

Hebel
(Keeping)
by Eleanor Gardner

The Scissors and Swords Series

A very special pair of scissors and a hobbit in need of a haircut.
Sequel to *Risto Vae*.

Follows the events in *Falling Into the Sky* and *Before Breakfast*.

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Chapter One - *Keeping* Secrets

“...and I heard that he found that treasure of the Baggins and went off to Michel Delving to get some coin for it. That's why we en't seen him for a bit.”

“Nah. He's just gone back to those queer Bucklanders is all. I knew he wouldn't last a fortnight alone in that big old place.”

“My Iris says he's took sick up there all by hisself. Always been too pale and skinny to be healthy, that boy, my Iris says.”

Sam slumped further over his ale, torn between leaving behind a half-full tankard or enduring more of the same whispered rumours and wild gossip that had been going on ever since Bilbo's abrupt departure three days ago.

It was getting worse because Frodo hadn't set foot off the Hill since the party. And it was making Sam feel angry and frightened at the same time, because he was beginning to worry that some of that wild speculation might be true.

He scowled into his drink.

“Pay no mind to em, boy,” the Gaffer declared gruffly. “I told you, it'll all die down soon enough. It'd die down a tad sooner than later if Mister Baggins'd come down the Hill. But that's his right. It's his hill, he is the Master of Bag End, and he can do as he pleases, if'n you ask me!” Ending his tirade in a loud tone, the Gaffer banged his tankard down on

the table. The babble of voices in the Green Dragon lulled suddenly as guilty glances were thrown in their direction.

Not discouraged from their favourite pursuit for long, the patrons of the Green Dragon began to chatter again and the volume escalated once more. "But he's can't be eatin' right, Da," Sam whispered. "I checked the stores right after Mister Merry and the rest left and there weren't much then."

"None of our business what he ets or don't et, boy," the Gaffer hissed in a low tone.

"But we haven't seen him at all for two whole days," Sam protested, his stomach going sour with fears he didn't want to name.

"And there've been days when Mister Bilbo Baggins was holed up in there for longer than that, an' you know it. They're a lot alike, those two."

Sam shook his head, "It's not like Mister Frodo to do that, Da."

"Boy, you don't know nothing about what Mister Frodo'll do," the Gaffer growled back. "You can't predict their ways any more than you can predict your sister's moods. They're one kind and we're another. And the sooner you--"

"Remember that the better off I'll be. I know, Da. I know." Sam was still amazed at the Gaffer's ability to ignore what he did not want to accept and to forget anything that did not support his long-held beliefs. But he was still the Gaffer, and Sam would still be the respectful youngest son.

The Gaffer hurrumped and took a long pull on his ale.

Sam felt the tension in the back of his neck creeping up into his head yet again. He had nursed an aching head for two days. The first day he could blame on too much Old Winyards with Frodo and his kin the day after Mister Bilbo disappeared.

It had been one of the hardest things Sam had ever done, watching what had gone on that day. Frodo and his cousins and friends had spent hours fending off greedy relatives who were after their share of the infamous Baggins' treasure. As the hours had ticked by, Frodo had grown quieter and quieter and paler and paler, until he practically locked himself in Mister Bilbo's study. And then Gandalf had left suddenly and Frodo's barely maintained composure had seemed to go with him.

Worst of all, Sam had to leave as well, just as dawn greyed the sky, because the Gaffer would not be delayed yet another day by the excuse of 'cleaning up after the party'. And when Sam had left, Frodo had still been awake and listlessly wandering through Bag End, although Mister Merry had been snoring comfortably, or perhaps uncomfortably, on the floor in the parlour. Sam had tried to get Frodo to go to bed, but Frodo would have none of it.

The first day's headache had slid into the second day's headache that evening when Sam finally managed to get away from the Sackville-Bagginses and the Gaffer only to find Bag End closed up tight as a drum, doors locked and windows firmly shuttered. He had circled the hill and pounded on the doors to no avail, then returned the morning in the grey light of dawn to find the smials still closed up tight, and no smoke from the chimneys. Granted, it was still mild autumn weather, but there was always a fire going somewhere in the damp, cool smials.

Now, sitting in the Dragon after yet another long day at the S.-B.'s, Sam itched for the Gaffer to finish his ale so they could go on home and he could check again. If there was still no sign, then he would send a message to Buckland. Perhaps Frodo had changed his mind and taken Mister Merry up on his invitation to stay with his Brandybuck kin for a while. Or perhaps he had hied off to Tuckborough to visit the Took.

But the Bagginses had always left the Gamgees with detailed plans for their trips and instructions on caring for Bag End in their absence, along with the extra key. At least, it had been that way before Mister Bilbo left. Perhaps now things had changed. Perhaps Mister Bilbo's leaving so sudden-like had changed things.

And that made Sam's head ache even more. Perhaps things between he and Frodo would change now. Only a week ago they had talked long and late about Frodo coming of age and how Frodo was determined that it wouldn't change their relationship. They had even talked about Frodo becoming Master of Bag End at some point, and how, even though that might complicate things a bit, it wouldn't change anything either. But they hadn't talked about Mister Bilbo leaving. Certainly Mister Bilbo had talked about it. But he had talked about it so often that no one around him, including Frodo, believed he would ever do it. And then he had gone and vanished. And so had Frodo, seemingly, without a word to Sam.

"Boy, are you listenin' to me?" came the Gaffer's voice over the rumble of conversation around them.

"I'm sorry, Da. What?"

“Miz Lobelia wants them bulbs pulled up and stored tomorrow, and she plans to count ‘em.”

“And what am I supposed to do if some critter got at a few of ‘em?” Sam gritted back.

“Boy, don’t give me lip!”

“I’m not, Da,” Sam responded quickly. “But I’d like to give her some. The way she acted toward Mister Frodo after Mister Bilbo left was--”

“None of our concern, boy!” the Gaffer growled, “I’ve told you, yer gettin’ too far above yerself messin’ about with their like.” He shook his white head. “You’ll only come to grief.”

Sam rubbed at his neck wearily. It was getting late. Tonight he would do something besides lay in bed worrying -- maybe breaking a shutter or bending that vent in the bathing room and squeezing through--

“...well, I heard Otho bragging that boy of his got him good. Paid him back just a bit of what he owed him for stealing his inheritance...”

“Yeah, left him black and blue and he’s hidin’ out up there, waitin’ till them bruises heal up.”

Sam sat up straight, his ears instantly tuned to the low conversation behind them.

“I don’t hold with that, though I heard they was quite put out about it all. Got nothin’ after all that waitin’ but some spoon or...”

“...too much for old Lobelia I’d say. Scalded her tail right good. And that boy of hers has a mean streak almost as bad as his mum.”

“And him wrapped around her thumb. I wouldn’t put it past him...”

Sam pushed back and stood hastily. “I’m goin’ up and check on Bag End, then,” he choked out. “Just make sure everything’s all right up there.”

He was out of the Dragon before the Gaffer could even blink in response, then he ran, focusing on catching sight of the tree on the Hill over Bag End. Sam hadn’t done it often, but when it was necessary, he could cover the distance from the Dragon to the Hill at a right fast clip. When

he finally did catch sight of the Hill tree, it looked to him as if it was a great distance off at the end of a long grey tunnel.

Why had he waited and not just broken through a shutter last night? He had left Frodo alone to face that lumbering bully Lotho. He had left Frodo alone.

Sam thought of every curse he knew, including the one in dwarvish that Frodo had taught him not long ago. He dumped all of them on his own thick head as he ran.

The Hill Road had never seemed so long or so steep before. His chest was heaving when he skidded to a stop in front of the green door of Bag End, but he didn't even take time to breathe. His fist slammed into the door, hard.

“FRODO!!!”

Even to his own ears, his voice sounded strained and frightened. Taking harsh gulping breaths, Sam slammed his hand against the door again in frustration. Then he looked around anxiously and saw it.

Half-buried in mulch by the side of the door was a piece of parchment that had obviously been there for a few days. Grabbing it up, he saw that there was a nail hole in it, but it had torn loose, it seemed. It was in Frodo's hand and it was dated three days back.

Sam -

I decided to go to Brandy Hall for a few days after all. I locked Bag End up tight so you need not worry about anything. I will be back soon, meleth-nin.

Frodo

Sam touched the paper reverently, caressing those last words with his fingertips. Only a few days back Frodo had taught him what those elvish words meant and, for a moment, just a moment, Sam could breathe again. Gulping in air, he leaned over with his hands on his knees and closed his eyes. Frodo was safe at Brandy Hall. No one had left him black and blue. The rumours about Lotho were just rumours. Looking at the note one more time to reassure himself it was real, he started to turn away from the door.

Then he remembered the end of that awful day, when, over yet another glass of Old Winyards, Mister Merry had begged Frodo to come to Brandy Hall for a visit, just to get away. And Frodo had been firm about how, after all that had happened, he couldn't just disappear -- not on the heels of Bilbo's vanishing act. Why, they might just make off with Bag End in his absence, as they had nearly done the first time Bilbo left. He hadn't even smiled when he said that, but instead he had looked sad and told Mister Merry it would be too traumatic for their tenants and everyone who depended on Bag End for their livelihood if he left too, even briefly.

And Frodo wouldn't leave without even a word or a touch, not after everything that had happened between them, not with everything they meant to each other -- Frodo wouldn't leave just a piece of paper, would he? Sam studied the note again, confused. Then spotted something strange -- the way the letters wavered just slightly on the page, not Mister Frodo's clear, precise script at all. The parchment began to shake in his trembling hands. Gripping it tightly, he folded it and tucked it into his trouser pocket, gazing at the chipped green paint on the door. Sam knew Frodo hadn't gone anywhere -- Frodo had shut himself up in Bag End, without a decent fire, nor even food enough for a day, much less two, pretending, to Sam and everyone else, that he was gone.

Sam wondered, only briefly, if he should just go out behind the hill and sit next to the privy. Frodo had to come out there sometime. Perhaps that would be best, just to go out there and wait. But then he thought about the shaky script and what might have caused Frodo's hand to shake like that. Frodo might have taken sick, be lying somewhere in Bag End, hurt, or even worse. Sam couldn't just sit and wait.

Then again, Frodo wouldn't have gone to all that trouble, leaving a note and locking everything up so tight and all, unless he had a good reason. If there were just some way that he could go in and make sure Frodo was all right and then leave before Frodo even knew he was there. Sam had done that before, checked on Frodo when he was worried for his safety, but the door had mostly been unlocked then, and Frodo had eventually found out about those times. Sam would've blushed at *that* memory, if he weren't so worried.

One last time while it was still light enough, Sam checked all the possible ways into the smials, clambering around the Hill, testing each shutter and door, until finally he realized the only possible way he could get into Bag End was through Mister Bilbo's secret door. Although he wasn't certain exactly how it worked, Sam knew precisely where it was. He scrambled on up the Hill and onto the roof, more sure-footed on this ground than any other place in the world.

Straight to the spot he went, knowing it as well as he did. He himself cultivated the shrubs and plants around it to look natural and wild, but behind and beneath their branches, there was another vent that was bigger and broader than the one in the bathing room a few paces away -- a vent that wasn't a vent at all. Sam could feel his heart pounding so hard that it seemed to vibrate down through his feet into the very soil covering Bag End.

What would he find if he did manage to get in? And why didn't Frodo trust him enough to tell him what was wrong? What if Frodo had gone to Brandy Hall after all? And how could Frodo go off leaving only a written note for his Sam? What if Frodo had really locked himself into Bag End? Why would he have done that?

Sam's fingers scabbled at the metal in the dim light, feeling desperately around the edges of the vent for anything at all. It was a cunningly crafted thing, probably made by the dwarves for Mister Bilbo. No one else had vents like these. And certainly no one had vents that hid secret entrances. He searched furiously for a latch, a catch, anything at all, but found only smooth metal and nothing else.

On the second pass, Sam felt something odd and misshapen on the metal, then slid past before it registered. Gingerly, he felt his way back to it. There it was, and no mistake. He grappled with it in the dim light, frustration and fear slickening his fingers with sweat.

Sam closed his eyes and took a deep breath, "Please open. Please?" There was a soft click and the vent swung out in his hands. Peering into the darkness below, he saw small steps receding into blackness. Without stopping to think, he slipped down onto those steps, pulling the vent closed behind him and feeling his way in the dark.

The dark.

Sam had forgotten how much he hated the dark.

Chapter Two - *Keeping Quiet*

Sam's pulse quickened and his skin went clammy and cold. The silence in the tunnel was absolute. He knew the opening was narrow and low because of the way his laboured breathing sounded, coming back at him from the walls and ceiling. Waiting until the dim light that still seeped through the vent above dispelled some of the complete blackness around him, he began to discern steps into the darkness below him and could see the passage curving away into shadow.

His heart began pounding even harder than it had been. What kind of fool was he, thinking he could do this? He had forgotten it would be so dark and so close.

Feeling his way carefully down each step, Sam put his hands on the walls and stooped over into the cramped passage. He knew he would eventually come out in Bag End's cold room or wine cellar -- perhaps even a secret storeroom, further and deeper under The Hill than those, but sooner or later he would come out in Bag End somewhere -- sooner or later.

As he moved forward, sliding his hands along the walls, he shivered with the chill in the stone and in the air. It stayed this way nearly all year long. Sam had to keep reminding himself of where he was or he began imagining all kinds of things -- horrible smelly things that hung down out of the blackness and brushed your face and made slithering sounds in your darkest dreams. Shutting his eyes, he tried desperately to remember how delightful it felt on a hot summer day to come down into the cellars to get eggs or cheese or milk or to top off a mug with ale or to get Mister Bilbo another bottle of Old Winyards. But his whole body was trembling. He could feel the blackness pushing in on him. Cold and clammy and--

Sam had been just old enough to be ashamed of his fear of the dark, but still young enough to be defeated by it. Daisy had been mad about something. Something about the wash, he couldn't remember what. But she had locked him into the cellar of their smials -- into the dark, cramped cellar, and left him. And he had heard it, the slithering sounds from his bad dreams -- back in the depths of the cellar, crawling toward him. He had pressed himself up against the crack in the door, trying to breathe -- alternately sobbing and sniffing, begging Daisy to let him out.

He hadn't heard Frodo come to the door or heard exactly what he said to Daisy, although he had heard Daisy's side of that story -- how Master Frodo had pushed his way into the smials and been very impolite to her.

Of course, Daisy and Frodo had not gotten along very well since that day, but all Sam could really remember was a very loud, very firm voice just outside the cellar door. Then the door had opened and Frodo had pulled him up off the floor, dusting him off quickly and telling him that he had an important errand for him. They had walked out of the smials together, hand in hand, and Frodo had never said one thing about the tears on Sam's face. And after that day, Frodo had tried hard to make sure Sam never ended up in a dark place, leastways not alone.

Now here he was, in a very dark place. Alone.

Sam suddenly found himself hoping that Frodo had gone to Brandy Hall. Even though the very thought made his head pound and his stomach go sour, he would rather Frodo be there with Mister Merry and his kin than here in the dark, alone, and hurt. Please let those rumours be just rumours. Just idle gossip of nasty minds. Let Mister Frodo be off down the road with his kin.

After stumbling along with his hands on the wall of the low passage, Sam came up hard against some kind of barrier and opened his eyes, but it was still absolutely dark around him. Running his hands around on the obstacle, he realized it was smooth wood and he searched desperately for a latch or a handle. Clearly, there were the seams of a round door, but it was all of one piece and so smooth and tight he could not get his fingers into the edge anywhere along it. And there was no latch, or handle -- nothing. He hunkered down next to it and nearly groaned in frustration.

Maybe Mister Bilbo hadn't used this entry in a long while. Maybe the passage wasn't safe and would fall in on him and he would be buried down here and no one would know and he wouldn't be able to breathe-- Sam suddenly realized that he was gulping in air and beginning to whine like some animal in a trap. Shutting his eyes, he clasped his hands together and dug his fingernails hard into his palms.

"Samwise Gamgee! You are not doing Mister Frodo any good at all sitting here in the cold dark shaking like a coney in a snare. Wake up! Mister Bilbo got in this way so you can too. Try again."

With his eyes closed, Sam rose to his knees and slowly ran his hands over the wood surface, feeling his way across every bit of it. It seemed a long time before his fingers found, on the left side of what appeared to be the door, an area that felt smooth and silky, as if it had been touched again and again by other fingers. Tempted to open his eyes, he squeezed them shut, continuing to trace the smooth part with his fingertips. He was rewarded to find seams there, almost undetectable. He pushed in. Nothing. He pushed harder, and a fist-sized piece sunk into the wood

with a resounding click. The round door swung open soundlessly toward him, almost knocking him over. Those dwarves of Mister Bilbo's had done a good bit of work under Bag End, seemingly.

Scrabbling backward, he peered into the blackness beyond the door -- if it were possible, it was even darker. No grey light from the vent seeped beyond the door. Only blackness.

"Just dark, dark and more dark," he whispered to himself. "Well, there's nothin' for it but to go on."

Sam crept in on his hands and knees, and found himself in a round wooden tunnel. Before he had crawled forward very far, he had run right into the end of it -- yet another wood partition. He took a deep breath, but somehow, the feeling of wood all around him reassured him. There was no movement of air and no possibility of anything brushing across his face. Reaching forward, he found that the end of the tunnel was yet another door of wood. Sliding his hand to the left, he found a handle of the smooth, silky wood this time. He tugged at it and heard that same resounding click and a smooth silent swing of the door outward into blackness.

Inky complete blackness.

Confronted with endless black space just in front of his face, Sam hung there in the opening for only a moment. He suddenly remembered that, as far as he knew, he could be perched on the edge of some great cliff over nothingness and scrabbled backwards into more darkness, a sound rising in his throat as he gulped in great breaths of air. Then he realized that the air he was gulping in smelled familiar -- very familiar.

Closing his eyes, he took another deep breath. The cold cellar! It was the scent of the Bag End cold cellar -- unmistakable. Leaning forward again, Sam was more certain now, but could not figure out exactly where he was. He tried to picture the room in his mind -- he had been in there so many times. It must be the barrel -- that huge barrel that he had always wondered about that lay on braces at the back of the cellar. Sam had often studied on what it might hold, but had never dared to ask about it. That must be where he was -- sitting in that barrel right there at the end of the cold cellar. And if he was right, Mister Bilbo always kept a lantern and tinder right there on the shelves to his left -- and now he knew why.

But how far off the ground was that barrel? Sam tried to picture the height of the braces. Not far -- if he was right. But what if he was wrong? What if he slid out of the barrel end and went tumbling end over

end forever into nothing? Sam scrambled back into the barrel again and sat there for a moment.

“Samwise Gamgee, you're ten times a fool. Just hang off the edge. If there's no floor, you can pull yourself back in!”

Turning around cautiously, Sam sidled backward, sliding over the edge with one foot, holding on desperately with his arms and reaching for the floor with his toes. There! Cold stone met his toes and he breathed a sigh of absolute relief, lowering himself down onto the floor. Gingerly, Sam swept his hands around him -- the stone flooring in the Bag End cold cellar, and it was very cold.

Crawling carefully on hands and knees to where he thought the shelves were, he felt out in front of him. Something wobbled as he touched it and hit the floor with a clatter. Likely he had knocked the very thing he was looking for off the shelf -- the tinderbox. He found himself scrabbling around desperately trying to find where it fell and breathing a sign of relief when his hand struck it. With shaking hands he barely managed to open it, much less find the flint and steel and strike it, but after taking a few deep breaths, he managed to strike a spark and light the tender.

Sam breathed a sigh of absolute relief as the light bloomed in the dark, throwing strange shadows against the cold room's shelves and barrels. He lit the lamp, putting the tinderbox back as he stood up on shaky legs. There were no more obstacles now -- the door into the main cellar and the corridor both had latches on the inside and outside. Mister Bilbo had done that after Frodo locked himself in the cellar once.

Going up the two steps and through the door, Sam found the main cellar quiet and the door into the corridor and the kitchen beyond shut tightly. Both the bathing room and the wine cellar were dark as well. He started for the door but then stopped in dismay in front of the awful pile of dirt and rock from the interrupted digging of Sancho Proudfoot. For a young one, he had made a substantial-sized hole in the wall of the main cellar.

“Ninnyhammer!” he whispered to himself, “You should’ve had that cleaned up and repaired when it happened. Frodo don’t need reminding of those goings-on.”

Sam approached the door into the corridor quietly. There was no light or sound in the corridor beyond, as far as he could tell. Turning down the flame on the lamp, he pulled the door open slowly and carefully.

The smials seemed to be completely quiet, but he could see faint light, as if from one candle in a distant room, far down the left side of the corridor where Mister Frodo's rooms were. Sam breathed a sigh of relief. If it was Frodo, at least he had been well enough to light a candle in the last few hours. But he had to make sure it was Frodo and that he was all right -- then he would leave as quietly as he came. Sam would give Frodo his privacy and his space, as Frodo seemed to be wanting it.

Sam padded quickly down the corridor toward Mister Frodo's rooms. The faint light, not enough to be seen outside through the tight shutters, flickered from Frodo's bedroom. There was no sound from inside at all, as far as he could tell. Slowing, he approached the door carefully and listened. It was completely quiet, and that worried him even more. He couldn't even hear Frodo breathing, and even if he was asleep he would hear him breathing. Sam stuck his head around the doorframe slowly. At the sight that greeted him there, he stepped out into the doorway completely, gaping in disbelief.

Frodo's wardrobe was empty, the doors standing open into the room. And the table next to his bed was emptied of books and papers. Everything that marked the room as Frodo's was gone. A trunk stood open on the floor, filled halfway with odds and ends of clothing. A candle flickered on the floor next to the trunk.

And worst of all, Frodo's filled pack was sitting on Frodo's bed, and the bed had been completely stripped of sheets and blankets and all.

Something in Sam's chest tightened and started to ache hollowly. Frodo was leaving. Leaving Bag End. Leaving Sam. Leaving.

Chapter Three - *Keeping Vigil*

He heard it coming from Mister Bilbo's end of the smials. Something. Some indistinct sound.

Sam peered back down the corridor, turning the lamp down even more. Now that he looked closer, there was more dim light spilling into the passage from beyond the kitchen. Again, he heard the faintest of sounds, and it was coming from there -- from where the light was -- either Mister Bilbo's study or his bedroom a ways beyond it.

Taking one more look at Frodo's room, still unable to believe what he was seeing, Sam moved stealthily back down the corridor, turning the lamp completely down. The sound solidified into noises in a rhythm that sounded like talking. He could only catch small snatches, not even words, but the voice was unmistakably Frodo's -- hoarse and scratchy, but it was Frodo.

Sam almost sank to his knees in relief at hearing that beloved voice, but something kept him on his feet. Something in the tone kept him moving forward, inexorably, toward the door into Mister Bilbo's bedroom. It was only Frodo's voice. No one was answering him. Was Frodo talking to himself?

Unless...unless Mister Bilbo had snuck back! He was back and he was hiding away in here. He had fooled them all! That was who Mister Frodo was talking to. Sam felt his heart lift with joy.

Sam stopped next to the door and carefully peeked around the doorframe into the room.

Frodo was on his knees in front of Bilbo's wardrobe. The doors were open and a multicoloured assortment of waistcoats surrounded him on the floor. A huge trunk stood open behind him, half full of clothing and a candle flickered dimly from the top of another. Frodo was clutching one particular waistcoat, a rather brightly coloured one, to his chest.

"If I left now, I might find you. I can hike faster and further than you in a day, but which way, Bilbo? Which way?"

He couldn't see Frodo's face, but Sam felt his heart clutch in his chest at the tremor in that voice. Frodo was missing Mister Bilbo something fierce, from the sound of it. Even though he had promised himself that he would just make sure Frodo was all right and sneak back out, Sam knew that couldn't do that now, because Frodo wasn't all right. He

watched as Frodo lowered his face into the waistcoat and breathed deeply as if of some wonderful scent. It seemed to him that Frodo was grieving, and worse -- Frodo was packing, and he seemed seriously set on following Mister Bilbo. It was one thing for Frodo to go off to visit his kin; it was another thing for Frodo to be on the road and for Sam not to know where, not to know how to find him. Sam suddenly felt as if he couldn't breathe and his skin went clammy. The lamp slipped the tiniest bit in his grip, barely making a noise, and he looked down to steady it, then he heard the gasp from across the room and realized Frodo had heard it too.

“SAM!!”

Sam looked up in time to see Frodo scramble to his feet, tripping over the waistcoats and knocking over the candle in the process. The candle upended onto the stone floor, the holder hit the floor with a clatter, and the room plunged into darkness. For a long moment, there was just the sound of their breathing -- Frodo's sounding strained and harsh, but Sam's no less laboured. The tiny flame in Sam's lamp shuddered with every breath.

“What are you doing in here? How did you get in here?” Frodo croaked from the darkness on the other side of the room.

Sam turned up the flame in the lamp. Frodo was standing at an odd angle, swiping at his face with one hand, the waistcoat still clutched in the other, his expression hidden in the shadows.

“I...I'm sorry Mister Frodo. I got worried an' I thought I ought to make sure everything was all right in here an' I--”

“Go home, Sam.” Frodo turned away from him. “Just go home. Bag End is fine.” The voice was shaking.

“I wasn't worried about Bag End.” Sam took a step toward him. “I was worried about you.”

“I'm fine, Sam. Just go home, please?” came the hoarse response.

Sam moved a little closer, turning the lamp up all the way, and Frodo suddenly headed for the wardrobe. “I just have things I need to do -- alone.”

“Like leaving?”

The dark head turned slightly toward him. “Leaving?”

Sam took a deep breath, looking meaningfully at the trunks, then back at Frodo. "You're packin'."

Frodo gazed into the wardrobe sightlessly. His hands twisted the fabric of the waistcoat as he stood there.

"I am. I...I'm packing Bilbo's..." his voice seemed to break then, but he went on, "things away in storage." Frodo finished in a quiet voice. "He left so much. He left so many things."

There was a long silence as Frodo stood in front of the wardrobe. Sam moved closer, trying hard to see if Frodo was really as pale as he appeared in the dim light.

"I didn't think he'd do it. I didn't think he would really leave. I know he only stayed here all this time...for me." Frodo spoke as if Sam wasn't there, talking to himself in an odd tone. "But I...I suppose I hoped he wouldn't do it. Not when it came to actually leaving."

Sam watched as Frodo bent his head and swayed on his feet. Unable to hold himself back, Sam moved then, tentatively gripping Frodo's shoulder. He was immensely relieved when Frodo turned willingly into his arms.

"I miss him, Sam," Frodo buried his face in Sam's shirt and Sam held on silently.

"I'll never know if he's all right," the shaky voice went on. "As long as he's happy, wherever he is, I could bear it. If I could just see him, one more time and know--"

"Then we'll just go find him." Sam said quickly, rubbing his hand in slow circles on the damp linen of Frodo's shirt. "We'll just close up Bag End and go find him."

Frodo stiffened in his arms, then pulled back to look at him. "You'd do that, Sam? You'd leave everything and go with me?"

"Frodo, don't you know? I'd follow you to--" Sam broke off, staring at Frodo's pale face intently.

At first Sam thought it was a trick of the dim light and shadows, then, when he realized what he was looking at, he felt every muscle in his body suddenly tense and his gut go icy cold. A dark purple bruise coloured

the left side of Frodo's face and it was clear that crying was not the only thing that had swollen his left eye.

“Mister Frodo, what happened to your face?” He tried to keep his voice calm, but he knew it was shaking.

Frodo's eyes widened and he quickly lowered his face back into Sam's shoulder. “I...I had a bit too much Old Winyards and I ran into the kitchen door,” came the muffled voice.

Sam looked around the room. No bottle. No glass. Only a teacup sat on the bedside table. His hand, hidden behind Frodo's back, clenched into a fist and he took a deep breath.

“That's good. Well, leastways, better than the rumours.” Sam managed a controlled tone. “Rumours are Lotho got the best of you and you're hiding out up here lickin' your wounds.”

“He did not!” Frodo pulled away, his blue eyes burning. “I sent him home limping and bleeding!” He said furiously, the dark, swollen bruise along the side of his face making him look even more fierce.

“Limping and bleeding? Really?” Sam's mouth quirked only slightly.

“Very much so,” Frodo's back straightened and he swiped at his face with his shirtsleeve. Sam noted that shirtsleeve appeared to have seen much of the same use recently. “Lotho was unable to walk very well when he left and probably won't enjoy...uh...well, he won't be having any fun with Delphinium any time soon. And his lip was split open,” he finished proudly.

“Really?” Sam managed a smile at that.

Frodo stared at him. Then he smiled as well. A tremulous smile, like a grey tinged morning after a dark stormy night. “Really.”

“I'm glad,” Sam retorted. “Because you...well, I'm sorry Mister Frodo, but you look awful.”

Frodo's smile grew a bit stronger. “I know. I thought the bruise would have faded more by now--”

Sam stared at Frodo's hair. “And, begging your pardon, but what happened to your hair?”

Frodo's hand reached up to a ragged gap in his curls at the front. "You don't want to know."

"It looks like you let Master Pippin cut it."

"Not quite, but close." Frodo demurred.

"Hmmm?" Sam reached out and dug his fingers into the tense muscles of Frodo's shoulders and Frodo leaned into his ministrations with a sigh and then a long groan, his head bent forward nearly under Sam's chin.

"I was under Bilbo's desk trying to reach something and upended an open glue bottle onto my head," came the muffled response. "By the time I realized...well, it was pretty much hardened in glue. I tried to get it out, but everything stuck to it. So I just hacked it off." One hand went up to touch the shorn curls.

Sam continued to work silently on the tense muscles up and down Frodo's back.

"Sam."

"Hmmmm?" Sam responded.

"Do you think you could cut my hair so it doesn't show?"

"I think so." Sam leaned back and studied the very ragged gap. "It'll be a bit short though." He ran his fingers through it, pulling and checking. There were still little chunks of some strange substance stuck in it.

"I wonder who will be cutting Bilbo's hair?" Frodo sighed and looked down at the waistcoat still in his hand.

Mister Bilbo had always cut Frodo's hair and Frodo had always cut Mister Bilbo's. It was a longstanding Baggins' ritual. Sam had witnessed it many times.

Now Mister Bilbo was gone. Sam blinked at the sudden tears in his eyes. "Mister Bilbo'll find someone to take care of him. You know how he is," Sam stated as calmly as he could manage.

Frodo looked up, managing a smile. "Yes. Bilbo will find someone to take care of him."

“Well, I'm thinking I should build some fires and open some shutters, if you're of a mind to. Bag End's a bit chilly and...musty, beggin' your pardon. At least it appears that way to me,” Sam said.

The smile disappeared as quickly as it had come.

“I was afraid of what...” Frodo reached up and cupped Sam's face with cold fingers. “I don't want you going after Lotho, Sam. I don't want to risk the Gaffer-- Lobelia--”

Sam reached out with his own fingers and lightly skimmed the angry-looking bruise, then grasped Frodo's fingers in his own warm ones.

Frodo was watching him closely. “I just don't want anyone else to be hurt because of Bilbo leaving. Especially not you.”

“Lotho'll hurt himself plenty more than I could ever hurt him,” Sam managed finally.

Frodo looked at him searchingly and frowned.

“Do you...do you want me to leave the shutters closed, then?”

“No, although I really would rather not have to explain this.” Frodo gestured to his face. “To anyone.”

“Well, you don't *have* to answer the door. And I can go out and get anything you need,” Sam responded.

Frodo smiled. “Then I believe you are right, Mister Gamgee. It does seem a bit...rank in here. And someone has let the fires go out.”

“Can't have that,” Sam tried hard to make his voice playful, but it was still hard while he was looking at that pale ravaged face. “I need to go get some wood in and get this hole warmed up some I think.”

“Indeed,” Frodo responded. “And I'll open some shutters to air it out a bit. And while I am at it, I think I need a bath.”

“Well, I wasn't going to say--”

Frodo swatted Sam's hand away. “Samwise Gamgee, I am hard pressed to figure how you got into 'this hole', so you had best behave before I think on it too much.”

Sam grinned at that. "I'll go down and set some coppers on for you and get the bath warmed up. Then I'll see what's around for supper." Sam watched as Frodo staggered slightly on his way toward the wardrobe, that bright-coloured waistcoat still clutched in his hand. "We can trim your hair after, if you're still awake, that is."

"I'm not tired, Sam." Frodo responded in a hollow voice, folding the garment carefully and holding it to his chest.

"Certain and you aren't," Sam muttered to himself as he looked around the room. "I wonder if Mister Bilbo left those scissors of his."

"I'm sure he did Sam. He didn't take much with him," came Frodo's quiet response.

Sam glanced back at Frodo, still standing in front of the half-empty wardrobe. *Oh yes he did. He took quite a bit of you with him, I think.*

Chapter Four - *Keeping House*

The crisp autumn air had driven out the musty smell of rooms closed up tight for three long days. Cheerful little fires burned in several rooms, warding off the dampness. Numerous lamps, lanterns and candles lit the kitchen, the corridor, and Mister Bilbo's bedroom.

Bag End looked inhabited once more, although Sam sincerely hoped that no one came calling tonight. He was almost tempted to find Mister Bilbo's "No Admittance Except on Party Business" sign and put it back up. But he also half hoped that Lotho Sackville-Baggins might dare to show his face.

The entire time that he was filling racks with wood, starting fires, drawing water for the bathing tub, and setting coppers to boil, Sam had been thinking of all the ways that he could hurt Lotho. He had narrowed it down to a couple that would leave him with a broken nose and with both sides of his face black and blue. It was the only way that he could halfway focus on what he was doing and not just storm off to the Sackville-Bagginses right that moment.

The last time he had checked, Frodo had been floating quietly in the hot water, his head against a rolled up towel, his eyes closed. Sam thought he might actually be sleeping, and he definitely needed it from the look of those deep shadows under his eyes, but Sam worried that he would slide in and drown in his sleep. So he kept going back to look in on him. Finally, he found Frodo soaping his hair and breathed a sigh of relief.

Sam had found very little in the way of perishables, but managed to scrape together some eggs and mushrooms with a bit of nice cheese and sliced ham. There was always that fine blackberry jam made by Frodo's Aunt Dora to go with the sturdy little biscuits he had come upon, although he had to toss some mouldy bread and questionable milk, so there was nothing to put in the tea. He thought about running down to Bagshot Row to get some milk, but he didn't feel like answering the Gaffer's questions just yet. It was enough the Gaffer knew where he was for now. They would just have to drink their tea black tonight and he would leave a note for Miz Dahlia to bring Bag End's usual share from the milch cow up in the morning. She had likely just been taking it all home with no one at Bag End to use it.

He had found every bit of bedding there was in Bag End shoved into a dusty storeroom. He didn't know what *that* was all about, but he would have to get the laundry down to Daisy in the morning. And the lamp oil was low as well. Plenty of firewood though, the Gamgees saw to it that Bag End had an ample supply.

While he was busily making tea, his thoughts alternated from pounding on Lotho to a growing list of domestic tasks to pounding on Lotho to what he might need to pack for the road to pounding on Lotho.

Glancing over at the table, set for two, he was well satisfied with the fruits of his labours. Omelettes steamed on each plate, one set for Frodo at the head of the table. He wasn't sure how Frodo would react to that, being that was Mister Bilbo's place, but he supposed if things would be changing and they might as well start now. Besides it would be better to sit there than to deal with the empty chair.

What else would be changing, he wondered. Why did things have to change? Why did those you love have to leave you? Sam had experienced enough loss in his life to know better than to ask that question, but still, here he was thinking of following Frodo to wherever looking for Mister Bilbo -- just walking away and leaving his family--

“Well, I imagine I smell much better.”

The voice near Sam's shoulder made him jump.

“I certainly must feel better because that smells delicious, Sam.”

Sam turned from the teapot and found it hard not to wince. Frodo was dressed in the deep blue velvet robe that Bilbo had given him last Yule. The colour emphasized the paleness of his skin as well as the dark purple bruise from his jaw to his temple. His hair hung in damp tendrils around his face and the gap left by the botched attempt to trim out the glue was very obvious. He looked achingly beautiful and terrible at the same time.

Sam clenched his fist behind him, secretly hoping that Lotho was at the S.-B.s tomorrow when he and the Gaffer worked on their gardens. “You look some better too.” He smiled and tilted his head toward the table. “You eat now. The eggs are nice and hot. I'll get the tea.”

Frodo didn't move. “Sam, I'm...I apologize for my behaviour earlier. I--”

Sam's hand unclenched quickly and his fingers were on Frodo's lips. “Mister Bilbo's gone. You're missing him terrible. Nothing to apologize

for far as I can see. Now, go sit and eat. We can talk more about it after you've got some food in you. You look like you been eating stars and drinking air for a while now."

Frodo's eyes closed and his hand came up to grasp Sam's, cool lips softly brushing Sam's fingers. Then Frodo turned away and stopped in his tracks. Sam knew Frodo was looking at his place at the head of the table where Mister Bilbo always sat. Frodo stood, not moving for a long moment, and Sam chewed his lip, waiting, wondering what expression was on Frodo's face. Finally, Frodo moved and took his place at the table as the Master of Bag End.

Sam joined him in a moment with the teapot and was greeted by a slightly watery smile.

"It is nice to have you here at supper, Sam."

He didn't quite know how to respond to that. *Just ask and I will be here for every supper and every breakfast. Just ask and I will follow you to the end of the world. Just ask.* But he knew it would never be that simple. Not for Frodo and not for him.

"Nice to be here -- with you." Sam poured the tea. "You don't have no milk nor cream, leastways none you'd want to use, anyway. I'll make sure Miz Dahlia leaves some tomorrow morning."

Frodo gazed at him for a moment as if he hadn't heard, then poked at the omelette with his fork.

"I'd be right pleased if you would eat it and not play with it," Sam chided.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Sam. Certainly. I...I'm sure it's delicious." Frodo cut a bite and slid it into his mouth, then another. His next bite was more eager.

Sam dug into his own eggs with one eye on Frodo's plate.

"Oh this is wonderful." Frodo looked blissful as he took yet another bite and then a sip of tea. "I am starting to feel much better."

"Good. I knew you weren't eating right. That can make you feel pretty poorly." Sam kept eating, hoping Frodo would follow his example. "We need to get a chicken tomorrow and make a nice pie with those taters and carrots in the cellar. I have to go to the S.-B.s tomorrow with Da, but I could stop at the Widow Millstone's and get a fine hen if you like."

“Bilbo always gets...” Frodo responded, his fork suspended half way to his mouth. The smile faded, “...got his hens from Ivy Grubb.”

Sam wondered how he could possibly be almost as angry with dear Mister Bilbo as he was with Lotho Sackville-Baggins. Yet, still, he wished Mister Bilbo would walk through the front door right now so he could give him a piece of his mind, personal-like.

“She lives close by Miz Lobelia. I can do that tomorrow.”

Frodo finally ate the bite on his fork. “They seem to be giving you more work lately. The S.-B.s, I mean.”

Sam eyed Frodo's fork meaningfully, and another bite made its way to Frodo's mouth before he answered.

“Well, they’re not expandin’ the gardens at all. Just pretending to know more’n they know about finishing the season and gettin’ ready for winter.” Sam snorted. “The Gaffer...Well, he doesn't tell me how much they pay, but knowing them, I suspect it’s not enough for the trouble, begging your pardon, them being your kinfolk and all.”

Frodo waved his fork, his mouth full for a moment. When he had managed that morsel, he spoke up. “Lobelia knows the Gaffer is the best gardener in the Shire -- well, one of the best.” He gazed at Sam meaningfully. “She wouldn't risk losing him. Just as I wouldn't risk losing Samwise Gamgee -- the Master Gardener of Bag End.”

Sam frowned at that. “The Gaffer--”

“No. *You*, Sam.” Frodo said firmly. “I *am* the Master of Bag End, you know. And if I call you the Master Gardener of Bag End -- well then, you are.”

Sam thought about that for a while, poking at his eggs and frowning. The Gaffer wouldn't understand that at all, to his way of thinking, even if Mister Frodo was the Master of Bag End now.

He felt cool fingers slide under his chin and lifted his eyes to meet Frodo's understanding gaze.

“Don't worry, Sam,” Frodo said softly. “It will just be between you and me -- for now.”

Sam moved uncomfortably in his chair. ‘Master Gardener of Bag End’ didn't seem a proper title for plain old Samwise Gamgee, but it sounded

so -- right -- when Frodo said it. Sam sat up a bit straighter in his chair and smiled tentatively under Frodo's satisfied gaze.

"Well, the Gaffer wouldn't work for Miz Lobelia's like, 'less she was paying well," Sam managed. "But I know *I'll* be hard pressed to continue down there after what Mister Lotho done." He stared at his omelette, then, remembering, looked at Frodo's. Still a ways to go. Sam forced himself to shovel a bite into his mouth, even though his stomach was suddenly sour. He looked meaningfully at Frodo's plate, then at Frodo.

Resignedly, Frodo took another bite and then another before he spoke again. "Lotho has received a full dose of Otho and Lobelia's envy and malice every day of his life. I don't know what is worse, growing up with those parents, or growing up with none."

Sam watched him carefully, staying silent, realizing that Frodo had spent a good deal of the last few days thinking. Perhaps a bit too much.

"Sometimes, when I don't want to wring his neck, I feel like I should pity him, Sam. I think he is so full of misery that it just spews out all over everyone else." Frodo pushed the remains of the eggs around on his plate, looked guiltily up at Sam, then took another bite.

Sam gazed at Frodo in disbelief. "I never seen no pain in Mister Lotho. He just seems full of spite and hatefulness to me," Sam offered bitterly. "What made you change your mind about him, if you don't mind saying?"

Frodo finished his tea and Sam quickly poured more, sugaring it and looking absently around for the milk.

"I don't know, Sam. I haven't really changed my mind. I still think he is mean and nasty and spiteful and stupid, but I just...I probably have been thinking about it too much. But, I think...I think he can't give his parents the one thing they want most in the world, Sam. The one thing that he thinks will make them happy, make them...love him. So, he takes out his frustration on anything that seems to be standing in the way of that love. A few days ago, that was me," Frodo said matter-of-factly.

Sam stayed quiet, thinking that was best when Lotho was being discussed. He wondered if Lotho had waited until he and the Gaffer had gone off to the S.-B.s before coming to Bag End to 'take out his frustration'. Remembering that when they had come back from the S.-B.s was when he had found Bag End shuttered and locked tight, he clenched his fist in his lap.

Frodo took the last bite of his omelette and sighed. "They have so much, the three of them, and they don't even know it."

Sam frowned, still playing with his eggs. "They just want Bag End."

Frodo shook his head and sipped his tea, "No. They don't just want Bag End. If they had it, they still wouldn't be happy."

"I don't understand," Sam picked up a biscuit and slathered on some blackberry jam.

"They have each other Sam, and they don't realize how precious that is," Frodo said wistfully, staring sightlessly at his plate. "I would give them Bag End, if I could have Bilbo back."

"Oh," Sam grimaced, *Yes, you pillock. 'Oh' indeed. Now you've gone and made him sad again.*

Then Frodo looked up and reached out a hand toward Sam's resting on the table beside his plate. Sam grasped the slender fingers, looking into the bruised face anxiously.

"But I am a bit like them," Frodo went on quietly. "For I have Merry and Fatty and Folco and even young Pippin. And I have you, my priceless Sam." The fingers squeezed Sam's tightly when he blushed just a bit at that last. "And here I sit feeling sorry for myself, and wanting more."

Sam couldn't say anything for a moment; he just held those cold fingers and gazed into those glimmering eyes. He wondered which was worse, mourning at a graveside, or at a roadside. Both seemed equally awful to him at the moment.

"I don't see as how wanting Mister Bilbo back is being like them S.-B.s at all," he managed.

Frodo gazed at him for a moment and Sam tried to read his expression. Then Frodo slipped his fingers free and cupped his tea. "No, I suppose not."

Sam took a deep breath and pushed himself up to gather and stack the dishes. "There's not much for afters--"

Frodo shook his head. "I am sorry, Sam. I am sure the pantry is in quite a sad state. I just haven't been very hungry."

“Well, everyone pretty much filled up at the party and there was quite a few took home plenty as well. No one in Hobbiton, or the Shire for that matter, should be hungry for a while,” Sam watched closely to see if that brought a slight smile, but Frodo was still just staring into space.

Sam poured hot water into the basin and made quick work of the dishes. “I can get some things tomorrow. That is, unless you...unless we...”

Frodo looked up at the discomfort in Sam's voice, “Unless we what, Sam?”

“Unless we're headin' down the road after Mister Bilbo.”

Chapter Five - *Keeping Promises*

Sam waited for some response. Anything. But Frodo just took a sip from his cup as he gazed at the table.

There was a long silence. Sam quickly finished cleaning up and put on more water for tea. As he left to carry things back to the cellar, the only sound in the kitchen was the crackling of the fire.

When he came back from the cold cellar, he found Frodo still in the kitchen, standing and staring into the fire with his fingers held out to the warmth and an absent look on his face. Sam wondered just how much sleep Frodo had gotten in the last three days. He looked as if he was about to topple into the fire, as if some tightly wound spring inside him had unwound and left him wobbling.

Sam couldn't keep from touching those silken curls as he walked up behind Frodo -- running his fingers through them then gently touching the bruised skin as Frodo turned toward him. "So, I guess we should get to trimming this while you are still awake," he managed gruffly, sliding his hand back into the drying curls and resisting the urge to gently kiss the sombre mouth. Even after a year and more, one touch could undo him utterly, but this night Frodo was strangely fragile -- his normal resilience seemed to have vanished like Mister Bilbo. Sam was surprised when cool fingers cupped his cheek and he quickly moved his own hand to cover them.

"I *am* spent, my dear Sam," Frodo smiled wearily at him. "I don't know why. I am just suddenly so very tired."

"I know." Sam turned his head into that hand and gently kissed the palm, then took it in his own, leading Frodo toward a chair. "So, let's get this done with, and you off to bed."

It was painfully familiar, this routine. As Sam settled a towel around Frodo's shoulders, he realized, too late, that they should have done this in the bedroom, or sitting out in the sun tomorrow morning, anywhere but here in the kitchen -- anywhere but where they had played out the Baggins' haircutting ritual a hundred times.

First, Mister Bilbo would fuss at Frodo about how he had let his hair get far too long, and then Frodo would fidget and act terrified that Mister Bilbo was shearing him like a sheep. Then Frodo would take the scissors and fuss at Mister Bilbo that his hair was turning darker at the roots and that he was aging backwards and would soon be a babe in arms. And they would laugh and joke and teach Sam scandalous words in elvish, and talk about distant lands, and the recipe for scones, and so many marvellous things. And after each of these rituals, Sam would carefully save Frodo's dark hair and carry it back to his room and stuff it into his cloth bag for remembering. And if sometimes some of Mister Bilbo's grey-tinged locks would get mixed in, Sam didn't mind at all.

He saw Frodo reach out for the scissors, shining brightly on the table. Slender fingers handled them reverently, one fingertip running down the inscription. "*Risto vae, hebel vanias pant an-uir,*" came the quiet whisper.

"*Cut well, keeping beauty intact forever,*" Sam recited from memory and waited quietly until Frodo held them up, then he took a deep breath. "It'll be quite a bit shorter, if that's all right."

"That's fine, Sam," Frodo said softly.

Sam could hear the tears in that voice. What he wouldn't give for Mister Bilbo to come walking in the door laughing at them both -- to be able to hand the old hobbit the scissors and watch them at their little haircutting ritual one more time.

Sam ran his fingers through those russet-tinged locks, still just a little damp, but starting to curl and twine around his fingers, the way that they had wrapped around Mister Bilbo's fingers that day so long ago, the first time Sam had seen Mister Bilbo cut Mister Frodo's hair. Not as many tangles this time. Sam ran the comb through them carefully, remembering.

There had been things said on that day that Sam hadn't really understood completely, then. He knew that a lot of it had been about Mister Bilbo leaving. But then it had seemed impossible to Sam that Mister Bilbo would ever really leave Frodo. And now Mister Bilbo had left -- vanished into the night.

How could you leave someone you loved like that? As Sam combed, he tried to remember what Mister Bilbo had said so long ago, but all Sam could remember was how overwhelming it had been to see Bag End locked and shuttered -- to think that Frodo had left without a word. Sam shook his head and started cutting.

The kitchen was silent for a long while, filled only with the sound of snipping scissors and crackling logs. As he ran his fingers slowly through the dark curls, Sam thought for a moment that Frodo had drifted off to sleep sitting up. The tired voice surprised him.

“Do you remember, Sam?”

“Hmmm?” Sam's fingers gently combed and held and cut, then moved on, combing, holding and cutting.

“Do you remember the day that Bilbo taught you that inscription?”

“Yes sir.” Sam looked at the dark curls surrounding them on the stone floor of the Bag End kitchen. “I do.”

“Do you remember what he said about it being a hard decision, to let someone go or to keep them with you?” Frodo asked.

“I remember some of it,” Sam stopped cutting briefly, but kept combing his fingers gently through the silky curls as he thought back to that long ago day when he had sat on the floor and listened to Mister Bilbo spin his tale. “I know we talked about irises that day. About separating them. And about a big person Bilbo met in Rivendell once and how she had to let her son go out into the wide world, though she didn't want to.”

“Yes,” Frodo's voice seemed relieved. “And Bilbo said that those you love are like your irises. Even though they are separate from you, they are still the same -- they are always a part of you.”

“Like the hair on the floor. I remember.” Sam stroked his fingers softly across Frodo's nape, holding and cutting. “That's when I started saving your hair.”

There was a soft murmur from Frodo, then, for a long moment, there was only the sound of the scissors and the fire crackling. Something about the silky texture of the curls sliding through his fingers and the way that Frodo subtly leaned into his touch, sighing softly, made Sam feel as if time had slowed and there was nothing in all the world but this room, the heat of the fire, and the feeling of Frodo's hair in his hands.

“I hope...I *know* he's finally happy. He sacrificed so much for me -- so much time. And I owe him so very much,” Frodo went on in a lethargic voice. “I don't think I told him enough.”

Sam longed to pull Frodo up into his arms, but this needed words, so he kept cutting and tried to think of the ones Frodo needed to hear. "Mister Bilbo, he...he loved you, Frodo. More'n anything. I know that it wasn't a sacrifice, what he did bringing you here and making you his heir and all. I remember, when I was real little, how lonely Mister Bilbo was up here in Bag End all by himself." Sam could tell by the slant of Frodo's head that he was listening intently. "Mister Bilbo used to joke with the Gaffer about buying me for his own. He would say that..." Sam tried to remember the words Mister Bilbo had used long ago, "If he couldn't have a Baggins living under The Hill after he was gone, then only a Gamgee'd do and he'd just take Samwise Gamgee and make him into a Baggins if he had to. And the Gaffer would joke back that any Gamgee would make ten good Bagginses."

There was a sound from Frodo that could have been a soft laugh.

"But it weren't just that. I'd see him standing up here in the garden or sitting on that bench out front, smoking his pipe, just watching us playing around the Hill. Sometimes he would laugh and shake his head, but it always seemed to me that he...he was missing something. He had a...Well, he looked sad, until you came." Sam kept cutting, but slowly, tenderly fingering each curl as he picked it up to trim. "But you...you made him the happiest I think I ever saw him. Why, Mister Bilbo said he would have dried up and blown away long ago without you in his life. I heard him say that to the Gaffer once."

Frodo was silent, but he seemed to shiver now with each brush of Sam's fingers, each snip of the scissors, and Sam moved to the side, carefully trimming the hair near Frodo's ear, his fingers caressing the ear tip briefly, then moving on. "I think Mister Bilbo loved the road all right, but he loved you more."

"And I wanted to follow him down that road, Sam," Frodo whispered. "I still do."

Sam swallowed hard at that, then moved to trim near the other ear. Resisting the urge to lean over and gently kiss the angry bruise, instead he ran his thumb slowly down Frodo's hairline before he started to clip carefully. There was a deep indrawn breath in response to that touch, then a long silence filled only with the sound of clipping and a log shifting on the fire.

"I was going to leave," Frodo finally continued in a shaky voice. "After Lotho. After everything that happened, I didn't want Bag End any more."

Sam waited for more, fingering the soft curls at Frodo's nape, but no more was forthcoming, so he moved around to finish the front. Frodo's eyes were closed -- dark wet lashes resting on flushed cheeks, breath sighing through parted lips -- and with one look at that face, something spiralled through Sam, frightening in its intensity. It was more than desire -- it was deeper and stronger than that. Sam knew then that he *would* follow Frodo wherever he might go. Oh, he had said the words and thought about it, but the reality of doing it had not sunk in until this moment. Sam would follow Frodo, without a second thought to who or what he left behind, to the pain that he would cause by leaving. He would walk away from those who loved him and follow Frodo off the end of the world, if that was where Frodo went.

Sam gritted his teeth and tried to study the ragged hair he needed to cut, but he was finding it hard to breathe, to focus, to think as he gazed at Frodo's face. Would Frodo do the same? Would Frodo walk away from everything -- from Bag End, his cousins, the Shire -- to follow his Sam off the end of the world? Whatever the answer, Sam knew it couldn't change the way he felt. He finally steeled himself to the swirl of emotions and slid his fingertips gently up the bruised cheekbone before easing them into the hacked off curls. Trimming slowly, Sam made certain that he got the last remnants of hardened glue and blended it carefully into the rest. His hands were shaking when he finished, but not enough to matter.

"I even...I got a pack ready," Frodo said softly.

Placing the scissors on the table with trembling fingers, Sam slid his hands into Frodo's hair at the temples and combed back through the russet-tinged curls soothingly, cupping Frodo's nape as the silken tendrils clung to his skin. He shut his eyes and leaned over to bury his face in Frodo's hair -- that smell would always be Frodo for him -- juniper, a bit of cinnamon from somewhere in the Bag End kitchen, and just the slightest hint of wildflowers. "I know. I saw it on your bed," he whispered as he started to pull back.

Frodo's hands reached out and grasped Sam's arms, the fingers were no longer cool, but seemed to sear into Sam's flesh. "But I couldn't leave, Sam."

Sam stayed quiet and still, pressing his forehead to Frodo's, shaking with the effort not to move or breathe.

"I couldn't leave you," came the broken whisper.

Sam felt the hot tears on his face before he realized he was crying.

“I don’t think I could ever leave you, Samwise Gamagee.”

Slender fingers wove into his hair and tugged downward. Sam found himself kneeling in the scattered dark curls on the floor. Then Frodo pulled Sam’s head forward and buried his face in Sam’s hair, breathing deep. Sam felt the moist, hot breath teasing at his scalp and imagined that he must smell of grass and dirt and fear and secret tunnels in the cellar. Frodo pulled back to look at Sam’s face, rubbing the gold curls gently, stroking through Sam’s hair with his fingers slowly, the same way that Sam had been caressing him.

“Who cuts your hair?” came the soft voice, and the teasing fingers moved to Sam’s nape then trailed up along his jaw to the side of his mouth.

Sam knew what Frodo saw on his face. He saw it in Frodo’s -- flushed with desire, wet with tears. Even with the bruise and the swelling, that face, that expression, made Sam quiver uncontrollably.

“One of the girls or another. Whoever will do it.” Sam managed, his voice shaky and gruff.

Frodo held Sam’s face between his palms, the blatant desire in his eyes sparking a deeper flush in Sam’s cheeks.

“From now on, I cut your hair.” Frodo said, his own voice husky.

“But M...Frodo, that wouldn’t be--”

Frodo laid his thumb across Sam’s lips and said softly, but firmly, “I. Cut. Your. Hair.”

And Sam couldn’t manage a response, because Frodo was slowly running his thumb back across Sam’s lower lip, those glimmering eyes following its progress. Sam gave up trying to think and closed his eyes, his lips opening with a sharp intake of breath. Then he fell headlong into hot, dark sweetness as Frodo’s mouth came forward and captured his own. He curved his fingers around Frodo’s nape and held Frodo there gently, unwilling to ever let go.

For long moments Sam forgot they were in the Bag End kitchen, forgot the unforgiving stone beneath his knees. All he knew was the taste of Frodo’s mouth, that taste he would never forget, that he never wanted to forget. That taste that slipped into him and swirled him around and whispered ‘Frodo, Frodo, Frodo’ until he was sure he was saying it aloud. And he was. Chanting it, memorizing Frodo’s face with his mouth.

Kissing his eyes and his forehead and his wet, salty cheeks. Whispering that beloved name over and over against Frodo's skin. Then suddenly Frodo pulled back and tried to stand, Sam rose with him, holding him on his feet as he staggered up.

"Frodo? Wha--"

"I promised...myself Sam," Frodo returned breathlessly.

"Promised what?"

"That we would...NOT make the...kitchen table a habit," Frodo responded.

Sam felt his face grow hot at that, but then he was too busy trying to make sure Frodo stayed on his feet as he headed out the door and down the corridor. Then, after a moment, Sam realized something was amiss. He looked back down the corridor, "Aren't we...uh...going the wrong--"

"Oh." Sam found himself standing in the doorway of Mister Bilbo's bedroom staring at the beautiful carved wood of that bed. "I...Mister Bilbo's..." Sam couldn't even think.

Mister Bilbo's bed.

Frodo had faltered to a stop just inside the room, lit now with firelight and a few candles.

Sam had packed away the spilled waistcoats in the trunk and shoved it to the side, shutting up the wardrobe. But he had forgotten that Frodo's bed -- Frodo's old bed -- had been completely stripped of bedding, as had every bed in the smials, except this one.

"It...it's *my* bed now Sam, but...I haven't slept in here. Merry said I should -- he said 'it's the proper bed for the Master of Bag End'. I think the scamp did something with all the other bedding. But I didn't...I haven't...I haven't been able to sleep anywhere since--" Frodo looked around the room, then at Sam, who stood uncertainly in the doorway, still staring at the bed. "I wasn't thinking." Suddenly Frodo seemed even more unsteady on his feet. The shadows were back in his eyes. "Perhaps...perhaps this is a mistake."

Sam looked at Frodo standing there in the candlelight, all pale ivory and blue velvet and ebony silk. The dark curls were too short, the eyes were shadowed and swollen, the awful bruise looked livid on that skin in this light, and those eyes were gazing at Sam as if he were the only certain

thing left in an uncertain world. Frodo was literally shaking on his feet with exhaustion.

"It's so confusing, Sam. I...I don't know where I belong any more," came the quivering voice.

Sam crossed the few steps between them in a moment, pulling Frodo into his arms. He buried his face in Frodo's hair and felt Frodo's arms twine tightly around his neck. He heard his own name repeated hoarsely over and over in his ear as he pressed desperate kisses to that pale throat. "You belong here," Sam whispered. "Right here."

After a long moment, Sam realized that Frodo wasn't moving at all as he leaned heavily into the embrace. "Come on then. Into your bed with you," Sam managed gruffly. He turned and supported Frodo, nearly carrying him those last few steps to the platform, then up and onto the huge expanse of a bed.

Frodo sat there on the edge of the bed, wavering, his eyes half open, as Sam tugged at the sheets and pulled them down. "I'm sorry, Sam. I'm just...so...so *tired*...suddenly," he whispered.

"You need to sleep. I suspect you haven't done much of that of late. And this bed is as good as any; better, in fact, since it *does* have sheets and blankets." Sam fussed, pushing him back into the mounds of pillows. "And you're cold again. You curl up here and I'll get things shut down for the night." Sam left Frodo still wrapped in his robe and pulled the sheet and covers up over him, adding an extra blanket for good measure.

Those eyes, glimmering with emotions too complex to name, were watching Sam closely, struggling to stay open. Sam felt a moment of panic at the thought of leaving Frodo, even for a moment, as if all the fear that he had pushed down over the past hours was threatening now to overwhelm him. But they would deal with this horrible, wrenching loss; together they would survive it. "I'll be right back," he said firmly.

Sam had never snuffed candles, closed windows, or banked fires so quickly in his entire life. He quickly swept up the clippings on the kitchen floor and tucked them away for safekeeping. He tried to find one of Frodo's nightshirts, and then realized that Frodo had apparently packed them all or moved them into Mister Bilbo's...into his new bedroom. But as he looked through drawers for the elusive nightshirt, he found that Frodo, evidently distracted, had missed all the personal and private things in his bedside table. He thought for a moment about whether it was proper, then pulled out the bottle of oil, tucking it in his

pocket and quickly placing the rest of the items into the top of Frodo's pack.

Hefting the pack over his shoulder, Sam walked through a darkened, quiet Bag End, sadly aware that this night Mister Bilbo was not going to come through that front door after a good long evening at the Ivy Bush. He could almost see Mister Bilbo laughing, his cheeks rosy with the chill air, asking what mischief they had been up to, and suggesting that they all have a nice mug of warm milk and brandy. Tears welled up in Sam's eyes at the thought.

Frodo was asleep when Sam got back to the bedroom. He sat the pack next to the bed and moved around the room, quietly closing the window part way and putting another log on the fire, then snuffing out the candles and leaving a lamp burning low, as he always did. Finally he returned to the bed and hesitated, looking at the impressive piece of furniture that was the headboard. Unable to decide whether he should open any of those intricate-looking drawers or not, he gave up at last and tried one. Breathing a sigh of relief when he found it empty, he quickly moved the bottle from his pocket to the drawer. The rest could wait until tomorrow.

Frodo was curled up on his side, nestled down into the covers and still not quite warm. Sam lost track of how long he stood there watching Frodo just breathing softly in exhausted slumber, the firelight shimmering on his battered face. Then, finally, Sam's hands went to his own braces, and he pulled them off his shoulders, untying his breeches and unbuttoning his shirt with shaking fingers.

Sam looked warily at the big old bed -- Mister Bilbo's...no, now it was *Frodo's* bed. Sam might get up before the sun and sneak back to the Row every morning, just to keep things proper-like and keep the Gaffer content, but this was home, here, next to Frodo, wherever Frodo was. And now Frodo was the Master of Bag End -- and this was his bed and Samwise Gamgee was going to crawl into it with nary a stitch on.

The room, even though warmed by the fire, was still a bit chilly as Sam went around to the other side of the huge bed. He folded his clothes carefully and laid them on the platform then climbed in, trying not to jostle Frodo awake as he crawled slowly across the expanse of the big feather bed and slid under the covers. The sheets were silky, soft and cool against his bare skin as he lay quietly only a breath away from Frodo, waiting to make sure he hadn't awakened him. When he was certain Frodo was still breathing evenly and deeply, Sam slid closer, and slipped one arm over the velvet-clad form, carefully sliding the other hand into Frodo's hair. Frodo snuggled back into his heat instinctively

and Sam relaxed at last, burying his face in the back of Frodo's neck and sighing with contentment and relief. It was the first time in three days that Sam felt he could really breathe easy. Frodo hadn't left him. Frodo would never leave him.

Chapter Six - *Keeping Always*

Sam swam out of a deep dreamless sleep to hear Frodo muttering somewhere in the vicinity of his chest. He couldn't make out the words, half in a daze himself, but it sounded as if Frodo was talking in his sleep.

At some point in the night Frodo had discarded the velvet robe in favour of snuggling into Sam headfirst, his head under Sam's chin, one arm flung over Sam's waist and his legs hopelessly entangled in Sam's legs. And the words were getting louder and more confused as Frodo started to shiver in Sam's arms.

"...don't...Bilbo?...I...where...Sam? SAM?"

"Ssshh," Sam whispered, running his fingers over the dark head tucked under his chin. "You're just dreaming. Your Sam is right here. I'm not going anywhere."

Frodo's head turned, and the bruised cheek brushed Sam's chest, "Ow. Wha...?"

"I said, I'm right here and I'm not going anywhere, far as I can tell."

The head lifted. In the dim light from the lamp, Sam watched Frodo blink away the fog of the dream.

"I...Oh, Sam," that slow, warm smile was better than any gift Sam could have ever received, beyond waking up with Frodo in his arms.

"Do you remember any of it? Me mum used to say it was best to talk out the bad 'uns quick so they would never come back."

Frodo blinked at him, then the smile faded. "I was trying to get home. I don't know where I was." He frowned. "But it was hot and dusty and I couldn't seem to find the way home."

Sam stroked his fingers down the cold cheek, "And?"

“And, I finally got back here, but...but I couldn't find it. Bag End was gone.”

“Gone?” Sam cupped his hand around Frodo’s face, warming the too cool skin.

“The...the Hill was here, but no...no doors...no windows...no garden -- just a hill -- a barren hill. Even...even the tree -- the Hill tree was gone.”

“Well, look around. Bag End's still here.” Sam traced a gentle line down the side of Frodo’s face to his mouth. “It was just a dream.”

“Just a dream,” Frodo repeated, looking around at where they were, and then he seemed to realize what bed they were sleeping in. “It's Bilbo who is gone, not Bag End.”

Sam pushed up on one elbow and looked down at Frodo's face in the shadows. He knew it would take time for this pain to ease and nothing could hurry that. He gazed at Frodo’s mouth for a moment, then ran his finger across Frodo’s bottom lip slowly, listening to Frodo’s breathing become ragged in response.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Sam whispered. “Unless you want to go find Mister Bilbo, then I'll be going with you.”

“Dearest Sam, you would go with me, wouldn't you?” Frodo’s hand slid up Sam’s arm slowly, tracing the bunched muscles under the skin, skating across his shoulder to the hollow of his throat. “But I bet your gaffer would have a thing or two to say about that.”

“That he would,” Sam managed in a gruff voice, “And I would listen real good--”

“And then just go ahead and do what you thought was right,” Frodo finished for him.

Sam must've grimaced a bit at that, from the smile on Frodo's face.

“But the Gaffer would have my hide when we came back, that is, assuming we did.” Frodo skimmed his fingers up the column of Sam’s throat and up his jaw line, gazing into Sam’s eyes solemnly. “I would not lead you off into danger, Sam. The wide world is not all adventure and excitement, you know.”

“I know,” Sam said solemnly, reaching out to capture the cool fingers tracing his temple, holding them firmly against his cheek. “Mister Bilbo

told me that many a time. And I saw he took that sword of his." A spasm of pain crossed Frodo's face at that reminder and Sam winced, his hand tightening on the fingers clenched against his cheek, intent on making sure that Frodo understood this one thing. "I know it's not all dragon's gold and happy endings out there -- all the more reason that I would go with you. I'll not let you go alone."

"But you can't leave here, Sam. I wouldn't ask you to." Frodo tugged insistently at his hand, nearly scowling as he responded firmly. "You can't leave your home."

"Home's not a place, Frodo. You said that about Bag End yourself, and I know how deep your roots are sunk in this hill -- how much you love this place. Sure, I would feel bad about leaving my gaffer, but..." Sam turned his head and pressed a kiss into Frodo's palm. "*You* are my home."

For a long moment Frodo held Sam's gaze, then Sam saw Frodo's eyes begin to shimmer with unshed tears, the intense look melting slowly into a tremulous smile. "What ever did I do to deserve you, Sam Gamgee?"

Sam blinked at the sudden tears in his own eyes, unable to find his voice to answer.

"My Sam," Frodo sighed, finally freeing his hand and stroking it up through Sam's hair, his eyes following its progress. Frodo's hand slowly slid to Sam's nape and pulled him down into a searing kiss. Then Frodo's lips were everywhere on Sam's face -- his eyelids, his nose, his chin, his hairline, his temple. For a long moment there was no sound in the room except Sam gasping for breath and Frodo whispering Sam's name -- again and again. Frodo lingered for a while nibbling at Sam's ear before he finally leaned back into the pillows, relaxed and smiling as Sam attempted to retrieve his scattered wits.

"Samwise Gamgee -- friend of friends, master gardener, brave adventurer," Frodo recited in a languid voice, still tracing Sam's eartip with one finger. "Should we add 'legendary burglar' to that list as well? We might have all manner of dwarves visiting if that gets out."

Sam frowned. Was this some part of the dream? But then Sam forgot the question and closed his eyes as Frodo leaned forward once more to nuzzle at Sam's neck for long, lovely moments. Sam groaned and tried to pull the slender body closer as Frodo's mouth moved up to linger over Sam's ear, and then shivered as warm lips nibbled at the tip and a skilled tongue traced sensitive flesh.

“How did you get into Bag End, Sam?” came the sudden loud whisper, right into Sam’s ear.

Sam stiffened and nearly jerked away in surprise, then he grimaced and turned to find Frodo smirking at him, one eyebrow raised quizzically.

“Well?” Frodo prompted in a serious tone after a long moment of silence.

Sam pulled himself up over Frodo quickly, grasping Frodo’s other arm and effectively pinning him into the mattress. Rewarded by a flash of heat in Frodo's eyes, he hung over him balefully. “I think you're feeling a bit better now, aren't you?” he whispered.

“And I think you’re avoiding the question, Sam Gamgee,” Frodo responded sternly, but Sam saw the side of his mouth twitch.

“That I am,” Sam said sternly. “The Master Gardener of Bag End must have *some* secrets, else he couldn’t do his job proper.”

“Indeed? Well, Master Gardener of Bag End, I am the Master of Bag End,” Frodo returned soberly, “And I say--”

Sam lowered his head and effectively stopped whatever nonsense Frodo was going to say, watching as Frodo's eyes fluttered shut and he leaned his head into the kiss. For a long moment, Sam was perfectly content to just explore Frodo’s mouth lazily -- tasting a bit of blackberry and tea and just luscious Frodo. Then, ever so slowly, Sam slid his lips over to the spot under Frodo's ear, the one that made him--

Frodo moaned, his legs shifting restlessly, and Sam smiled, slowly kissing his way down the pale column of throat, shadowed in the dim light, listening to Frodo's sighs like some wonderful music that he was creating. He had worried so that he might never again taste this silken skin beneath his mouth, which made it taste all the sweeter.

Sam stopped to spend some time paying special attention with his tongue to the shadowy hollow at the base of Frodo's throat, the one that made him--

“Sam.” It was a breath, a plea, a groan, and Frodo's hand slid into Sam's hair.

Sam smiled against sweet, salty skin, and slid his hands down either side, counting each rib. He found himself briefly thinking of recipes and roasted chickens, but only for a moment before sliding his fingers lightly

across the too-flat stomach to that spot, just beside Frodo's jutting hipbone, the one that made him--

“Mmmmm,” and the hips lifted, questing for more contact.

Sam looked up at the moist, flushed face framed by dark tousled hair and felt his heart twist painfully. He watched as his lips and tongue found the sensitive nub of flesh on Frodo's chest, and nipped just that way, the one that made him--

Frodo bit his lip and threw his head back, bringing his other hand up to grasp the back of Sam's head.

And Sam smilingly kissed his way down across quivering muscle, as his hand slid further down, slowly questing across slick flesh to a spot just inside Frodo's leg, the one that made him--

Frodo sighed and his legs spread further apart, allowing access to hard velvet heat that rose into Sam's fingers.

It would never grow old, this exploration, this discovery, this union that felt as if he were caressing his own skin, as if Frodo's reactions were his, and his Frodo's, building back and forth as if they were connected by more than touch. Sam encircled and stroked Frodo slowly, moving his thumb up and across a familiar ridge of flesh, the one that made him--

Frodo nearly lifted up off the bed and twisted, trying desperately to gain more contact. Then he whimpered and Sam smiled, kissing the sweat-slick skin under his mouth.

He found himself under the soft sheets, unable to see Frodo's face any longer, but no longer needing to. His mouth breathed over sparse dark curly hair and unerringly found the one thing it was seeking, the one that made him--

“Oh! Sam!” Frodo thrust upward into slick wet heat and Sam was suddenly far too busy with mouth and tongue to smile.

He had learned well. Mister Bilbo always said, show Samwise something once, and he remembers. Sam slid his hands to rest on questing hips and held tightly, slowing desperate movement, languidly exploring and enjoying with mouth and tongue. Nipping and sucking and stroking slowly, listening to the groans building and feeling the muscles rippling and pushing against him, the fingers tugging at his head, the sheets being pushed back. He lifted his eyes to watch, and felt himself tighten,

his own hardened flesh sliding against soft, silky sheets and restlessly moving leg.

Frodo's head was thrown back, one hand against his mouth. As Sam watched, Frodo raised his head and met Sam's eyes. And Sam managed, under the searing gaze, to move his mouth just that way, the one that made him--

“Nuh...” Desperately strong hands were suddenly pulling at him, tugging him up, and Sam complied willingly, groaning as his own rigid flesh slid across hot slick skin, coming to rest with his hands planted firmly on either side of Frodo's head, smiling broadly down into that beloved face.

“You...are...amazing,” Frodo muttered hoarsely, pulling him down into a deep, probing kiss. Sam felt the vibration from his head to his toes as Frodo groaned into Sam's mouth. Then Sam watched as Frodo's hand reached out to where his bedside table would have been, and found empty space. A frown quirked Frodo's brow, and he started to turn his head to look.

“Here. It's here.” Sam managed breathlessly, pulling out the drawer and fishing out the small bottle of oil. Frodo gazed up at him in delighted disbelief as he grasped the bottle.

“Samwise Gamagee,” Frodo said huskily. “As I suspected, you are a master burglar.”

Sam couldn't manage to be embarrassed, not at this moment. He lowered his head to capture Frodo's mouth beneath his and heard Frodo's startled intake of breath. Then Frodo's arms looped mindlessly around his neck as he slowly explored the hot slick depths of Frodo's mouth. And Sam did the trick with his tongue, the one that made him--

Frodo moved, the lithe, sinewy limbs and unpredictable strength rolling Sam over onto his back in the huge bed. Then Frodo was hanging over Sam, pushing him into the headboard, hot demanding tongue sliding into Sam's mouth, groaning mindlessly. And Sam forgot to smile, moaning instead and pulling his knees up to wrap them around Frodo's waist, moving just that way, the one that made him--

“You!” Frodo growled, fumbling with the bottle, managing to coat eager fingers with the pungent oil and at the same time lean over to recapture Sam's mouth with his own, frantically sucking and biting. Sam slowly ran his hands down shivering sides and crooned softly and soothingly under his breath.

Then it was Sam's turn to move and groan when Frodo dipped his head to lay a line of nipping kisses down Sam's neck, to rub silky hair against sensitive skin. And it was Sam's turn to whimper when slender, skilful fingers reached down to sink slowly into Sam's flesh, easing in and filling him to the edge of pain, but not quite -- just slippery and hot and achingly full.

Sam shifted one leg further up and Frodo bent his head, nuzzling into Sam's neck until he could not think, between Frodo's mouth and those fingers, teasing him beyond conscious thought. But too soon the fingers were gone and he started to moan in protest. Then he felt Frodo shift over him and sink into him in an achingly slow, searing thrust, replacing fingers with hard throbbing heat. And Sam was lost -- lost in those unbelievable eyes gazing down into his -- lost in pure, unrelieved sensation as Frodo began to move, pulling slowly out of him. He gripped Frodo's arm, trying to hang on somehow, to stay anchored. From somewhere, he heard Frodo groan mindlessly and felt the slick muscles quivering as Frodo ever so slowly thrust back in, then slowly out, then back again.

"Tease," Sam growled out in response to the deliberate pace. He squirmed impatiently, demanding faster and harder. There was a familiar choked-off laugh from above him and then a gasp as Sam shifted then clenched certain muscles, just that way, the one that made him--

"Oh my...S..sam," Frodo gritted out in a raspy voice and then surrendered, beginning to thrust hard and fast. As if from a distance, Sam heard the huge bed begin to creak beneath them in an age-old rhythm -- the pace quickening as their frantic gasps and sighs grew louder than protesting wood joints.

Then Frodo's hand slid between them across slick warm skin, and Sam lost all coherent thought as Frodo's slippery fingers grasped his hardened flesh, encircling and stroking urgently. Frodo was plunging into him, whole and entire, wild wanton heat and hardness. Sam groaned mindlessly, closing his eyes, feeling as if the huge old bed was sinking deeper into the hill and them with it, sinking into the heart of Bag End.

Somehow Sam lifted his head with an effort and opened his eyes to see Frodo's open hazily in response, feverish with desire. He reached up and sank his fingers into the short silky curls, wanting more, wanting all of Frodo inside him. And when Frodo's greedy mouth covered his and he tasted that familiar hot sweetness, he clutched Frodo tightly to him, as if he would never let go. Then he fell into swirling oblivion, groaning into

Frodo's mouth, lost in a white-hot shudder around Frodo's body, the one that made him--

Frodo lifted his head and moaned hoarsely, "Oh! Oh stars. Oh Sam. Oh Sam...Sam...SAM!"

Sam hung on tightly as Frodo shivered with release and then collapsed, trembling, into his arms. Sam thought, only briefly, clutching that limber, sated body tightly to him and sliding back into the warmth of the Master of Bag End's big feather bed, that they *were* home -- both of them.

Epilogue - *Keeping Score*

“...and I heard that he were black and blue, *both* eyes, if you’d believe it! And that’s why we en’t seen him for a bit. He’s hidin’ till them bruises heal up. Ashamed of bein’ beaten up by garden tools an’ all.”

“Nah. He’s jest off gallivanting around someplace, rilin’ things up, as he’s inclined ta.”

“But my Iris says that Delphinium en’t seen him neither, an’ he weren’t one to stay away from *that* fer long, if you take my meaning. If he was whole, he’d be hangin’ round Del, my Iris says.”

Sam smirked into his tankard of ale, careful to hide his expression from the Gaffer. All the talk of late was of the rumoured accident that Lotho Sackville-Baggins had in the garden at Miz Lobelia’s. Somehow, according to the stories, Lotho had managed to step on a shovel, hitting himself with the handle and blacking one eye, then, blindly stumbling away, had tripped over a basketful of bulbs and landed right on the barrow that the Gamgees were using, blacking the other eye. And this, apparently, was told by the mistress of the house as if it must all be the fault of the gardeners, and not the clumsy oaf who managed to encounter every possible tool they owned on his trip through the S.-B.s’ garden.

But Sam had only grimaced and shrugged when he had been asked, repeatedly, if it was true that Lotho had also broke that pretty nose of his. Now he and the Gaffer could only sit and listen as the story was retold and dissected, over and over again around the tables of the Green Dragon.

“Well, and certain, I en’t seen that Lotho around fer a while, but it en’t no business of theirs,” the Gaffer growled loudly, more for the benefit of those around them than for Sam. “Bunch of useless tongue waggin’ if’n ye ask me!” he continued, loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. “Don’t remember nothin’ of the sort and it were my shovel and my barrow! I think I would remember somethin’ like that. Besides it en’t none of my business and certain it en’t no one elses!” He ended his tirade by banging his tankard down on the table. The chatter around

them died down just for a moment. A few startled glances were sent in their direction, but gradually, the talk picked up just as before and even louder, but now on a different, still titillating topic.

“...and I heard that there were dwarves around that night. Strange doins if’n ya ask me. Always dwarves and wizards about up there. It’s not natural.”

Sam recognized Sandyman’s voice and frowned. Much to Sam’s regret, the stories about Lotho’s supposed ‘accident’ had only managed to overshadow the wild tales about the disappearance of Mad Bilbo Baggins for a short while.

“Well, I heard the new Master of Bag End run off to the elves hisself for a while there. Came back lookin’ handsomer and more filled out than he were before. And he was polished up like a jool. At least, that’s what my Iris says.”

Mister Bilbo would remain a topic of conversation for a long while, Sam supposed, and apparently Frodo as well. Lifting his ale, he struggled not to smile at the reference to Frodo looking ‘handsomer and more filled out’. He wasn’t sure, but he thought some of the cooking he had been helping with of late *had* been having an impact on Frodo’s waistline.

“Polished up like a jool? Nah, he was jest waitin’ fer Mad Baggins ta be off so he could git his hands on that treasure that’s up there under the Hill. And now he’s spendin’ some of that gold on clothes and fineries, thinking to be noticed -- as if anyone pays a mind to what *that* Baggins does.”

That was Sandyman again, and Sam glowered appropriately over his shoulder at the table where the miller was sitting. It did no good, but it was expected of him. Someday he would take Sandyman down a peg or two -- someday.

“Hmmpf. No one pays any mind to what comes out of Sandyman’s gob, more like,” the Gaffer muttered, loud enough for only Sam to hear.

“Mister Frodo Baggins is worth more’n a hundred of that lot.”

Sam smiled at that, but quickly hid it from the Gaffer by taking another drag on his ale. Glancing around at those gathered at the tables in the Green Dragon, he was struck again by the thought that something was different, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was. He looked once more, gazed over his shoulder, then grinned broadly as he turned back to his ale. Finally, he had puzzled out what it was that had been nagging at him since they had come in. Many of the younger hobbit

lads, and even some of the older ones, including Sandyman himself, seemed to be wearing much shorter haircuts than had been the style before mad Bilbo Baggins disappeared.

A few of those seated at the tables nearby were startled when Samwise Gamgee suddenly burst out laughing. Even the Gaffer snorted in response to the unseemly outburst.

Much shorter haircuts.

FINIS

This tale is finished, but the story of this very special pair of scissors goes on.