyone relaxed at last.

"Tea and broth?" Strider asked and Blossom saw that he held a cup in both hands.

She smiled. "You read my mind, Estel," she said cheerily. Strider slipped behind Frodo, pressing his back against the headboard and sitting the hobbit up against his chest, his head resting against Strider's shoulder.

Very slowly Blossom spooned the liquid into the side of their patient's mouth as Strider gently stroked his throat. They watched as Frodo slowly swallowed each spoonful. It was a laborious process but eventually, both cups were emptied and Strider slipped out from behind him, lowering him to the pillows.

Sam passed bowls of the fragrant stew and slices of crusty bread around. All were quiet as they ate, each lost in their own thoughts.

"Excellent Bell, Sam," said Gandalf. Everyone nodded in agreement and Sam was also pleasantly surprised at how good the stew had turned out. After everyone was sated Blossom rose and crossed to the bed. She lovingly wiped Frodo's brow and looked up as Strider joined her.

Gandalf came up behind her and placed a knarled hand on her shoulder. She jumped slightly and then smiled up at him.

"Rest, my friend. I will watch over him now. All of you have worked tirelessly but now it is time to sleep and regain your strengths. Be proud of a most difficult job well done," he murmured.

"Normally I would fight you on this, Gandalf my friend, but I am so weary I cannot," she said as she rose slowly and walked down the hall to a room Bell had readied for her. Sam and Bell finished cleaning up the kitchen and banking the fires before retiring themselves, to their rooms. Blossom entered her room and quietly snicked the door closed. Later, as Strider walked to his own room, he paused at Blossom's door and listened helplessly to the muffled sobs coming from within.

To be continued-
A Fire Within

Chapter Summary

An injured Frodo relies on his closest friends to help him heal.

The Fire Within

He dreamed of a barren wasteland under a cruel sun. Nothing grew here, and he saw only miles and miles of endless scorched earth rippling in the blazing heat. He stood on a low rock outcrop that was beside what looked to be a long abandoned roadway, and gazed at the expanse in despair. He was so very thirsty and, looking about, saw that there was nothing for it—no caves, no trees, nothing to shade him from the pounding heat. Sweat had long since stopped rolling down his face as his body used the last of its fluids trying to keep his heart pumping and blood flowing. A fierce ache filled his head until he was unable to turn his neck right or left and he knew he had the heat sickness that had claimed a few Shire dwellers on those rare blisteringly high days of summer.

"Frodo. Frodo you must come inside or the heat will make you ill again."

He turned and there before him, was Bag End, as it had always been, in the side of the immense hill. Gone was the tree that grew on the top of the smial. In its place a skeletal remnant remained. No flowers, green grass or vines filled the long abandoned garden that Sam had always so diligently maintained. In front of the faded green door stood Bilbo, dressed as a gentlehobbit minus the weskit. He was rumpled and sweaty, and was peering quizzically at his nephew. Frodo turned back to the barren scene and now saw that long deserted smials dotted the wasteland. The party tree stood in the former field, a blackened testament of a cruel twist of fate. The land was devoid of hobbits or any other living thing, either having perished in the catastrophe that had raped his homeland, or moved on to 'greener pastures.' Only he and Bilbo seemed to be present, it seemed, in his once bucolic and verdant Shire.

"Where...where is everyone, Bilbo? His voice croaked.

Bilbo studied him, confused. "Gone, Frodo, surely you remember, lad," he said.

"But Sam...the gaffer and Rosie. I don't understand. Bilbo what's happened to the Shire?" Frodo asked, bewildered.

"Taken away. Enslaved or killed by Sauron," the old hobbit said sadly. Frodo looked at him in dismay. "They are all gone save us. Somehow we survived, although for what purpose only Eru knows," Bilbo added, somberly. Frodo stared at his uncle, his mouth agape. "Come inside, Frodo," he said sadly.

Frodo walked haltingly towards the smial as tears coursed slowly down his face. "Gone? All gone?" He whispered. As he entered Bag End he was further dismayed to see how sparsely it was furnished. Gone were the elegant trappings, the home a mere shell of its former beauty. He approached the low sofa and sank onto it, a stunned expression on his pale face. Bilbo brought him a cup of water and sat down beside him, a concerned frown between his brows.

"Frodo, are you quite alright? You're so pale. Perhaps too much sun. I'll bring us our tea while
you just relax and try not to dwell too much on things that occurred so very long ago." He rose and started to leave the room when Frodo stopped him.

"How...how long ago, Uncle?" He looked up at his guardian, a haunted look in his eyes.

Bilbo studied him for a moment and hesitated, thinking on the question. "Well, let's see, about four years now. Is that all it has been? It seems far longer," he said as he turned slowly and left the room. He returned shortly with tea and a small plate of crumbled cheese and two stale biscuits. "I am sorry, lad, for the meager meal. Supplies are so short, you know. I suppose one of us will have to venture out again in search of food." He said this as if it were a daily occurrence, and Frodo realized, with a start, that it probably was. The room was oppressively hot and he shifted uncomfortably on the couch. He sipped slowly at the tea, which had a strange, bitter taste to it, and tried to wrap his brain around the horrible truth. He studied Bilbo, seeing for the first time, how terribly gaunt he was. His uncle gazed at Frodo in concern. "My but you are so very red, my boy," he said in alarm.

"Bilbo, why is it so very hot?" Frodo asked, loosening his cuffs and collar button. His uncle turned towards him, watching as sweat ran down his nephew's face and into his collar. "Uncle, I am so hot!" Frodo cried. A jolt of pain lanced up his arm and he looked down to see what could be causing it. He watched as the limb burst into flame, searing the creamy flesh first to red then to a blackened mass of blisters and blood. He screamed in agony as the rest of his body ignited, writhing on the floor at his uncle's feet. Bilbo stood watching, helpless, his mouth agape and tears standing in his eyes. Shriek screams tore from his throat, "Bilbo! Bilbo, help me," he cried, knowing there was no savior for him now. "All is lost. They are all gone," he wept as he fell finally accepting his fate.

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"Aragorn, help me!" Blossom cried. Strider, disregarding the use of his birth name, moved in quick order into the room to help restrain the twisting hobbit. He started when he grasped the flailing arm, alarmed at both the heat that radiated from the small one, for that was how he thought of this new endearing friend, and the total lack of flesh on the emaciated frame.

"We *must* somehow break this fever," Blossom said anxiously. "His delirium is worsening as it continues to climb. Bell, would you please soak some sheets in cool water for me?" the healer called out. Bell had run into the room from the kitchen and watched as Frodo twisted and called for his uncle with amazing strength for one so ill. Sam sat at Frodo's head calling softly to his master and friend, whispering reassurances to the writhing Master of Bag End.

"Samwise, help me," she shouted. Sam rose, looked sadly at his master, hesitant to leave his side. He hurriedly filled the small tub with lukewarm water as Bell retrieved a sheet from the closet. After soaking it they quickly wrung it and took it to the bedside. Blossom and Strider unceremoniously stripped Frodo and lay the cool sheet over the burning body. Frodo's movements stilled somewhat as he reveled in the sudden reprieve from the heat. His head still twisted restlessly upon the pillow. He called pitifully for Bilbo as he sobbed.

"All is lost. They are all gone," he said in resignation, then his movements stilled. Blossom quickly reached for his neck and felt for a pulse, alarmed by this sudden acquiescence.

"His pulse is very weak, Estel. Let us move him to the bath and try to cool him more quickly," she said frantically.

Strider could see how Blossom's caring for her dear friend had taken its toll on the hobbitess. Elrond had ingrained in all healers under his tutelage, how dangerous it was to become too close to a patient. He had always sent those who were personally attached to the ill, from their bedside,
deeming them incapable of the aloofness and rational thinking needed to make decisions quickly and objectively. As Strider assisted Blossom he wondered if he should intercede and attempt to send Blossom from Frodo's room. A grim smirk touched his lips. Somehow he knew he would certainly lose that fight and pushed the thought from his brain before it had a chance to take hold. He scooped up the frail body and bore him to the small tub. The water came to the hobbit's neck and he gladly supported him with one of his immersed arms. He and Blossom lovingly began to wash Frodo's hair and face, and the hobbit sighed as the water cooled his feverish body. Blossom rose and helped Bell to change the sweaty sheets as Strider continued to pour cool water over Frodo's body. He spoke softly to the hobbit and was soon joined by Sam. Frodo continued to whisper to himself, too low for his caregivers to make out the words, his struggles stilling as fatigue finally won out.

"We're here for you, Mr. Frodo. Your Sam is right here and he aint goin' nowhere. You're safe as can be," Sam softly crooned as he scooped cool water over his master's head.

Strider smiled as he observed the obvious love and loyalty of the gardener. Frodo was now relaxed and slept fitfully, his head resting limply on the ranger's forearm. They left him like this for most of an hour; loathe to disturb him as it was the calmest he had been for many hours. Eventually they had to transfer him from the bath to the bed, drying him and then draping him with soft towels. Blossom was busy preparing Frodo's hourly medications as the hobbit's eyes fluttered weakly open.

"How do you feel, Frodo?" Strider asked softly.

"Tired. Thirsty," Frodo murmured. Strider lifted his neck enough to bring a cup to his mouth, the cool water like ambrosia to his parched throat. Strider had to withdraw the cup numerous times to keep Frodo from gulping, causing the hobbit to whimper plaintively. But he was unable to withhold the beverage for long when Frodo begged so pitifully. He realized, suddenly, how attached he had become to the hobbit and how he could refuse him nothing. Bell entered carrying the usual cup of broth.

"Hello there, my lad," Blossom whispered, entering Frodo's range of vision. "Time for some tea and broth, dear," she said, softly.

"No...can't," Frodo said weakly as his stomach rolled at the mere mention of food.

"Nonsense. We have had this discussion every time and I simply won't abide it further, love. You wouldn't want to hurt Bell's feelings, would you?" Blossom said, with a small smile.

Sam moved to Frodo's side. "I'd like to feed 'em, Missus, if that'd be alright," Sam said. Frodo stared long and hard at Sam, trying to grasp at a snatch of a memory, feeling an urgency and certainty that it was important, and that it concerned Sam. Strider slowly pulled Frodo up against his chest as the hobbit continued to study Sam.

"Here you go, Mr. Frodo. This'll make you feel a might better. We got to get some 'o your weight back on ya. Not proper for a hobbit to be without his girth as me gaffer is always a sayin." He nattered on tenderly as he gently spooned the soup into Frodo's mouth. He was happy to see his mum had added some softened vegetables and pieces of meat to the broth. Frodo chewed and swallowed automatically, a small frown between his brows, as his gaze remained fixed on Sam. The tea and soup finished, Sam washed his master's face and brought another cup of cool water to Frodo's lips. The water tasted delicious and Frodo drank thirstily although slower than before. Frodo watched Sam closely until the water was gone.

Sam smiled broadly at his master. "Meanin' no disrespect sir, but you've been starin' at me all through your meal. Lookin' at me as if I was a ghost, you have," he chuckled.
Frodo's eyes flew open at the comment, suddenly remembering the horribly vivid dream. "Sam! I thought I'd lost you!" he gasped. Sam frowned. "Bilbo said you'd been taken. Everyone was gone and the Shire was in ruins and Bilbo said you were dead," he exclaimed, becoming highly agitated. Strider looked on the hobbit in concern. Gandalf entered the room at that moment and stood watching the excited hobbit, bent over with his staff supporting him.

"Frodo it was only a nightmare. We are all fine it would seem, including yourself, my dear, dear boy," the wizard said with a smile. Frodo's eyes darted to Gandalf and then quickly back to Sam's face, memorizing every detail.

"But...but it was so *real*. They took you to Sauron..."

"Sauron? What are you talking about, Frodo?" Gandalf said, his voice suddenly urgent. His whole demeanor changed from the kindly grandfather figure to the tense Istari, poised for battle at the mention of the dark lord's name. Frodo started at the sudden change and Sam swiveled around to look at the wizard in confusion.

"Speak, Frodo. Tell me of this dream," the wizard commanded.

Strider looked at Gandalf carefully. "It was only a dream, Gandalf. It means nothing," he said trying to soothe the hobbits. He gave Gandalf a withering look as if to say 'Later, not now. Not so soon after we came so close to losing him.' Gandalf visibly struggled to calm his voice and smiled disarmingly.

"I am sorry, my friend, you just took me by surprise, is all," he said trying to dispel the tenseness in the room.

Frodo relaxed slightly. "I understand, Gandalf. It was a most disturbing dream, much more vivid than usual and so frightening. Your reaction was no less than my own, I can assure you," he spoke slowly as exhaustion began to take its toll on him.

"Would you mind telling me of it? Leave out nothing, Frodo," Gandalf asked slowly.

"Well, I found myself in this desert wasteland. There was nothing but rock and sand, the land completely denuded. Bilbo called for me to come in out of the sun and when I turned I saw he stood in the doorway of Bag End. The tree on top of the smial and the party tree were dead, only their withered trunks evidence of them ever being there. I asked Bilbo where everyone was and he said," Frodo tried to reach out to Sam as sudden tears filled his eyes. Sam met him halfway, taking the sprained hand gently and rubbing slow circles over the top. Strider rubbed his back soothingly, trying to calm his friend and offer reassurance. "He said ...he said," Frodo gulped convulsively. 

"He said that they had all been taken," he looked tearily at Sam, "that they'd been enslaved or killed," he whispered. "It *was* just a dream, wasn't it, Gandalf?" Frodo asked tersely.

Gandalf had been lost in his own thoughts after hearing Frodo's rendition of the dark dream. Strider scowled at the wizard over Frodo's head. Gandalf, coming back to himself and noticing the ranger's expression, smiled wanly at Frodo. "Of course, Frodo, only a dream, my boy. Think of it no more and be at peace. You are safe, as is the Shire," he reassured softly. He rose slowly, his body bent in weariness and his face showing that, once again, he was lost within his own thoughts. Sam followed the wizard out into the hallway.

Frodo sighed and closed his eyes as Strider laid Frodo back against his pillows.

Blossom came into the room and placed her hand on Frodo's forehead. The hobbit moved languidly, a frown forming on his brow. Blossom frowned. He was still very warm, only feeling slightly cooler than before. "He seems more lucid and he did eat well." She looked up at Strider.
"I think his fever is breaking, Estel. Yet it is still too early to tell for sure," she murmured.

Strider eyed the hobbitess. "How long since you have rested, milady?" he asked, pulling his pipe from his pocket and loading it with leaf.

"I am perfectly fine, Dunedain. I will rest when Frodo is stable," she said wearily.

"Frodo is stable, Blossom. Go and rest. I will call you if needed," Strider said firmly. He lit his pipe; closing his eyes as he inhaled and tipping his chair back against the wall.

"It is you, Dunedain, who needs rest. You have been caring for Frodo many days longer than I," she said in concern.

"*Both* of you needs rest. If you didn't have chairs you'd both be a fallin' over, I dare say," Bell chimed in from the doorway. She stood, fists on her hips, a comical frown on her face, staring at the two healers. "I've already sent Mr. Gandalf and Sam off for naps. There's a bath waitin' for ya, Mistress, and I've turned down your very long bed, Mr. Strider. All we need now are bodies to put in both," she chided. Blossom smiled at the hobbitess.

"I believe we have been outmatched, Dunedain," she said with a grin. "Very well, Bell, a bath does sound heavenly. If I'd only thought to bring a change of clothing," she mused.

"I've taken care 'o that, Missus. I brought one 'o me housedresses back from home for you to change into. It might be a bit large on you, but it's clean," she replied.

"You Gamgees are prepared for everything, aren't you? No wonder Frodo finds you all so indispensable," Blossom jested.

"Yes 'em, that we are," Bell replied as she shoved the healer into the bathing room. Soon Blossom was stripped of the filthy shirt and pants and lay up to her chin, and delightfully relaxed, in hot water foaming with lavender scented bubbles. Next, Strider was browbeaten to his own room, objecting all the way. He lay down as Bell watched, her arms crossed, and stretched out. Only then did she leave, closing the door behind her. He fell asleep almost instantly. Bell returned to Frodo's room and seeing that their patient slept soundly and that his fever was much reduced, took up her knitting, sinking into one of Mr. Bilbo's overstuffed chairs. Her head began to nod, the silent home lulling her to sleep. She jerked herself awake for the third time in as many minutes. "This'll never do," she muttered to herself as she rose. "Perhaps a chore that doesn't require sitting," she said. "Ah...the linens. I need to get 'em washed up right quick, and hung out to dry."

She turned and looked at Frodo, once again. "Well, I won't be but a few minutes. I'm sure naught will happen if I work quickly." She felt Frodo's forehead once again, smiled at the results, grabbed the laundry basket and made for the washtub on the back porch.

Some time later Frodo slowly opened his eyes and looking about the room and saw that he was alone. He gulped, recalling the nightmare once again. Perhaps talking with Sam and Gandalf had been the true dream, he thought to himself. Sudden panic seized his heart. If only I could see outside, he thought as he looked towards the window and watched as the curtains fluttered in the morning breeze. He tried to raise himself up but a sharp pain in his sprained wrist changed his mind. He looked down at his legs and, seeing the broken one, began to think perhaps this was not one of his better ideas. Still, how would he know for sure that all was as it should be unless he could see the Shire for himself? He set his jaw in a firm and determined line as he tried, once again, to push himself upright using his good foot and arching his back, inching towards the headboard. He was so weak that he had to stop several times to catch his breath and to quell the vertigo that repeatedly overwhelmed him. The window was close to the bed but, try as he might, he could not see outside because the curtains continued to billow into the room, effectively blocking his view. Frodo shakily reached out and caught hold of one of the tiers, pulling himself
towards the window. His vision dimmed and small sparks of light dotted against black as he began to lose consciousness. He slapped his face, causing fresh pain to soar through his wrist. He panted harshly from his efforts but his struggle paid off as he, at last, pulled himself upright. His wrist screamed in agony, but the thought of seeing the valley below the smial had become an obsession to Frodo by now. Had he been thinking clearly he would have waited for someone to simply carry him to a window or even outside, but Frodo's mind was still locked in the delirium brought on by his injuries and fever, and he was *not* thinking clearly.

He lay back against the headboard trying to stop his body from shaking and his vision from fading in and out. The room swam out of focus until, finally, he had to close his eyes to avoid becoming ill. He began to lower his legs over the side of the bed thinking he could hop to the window on his one good leg. As the blood rushed to his feet his broken leg pulsed with the rhythm of his heartbeat as pins and needles ran through the other. He gasped in surprise at the pain. The broken leg continued to throb but, thankfully, the other began to feel a bit better. He reached out for the drape and pulled himself over the edge of the bed, touching his good foot down onto the floor. Had he not been hanging on so tightly to the drape he would have surely fallen as it tried to collapse beneath him. The wrist screamed in pain, holding his full weight, as he clutched at the curtain. He cried out as the leg finally found purchase and he stood, wobbly, leaning against the bureau under the window. At last he gazed outside. The land was a verdant green and Frodo could just make out small hobbit lads and lasses as they rolled down the hillside then ran back to the top of the hill to do it all again. A relieved smile lit his lips.

A gasp from the doorway caused Frodo to turn suddenly. The vertigo won over, this time, and Frodo's face paled as the room spun uncontrollably, blackness filled his vision and he fell backwards. Sturdy arms caught him before he could hit the floor and re-injure himself. He felt himself being lifted and then laid within the softness of his bed. All the while the figure tutted and berated him but Frodo only heard a strange rushing in his ears. Finally, he opened his eyes and looked up into the worried hazel eyes of Bell Gamgee. Frodo realized suddenly, that he had never noticed until that moment, how much Sam looked like his mother.

"Are you daft? What were you tryin' to do, Mr. Frodo? You coulda' been serious hurt...sir!" Bell scolded, forgetting her place in her alarm. "You, just barely survivin' *just* *this* *day* all that's happened and here you are usin' all your energy to get outta bed. If'n you was one 'o mine why I'd be cuttin' me a switch, I would," she yelled. Frodo looked up at her and saw tears were standing in her eyes and that her face was very pale. Her hands shook as she checked him over and brought the covers back up to his chin. He realized just how badly he had frightened her and reached out to grasp her hands.

"I am so sorry, Mrs. Gamgee, for scaring you," Frodo whispered.

"And what *exactly* are you sorry about, Frodo?" Blossom stood in the doorway looking clean and refreshed. "Bell, what has he been up to? I can see for myself how very pale he is, even more than usual for Frodo Baggins." She frowned. "What did he do?" she said enunciating each word clearly.

"'Tis my own fault, Mistress. I left 'em alone but for a minute, to get the sheets a soakin' and he was standin' at the window when I come back," Bell said shamefacedly.

"Bell, this is most defiantly *not* your fault. This is hardly the first time that Frodo has gone against orders, be they from doctors, healers or relatives, to do whatever it is he feels he must do. Didn't he tell you of the time he was quarantined in his room here at Bag End with influenza and, seeing everyone else outside playing in the snow, snuck out the window to join in the fray? No? What about the time he broke his leg falling from a tree while stealing apples and, after the doctor told him he *had* to stay in bed with his foot elevated, he *crawled* to the kitchen, climbed up
on the cabinet and ate a whole pie? No, my dear, this is not your fault, and I won't have you covering for him, sick or no," Blossom said exasperated.

Frodo had pinked at the accounting of the first story and continued to redden as Blossom started into the second. He looked up suddenly at the healer. "Please don't be angry with me. I would never have let Bell take the blame, Blossom," he said.

"Oh Frodo, I know that, but how could you have been so very stupid, my boy? You've made huge progress today, and the thought that you could have lost it all just to look out the window?" Blossom said with concern. Frodo lay limp against the pillows, his eyes beginning to close of their own accord. I am so very tired suddenly, he thought. The healer crossed quickly to him, feeling at his neck for his pulse. It was very rapid and she could see the beads of sweat upon his forehead and upper lip. She frowned, worried. "Frodo, why...why would you use up the last of your strength to do this?" she asked in alarm.

"I had to make sure it was still there, you see," he mumbled.

"What was still there, Frodo?" Blossom said, her voice softening. She had never been able to stay angry with Frodo; indeed, she had been unable to deny him anything as long as she had known him. She looked at him now as he tried to explain why this had been so important to him; so important that he had significantly risked his health to do it, and had possibly delayed his recovery by several more days. She sat down, as did Bell, beside him.

"It was all gone in the dream." His eyes fluttered slowly open, they had a haunted look in them as he struggled to explain. "The Shire wasn't green, nothing grew, all the hobbits...everything had been destroyed," he looked up beseechingly into Blossom's eyes. "I had to see for myself that it wasn't so, that it really had been just a bad dream," he said huskily. Bell wiped at her eyes and rose.

"I bess be gettin' his feedin' and teas, Miss," she said as she left the room hurriedly.

"My dear boy, what am I to do with you?" Blossom asked as she bent down, placing her forehead against Frodo's. Frodo's eyes had closed again, a happy smile touching his lips.

"Green, Blossom. It's still green and beautiful," he murmured sleepily.

"Yes, love, green. And it always shall be," she said softly as a slow tear flowed down her cheek.

To be continued...
Slow and Steady Wins the Race

Chapter Summary

After Bilbo's departure an increasingly lonely Frodo is injured. Only with the help of new friends and old will he find true healing, mentally as well as physically.

Disclaimer: The characters and places depicted are all the creation of JRR Tolkien, and I am only trying to emulate him in my own small way. *sigh*.

Medical disclaimers: Methods of treatment and medicines used have been researched for validity, however are used in this story simply for fictional purposes. In other words, don't try this at home; seek a professional-- yadda, yadda, yadda.

A/N: And now for the standard apology. I am so very, very sorry that it has taken me almost two months to update this story. I vow that will NOT happen again because I feel writing and continuing a fic is every bit as important as the other 'have to's' we do in life. Be assured that I will NEVER abandon a story and that, even if it takes awhile, I will update...thanks so much for sticking with me. On an unrelated matter...this was SUPPOSE to be the last chapter, but it grew far too long for the average reader to be able to complete in those often stolen moments that are taken to read a fic, so I have split it into two chapters. On the upside, I have half of the next chapter already written so it won't take as long to update this time around....:D

Chapter 12

"Slow and Steady Wins the Race"

Frodo slowly awoke to the sensation of searing pain in his right arm. He moaned softly, and then swallowed thickly trying to moisten his parched throat. He licked at his cracked lips as he slowly opened his eyes and surveyed the room. After Bilbo had left Frodo had moved into the old hobbit's former bedroom, seeking scents and mementos of his uncle that would help assuage the loneliness that had filled him. The room was spacious and well appointed. Well, it was *normally* spacious, Frodo mused, with a small smile. His eyes slowly moved around the room alighting briefly on each of its inhabitants. By his bed sat the man Strider, the chair tipped back precariously against the wall, his face still in peaceful repose. At his side lay a long length of wood that the healer had obviously been carving, at its end the beginning of a graceful crook. Frodo wondered foggily, as to what the end product would be. Next to the man sat Gandalf in a large, overstuffed armchair that had been specially made for the wizard's imposing dimensions, by his Uncle Bilbo. His feet, along with half a cup of cold tea, rested on an ottoman in front of him. Across from Frodo, on a low settee, he could see his good friend Blossom curled on her side, a soft lap quilt covering her as she slept. Sam was warmly ensconced on the bed against Frodo's good leg, snoring softly. Finally Frodo's eyes lit upon the last of the room's occupants. She hummed softly to herself as she knit, her rocking chair moving slightly to and fro in a steady rhythm. Frodo wondered goggily, as to what the end product would be. Next to the man sat Gandalf in a large, overstuffed armchair that had been specially made for the wizard's imposing dimensions, by his Uncle Bilbo. His feet, along with half a cup of cold tea, rested on an ottoman in front of him. Across from Frodo, on a low settee, he could see his good friend Blossom curled on her side, a soft lap quilt covering her as she slept. Sam was warmly ensconced on the bed against Frodo's good leg, snoring softly. Finally Frodo's eyes lit upon the last of the room's occupants. She hummed softly to herself as she knit, her rocking chair moving slightly to and fro in a steady rhythm. Frodo moved to try and sit up and was rewarded with a sharp pain not only in his arm, but his head and leg as well. He gasped in surprise, not remembering until that moment, just how bad off he really was. At the sound Bell looked up quickly from her work.

"Well now, look who's joined the land o' the livin'," she whispered with a smile. She set her knitting aside and rose, crossing to his side in two steps. She gently placed her hand along side his...
face and smiled widely at the results. She brought a cup of water to his lips and Frodo drank greedily. "Ah, but you gave us all a mighty scare, ya did, sir," she said gently.

"Where's Bilbo, Mrs. Gamgee?" Frodo croaked. Bell's face clouded slightly, the joyous smile vanishing as quickly as it had come. "He's gone, isn't he?" he said, answering his own question. "He's gone, never to return," he continued, unable to keep the sadness from his voice.

"Aye, Mr. Frodo, that he has," she whispered with concern.

"How long have I been asleep?" he asked.

"Well... 'twas but two, no three, days since your surgery..." Frodo looked quickly at his arm expecting the limb to be gone. His eyes slowly closed as relief replaced dread at seeing he was still whole. "...Days since then," Bell was saying. Frodo looked up at her in confusion. She smiled lovingly down at him. "You've had a bad time o' it, Mr. Frodo, an' I don't jes mean after yer accident. Since Mr. Bilbo left it's been a struggle, hasn't it sir?" she murmured gently taking his hand in hers.

Frodo turned his head away as tears filled his eyes. His lips trembled as he spoke. "It has," he answered, and he was unable to keep his voice from quavering. He turned back towards her. "But I suppose, I shall just have to get used to it," he said with more bravado than he felt.

"Well now, there jes' might be an answer to this 'ere problem." She looked hesitant to continue, as if she felt she might be overstepping to make a suggestion to her Master that might not be something he would like. She cleared her throat and, seeing the cup, chose to bring it to Frodo, once again, obviously stalling. Frodo drank deeply, his eyes fixed on Bell's face, wondering what might cause the hobbitess to feel suddenly uncomfortable.

"Bell, I would greatly appreciate any ideas you might have," he said huskily, trying to make her more at ease.

"Well...we, all of us here, were talkin' earlier...and, umm, well, we wondered if you would be opposed to havin' someone livin' with ya jes ta look after ya like. They could fix yer meals and tend the smial, doin' yer laundry and such," her voice drifted off.

Frodo's brow wrinkled at the thought of a stranger in his home. "I don't know if I would feel comfortable with someone I don't know well, in my home," he began slowly. "I keep odd hours and I like to come and go as I please," he said trying to explain. Bell's face fell. "It's truly a marvelus idea, really it is. But I tend to be much like Uncle Bilbo being a bit of a hermit, I suppose," he said sadly, resigning himself to the belief that he was simply meant to lead the rest of his life alone and lonely. The thought filled him with despair and he found, much to his annoyance, that his eyes had become misty again.

"But sir, what if it weren't jes' *anybody*? What if it were someone ya knew and trusted right well?" Bell asked with a gentle smile. Frodo looked at her, his facial expression one of mixed hope and confusion. Bell laughed lightly and patted his hand. "If'n you'd like, Master Frodo, my Sam said he would be right pleased to do fer ya," she said quietly. Frodo's eyes lit up and a smile quickly covered his face, causing him to wince in pain as his chapped lips were stretched.

"He...he would want this...to live with an old hermit? Sam would do this?" he asked, hardly daring to believe his sudden good fortune.

"Not only does he want it, he wishes with all his might to be there for you, sir," came the response, not from Bell, but from the warm lump that lay by his side. Sam sat up slowly mindful not to jostle the bed. "If you'll have me sir, I would be honored, I would, to stay here with ya," he
"Oh Sam!" Frodo exclaimed as Sam pulled Frodo to him and embraced him warmly but gently. Frodo wept softly into Sam's chest feeling suddenly filled with such relief and love that he could not contain his emotions.

"There, there sir, none o' that, now. Yer Sam won't be leavin' ya alone no more," Sam murmured as he soothingly rubbed the thin back. He frowned. "First thing I'm gonna do is fatten you up, Master. Why, I can feel every one of yer ribs, I can," he said with a huff.

Frodo began to laugh, his heart feeling lighter than it had in months. Sam eased him back onto his pillows and gently wiped the tear streaked face with a damp cloth as Frodo continued to beam up at both he and Bell. He frowned slightly. "But what about the Gaffer, won't he be upset if Sam moves in here? Won't he need you at your own home?" he asked, worriedly.

Bell tsked lightly. "I've already spoken with Ham and he's fine with the whole idea. Sam already spends most of his time here at Bag End in the gardens and if he does decide he needs Sam for anything it isn't all that far to come," she said reassuringly. Frodo beamed.

"When can he move in?" he asked impulsively.

Now it was Bell's turn to laugh. "Soon as yer feelin' better, Mr. Frodo. Which reminds me, tis time for your tea." She rose and crossed to the fire, passing the settee as Blossom yawned and stretched. She sat up and seeing Frodo awake and smiling, jumped to her feet and made a beeline towards the bed.

"Frodo! How wonderful to see you awake and obviously feeling better," she exclaimed, a huge smile on her face. As she felt his forehead and inspected his arm the room's other inhabitants began to stir. Strider came forward with a lurch and a thud, a startled look on his face as the chair tipped forward and righted itself. He smiled sheepishly then, seeing Frodo awake, grinned widely. Gandalf was chuckling at the ranger's near mishap as he stood and stretched, then searched his pockets for his pipe.

"Dear boy," he tutted, "So very good to see you better."

"Did you hear, Gandalf? Sam's to come live with me at Bag End," Frodo exclaimed joyously. His eyelids fluttered as he collapsed back onto the pillows. "You've all made me so happy, I can't begin to thank you. Sam, you and your family have always made me feel included in your lives. I think of you, I suppose, as one might think of a brother," his eyes became distant. "Only one other has ever made me feel so protected and cared for and he is far from my side now. When Bilbo left, I felt deserted, as if I had lost my parents all over again. It mattered little that he left me Bag End and all of his possessions, all I ever wanted was someone to share things with." He turned his head slowly and looked at Sam, Bell and Blossom who were watching him closely. "I was so lonely. There was no one to talk to. At night Bag End almost seemed to grow larger and emptier, every sound echoing off the walls. I got so I would stay away all day walking to avoid the smial and at night I would stare at the ceiling above my bed praying for first light."

"No more, Master. I'll earn my keep right enough. I'll cook and clean and work the gardens...you'll never be sorry you allowed Samwise Gamgee into yer home," Sam said earnestly.

Frodo stared long and hard at his gardener and friend. "Sam, you aren't a slave. I insist on doing my share of the chores and the cooking."

Sam turned crimson. "But...but you can't, Mr. Frodo," he sputtered. Frodo's eyes grew wide, a tiny smile touching his lips.
"Why ever not, Sam? Sam, I realize you think me your better, but I'm not. I'm just like you except my rich uncle adopted me. I must insist, Sam, or I'm afraid this arrangement will never work out," Frodo said. A look of steely determination had replaced the mirthful one of a moment before. All heads turned anxiously to look at Sam. The gardener's color was very high and he still looked as if he might object. He glanced nervously about the room and then his eyes lit, once again, on his beloved Master. "Please Sam. Treat me as an equal, just once," Frodo whispered, his eyes moist. "I don't want a servant living in my home, but I would enjoy having a friend," he finished hoarsely.

"Very well, Mr. Frodo. I would like that too," Sam said, looking at his toes.

"And no more of this "Mr." and "Master", it's FRODO, Sam," Frodo said sternly.

"Ah, now you've just gone too far, Mr. Frodo," Sam blustered. Everyone in the room burst into laughter causing poor Sam to look around in total confusion. Finally he looked back at Frodo, who was smiling slyly.

"Mr. Frodo?"

"Very well, Sam. I *am* serious about you just calling me Frodo, as we are friends, but I know I've won the important battle so, for now, I suppose we can let the title issue slide," he chuckled tiredly.

Blossom could see how even just the few moments of talking had tired Frodo and knew they had to yet feed him. 'A bath would do him good,' she thought, 'but we'll have to see, I suppose'. Bell brought the tea and handed it to Blossom who began to ladle it slowly into Frodo's mouth.

Each passing second his eyelids grew heavier and heavier. He could hear the boisterous conversations going on about him, but even they seemed to become more and more faint as the seconds ticked by. Someone was shaking him gently and he turned groggily to see who it was.

"Wha' dyou wan'? He asked irritably.

"Soup, lad. You must eat to get better. It's very good, Frodo," Blossom was saying.

"No...tired. No soup," Frodo mumbled.

Blossom sighed and looked over her shoulder at Strider. "Dunedain?"

Strider gently raised Frodo and slipped behind him, propping the now very cranky hobbit against his chest. Frodo's head drooped, his chin resting on his chest. "Come, little one, just a few swallows then you may rest," Strider crooned.

"No...no soup. Jes' leemealone," Frodo slurred irritably.

Strider lifted Frodo's head back and let it rest against his shoulder. Blossom brought the first spoonful up and slipped it between his lips. Frodo whined but swallowed by reflex. She continued to slowly ladle the rich broth until, at last, Frodo could take no more and the liquid merely ran out of his mouth and down his chin. She sighed. "Well, he ate *some* at least."

She gently wiped his face with a damp cloth and Strider slipped out from behind the hobbit, slowly lowering him to the bed. They cocooned him within his nest of pillows with a warm comforter and withdrew to the corner to discuss his treatment. The others had left the room when they began feeding Frodo to fill up on Bell's delicious cooking.

"We need to check his arm to make sure it is healing well. He still has a fever, though it is much
reduced from before," said Strider quietly.

"I agree, Estel. He could also use a nice bath and we will need to continue waking him on the hour to give him the tea and more broth," added Blossom.

Armed with fresh bandages, a fresh bears weed poultice, the powdered goldenrod and arnica they, once again, converged at the bedside. The arm was removed from its splint and carefully unwrapped by Strider. When they could see the surgical site at last they both sighed in relief. It was an ugly shade of dark blue and yellow but still they could see the wound was much improved. The swelling had gone down substantially and the red lines that had been crawling towards Frodo's heart had all but disappeared. The incision continued to drain, but the exudate was without the sickening sweet smell of decay, nor was it draining the thick yellow pus of before, but a clear, blood tinged fluid without odor. They smiled at each other in relief.

"Let's change the dressing, Dunedain then rewrap it and allow him to rest," Blossom said quietly. Strider flushed the area with warm athelas water and, after sprinkling the site with the powdered goldenrod and arnica, affixed the bears weed poultice so as to continue to draw out any residual infection. He rewrapped it in clean gauze and reattached the splint to the arm. Throughout it all Frodo never stirred.

After they were sure that Frodo was as comfortable as possible Blossom and Strider left him to rest. They joined the others in the kitchen for elvesnees. There was a celebratory air about the gathering and as they partook of the delicious spread Bell had prepared, they smiled and laughed more than they had in a week. Bell had not been idle while they had slept and then cared for the young Baggins. The table fairly groaned under the weight of the feast. Roasted duckling stuffed with sausage stuffing, fluffy rolls, Frodo's hearty soup was there, pear tartlets, creamy butter with strawberry jams, roasted potatoes with rosemary and a creamy mushroom soup were the main courses. Strider's mouth watered to see the delicacies. Before long all had a plate loaded with the dainties sitting on their laps, for Strider and Gandalf who could not sit at the hobbit sized table, or in front of them for those who could. There was wine and ale for all and before long human and wizard and hobbit alike, were sated. Thanks and accolades were showered on the cook until at last, blushing furiously, she shooed them outside with their pipes. Blossom had tried to take part in the clean up efforts, but Bell had firmly insisted that she join the men on the front porch. Blossom stepped outside and withdrew her own small pipe from her pocket. Strider and Gandalf's eyebrows rose slightly. While it was common for all Shire hobbits to smoke it was rare to see female hobbits enjoying the habit. Blossom blushed under their scrutiny and asked timidly if she could join them. Both men realizing, too late, that they were staring rudely at the hobbitess, rose as one to their feet, offering a seat between them. Once she was seated, Strider offered to pack and light the pipe for her, which she happily accepted. At last they all sat and puffed contemplatively, truly relaxing for the first time in days.

"My beloved Bosco carved this pipe for me before he died. We would sit on our porch after dinner and watch the stars slowly appear, one by one, as we smoked," she said wistfully. "I have found him never far from my thoughts when I am relaxing with my pipe," she sighed.

"An unusual, but not completely unknown, habit for a hobbitess to smoke," Gandalf commented with a wink.

Blossom smiled around the pipe stem. "True, but I am not the 'usual' hobbitess, am I dear friend?"

Gandalf chuckled and smiled widely.

"I believe that the reason you see more hobbit men smoking than hobbit women is because, after a meal, she is still cleaning the cook pots while he is free to relax," she said sarcastically.
Strider coughed and then laughed openly. He looked as if he were going to speak when the door opened suddenly and an obviously distressed Samwise came through it. They all rose in alarm, thinking that Frodo had taken a sudden turn for the worse.

He turned towards them, his eyes teary, and blurted, "She sent me away. Wouldn't let me help her clean up, as is my duty."

They all smiled in relief and sat back down. Strider gestured to an empty bench and Sam sat, pulling his own pipe out and slowly packed it with Longbottom leaf.

Blossom chuckled, "Sam, there will be ample opportunities in the future to 'clean up' when you move in with Frodo."

At this his downcast appearance changed to one of happy anticipation. He looked up at her, a thankful and beatific smile lighting his face. He looked as if he wanted to speak but, thinking once again of his proper place, decided not to. Gandalf saw this and nudged Blossom lightly. She smiled up at the wizard.

"Sam, what do you think of this arrangement to stay and care for Frodo?" she asked. Seeing his hesitation she continued. "There are no class divisions here, Sam. Tell us your thoughts on the matter, please," she encouraged.

Sam looked at each of them slowly, lit his pipe and seemed to drift into a long ago memory. "When I was a wee lad Mr. Frodo came to live with Mr. Bilbo. He weren't like any hobbit I'd ever seen. He would come out and get his hands all dirty digging in the dirt with me. My Gaffter had a fit, ya know, and afterwards talked with Mr. Bilbo about how it weren't seemly to have a gentlehobbit working alongside the help. Bilbo had told him that was pure nonsense but it made the Gaffer so upset that only when me Da wasn't about, would Frodo join me."

He looked up at them, a small smile curving his lips. "Mr. Frodo had some little round glass pebbles he called "marbles" that the dwarves had sent for one of his birthdays and he and I would play a game in the dirt that was a pleasure, it was, after I'd got done with me chores. He taught me ta read and we would have a game of checkers or chess in the evenings. He even invited me ta his room, though I felt right uneasy about going into me Master's home like that, ta play with all o' the strange toys and blocks that had come from Dale." He paused, looking off at the green hillside that led down to the party tree, as he collected his thoughts. "He has never treated me once like a servant," he looked up at them wistfully. "It were almost like bein' with one o' me brothers, if I can be so bold ta say."

"If *I* may be so bold, Sam, I'd say Frodo has always thought of you as just that. He had no close family except for Bilbo, and Frodo never saw the lines that were suppose to divide the two of you by class. He thinks of you as a brother and a dear friend, Sam, and I think that is one reason he wishes you to call him Frodo. Each time you call him 'Master' or 'Mr. Frodo' the idea of class is brought to the fore. I believe it makes him feel like you, possibly, do not feel the close family bond that he feels. It makes him painfully aware of the fact that you are *not* his equal and that he has no one, being simply the Master and nothing more," Blossom said gently.

Sam looked at her in alarm. "No, no that's not it at all, Missus. I don't want him feelin' like I wouldn't be honored to call him a brother. No...it's jes' that...well, all my life I've been told he were above me and that I was to show due respect for him bein' my employer and my better. I was told that to call him anything other than Mr. Frodo or Master would be to show him disrespect and cross a line that I weren't worthy o' crossing, even if'n he wanted me to. It's hard to do somethin' different after all them years," Sam said now worried of what his Master might think.

Blossom smiled. "I'm sure Frodo realizes this only too well and still thinks of you as a little brother no matter what you might call him, Sam. I do believe, however, that if you were to call him simply
Frodo one day, that it would gladden his heart immensely." She watched him, surreptuously, take in all of the new information and store it away as she smoked.

Sam's face was a mask of confusion. "I don't know if I can do it. I'd do almost anything to make Mr. Frodo happy, though, that I would," he mused to himself.

Blossom smiled to herself, happy to see she had at least planted the seed of a thought in Sam. Strider looked at her sideways and they shared a secret smile.

Deeming it time to check on Frodo, one by one they filed back into the smial. Blossom quietly opened the door to Frodo's room and, seeing that he was still sleeping, closed it once again. She sighed. Reliefs that Frodo was finally on the mend coupled with the exhaustion from running on adrenaline for so long made her suddenly feel near collapse. Strider noticed this and thought this would be as good a time as any for all of them to rest before Frodo awoke. He escorted her to her room and after seeing that she would, indeed, rest, retired to his own. Gandalf stretched out on the too small sofa in the parlor, as Sam returned to his Master's room and curled up in the overstuffed chair by the fire. So it was that after Bell had finished cleaning the kitchen, she found each and every one of them captives of exhausted slumber. She smiled as she checked on them, saving Mr. Frodo for last, before she sat down on the small settee in Frodo's room. After a few moments she too had fallen asleep, her knitting still held loosely in her hands.

To be continued---
A Sense of Family

Chapter Summary

After Bilbo's departure an increasingly lonely Frodo is injured. Only with the help of new friends and old will he find true healing, mentally as well as physically.

Disclaimer: The characters and places depicted are all the creation of JRR Tolkien, and I am only trying to emulate him in my own small way. *sigh*.

Medical disclaimers: Methods of treatment and medicines used have been researched for validity, however are used in this story simply for fictional purposes. In other words, don't try this at home; seek a professional-- yadda, yadda, yadda.

Chapter 13

A Sense of Family

Hours later when Frodo awoke, he found, once again, the room's occupants deep in slumber. He realized that these people had sacrificed much for him and the thought of how much they valued him, and his well being, brought tears to his eyes. Sam stirred feeling, somehow, aware that his Master had awoken. Seeing that his Master was in distress and interpreting it as pain, he rose and crossed quickly to his side.

"Mr. Frodo are you in much pain? Should I fetch Miss Blossom or Mr. Strider?" He asked anxiously.

"No Sam, I was just momentarily overwhelmed by the love and friendship you all have shown to me," his voice croaked.

Sam looked at him, confused, as he brought a cup of water to Frodo's lips. "It's no different than how you've always treated all of us, Mr…uh, Frodo," Sam said shyly.

"But Sam...did you just call me Frodo?" Frodo asked, his voice full of awe.

"Uh...yes sir. I hope I haven't overstepped none," Sam said, anxiously.

"Say it again, Sam, please," Frodo asked, excited.

"Umm...Frodo?" Sam said quietly.

"Oh Sam...you called me Frodo," Frodo exclaimed in delight. Sam smiled to see the obvious happiness in his Master's eyes at this simple gesture.

Blossom, Gandalf and Strider entered the room at a run, thinking the worst by the commotion Frodo's excited voice had caused. Bell stirred, wondering what all the fuss was about.

"He called me Frodo!" Frodo chortled. "Sam called me Frodo!" He said again, for those who might have missed it. The entourage smiled then laughed in amazement, much to the extreme embarrassment of the gardener, who was, by now, a bright red. Sam began to wonder seriously if this had been a mistake.
Frodo continued to smile as Blossom felt his forehead and declared no touch of fever could be felt. She turned to the red-faced gardener saying, "This is the best medicine of all, Sam, and don't you forget that. Sometimes where medicines fail the true love of friendship will heal the most ill of patients." Sam didn't think he could be more embarrassed but quickly showed he could. He smiled hesitantly at the group. She turned back to her charge. "Now my dear boy, it is time for a bath and more tea and broth," she said firmly.

"But...uh...I don't think that's really necessary," Frodo stammered, looking about him at the obviously amused gathering.

"Oh indeed it is, my sweet hobbit. You must be feeling better indeed to feel so uncomfortable about another bath," she said with a grin.

Frodo blanched, his eyes wide. "Another?" he croaked.

"Yes, my friend. We wouldn't have dreamed of allowing you to lay in the sweat and offal brought on by your sickness," she continued, barely able to contain a chuckle at the hobbit's discomfort.

"Offal?" Frodo asked, a frightened look in his eyes thinking what must have had to be taken care of while he was unconscious.

"Well of course, Frodo. Even while you were unconscious your body continued to function as normal," Blossom's face contorted into a wide grin, no longer able to hold back at the humor of the situation.

Strider, at last, had pity on the poor hobbit and decided enough was enough. "Be at peace, Frodo. At all times we were careful to protect your dignity. Do not let Blossom tell you otherwise," he said reassuringly. Frodo relaxed slightly.

"Bell, Sam let's heat some water and get the tub filled for our dear hobbit," Blossom said, knowing the fun was indeed over and snapping back into healer mode.

The water was heated and lavender oil added. As an after-thought Strider broke athelas leaves into the awaiting bath, whispering the ancient words as he did. Blossom and Bell quitted the room to allow Frodo his privacy but Frodo was still nervous about the situation.

"As you are prone to falling asleep at the most inopportune times I think perhaps, we will start with the tea and soup before we clean you up, Mr. Baggins," Strider said with a smirk.

As Frodo drank the tea then the broth, he looked nervously at the wizard, the sympathetic Sam and at Strider, completely unaware of the nourishment he imbibed. When at last it was time for the dreaded bath, Strider gently lifted the covers and snaked a towel over Frodo's groin. He then removed the nightshirt slipping it carefully over the healing arm. He removed the counterpane and tenderly lifted the embarrassed hobbit and bore him to the awaiting bath. Frodo's breaths were coming faster at the thought of all of these spectators watching, or worse, bathing him as he was obviously too weak to do for himself. As he was lowered into the bath, the towel firmly fixed around his hips and the broken leg propped up on the end of the tub, his nervousness dissolved as the warm, sweetly scented water covered him up to his neck. Strider slowly lathered a flannel and carefully washed his upper body. He then moved to the legs and nether regions where Frodo abruptly stopped him.

"I am perfectly able to wash myself," he said indignantly.

Strider raised his eyebrows at the invalid and placed the flannel in Frodo's sprained, outstretched hand. The hand trembled and Strider was uncertain as to whether it was due to the hobbit's
weakness or his attempt to keep his dignity. He averted his eyes as Frodo winced, his hand objecting to the activity and determinedly washed his unexposed regions. He was panting, a sheen of sweat on his brow, in the short time it had taken to deem himself clean.

"Enough, Frodo," Strider said firmly. "You have unnecessarily over exerted yourself for the sake of modesty. We are all males here and this is not something you need be embarrassed about," he said, concerned that the hobbit had overtaxed his weakened body. Frodo looked at him pleadingly. Strider's voice gentled. "Let's wash your hair, all right?" Frodo nodded and Strider began to pour cups of water over the sweaty curls. He lathered and rinsed the hair until it shown a shiny chestnut.

Sam had placed toweling on the floor by the fireplace and more towels on the hearth, not wishing his Master to catch a chill. Strider gently lifted Frodo from the bath with the towel still in place and set him on the warmed towels by the fire. He was quickly covered and dried with the heated towels, the now sodden privacy towel removed from underneath the dry ones. A nightshirt was slowly lowered over his torso and the towels removed. Gandalf and Sam had replaced the dirty linens with clean ones and Strider carried Frodo to the awaiting nest. He was covered with a thick blanket and the healer set about replacing the sodden bandages with dry. Frodo was pleasantly surprised at how much better he felt, the bath having washed away the smell of sickness. After the trauma of the bath and having had a warm, if scant meal, exhaustion crept over the hobbit. He gladly gave into it and slipped into slumber. The three friends left him to rest and joined Bell and Blossom in the kitchen for the morning meal.

"I fear it is time for me to return home," Blossom said, her voice containing a note of sadness. "Frodo is out of danger and my poor plants need to be cared for."

Strider nodded. "I will stay until he is healed then, I too, will need to depart. It has been most enjoyable spending time with such wonderful people and I am loathe to return to my solitary wanderings, but it is necessary," he said with regret.

Sam and Bell looked at the two, saddened by the dissolution of their little group of newfound friends.

"Sam, if you would be so kind as to hitch up my wagon and I'll be on my way," Blossom said.

Sam nodded and left to find Goldenrod and Pansy's Girl who had been happily frolicking with the other ponies during the duration of the visit. He brought the wagon to the front of the smial and Blossom, now in her shirt and pants once again, climbed up onto the seat with a hand from Sam. She placed her healers satchel next to her on the bench and looked down at the assembly.

"Sam, come out to my home in a weeks time, or sooner if you like and tell me how Frodo is faring, all right? Watch after your Master for me, dearest Samwise, and always remember to show him how much he means to you. No matter what you have been ingrained to believe, class is an unnecessary barrier that keeps us from developing and enjoying friendships with others. Do not allow the misguided teachings of "class", "place" or "station" to interfere with your obvious feelings of brotherhood with Frodo. He needs to feel a sense of belonging and family and I know you will strive to give him those things," Blossom instructed. Sam nodded determinedly and told her, once again, that his Master would never feel abandoned or alone again. And that he would be the companion as well as the gardener for as long as Frodo needed him to be. Blossom smiled knowing that Frodo was, indeed, being left in good hands.

"Dundain, Anna en suilannad an Elrond (Give my greetings to Elrond), ah hanned le an lin an lin gwend a curu (and thank you for your friendship and skill)*. Please return and visit with me. That invitation is for you, as well, my wizard friend. Let us not allow so much time to pass again," Both Strider and Gandalf smiled and nodded, reassuring the hobbitess that they would redouble their
efforts to visit.

Lastly she turned to Bell. "It has been my privilege and honor to rekindle our friendship and to work side by side with such a wonderful person," she said. Bell blushed a deep crimson but stepped forward and took Blossom's hand, giving it a squeeze.

"Thank you, Mistress," she said quietly.

With that Blossom clicked her tongue as she flicked the reins and the wagon slowly moved down the lane. At the curve she turned back and waved to her friends. They did not see the tears that slowly rolled down her face.

They watched until she was gone from sight then re-entered the smial. Strider went to Frodo's room and was surprised to see the hobbit not only awake but attempting to rise from the bed.

"Frodo! You should have waited for one of us to return. Just where do you think you are going, my friend," Strider exclaimed. Frodo had managed to push himself up to the headboard before vertigo and exhaustion had stopped him.

"I...uh...I needed to ...uh...use the chamber pot, Strider, but haven't the strength to lower myself to the floor other than falling to it, that is," Frodo said, attempting to use humor to cover his embarrassment.

"Do not try to move on your own again, I implore you. You have lost a great deal of blood from the surgery and are weakened from your injuries. I would not want to find you collapsed on the floor. If for no one else, think of Sam and how frightened he would be were he to see you in such a state," Strider said with concern.

Frodo's face paled, "Of course, poor Sam would be quite beside himself, wouldn't he?" "How foolish of me," he said, the thought having never occurred to him until Strider had mentioned it.

Strider sighed and closed the door behind him. He moved to the bed and drew back the covers. Frodo looked at him in alarm. "What are you doing?" He asked nervously.

Strider looked at him, puzzled. "I am helping you to use the chamber pot, Frodo," he answered.

"Oh...no...no, I don't...no, that's truly not necessary, I assure you," came the stammered reply.

Strider's eyebrows rose quizzically. 'Frodo, if you are unable to leave the bed how else do you propose to do this?'' he asked quietly. The hobbit looked away. Strider retrieved the bedpan from under the bed and lifted Frodo's narrow hips, setting it in place. He was re-covered and Strider smiled at him reassuringly. "I will wait outside the door. When you are finished call to me." He left the room, closing the door behind him. Since the ceiling was so low, he sat down against the wall, stretching his legs out before him, and waited.

Frodo sat on the cold pan for a few moments, his eyes wide, before he was finally able to relax and complete his business. "Strider?" He called shyly. "I am finished." Strider re-entered the room, slipped the pan out from under him and left the room. He returned shortly and saw that Frodo had turned towards the wall.

"Frodo?" He asked in concern, placing his hand on the hobbit's shoulder.

"It is humiliating enough to be given a bath, but to have to have someone assist me to...to...well, it is an affront to basic hobbit dignity," he whispered. His voice shook with emotion. Strider frowned. He knew, from observation, that hobbits were a fairly conservative race. Their privacy was one of their most closely prized possessions. To have to have someone assist them in their
bodily functions would have been a great embarrassment indeed.

"Frodo, sometimes we must rely on others to help us attend to our needs when we cannot do for ourselves. There is no shame in it; it is simply how it is. I am a healer and you should not feel ill at ease in front of me. I much prefer doing things this way than endangering your health and safety by allowing you to try and wrestle with a chamber pot."

Frodo turned to look at him. "It's just that I've never had to rely on someone else to care for this aspect of my life. I cannot help but feel self conscious but I do agree that I am unfit to leave my bed at the present time, and suppose I will have to adjust until I can," he said quietly.

"I have a surprise for you," Strider said with a grin and desperately wanting to lift Frodo's spirits. "Close your eyes." Frodo closed his eyes, a slight smile tugging at his lips. Strider gently lifted the hobbit so that he was propped against many pillows and against the headboard. "Now, don't move...I'll be right back." He could hear the swiftly retreating footsteps then the scurry of many footsteps re-entering the room. Something that smelled delicious was placed on his lap and he smiled widely. "All right, Frodo. Open your eyes," Strider said with a chuckle.

Frodo opened his eyes and saw that everyone in the room stood about him smiling. He looked down and saw that instead of the standard soup there were four small covered dishes on his tray. He went to lift off one of the lids, but his hands trembled then fell back to the coverlet. Sam quickly pulled a chair up to the bed and lifted the lid off of the first dish.

"This'n is one o' my favorites when I'm sick, Mr. Frodo. Me mum always makes it just for me, until now, that is. I asked her to fix some for you since Mr. Strider said you could move on to soft foods," Sam said cheerfully. "It's an apple and raisin steamed pudding with honey, nutmeg and cinnamon," he smiled at Frodo and Frodo couldn't help but smile back at his friend. Sam removed the next cover. "This here is a nice bit o' vanilla custard with some brandied peaches a' top o' it." His mouth began to water as the aroma accosted him. Frodo, though touched by Sam's devotion and attentions, could not help but smile. The picture of a truculent and picky child being convinced by an elder of the palatability of his dinner went through his mind.

He chose the steamed pudding as his first choice and obediently opened his mouth as Sam brought spoonfuls of the indulgence to his lips. Although everything looked and smelled wonderful, he soon found himself full, much to the dismay of his friend. Sam left the room with the tray muttering something about 'eating like a bird' and a drowsy hobbit settled back against the pillows. Strider had moved to his regular spot on the corner and was diligently smoothing and sanding the long stick of wood.

"Where is Blossom, Strider?" he murmured.

"She has deemed you on the mend and decided it was time for her to depart back to her home," Strider said quietly.

Frodo felt a sense of loss but understood the old hobbit's need to return to her smial and her plants. He sighed. "What are you making, Strider?" He asked sleepily.

The ranger smiled secretively. "Some crutches for you, Frodo. I took the liberty of measuring you for these as you slept. It will be some time before you have the necessary strength, especially in your arm, to use them but I thought now would be as good a time as any to get them ready for you."

"They are beautiful," Frodo murmured. He gazed at the intricately carved and smoothed wood. Small vines had been inlaid along their length and he could not help but marvel at the amount of work that had gone into such a functional item. "You have put far to much work into such a
utilitarian device," he commented.

"Not at all, Frodo. The elves taught me as a boy that all things created should be a thing of beauty, even the most mundane," Strider smiled at the memory.

Frodo's eyes had drifted closed and Strider moved to the bed to remove the extra pillows and lower him down.

"Thank you...Strider...for taking care of me," the hobbit mumbled dreamily.

Strider smiled and gently moved the curls from Frodo's forehead. "Not at all, small one. It was my honor to get to know you and those close to you," he whispered. "May the Varda always watch and guide you," he added softly.

Frodo improved steadily over the next few weeks. Bell had returned to her own household after that pivotal week of his recovery, but continued to bring tempting meals over to the smial. Sam was true to his word and had walked, many times, out to the Bogs smial to apprise Blossom of his Master's condition. Strider and Gandalf had stayed at Bag End and delighted in seeing the hobbit slowly regain his strength. He was still too thin, by hobbit standards, but under the watchful eye of his gardener, never failed to eat often even if little or no evidence of it was noticeable on his lean frame. This continued to be a source of frustration for Sam who could not fathom how his Master could have such a picky appetite and lack of girth. Sam had settled into Frodo's old room with his meager possessions. Frodo had told him to remove his old belongings to the mathom room, but Sam enjoyed the assorted collection of unusual knickknacks that had either been given to his Master or that he had found for himself on his many walks, and opted to keep things as they were. He had very few items to display and easily found shelves to house these without having to disturb the treasures.

Frodo had also been enjoying short excursions into Bag End's gardens, carried by Strider and placed gently on a low chaise with pillows, to bask in the sun, and that is where Sam found him this day. His Master's eyes were closed, a small smile on his lips, as he listened to the calls of birds and the buzz of insects, surrounded on all sides by the sweetly scented flowers.

Sam sat down beside him on a low bench and pulled his pipe from a pocket. Frodo opened his eyes and gazed at his friend, his eyes fixed longingly, on the pipe. Sam noticed this and produced his Master's pipe from another pocket with a smile.

"Sam, you are a marvel. However do you do it?" Frodo exclaimed in wonder. Sam looked at him, confused. Frodo chuckled. "You always seem to know what I'll need," he elaborated. Sam blushed and slowly filled the pipes with leaf, handing Frodo's to him. After they were contentedly settled, curls of sweet smelling smoke wreathing their heads, Sam turned to his friend to ask him what he had wanted to ask him for many days. It had been brought to Sam's attention that he, too often, asked Frodo how he was feeling. So he had tried to stop being such a fusspot, but this had nearly driven him to distraction. He decided enough time had elapsed between his inquiries and broached the subject.

"Umm...Mr. Frodo, how are you feeling? Are you in any pain, sir?" he asked timidly.

Frodo smiled. "Why Sam, you lasted longer than I thought possible. No small feat for such a devoted friend, I'll wager."

Sam blushed. "I meant no offense, sir..."
"None taken, dear Sam, and no need to apologize," he reassured the gardener with a smile. "As to your questions, no, I am not in any pain and I feel almost like myself again." Strider had removed the drain from the wound and stitched the opening closed the previous week and Frodo was quickly re-gaining full use of the arm. "Strider and I have been exercising my arms and my other leg so that I will have the strength to use the crutches. I've even been allowed to get out of bed on my own as long as he is present," he said happily. Sam frowned, not liking the idea of Frodo doing anything that might result in a fall or another injury. "He has even permitted me to use the chamber pot unattended and to take a bath without assistance," he continued. He turned to his companion and beamed. "I feel very much like my old self again, Sam," he said.

Sam felt a great surge of thankfulness for Blossom and Strider. He reflected on how something so everyday as good health could be a source of joy that few people even considered until it was taken from them. The friends basked in the sun, talking and laughing, content with their place in life, until Bell arrived later and declared it suppertime. Strider came to get Frodo and only then did they quit the garden and retire to the kitchen, secure in the knowledge that the verdant lawns and flowerbeds would greet them the next day and that Frodo's strength and the feelings of family and belonging were, at last, within his heart and his home.

Please read on in the Epilogue...
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

After Bilbo leaves the Shire, Frodo is left alone. An accident shows him how very much his friends love him as they work to heal the hobbit.

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I just wanted to say thank you so very much for traveling on this little journey with me. I enjoyed writing the story so very much and it is gratifying to know that so many of you enjoyed reading it as well. Thanks to my die-hard reviewers who always had wonderful things to say or add and to those who just read without reviewing, I appreciate all of you. And a very special thanks to Elwen who started this whole adventure in the first place....

Epilogue

The cart jerked along the rutted road as Sam attempted to guide the pony to the smoother surfaces. Each time an unseen hole rocked the small wagon Sam would dart a worried look over his shoulder to his Master who laid cushioned against the buckboard, his eyes closed, as if in slumber.

"Sam, do try to relax. I won't break, you know," Frodo chided, aware of his friend's frequent glances. Sam blushed, realizing he had been discovered, and turned to face forward, brow furrowed as he continued to guide the cart smoothly. Frodo smiled to himself. His health had continued to improve until, at last, he had been deemed worthy to make the long delayed excursion. Beside the cart Strider and Gandalf walked, both smiling at the obvious care and concentration of the gardener. Bell sat beside Frodo, nervously plucking at the folds of her best dress. Frodo had been most insistent that she accompany them and she was feeling a bit anxious, as well as excited, about being invited on her first inclusion into, what she thought of, as the life of gentry. The wagon turned up the small, grassy lane which was even more rutted than the main road, and Sam frowned as he slowly maneuvered the pony, making a mental note to himself to come and fill in the ruts on his next trip out.

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It was Mersday. Blossom Bogs checked the clock on the mantel for the fourth time in as many minutes, as the large hand arrived on the twelve making it two o'clock. She sighed. Each week for the last month she had awaited the arrival of her young friend.

"Foolish old hobbit," she muttered to herself. "You know perfectly well he is yet too weak to make such a journey and still you continue, each week, to set yourself up for the disappointment," she chided to the room. She rose slowly, depressed and angry with herself, and moved to the table she and Frodo always shared for their weekly tea. All of Frodo's favorite foods sat awaiting the injured hobbit's return to normal activity. She sighed again as she wistfully removed each item to the kitchen to be stored later in the pantry. She left the flowers and fragrant herbs sitting in the
table's center along with the carefully pressed tablecloth and, dejectedly, left the room. She plunked herself down on the sofa in the parlor, knowing she should be changing out of the fine dress and back into her usual work clothes, but feeling no energy to do so. She pulled a lap quilt about her and stared into the fire with a melancholy expression.

The mood, however, was broken by the sound of a wagon slowly approaching the smial. She rose, curious as to who would be visiting, and peered out the porch window. She gasped as she beheld Estel and Gandalf flanking a small cart driven by Sam. In the back she could see Bell, looking decidedly uneasy. But what really held her eye was the curly head of a hobbit nestled amid a pile of blankets and pillows, in the corner of the bed.

She quickly glanced about the room, ready to put things to rights, forgetting, momentarily, that the room had already been tidied earlier. She fidgeted with her dress then her eyes flew open wide as she remembered putting the tea things in the kitchen. She ran from the room and into the kitchen, retrieving the dainties and placing them back on the round table. When all was as it was she stood before the round door awaiting the knock and trying to catch her breath.

The wagon stopped with a jolt at the small home and Sam alit to help his mother from the cart bed. Strider moved to lift Frodo out, but the hobbit moved away, gathering the crutches to him. He had insisted on bringing the supports even though he had tried to use them only once. Sam tensed, knowing what was to follow, and cringed inwardly at what was sure to be, a show of the famed Baggins stubbornness.

"No, thank you, Strider. I wish to walk through that door on my own," Frodo said, his jaw set for battle into a determined line.

Strider looked at him in concern. "Frodo, I do not think that is wise. Remember what happened last time," he said, reminding Frodo of the near disaster. He was referring to Frodo's first attempt to pull himself up and walk with the crutches across the bedroom. Strider had allowed it, knowing full well that if he did not Frodo would try it on his own when no one was around. The ranger had stood across the room as Frodo had maneuvered the crutches under his arms and stood, holding the broken leg up off the floor. He remembered how Frodo had paled, a sheen of sweat forming on his forehead, and, with trembling arms, taken two hesitant steps towards him. At that point his arms had buckled under the strain and he had begun to fall forward, the broken leg coming dangerously close to taking his full weight. A horrified Strider had lunged forward, capturing the limp hobbit before any injury had been done. He had placed Frodo back into bed and, after checking the frustrated hobbit over, had told him, sternly, that he was not yet strong enough to attempt such a thing. The hobbit had looked at him dejectedly then rolled to his side with a whimper. Strider had approached the other side of the bed to regain eye contact and continue the lecture but Frodo had fallen into an exhausted sleep. He frowned as he now looked at the sullen face before him and, sighing, lifted Frodo from the cart. He retrieved the crutches, placing them under Frodo's arms, and slowly lowered him to the ground. He situated himself in front of Frodo, arms extended as the hobbit took his first step. Behind Frodo, Gandalf walked in the same way. Sam, tense as a bowstring, walked at his side. Frodo grinned as he pictured how the group must appear. He took another step and Strider stepped back, expecting at any moment, to have to lurch forward and catch the hobbit.

Frodo glowered at the ranger. "Must you do that, Strider? It is most distracting and shows a decided lack of confidence in my abilities," he said grumpily.

"Those are the conditions of your walk, Master Baggins, take it or leave it," the ranger said in annoyance.
Frodo glared at him but continued his slow progress towards the smial's doorway. Perspiration formed small beads on his face and he panted harshly as his body strained with each step. He gripped the handholds tighter as he willed his trembling body to make another step. Strider could see, all to clearly, how Frodo struggled and was about to grab the willful hobbit and carry him the remaining distance when, thankfully, they reached the doorway.

Strider reached behind him and gave a loud knock on the door, only then did he step aside. The door was opened and Blossom stood on the threshold, arms crossed over her chest.

"You're late *Mister* Baggins," she said, her mouth set in a grim line. Frodo looked up at her and she was appalled at the lack of color in his face. Instinctively she reached forward as Frodo wobbled, his arms trembling violently, and collapsed into Strider's waiting arms. Strider carried the near unconscious hobbit inside and placed him gently on the sofa. After propping his leg up on an ottoman and arranging pillows behind him and under his arms, he turned on the hobbit, anger suffusing his face.

"That was most foolish of you, *Master* Baggins," he stormed. The stuporous hobbit only listlessly stared at him. He tended to agree with the ranger but was loathe to admit it. He sighed, happy that the ordeal was over. Blossom brought a glass of water and a cool rag and tenderly dabbed at his face as he drank.

"Since you are all here, why don't we have tea?" Blossom said cheerfully, trying to diffuse the situation. Strider, Sam and Gandalf helped Blossom move the tea things into the parlor and they all found a place to sit. A relieved sigh passed through the group as they helped themselves to the delicacies while Blossom poured tea into china cups. She smiled at Frodo who had regained a portion of his strength from the walking debacle. "I have thought of little else but you, dear Frodo, these many weeks. I am delighted by your progress," she said, smiling.

Frodo smiled weakly back at her. "Well, I simply could not allow another Mersday to pass without meeting for tea with you." He looked wistfully at her. "I've missed you, Blossom."

"And I you, dear boy," she said her eyes moist. They both turned to the rest of the group and raised their cups in a toast.

"To newfound and very old friends, may we remain so until the end of our days," Frodo said in a clear, strong voice. All present smiled widely at the sentiment and lifted their cups in unison. As he watched his friends chat and laugh with one another he smiled to himself. He had found family and, somehow, he could feel his mother and father watching and smiling along beside him.

The End

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