

prelude to a midsummer's eve

by Mary Jean Holmes
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On the morning of Midsummer's Eve, 1421, Rose Gamgee awoke shortly before dawn, as was her wont. Little Elanor, responding to her mother's rising, roused, and was taken from her cradle and fed before she could fuss and waken the entire household — especially her father, who had worked hard and late the day before, and had earned a good rest. As she sat in the comfortable little room where she always nursed Elanor and planned the day ahead, Rose felt (in a curious way to which she was completely unused) that this was not to be an ordinary day. Of course, there were things she knew well that would make it special: The day itself was a holiday in hobbit tradition, full of merrymaking and song and feasting, a prelude to the festivities of the day that would follow; Masters Peregrin and Meriadoc were due to visit later that morning, and she had already set by all the provender necessary to make certain they and Master Frodo and her Sam would want for nothing. She had prepared guest rooms for them the day before, and would bring in flowers from the garden to sweeten the air and brighten the entire Hole before Sam and Master Frodo rose for breakfast.

But while she cuddled the sated Elanor and considered what she had planned to prepare for that breakfast, she knew there was something more causing this feeling of...difference. She couldn't for the life of her set finger to what it might be, until a breeze, carrying with it the warmth of the newly-risen summer sun, wafted through the windows at the front of the Hole, stirred the air within, and brought with it the scents of fresh tea and honey-and-spice bread.

"Oh, no!" she gasped, springing to her feet, certain one of the menfolk had risen before her and started the morning's cooking. But Sam had been dead asleep when she'd crept out of the room with Elanor, and he'd never been too quiet-footed in moving about the Hole. Besides, she could still hear his soft snores droning on as she passed the door to their bedroom.

Master Frodo, then? He was exceptionally quiet, she'd come to know, and often woke at odd hours, to watch a sunrise or take a walk under the morning stars before dawn. If he'd slipped out and fetched his own breakfast while she'd been tending Elanor, she'd be heartily embarrassed — and, maybe, a little vexed with the Master for poking his nose where it didn't belong. Mr.

Baggins may have owned the house, and though he certainly treated them as family, not as mere servants, Rose was as adamant about no one disturbing her kitchens as Sam was defensive about his gardens and the Master his study. Well, she'd put a stop to this straightaway, even if it meant apologizing for being late in starting breakfast.

But as she took Elanor and hurried across the Hole, she noticed by the clock on the mantelpiece that she was, if anything, early, not late, and that the door to Frodo's bedroom was still shut, not left ajar as was his habit after he'd wakened, his subtle signal that the room could now be straightened and redressed for the day. Puzzled and a trifle miffed, Rose continued on to see what was afoot.

As she flew into the kitchen with Elanor — who was giggling with infant delight at the gentle jostling — Rose fully expected to see the place in a ruin to rival that which had been made of the Shire by that horrible Sharkey and his ruffians, two years before. Instead, she saw the breakfast table neatly laid with fresh linen and clean china and shining utensils, a basket of bread set beside the jams and butter along with a bowl of ripe berries from the garden, a bowl of steaming porridge, a pitcher of cream, and a pot of tea. The remainder of the room was clean, with no hint of disarray, and the table, she noted, was set only for one.

Now in a complete quandary, Rose stood there for at least a full minute, unable to think of a solution to this riddle — until the sound of movement from the door leading to the garden provided an answer. "Master Frodo?" she queried, this being her only logical explanation, and moved toward the door. She stopped dead with surprise as the answer stepped inside, bending to pass over the threshold without mishap, bright as a ray of sunshine and carrying an armful of fresh-cut flowers from the garden.

"Good morning to you, Mistress Rose," said the unexpected guest, giving her a deep bow and a warm smile. "And to you, too, little Elanor. I trust I didn't waken you?"

For what seemed a very long time (to her), Rose simply stared, mouth open. She, of course, knew all about the wizard Gandalf (or, at least, as much as Frodo and Sam had told her, and that she herself had seen on his infrequent visits during her childhood), but she had never actually *met* the old man. What she recalled of him had always been distant glimpses, never as close as she would have liked, being a curious but shy little hobbit-lass. She had heard all the popular stories, of course. Some were pleasant reminiscences from the older folks, who had seen him more than the young people, generally about his magical fireworks (which Rose had only seen once as a very young girl, at old Bilbo's famous Birthday Party). There were remembrances of his kindness, especially toward the hobbit-children, and to the Shire as a whole during the terrible Long Winter, which now was recalled only in hobbit history. Some stories were wary, recollections of the outlandish tales of the outer world Gandalf brought with him when he visited, on several occasions accompanied by Elves and Dwarf-folk. More than a few were suspicious and a little frightened, tales told by those who'd heard of adventures the wizard had brought upon unsuspecting hobbit lads and lasses who should've known better than to let him lure them off into the wild. And a few were downright hostile, convinced that wizards in general (and Gandalf in particular) came to the

Shire only to steal from it: gold, food, pipeweed, even people. Wizards, said they, were bad business, and any hobbit who still had the good sense they were born with would do well to steer clear of them.

But Rose had more than the usual measure of good hobbit sense, and could see beyond the jealousies and suspicions some people nurtured to discredit things they couldn't understand. She didn't for an instant claim to actually *understand* the wise old man, but to her, Gandalf had always seemed very kind, if aged and weary, at times as stern as a schoolmaster, at others as merry as a traveling minstrel, at still others as gentle and generous as a grandfather content beside the fire. Her sharp wits had told her, even as a child, that Gandalf came to the Shire because he loved it and all the people in it, and that, despite what gossip might have to say about him, he never meant them anything but the best. She often felt sad that he had so little, that his clothes were so worn, and his shoulders so stooped and his face so lined from care. He deserved better, she thought, and had she been given the wherewithal and the opportunity, she would at the very least have offered to mend his clothes for him. In ways, he reminded Rose of her own Grandad Cotton, now long gone, who had been the source of both delight and wisdom to his family.

Her menfolk — who held the wizard in the greatest respect and esteem and love, and spoke of him often — had told her that much had changed for Gandalf during the Great War, especially once there was again a King in Gondor. But none of what she'd heard — including Master Frodo's attempt to explain how the wizard had actually died a terrible death, only to be returned to life — had prepared her for the smiling, unbent, no longer care-burdened person now standing before her, robed in beautiful new garments all of shining white, with his snowy hair and beard bright as the full moon in winter. Her breath went in with a small gasp, so startled was she; the wizard's appearance left her not dumbstruck with awe, but rather speechless with the pleasure of seeing her childhood pities now erased. After what was really only a moment or two, she closed her mouth, smiled back, and curtsied politely.

"Not at all, Master Gandalf," she replied, shifting the baby to the crook of one arm as she performed her quick obeisance. "And good morning to you, as well. I always wake about this time, to see to Elanor. But I'd not been told we had a house guest. Did you arrive late last night, after Sam and I were asleep?"

The wizard laughed softly and turned to lay the flowers on the board alongside the sink. "No, as a matter of fact, you happen to be the first to know I'm here at all, save perhaps for the birds and rabbits in your gardens." There was wistfulness in his eyes as he again faced Rose. "I have no doubt that the good folk of the Shire will be less ill-disposed toward me than before, when they were certain I was in the business of spiriting away people in order to steal their wealth, or to satisfy some strange wizardly whim they felt sure was unhealthy. But after that dreadful business with Saruman and his ruffians, I would rather not risk being mistaken for him by angry hobbits with long memories!"

Rose favored him with a wry expression, recalling well the wizened old man in dirt-greyed tattered clothing who had wreaked so much havoc in the Shire less than two years past. She hadn't

seen much of him then, but when she had, she'd felt that in a way, he was like to Gandalf, only Gandalf gone bad, spoiled and petty and nasty for the sake of nastiness. She'd often hoped that the wandering wizard would return and take care of what was clearly one of his bad relations, but she'd eventually come to understand that it was her people's duty — indeed, their privilege — to learn to manage their own affairs with the Big People, to say of their own free wills who and what they would and wouldn't allow in their own country.

"Only the foolish ones might," she declared. "Some of us know just what went on away south, during the Great War, more than you might think. And even if there are those who go around telling tall tales about how my Sam and Masters Meriadoc and Peregrin threw down that Black Lord by themselves, there are more of us who know what's proper and true. We know things would've been all the worse for the Shire, and many other folks, without you and Master Frodo on our side — and I daresay much worse than we got from that wicked Sharkey. We're not as noisy about what we know as some folk are with what they don't, but we'd all be happy to see you again. I know I am, and I'm sure Master Frodo and Sam will be even more so."

The wizard bowed to her again, smiling, his long white beard almost sweeping the floor. "That's very kind of you, Rose, and I thank you for your gracious words. But I really think it would be best for us all if I came and went unobtrusively. Gossips will be gossips, and some people enjoy the taste of vinegar on their tongues. Besides, I came not for the parties, but to talk with my friends while they are all in one place."

Rose understood at once — or thought she did. "Of course you have — and here I am, taking your time and keeping you from your breakfast! Please, sit down, and I'll set to fixing food for the others. I'm sure they'll be awake soon."

She started to move past Gandalf toward the cupboards and pantries, but he caught her by the shoulders, gently, aborting her attempt to begin her daily chores. There was a bright, laughing twinkle in his dark eyes that at once stilled any protest Rose might have begun. "I'm sure they will, too, which means we have only so much time to *ourselves*. I have already broken my fast," said he, turning her about to face the table. "This I made for *you*, so that we might have our own quiet moment to share and talk without the interruptions of your menfolk."

"But—" she began, glancing up at the wizard, only to be stilled once again by a shake of his snowy head.

"No buts," he insisted. Extending one arm fully twice the length of Rose's, he pulled out the chair before the table setting and gestured for her to be seated. "Sit down, enjoy your breakfast *first*, for a change, and I shall sit beside you and mind Elanor while we chat."

Before Rose could blink, she found herself in the chair, her daughter in the wizard's arms, and him settled in the chair to her left. She would have attempted another protest, but she really was hungry, the food smelled wonderful, and Elanor seemed perfectly content in Gandalf's care, tiny though she was in comparison to him. The baby was fascinated by the long soft hair of his

beard, and he did not appear to mind her playing with it.

From the corner of his eye, he must have seen the hobbit woman hesitate; he motioned for Rose to eat and, for a while, smiled as he spoke softly to little Elanor. Her mother could not hear most of the words, and those she did catch were in no language she understood. But Elanor grasped something in either his words or his voice or his face, for she smiled back at him, giggling with delight in a small voice more beautiful than the birdsong from the garden. Suddenly at ease, Rose put aside her domestic worries and began her breakfast.

She was pleasantly surprised by the quality and flavor of both the food and drink. All hobbits, of course, learned to cook at a young age, be they boy or girl, as enjoyments of plate and cup and bowl were a universal constant among them. But she'd always thought the Big Peoples' talents in this area fell short, since their minds were usually too concerned with things like war and industry and other unhobbitish matters to learn the culinary arts properly. Sam had told her about some of the foods he and his companions had shared at great feasts among the noble folk of far-off lands, but none of it, he'd declared, had been proper hobbit fare, well-prepared and tasty though it may have been. This, however, was as good as anything her mother might have prepared, and Mistress Lily was one of the most renowned cooks in the Shire.

She could not help but comment upon it. "The food is delicious, Master Gandalf," said she, "and I'll not hide that I'm more than a bit surprised. I've never known any of the Big Folk who could hold their own against a hobbit in the kitchen — but then, I've not known too many, other than the ruffians, and those I met when I was young and travelled with my Dad to sell goods in Bree. I can't reckon how a person such as you, with such great matters to worry about and no place to call home, could have had the chance to learn, begging your pardon."

Gandalf laughed merrily, the sound of his voice fascinating Elanor. "No need, Rose. When one has no home and spends long months in lands far from any inn or friendly abode, one learns to cook, just to stay alive, and learning to do so decently makes staying alive more enjoyable. The finesse I happily admit I learned from hobbits, Bilbo in particular. The Elven-homes and houses of kings in which I am a welcome guest provide excellent provender, I do grant, but when one wishes for fare that both sustains the body and delights the senses, even the Elves could learn much from the Little Folk."

He shifted Elanor to his lap, where she settled back, gleefully nestled against his white beard. It seemed as if the barest hint of a shadow passed across his face, like a high thin cloud that momentarily passes over the summer sun, quieting for a moment the raucous play and unbridled merriment of the children below. "As you have brought up the subject of Elves and wandering, I think perhaps I should bring up the subject I wished to discuss with you. Have you been happy these last two years, Rose?"

The question hardly required thought before a response could be given. "Yes, sir, very happy. I know some of the other girls my age thought I was a fool for waiting on Sam to come back, but I never believed as they did, that he'd gone off for good and would never return. I knew

he loved the Shire too much, and would find his way home, even if it meant getting past every goblin and troll and other evil creature ever borned. Some of those same folk are saying it's high time Sam and I had a hole of our own, and that we ought leave Mister Frodo to take care of himself, but I know they're just jealous of us having such a fine place to live, and a good Master to work for. Besides, it would break Sam's heart to leave Mister Frodo now."

The wizard watched her while she spoke, the intensity of his gaze half-hidden by the slight downward tilt of his head and the shade of his long lashes. "And would it break *your* heart as well?" he asked in the mildest of tones.

She considered the question, but not for long. "Aye, I think it would. I'm not as close to the Master as Sam, of course — I haven't travelled so far or gone through such hard times with him — but I couldn't leave him, just so we could have a place all to ourselves. He's as much my Sam's friend as Sam is his, and he loves Elanor like she was his own kin — and sometimes, he needs as much looking after as she does."

Gandalf raised his head slightly, curiosity piqued. "What do you mean?"

Rose collected her thoughts before answering. "I mean, Mister Frodo's a fine gentlehobbit, the finest in the Shire and I'm sure one of the best people in all the lands beyond. He knows more than anyone I've ever met — excepting yourself, Master Gandalf, to be sure. He's kind and generous and well-spoken — but I know that were we to leave him alone, he'd wither right up and die, just like the trees that were choked to death by all the foul smokes Sharkey's machines belched out. Not that I'm saying he's gone crazy, mind you, or taken with a wasting sickness, like the one that was the end of poor old Perry Greenbriar. But there're times when fits come upon him all of a sudden, and he takes such a bad turn so quick and acts so strange, I think he'll crumble and blow clean away from this world. It doesn't happen too often — twice or thrice a year, at most — and he's always right as rain the next day, but it's so queer and gets me so scared, I wouldn't think of leaving him any more than I'd think of leaving Sam or Elanor. He needs someone to take care of him, and I wish it were someone who knew a bit more about such things as we."

Such a profound look of pity came over Gandalf's features while Rose spoke, she knew at once that he had expected her reply. "You know what's wrong with him, Master Gandalf, don't you?" said she, certain of his response.

"I do," answered the wizard, stroking Elanor's curls to soothe away the beginnings of a fuss that their tense talk had aroused. "At least, I know the causes, even if I do not fully understand them. The arts of the Enemy are evil beyond the reckoning of good folk, and they have long-lasting effects upon those whom they afflict. I fear that the wounds Frodo experienced exacted a permanent price, more than just the loss of his finger. Even the greatest healers in Middle-earth cannot give him any lasting ease."

Rose set down her teacup, unable to swallow, her face stricken. "Are you saying, then, that Mister Frodo *will* die, then, even with him so young and all?"

But the wizard's response was a gentle smile of comfort. "No — though the fits will continue so long as he remains in this world. And that is why I wished to speak with you, Rose. Have you ever heard of the Uttermost West?"

Rose searched her memory for long moments before she nodded, hesitantly. "Yes. My Sam is fascinated by the Elves and anything Elvish, I'm sure you know, and he's told me tales he heard from Mister Bilbo about the White Ships and how the Elves go to the Havens away west of here and sail off into the Far West, to Elvenhome, the happiest of places where they live in the light of the Great Powers and never grow sick or die. Now, I'm none too sure about what these Powers are, 'cept that Mister Frodo says they keep an eye on what goes on with us lesser folk, and try to help when evil people start fixing to ruin everything."

"That is perhaps as good an explanation as any," Gandalf confirmed. "And Sam is right when he says that the West is a blessed land full of joy and comfort and healing. It is *my* home, too, Rose, and before the winter comes, I and a company of Elves will be leaving Middle-earth for the West. I shall not be coming back, nor any of those who take ship with me."

"That will come as a sore blow to Mister Frodo," said Rose, "and to more than Mister Frodo, myself included. Did you come to tell us this, then, to say goodbye now?"

The wizard's head shook. "No, not precisely. I think it would be better for most not to anticipate what might prove to be a sad event so far in advance. But there will be others coming, too: Bilbo, for one, and Frodo, too, if he wishes. There he can find the healing and the peace he needs and has earned, and I believe he would be happier there than he would be wasting away little by little in a life without respect, here in the Shire."

For a span of seven heartbeats, the hobbit woman felt a sharp pang of grief at the thought of Frodo's departure — then she suddenly understood why Gandalf had come to tell her this. "You're afraid Sam will insist on going, too, aren't you, Master Gandalf? Especially if he has too long to think about it?"

"The thought has occurred to me. And the longer he has to think about it, the more unhappy it will make him when he learns he cannot follow his master — for indeed, he cannot. His future is here, with you and your children and the Shire and the new age of Middle-earth. But his loyalty and love for Frodo are as strong as his feelings for you. I would not see him torn between two impossible choices, and left crippled in heart for the rest of his life. He deserves better, as do you. But you must not mention this to him."

Confusion darkened the hobbit woman's face. "Then why tell me this now, if I'm not to breathe a word of it to him — or anyone else, I imagine?"

The wizard's smile was full of amusement. "You imagine correctly," said he with a soft chuckle. "But I am telling you this because if Frodo does choose to go — and I believe he will, from what I know of the pains he suffers — he will not wish to travel alone to the Havens. He will

ask Sam to get your permission to go travelling for a week or two, and you must give it gladly."

"Gladly?" echoed Rose. "But if Sam goes with him to the Havens, how will I know he won't choose to follow Mister Frodo, after all?"

Gandalf heard the distress in her voice, and instantly quelled it. "He will not go beyond the Havens, Rose, for he shall not be allowed to do so. It is not his time, if ever it will be. He will grieve at the loss, but if he does not set out with the knowledge that you love him enough to trust him to return, his heart may be so torn, the rent might never heal. Once Frodo has gone, if his return is to a house and a wife full of doubt and bitterness, it will surely shatter more than just his heart; it may destroy your future together. But if he knows that what awaits him at home is love and trust and sympathy, he will feel the sorrow of his loss, move on, heal, and become the whole and happy person he was meant to be. You *will* give him your permission, Rose, won't you?"

The hobbit woman set down her teacup again, thinking hard on everything the wizard had said. She did not deny the deep fear that a journey to the Havens and being so permanently parted from his beloved master might break her husband's heart beyond repair, so that the Sam who returned to her would not be the Sam who had set out.

Yet she could also see the wisdom in Gandalf's advice. Sam would be far more aggrieved if he could not say goodbye to his beloved Master at the very moment of departure, yet if Rose complained about him taking off before he even set out (which, she admitted to herself, she might have, had the wizard not spoken to her), he would either stay at home and feel unhappy that he had not been allowed to comply with Frodo's request, or would go anyway, and feel all the more unhappy for displeasing his wife and saying a last goodbye to his best friend all at the once. And the more she thought of it, the more Rose understood that she truly had nothing to fear, if she would simply trust in Sam's love for her, and hers for him.

She made her decision without another thought. "I will," she declared firmly, and never regretted it.