heart of fire

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Summary

Written for seniorpotato on tumblr, who asked for a sort-of-Frozen!AU
Every Hobbit in the Shire has a Season. The children of Summer are known for their fires, the Springs for their skills at gardening and healing, and the Autumns for the winds that they can bend to their will.

Bilbo Baggins has a different Season, a cursed Season.
Bilbo Baggins is a child of Winter, blamed by many for the suffering of the Fell Winter of his infancy. Shunned and forced to restrain his powers with an amulet, Bilbo suddenly finds his skills needed to assist a horde of suicidal Dwarves on their Quest to kill a dragon.
Fire cannot kill a dragon, but perhaps Ice can... if it can be controlled.
The Seasons were some of the best kept secrets of the Shire.

Ironically enough, they were also the secrets that the Hobbits who inhabited that fair land did not actively try to keep. In fact, it had often been a source of great confusion for the Halflings during the occasional late night at the Green Dragon. Why, they often wondered, did the Men or Elves or Dwarves who often passed through the Shire never stop to ask the Hobbits for their help? After all, it wasn’t as if any self-respecting Hobbit would pass up a chance to use their Season to assist a fellow creature (except, possibly, a Sackeville-Baggins), and Yavanna alone knew that it would be a lovely change to use the Seasons for something other than gardening or cooking or the odd, minor illness. How many old Gaffers could count on both hands the number of times that they had seen a cold, rain-soaked Ranger that could have benefited from the warm fires of the Summer Hobbits? And how many gentle Spring lasses would gladly have healed the occasional sick or wounded Dwarf that stumbled through the Shire on their way to Bree or the Blue Mountains? How many adventurous Autumns would have jumped at the chance to fill Elven sails with brisk winds in the Grey Havens?

Understandably, the failure of their non-Hobbit friends and neighbours to ask for the use of the Seasons never ceased to confound and, at times, frustrate the Hobbits of the Shire. Yet, what could they do? For it seemed that the Men, Elves, and Dwarves were only too happy to go about their lives without looking twice at the secluded, peaceful Shire, and it really wasn’t proper to prance around showing off a person’s Season to someone who didn’t ask for it. So the Seasons of the Shire remained a secret that was never quite meant to be secret, and for many years the people of Middle-Earth went on with their lives never knowing of the power that resided in some of Illuvator’s most unassuming creations.

Then Belladonna Took ran off with a Wizard.

In many ways, the Shire was not surprised. After all, the woman was a Took, and an Autumn at that. A child of the Autumnal winds was always more susceptible to the sort of adventurous nonsense that made respectable Hobbits shudder in their sleep, and the fact that such a strong, adventurous Autumn spirit manifested itself in a descendant of the Old Took made it almost inevitable that the young woman would run off at least once in her life. Belladonna Took and Gandalf the Grey, for such was the Wizard’s name, travelled together for many a year as the young Took girl grew into a strong Hobbit woman. It came as no surprise to the inhabitants of the Shire that young Belladonna had used her skills many times during her adventures, and if the grey wizard was said to have been genuinely shocked by the revelation of the Seasons, the matter was quickly attributed to the oddness of Wizards. After all, what was it to Hobbits if Men, Elves, Dwarrows and Wizards were too unobservant to notice the fires that Summers could create from thin air or the winds that Autumns could summon from the trees?

Eventually Belladonna returned to the Shire, as most Autumns are wont to do in their own time, where she promptly shocked the entire neighbourhood by getting engaged to a quiet, unassuming Spring lad by the name of Bungo Baggins. Bungo was a fine lad, to be sure, as many of the dumbfounded elder Hobbits muttered amongst themselves following the engagement. He was a peaceful sort of creature, as most Springs are, with the usual gifts of healing and gardening that come to the children of Spring. He was, however, unavoidably dull by even the Shire’s high standards, and the only things about him that were truly of note were his family’s fortune and the rather incredible state of his garden. Belladonna, on the other hand, was anything but dull, and could conjure some of the fiercest winds that any Autumns of the Shire had ever seen. She had
even been known, in some of her angrier moments, to chill the air so much that a light frost seemed to fall across the leaves and branches of the nearest trees.

Despite the general confusion that continued to permeate the Shire long after their marriage, Bungo and Belladonna Baggins remained genuinely happy in each other’s company. Bungo would see Belladonna off on her numerous adventures with a loving smile, and the Autumn woman would always return to Bungo’s beloved hole with gifts in her arms and tales on her lips. The happiness of the couple was undeniable and, impossibly, only seemed to grow when they welcomed a tiny son into the world shortly after the first chills of winter.

In any other time, the Hobbits of the Shire might have taken a strange sort of enjoyment out of the destruction of that happiness. After all, the perfect joy and peace that seemed to have taken up a permanent home in the hole at Bag End could never have been meant to last forever, and there will always be people in the world who are only waiting for those happier than them to fall into ruin.

However, the Shire quickly found that it had more important things to worry about, for the winter of young Bilbo Baggin’s birth would be known as the worst winter that the Shire had ever seen.

It would be known, before many years had passed, as the Fell Winter.

It began, as many things do, with bloodshed. Wolves poured into the Shire from the forests of Bree and Buckland, ripping and tearing into anything in their paths. The gentle Spring farmers and curious Autumn wanderers that had long ago settled on the edges of the Shire were quickly overwhelmed by the slaughter, and calls for assistance were lost among the violent blizzards and icy storms that had descended upon the Shire in an impenetrable blanket of white. Few of the Hobbits of Hobbiton and Michel Delving dared to travel through the deadly winds that had divided their land with walls of ice.

Bungo Baggins was one of the few.

In later years, gossiping Hobbits would claim that it was his wife’s adventurous spirit that finally inspired him to leave the safety of his home for his own, fatal adventure. Others would claim, very quietly, that it was Belladonna herself that had forced him to leave in her stead, as the Autumn woman was still too weakened from her recent childbearing to attempt the journey. Whatever the reason, Bungo, along with many of his kin, perished before ever reaching the besieged and bloodied regions of the Shire. Stricken by grief, Belladonna fled from Bungo’s beloved Bag End for her family’s home in Tuckborough soon after with her infant son in tow, only to find that her troubles were not quite finished.

The Shire, already reeling from the events of the Fell Winter, found itself struck by another shocking revelation.

Bilbo Baggins, the only child of Bungo Baggins and Belladonna Took, was not a Spring lad as his father had been, nor was he a child of the Autumn winds, like his mother. Ice streamed from the babe’s unpractised fingers, and every laugh or wail from the child’s mouth brought a wind so sharp with cold that it sent most Hobbits scurrying for the nearest fire.

Bilbo Baggins was a Winter, the first of his kind to ever appear in the Shire. And to have such a child appear so soon before the sorrows of the Fell Winter… Well, Hobbits could believe in many things, but very rarely did they allow themselves to believe in coincidences.

Perhaps the child had been a sign of things to come? A warning to the Shire from Yavanna that may have allowed her people to prepare if only Bungo and Belladonna had spoken sooner about their son’s gifts?
Or, perhaps, as the Sackevilles and the Chubbs and the Proudfeet began to murmur, perhaps young Bilbo had been the cause of the Fell Winter. After all, the child could hardly control himself, and even Belladonna admitted that she would often go to the babe’s cradle to find that it had been coated in ice overnight. Perhaps young Bilbo had unknowingly released his powers onto the Shire, a curse from the Valar on a Spring and an Autumn who had dared to be too happy in such an unhappy world. Belladonna railed and argued against the rumours surrounding her child with every breath (or wind) in her body, even as her strength began to fail and the child at her side began to grow and to understand. When Belladonna was found in Bag End shortly after her son’s thirtieth year, her limbs blue with cold and hair frozen, and her son kneeling half-frozen and shivering by her side with eyes wild with fear and a strange, burning fire that belied the ice streaming from his fingertips, the inhabitants of Hobbiton knew that something had to be done.

They took Belladonna and- ignoring her child’s wild, grief-stricken claims that she was alive, she was only healing she was still alive- burned her body with the fires of the Summer Hobbits and scattered her ashes to the four Autumn winds as was only proper. A necklace was sent for and fashioned with the strongest magic of the Seasons in the most sacred corner of the Shire and brought to Bag End, where it was placed around the neck of an unresisting Bilbo with the instructions that he should never take it off, for fear of releasing his cursed Winter upon the innocent people of the Shire once again.

And so Bilbo grew up, his ears filled with the bitter rumours of Hobbits who had lost far too many loved ones in the icy winds of the Fell Winter, his neck burning with the accusing and pitying stares of his neighbours. He went through life with a defiant sort of vivacity reminiscent of his mother, and accepted his lot with the quiet strength of his father. Hobbits turned away when he approached or offered him the barest of civilities at parties or visits, never once noticing that the fire that had once flickered in his icy blue eyes was no more than a dim spark.

And if, every so often, the young master of Bag End would remove his necklace and paint the inner walls of Bag End with swirls of ice or send a lone, whistling wind into the dark winter air, he never told anyone of it.

The Winter child of the Shire became its best kept secret.

Until the Wizard came.

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“Dwarves, Gandalf.”

“Yes.”

“In. My. House.”

“Yes, I do believe that we have established that, my dear Bilbo. They are still rather hungry, I am afraid, especially Thorin- you wouldn’t happen to have any more food, would you?”

“Probably in the second pantry- now wait a minute, why do I have to give them anymore food? They’ve already eaten everything in my first pantry,” Bilbo spluttered. His fingers began to tingle and he hastily curled them into tight fists in his lap, his brow furrowing in a slight grimace when the pendant at his throat burned hotly in response.

Gandalf noticed and frowned, his grey eyes darkening with the shadowy anger that had been released earlier in Bilbo’s (rather crowded) dining room.
“Why, because they are your guests, of course,” the Wizard answered with careful cheeriness. “And a respectable Hobbit would never allow their guests to go hungry, now would they?”

“They are not my guests,” Bilbo hissed. “I didn’t invite them, I don’t even know them, for Yavanna’s sake.”

“They are in your house,” the Grey Wizard pointed out pleasantly.

“Yes, and why is that, exactly?” the Hobbit demanded through gritted teeth. “Because, as far as I can tell, I didn’t agree to any adventure. And even if I had, there was never any mention that it would come in a package deal with thirteen ill-mannered Dwarrows!”

“The Dwarves have explained their quest to you themselves,” Gandalf argued. “They wish to reclaim the Lonely Mountain, a home that has been lost to them for many years. However, in order to get past the dragon that currently resides within said mountain, they need a burglar. And, given your abilities and your heritage, I decided that you would be the perfect Hobbit for the job, if I may.”

Bilbo’s eyes darkened as they always did at the mention of his powers and he turned to look back in the direction of the room where he had left his ‘guests’. The occasional burst of song or rumble of hushed, bass voices continued to be heard through the cosy walls of Bag End. Bilbo grimaced to hide a smile when one of the younger Dwarves- Kíli? Ori?- announced the discovery of food with a triumphant roar.

“I suppose that means they’ve found the second pantry,” he mused. “And I cannot go with them on this Quest, Gandalf. I’ve made up my mind.”

“They need you, Bilbo Baggins,” Gandalf insisted. “Whether they are aware of it or not, this Quest will not succeed without your help.”

Bilbo managed to laugh at that. “How? I am simply a Hobbit who has no experience with adventures or fighting, or anything really; a Hobbit who is more of a curse than a blessing. I… I will hurt them, Gandalf. Tell me, how much will they appreciate my contributions when they reclaim their Mountain only to find it covered in snow?”

“The Fell Winter was not your fault, Master Baggins,” Gandalf snapped. “Any person who says otherwise is a fool.”

“I’m afraid you would have to call the Shire a den of fools, then, Gandalf,” Bilbo murmured. “It would not be the first time,” the Wizard muttered darkly. He took a deep breath and reached for Bilbo’s pendant, his expression slowly clearing even as his fingers pressed against the curved, gleaming metal and polished gem with increasing aggression.

“Bilbo,” he said finally. “Your mother would not have wanted this life for you.”

Bilbo shot out of his chair with a violence that seemed to shock the Wizard. The pendant burned against his collarbone again, forcing his eyes to close against the pain.

“I’m not going,” he whispered finally. “I’m sorry Gandalf, but I cannot risk putting them in danger. Find yourself another burglar- perhaps an Autumn, or a Summer if you really need the fire power.”

“The only Autumn that I would have considered taking is dead,” Gandalf countered.

Bilbo’s lips curled in old, remembered bitterness and he turned away with another deep, shaking
breath.

“…She wasn’t dead,” he whispered. “I could have saved her.”

“Come on this adventure with me, and you could save these Dwarves,” the Wizard pressed. “They are not your mother, and saving them will not bring her back. But you can save them.”

Bilbo shook his head and ducked out of the smaller sitting room that the Wizard had settled him in after his rather embarrassing fainting fit regarding the Dwarves’ blasted contract. He slipped past his parlour and began to creep towards his bedroom on silent feet, his ears throbbing in time with the deep, gravelling voices that rose up in mournful song behind him.

“Far over the Misty Mountains cold
To dungeons deep, and caverns old
We must away, ere break of day
To find our long, forgotten gold.”

Bilbo would never know how the contract had managed to sneak its way into his bedroom.

He stared at the wrinkled, half-furled scroll of paper for a long while as the songs finally faded and night reigned high above the heavens. The Hobbit reached up to unclasp the necklace from around his neck almost as an afterthought and gently pressed his hand against his bedpost. Curling tendrils of ice crept across the worn wooden post, carving tiny snowflakes and dainty winter flowers into the wood for a few precious moments before they melted away. Bilbo stared down at the contract, and remembered his mother’s old pack, locked away in some dusty corner of her chambers.

The contract was signed before dawn, and if any of the Dwarves were surprised by the extra pack that had managed to join their pile in front of the Hobbit’s door, they made no comment other than the occasional grumble over a lost bet.

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“Hey, Bilbo! Where are ye goin’?”

Bilbo nearly stumbled at the sound of Bofur’s voice and glanced over his shoulder. Twelve pairs of Dwarven eyes stared back at him with varying expressions of curiosity and suspicion. Even Thorin graced him with a brief, sceptical look before turning back to the argument that he seemed to be having with Gandalf. The Hobbit lifted his chin in an automatic gesture of defiance and shrugged.

“I’m just getting some air,” he huffed, taking care to use that posh, sophisticated tone that was sure to irritate his companions.

As the Hobbit had expected, many of the Dwarrows stiffened at his tone and turned back to the fire with low huffs or muffled grumbles about the strangeness of Hobbits. Only Bofur, Fili, and Kili continued to look at him with something akin to innocent curiosity long after the others had turned away. Bilbo offered the three of them a small, tight smile and strode away from the campsite with all the confidence that he could muster. His fingers had already begun to tingle with the first chills of Winter, and he could feel the familiar cold shiver of freedom creeping up his spine in the absence of the necklace’s restraining fire.

The Hobbit waited until the light of the campfire had faded into faint curls of silver framed by the light of the moon before he finally raised his hands to the sky.
Cool, biting winds flew to his command and slipped through the matted curls of his hair with all
the tenderness of a mother’s embrace. Bilbo smiled and gently pushed out against the air. Swirls of
ice and snow spilled from his fingertips and danced across the hard ground before shattering
against a lone, crooked tree several feet away. Quiet laughter bubbled onto the Hobbit’s lips and he
whirled around with a small, irresistible flourish that sent two thick streams of ice across trampled
grass and weathered stones.

Bilbo stepped back and took a deep breath, his body shaking with a feverish chill that seeped
through his bones and veins in an invisible river of ice. The Hobbit shuddered and rubbed his hands
across his arms in an instinctive attempt to warm himself.

*Cut it out now, old boy,* he told himself. *Don’t push yourself too far. Yavanna, Thorin would kill
you if you slowed his blasted Quest down by accidentally freezing yourself- Not that I actually care
about what the blasted Dwarf thinks or anything…*

The Hobbit sighed and took one last, wistful look at the melting streams of snow and ice around
him before making his way back to camp. He paused when his fingers travelled up to rest against
the hollow of his collarbone where his necklace normally rested, and wondered for the hundredth
time if he should have left the blasted thing back in Bag End. Granted, the other Hobbits would
probably have thrown a fit if they had found that he had left without it, and Bilbo was almost
willing to bet that he would have been permanently exiled from the Shire if that had been the case.

And yet, he was involved in a dangerous Quest, as several of the Dwarves reminded him on a daily
basis. Who was to say that the small amulet resting in his pack wouldn’t go missing someday or be
damaged beyond repair? Wouldn’t it be better for Bilbo’s own safety if he could use his powers
whenever he needed to, without having to worry about whether or not he was still wearing the
necklace?

And yet… Wouldn’t it be more dangerous to go without the necklace, to gamble the safety of the
dwarves solely on his own ability to control Winter’s power?

*I can’t risk it,* Bilbo thought resignedly. *I cannot risk them.*

The Hobbit squared his shoulders and stalked into camp with a brief, strained smile for the three
Dwarves that stubbornly continued to acknowledge his existence. Bilbo slipped beneath the folds
of his rough wool blanket with a quiet “Good Night” that, as always, went unreturned. He waited
until his frozen fingers had retrieved the gleaming necklace from the bottom of his pack and
fastened it around his neck before finally allowing his exhausted body to sleep, never noticing the
sharp sapphire eyes that watched him silently from the other side of the fire.
Um, wow. So, I did not actually expect to get the kind of response that I did for this story. It has actually sort of made my entire week lol. Anyways, I'm really glad that you all seem to like it so far, and please continue to let me know what you think!

The journey continued, as journeys always do, with days blurred together in a strange mixture of tedious exhaustion and bright-eyed wonder laced with sharp adrenaline. Bilbo found, to his slight dismay and surprise that he could no longer count the number of days that had passed since he had last sat in his father’s armchair in front of the fireplace or poured over the pages of a book in the study. One morning Bilbo realized that he could no longer remember the feel of a mattress beneath his bruised and aching muscles, and that the scent of tea was all but a phantom in his memory. That evening, Bilbo encased an entire tree in ice.

The Dwarves continued to keep the Hobbit at a healthy distance, with the puzzling exception of Bofur, Fíli and Kíli. The toymaker and the brothers had gradually taken it upon themselves to sit closer to Bilbo in the evening and pester him for stories of the Shire. Several nights into their journey, Bilbo caught Ori, Bifur and Bombur listening intently to his tales, and found the following eve that they had shifted to join his three companions after dinner. Balin joined the group two nights later, followed almost immediately by Dori, Gloín and Ofn. Occasionally, Bilbo fancied that even Nori and Dwalin were listening in. Thorin alone remained aloof, his shoulders visibly stiffening at every shout of laughter that rose from Bilbo’s listeners.

If Bilbo ever noticed the sharp eyes that watched him depart from camp every evening, he made no mention of it, and the Dwarf king continued to resolutely ignore the hobbit’s presence unless he found a need to berate the other creature for his lack of experience.

Away from the warmth of the evening campfires, the Dwarves did not seek to engage Bilbo in conversation. Every once in a while, the Hobbit would be called upon to share in some joke of Fíli and Kíli’s or would look up to find that Bofur had come to tease him over his daily troubles. For the most part, however, Bilbo was left alone, as he preferred it. It was easier, he told himself, to be distant than it was to be close. Any friends that he made would only spurn him later, would fear him once they realized what he could do. Friends would only hurt him. Or worse, he would hurt them.

In his heart, Bilbo knew that he couldn’t keep his Season secret forever. Gandalf had told him that it had taken him less than a fortnight to notice Belladonna’s Season, and Bilbo had already had to field several questions from Bofur, Kíli and Ori regarding where he went every evening. Any other Hobbit would probably have revealed their Seasons by this point, whether by accident or on purpose. Bilbo often wondered how he would have revealed his powers, late at night after he had painted the hills and trees with ice and snow. He imagined freezing Fíli and Kíli’s hair to the ground while they slept, or tossing a ball of snow into Thorin’s stormy features the next time the
Dwarf shouted at him. He strove to picture the expressions of shock that would cross the faces of the Dwarves and, on nights when he felt particularly homesick or exhausted, made himself chuckle at the thought that even Dwalin would drop his beloved Warhammer at the sight of Bilbo’s powers.

Then he would remember the gossip that he had endured in the Shire, and the looks of fear that often crossed the faces of children that he passed in the street. He would wonder what the Dwarves’ faces would look like twisted with fear. He would think of Thorin, and see the Dwarf’s eyes darken with deeper disgust and anger at the fact that such a dangerous creature had been allowed to travel with his people. And Bilbo would shudder and roll over, preferring to slip into the nonsensical throes of sleep rather than linger on fears of things that he only wished to avoid.

He nearly slipped the night of the Trolls.

As with many things, the trouble started with Fíli and Kíli. The two brothers had been placed on watch over the ponies shortly before Bilbo tried to slip away for his nightly ritual. They called out to him as he passed, pelting him with their usual questions regarding where he was going, and was it true that Hobbits grew mushrooms in their cellars? Bilbo tried to shrug them off as he always did, his fingers already beginning to tingle with the beginnings of cold. Kíli was at his side before he could take a step, his eyes dancing with a bright sort of mischief that would send chills down the spine of any sane person.

“One now, Mister Boggins,” he mused. “Have you noticed something odd about Uncle?”

“Sorry?” the Hobbit spluttered. “What-?”

“He’s talking about Thorin,” Fíli put in, his solemn features twitching into an amused smile almost identical to Kíli’s.

“A-Ah,” Bilbo muttered. “Was I supposed to notice something… odd about Thorin, then?”

“He seems a bit more preoccupied than usual,” Fíli replied airily. “As if something was on his mind.”

“He seems especially concerned with you,” Kíli added.

“With… Me?” Bilbo yelped. He flinched when a flash of ice travelled through the nerves of his fingers and nearly buried his hands in his pockets. Cold, wet snow seeped through the fabric of his jacket and waistcoat and stung his skin. “No, no I’m sure that you are very much mistaken.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you saw the way he watched you every night,” Kíli objected with what could almost be called a pout.
Bilbo struggled to hold back another burst of ice and snow from seeping through his pockets and shook his head. He stumbled away before either of the brothers could pull him back again and offered them a small smile.

“If your… uncle looks at me, it is only so that he can find something else to ridicule me about,” he muttered. “Now, if you will excuse me, boys, I really must go.”

He could almost feel the disappointed glances that the brothers sent after his retreating back. The Hobbit slipped away into the trees as quickly as he could, eager to escape their gazes. He wrenched his fingers out of his pockets the moment he was out of sight and pressed them against the nearest tree with a low sigh. Frost curled across the roughened bark and skated upwards towards the trees, seeking the starlight above even as Bilbo stared down at the damp earth below.

They’re wrong, he told himself firmly. They have to be wrong. Thorin hates me, he’s made that very clear and… and it’s better that way. I can’t-

“’Ey Burt. Do you see that?”

“Wha’? I don’ see anyfing.”

“Tha’se because yer not usin’ yer bloomin’ eyes. Isn’t tha’ right, Bill?”

“Stow it, the both of ya. There’s food nearby…”

Bilbo squeaked and pressed himself close to the half-frozen tree as three giant, lumbering figures came towards him. Beady eyes glowed a dark, sickly yellow in the dim light that had managed to filter through the trees. Lumpy, misshapen heads swiveled in slow, sickening circles atop bulging necks and towering, flabby bodies while bulbous noses sniffed the air like bloodhounds searching for a scent.

“Trolls,” Bilbo breathed as ice streamed from his fingers in thickening swirls that soon covered the tree in a sheen of hard, gleaming silver.

One of the Trolls stumbled to a sudden halt and threw out one long, meaty arm to halt his companions.

“I smell somefing,” he announced.

The troll to the far right sniffed loudly. “I don’ smell anyfing, Tom.”
“Tha’s because yer stupid,” Tom informed him huffily. “There’s food ‘ere-There!”

Bilbo gasped and darted away from his frozen tree just as the first Troll lunged for him. He lashed out without thinking at the Troll that had tried to come at him from behind and watched ice curl in a thick band around the creature’s chest. The Hobbit screamed and scrambled away from the freezing Troll, his cries nearly drowned by the high, piercing shrieks that rose from the freezing Trolls lungs before his head was completely covered by blue-white ice and snow. The third Troll roared and grabbed the Hobbit in a tight, painful grip around his chest.

“Wha’ are ye?” it snarled. “Wha’ did ye do to ‘im?”

“I-I don’t know,” Bilbo whimpered. “I don’t know, please I didn’t mean to-.”

“Blasted ferret!” the Troll screamed. “I’ll rip ye limb from limb-!”

Loud, furious roars rose up behind them and nearly made the Hobbit jump in the Troll’s grasp. Thick fingers loosened from around his waist and Bilbo found himself falling, his body slamming into weathered leather, armor and cloth with such force that it drove the breath from his lungs. The Dwarf that had caught him fell back onto the ground beneath them with a low groan of his own.


Bilbo yelped and shoved away from the young Dwarf’s chest, his wide eyes flickering between Kíli and the cold, tingling tips of his fingers. Ice… Ice… He had frozen a *Troll* and oh Eru, now Kíli was coming towards him he couldn’t let them touch him, he couldn’t-.

“Master Baggins!”

Bilbo flinched and whirled around at the sound of Thorin’s voice, his feet moving instinctively to put distance between himself and the Dwarf king when he saw the Dwarf approaching him.

“S-Stay back,” he cried. “Don’t touch me!”

Thorin halted immediately and stared at him with something that verged on alarm, his sapphire eyes dark with anger and confusion.

“You are wounded, Halfling,” he growled.

Bilbo merely frowned at him. Wounded? He hadn’t been wounded, he was only dropped, and while that was rather inconvenient it wasn’t as if he had never suffered worse-. 

Calloused fingers poked at an area near his hairline and sent a sharp flash of pain through his skull. Bilbo gasped and pulled away from the touch, his eyes widening when he felt a thin, warm stream of blood slide across his sweaty, dirt-encrusted skin. He looked up in time to see Thorin smirk and pulled away before the king could touch him again.

“Don’t,” Bilbo whispered. “Don’t touch me.”

Thorin frowned again.

“Bi-,” he began, only to be cut off by Fíli’s cry of surprise and alarm.

“Uncle! There is a frozen Troll here.”

Thorin blinked and turned to look at the towering block of ice that his nephew was staring at, his hand reaching out to grip Bilbo’s arm in a firm grip when the Hobbit tried to slip away.

“No, no let me go,” Bilbo whimpered. “Frozen, it’s frozen b-but it’s so big… Please, let me go before…”


“…Frozen,” Bilbo whimpered, his eyes widening in alarm as sense finally began to pour back into his shell-shocked brain. Yavanna, he had done it now, he had almost told them-.

The grip on his arm disappeared, only to be replaced by a warm clasp to his shoulder that nearly made Bilbo yelp again. Thorin stared down at him with something akin to gentleness and squeezed his shoulder one more time before pulling away with his customary scowl.

“All is well, Halfling,” he scoffed. “The Troll will not hurt you. Even a creature as thick as that being could not survive being encased in ice, and his companions will harm you no longer.”

Bilbo swallowed back the bile that threatened to rise in his throat at the thought of the life that he had taken and forced himself to nod even as Gandalf burst onto the scene and demanded to know what had happened. The Dwarves spared him a few more moments to see to the small cut at his scalp and ensure that he would not faint before they split off into groups to seek the Trolls’ cave, leaving him under the guard of a pair of near-frantic Dwarven princes. None of the company questioned him as to how the Troll had been frozen, and Bilbo slowly began to realize as the minutes passed that none of his companions believed that he had had anything to do with the ice.

As far as the Dwarves were concerned, Bilbo had only had the unlucky misfortune to stumble upon the Trolls during his idiotic trek through the woods.
It was a blessing that he continued to cherish even as the necklace was returned to its customary place around his neck and a sword was pressed into his fingers.

No matter what happened, at least his secret was still safe.

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It bothered Bilbo when the Elves of Rivendell stared at him, although he supposed that he could not blame them for their curiosity. Hobbits, even Autumn ones, rarely travelled so far from the Shire, and to find a Child of the Kindly West in Rivendell with a company of thirteen Dwarves of all things was certainly an unique occurrence.

And yet, Bilbo couldn’t help but feel that there was something more to the Elves’ stares than simply curiosity or shock. Elrond in particular often glanced at him on the rare occasion that they were in the same room or corridor, his imperious brow furrowed with a thoughtfulness that made Bilbo want to run. Thorin seemed bothered as well, although Bilbo couldn’t imagine how the Dwarf even noticed the stares when he was so absorbed by the mystery of Thror’s map. The king had pulled Bilbo aside near the end of that disastrous dinner and demanded to know what he had done to attract the Lord of Rivendell’s notice.

“This Company is already attracting far more attention than it needs to,” the Dwarf had hissed. “Our encounter with the Wargs has proven that. Do not create more problems for us, Master Baggins.”

Bilbo had only nodded, choosing to refrain from pointing out that he had not been the one to jump up onto a blasted dais and sing in front of Elrond and his staff while others tossed vegetables and bread at statues that were probably worth more than all of Hobbiton.

He felt the weight of Elrond’s stares as they left the dining area and could not find it in him to be surprised when the Elf lord discovered him in the midst of his lonely wanderings. The Hobbit and the Elf spoke as civilized people do, and Bilbo felt that he could have counted the conversation as a pleasant one if it weren’t for the odd look that would creep into Elrond’s eyes whenever he looked down at the Hobbit’s necklace.

Naturally, it surprised Bilbo immensely when he was taken by Thorin and Balin to the meeting with Elrond and Gandalf. He watched the Elf read and explain the mysterious moon runes to a cautiously-pleased Thorin in silence, trying to ignore the anxiety that crept through his heart and made his fingers chill even as the pendant burned at his throat.

The Elf and Dwarves ignored him for the most part, leaving Gandalf the task of explaining things to the weary Hobbit. Bilbo nodded, tucked a few useful facts away when he could, and nearly smiled when Balin and Thorin started to leave Elrond’s presence with the map tucked securely into Thorin’s tunic.
“A moment if you will, Master Baggins,” Elrond called before Bilbo could move to follow them.

The Hobbit froze and turned to stare at the Elf in expectant silence. Elrond only smiled thinly and glided closer on silent feet, his eyes cool and thoughtful.

“I have often heard rumors regarding the inhabitants of the Shire from my kin in the Grey Havens,” he mused. “They tell me strange things, tales of small creatures with unusual power.”

“Is that so?” Bilbo managed, his voice somehow steady despite the blood that raced through his veins and the fire that continued to war with ice at his neck.

The Elf nodded and stepped closer, his eyes now locked on the pendant.

“And now you are here, with such a strange air of power about you,” he continued. “It makes me wonder about those rumors, Master Baggins.”

“You may go to the Shire if you wish, Master Elf,” Bilbo told him with all the strength that he could muster. “There are no secrets among Hobbits.”

Except for me.

“Yet you are a different sort of Hobbit, I think,” the Elf pointed out. “You travel with Dwarves as companions, and yet you keep your distance. You allow yourself to be presented as one who is ordinary, and yet there is a power about you, a secret that you are too afraid to tell…”

Bilbo sucked in a sharp breath and moved to step away, only to freeze once more when the Elf unexpectedly crouched and brought his slender hands to Bilbo’s shoulders.

“I too know something of power, Bilbo Baggins,” he informed the Hobbit. “It is strange, hard to understand and often, it is to be feared. I also know that it can bring cruelty from those who do not understand and that those who do not deserve suffering are granted it through no fault of their own.

“There is power in you, Bilbo Baggins, but there is also kindness and loyalty and passion. Do not allow yourself to be ruled by the fear and cruelty that others have shown to you, for you alone are the judge of your worth. The Valar mean for you to do great things and have given you what gifts they have for that purpose. Do not let anyone else tell you whether those gifts are blessings or burdens. You are the only person who has the right to decide such a thing.”

Bilbo swallowed and struggled to shut his gaping mouth before he offered the Elf a small, strained smile. Elrond smiled kindly and winked before straightening with an impossible grace. His eyes focused on something over Bilbo’s shoulder with undeniable amusement.
“Do not fear, Master Oakenshield,” he called. “I will not attempt to steal your Hobbit from your Company. He is free to go now as he wishes to.”

Bilbo blinked and turned to meet Thorin’s black, furious scowl. The Hobbit swallowed and walked back towards the two Dwarves that had waited for him at the door, his eyes flickering unwillingly to glance at Elrond one more time before the Elf disappeared from sight.

The fire had faded from his pendant, and yet Bilbo found that he was not cold, as was usually the case.

A new fire blazed for a few confusing moments within his chest, its flames stoked by the warm, calloused hand that briefly touched his shoulder before Thorin pulled away.
Bilbo dreamed of the Shire the night before they journeyed into the Misty Mountains.

That in and of itself was not really unusual; the gentle Hobbit had often found himself dreaming of home in the early days of the journey, and if those dreams had faded as the days drifted and passed into weeks, it did not mean that they were gone entirely. As the dream opened with its usual vision of Bag End’s cheerful fire and a stack of books waiting for him beside his father’s armchair, Bilbo saw no reason to believe that this particular dream would be any different. He smiled in his dream and walked across the familiar floorboards until he could sink with a low sigh into the armchair, his left hand wandering instinctively to the book on the top of the pile.

“Bilbo.”

Bilbo jolted for a moment before relaxing into the cushions at the sound of his mother’s voice. Belladonna’s appearances were not unusual either, really. His mother had been one of the only people in Hobbiton to accept him and love him in spite of his gifts, although she had always insisted that she did not love him in spite of anything, for she loved everything about him.

“Bilbo,” his mother called, her dark eyes squinted and twinkling with that warm, mischievous sunlight that he had never been able to find in any other being. “Bilbo, darling, you need to stop.”

“Stop reading?” Bilbo shot back, his voice slipping effortlessly into that playful tone that very few had ever heard outside of dreams. “I don’t think that’s going to happen anytime soon, Mum.”

But Belladonna’s smile had faded and her eyes were no longer twinkling. She stared at Bilbo from the kitchen doorway, features frozen into an open expression of dismay.

“You must stop now, darling,” she urged him. “Stop all of it.”

“Mum?” Bilbo was at her side without any memory as to how he had gotten there, not that such things were important in dreams. “Mother, please, I don’t understand.”

“It’s so cold outside, Bilbo.” By Yavanna, his mother was whimpering now. “Won’t you build up the fire?”

Bilbo frowned and turned back to the fire, his fingers curled around the roughened bark of the logs that were now sitting calmly beside the hearth. He felt his mother’s presence at his back as the flames rose to an impossible height beneath the hearth, the golden glow of its tongues pierced with
“You are so cold, darling,” Belladonna whispered regretfully. “Won’t you warm yourself up for a little?”

She shoved him into the flames.

Bilbo howled in instinctive pain as flames licked their way across his skin, his burned fingers scrabbling against the edge of the hearth in an effort to pull himself away from the fire. He felt something holding him in the fire and struggled to twist away from its grip, his hands flailing for freedom or rescue.

“Bilbo.”

Cold flew across his fingers the moment they connected with the force at his back. Bilbo whirled and grabbed at the stiff, frozen limb that had up until now been pushing him further into the flames and clawed his way out of the hearth. Ice curled around him and reached up until it battled with the highest flames at the top of the hearth. Bilbo shivered beneath its familiar, comforting chill and collapsed onto the hard, scorched floor of his hobbit hole, his chest heaving with raw, scorched breaths. He realized suddenly that his hand was still pressed against the frozen limb that he had used to drag himself out and turned to look at it, only to push away with a scream the moment he realized what he had seen.

Belladonna stared back at him, her skin a pale, striking blue against the dark curls that had been frozen onto the floor beneath her head. Wide dark eyes stared at him without any trace of accusation or blame, their depths flat and lifeless but for the barest hint of sadness that had been left within their depths by a departing soul.

Screams tore themselves from Bilbo’s throat in an unending cry of pain. He felt himself scramble away from the body, only to stop when his back slammed into the frozen surface of another outstretched hand. The hobbit’s head turned slowly, vision blurred by the tears that were falling across his cheeks in burning streams.

Thorin Oakenshield stared down at him, blue features frozen into his customary scowl despite the odd, vulnerable hurt that was quickly fading from his sharp blue eyes. His lips moved to allow a single, breathless word to slip from his throat and hang in the air like accusation.

“Bilbo…”

Bilbo jolted awake to see the stars covered by a grey blanket of roiling clouds, his face half-numb from the wind that skated across every exposed bit skin. He rolled over with a choked gasp and gingerly pushed himself into a crouch even as his stomach heaved and begged to release its contents. A fire burned at his collarbone beneath the pendant, and he caught himself wondering if this would be the day that the thing would finally leave a mark of its magical flames. Ice stung his
fingertips with a cold that was too cruel to be numbing.

Ice… the grass beneath his hands had turned to ice.

Bilbo pulled back with a start and nearly leapt off of his pallet, his chest heaving with restrained screams, throat burning and foul with bile. The Hobbit took a deep breath and risked a glance at his companions to see if he had woken any of them. Slim shoulders slumped in relief when he saw that all of them still slumbered and snored in their furs and cloaks. Even Bofur, who had insisted on moving his pallet closer to Bilbo’s due to the threat of Wargs, remained wrapped in his own world of dreams, his odd hat pulled low across his face.

The air fell silent but for the wind as Bilbo crept away from Glóin’s dying fire into the darkness of the trees. He tugged restlessly at the pendant at his neck, fighting every urge to tear the burning thing away from his skin and throw it into the night where it would never be found again.

_It’s not safe, I need it_, he told himself sharply. _I need it for control, I need it for safety… It’s not safe._

_I’m not safe._

A sob crawled out of his throat and sent him reeling into the nearest tree with weary disgust and sorrow.

“She wasn’t dead,” he muttered, remembering the blue of Belladonna’s skin and the calm sadness of her eyes before they had closed for good. “She wasn’t dead, she was just sleeping. If they had just… I could have saved her if they had let me, I swear I could have. I didn’t kill her, I don’t kill, I can’t kill-.”

_I killed the trolls easily enough._

“Oh Eru,” he choked and pressed his face against the tree, desperately trying to ignore the tears that fell with suspicious coolness across his face and occasionally froze to his cheeks. The Hobbit slumped to the ground in a boneless heap and sobbed just as he had done many nights alone in Bag End, desperately trying to remind himself that he wasn’t wrong.

He chose to curl in on himself rather than lash out when someone settled onto the ground beside him, the horrors of the dream still fresh in his mind.

“Master Burglar.” Thorin’s voice was a deep rumble in the wind, a fuller, truer sound than it had been in Bilbo’s dream.

“S-Sorry,” Bilbo croaked even as he furiously dashed frozen tears from his cheeks. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”
“You didn’t. I was on watch.”

“I thought that Dwalin had ordered you to sleep tonight,” the hobbit mumbled.

“I am the king,” Thorin huffed in reply. “No one can order me. Besides,” he added with a hint of sheepishness that made Bilbo smile. “I couldn’t sleep. No use forcing Bombur to needlessly go without sleep when I can bear his burden.”

Bilbo’s smile softened and he almost dared to brush his shoulder against Thorin’s, only catch himself and carefully pull away just in time to see the dark scowl that the Dwarf king was now sending his way.

“What has disturbed you?” he demanded.

The Hobbit winced at the Dwarf’s bluntness and turned away with a shrug.

“Nothing that you need to concern yourself with,” he sighed.

“You mentioned killing someone,” Thorin snapped. “Know this, Burglar, I will endure many things for the sake of this quest, but I will not allow a killer to put my men in danger-.”

“I am not a killer,” Bilbo snarled. He hissed as the pendant burned against his throat and pulled away, silently praying that no stray slivers of ice had escaped from his fingers into the ground.

“I am not a killer,” he repeated in a calmer tone. “I did not kill my mother. She… She wasn’t dead, just sleeping but they- but the others they thought… and the fire.” He turned away, unable to go on, and gleaned a brief, painful flash of satisfaction at the uncomfortable sort of understanding that had crept into Thorin’s stony features.

“…I am sorry for your loss,” the Dwarf said finally.

The laugh that came out of Bilbo’s throat was a brittle thing; it made the Hobbit wince even as the Dwarf’s gaze sharpened into defensive anger.

“Funny,” Bilbo murmured. “No one has ever offered me such words. Back in the Shire… they always spoke as her death had been my fault.”

“Why would they speak of such things?” Thorin grunted.

Bilbo bit his lip and shook his head, his fingers quivering with the unspoken desire to simply show
him, to freeze the tree beneath their backs and let the Dwarf see the frozen, beautiful terrors that had been haunting him for so long.

He remembered the frozen Thorin in his dream, and kept his silence.

Eventually, the Dwarf pulled himself to his feet with a sigh and offered the Hobbit his hand. Bilbo took it hesitantly, surprised by the warm, painless fire that replaced the ice in his veins at the Dwarf’s touch.

“Sleep, Burglar,” Thorin commanded. “For tomorrow’s journey will be hard.” Then, in a softer tone, “Do not allow the past to torment you. It is gone, along with the person that you were then. Remember those that you have lost, for they will give you strength, and remember the mistakes that you must learn from, but do not let them define you. Who you are now, and what you do with the time that has yet to come to you- that is what truly matters.”

“…Those are wise words, oh king,” Bilbo managed to murmur once he had regained his voice, his cheeks flaming red beneath Thorin’s intense stare.

The Dwarf flashed him a wry, humourless smile.

“They are only wise if the speaker remembers to follow them,” he whispered in reply.

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Bofur’s voice stopped him before he had truly decided where he was going. Bilbo turned back to the concerned Dwarf and watched the toymaker scramble from his perch to stand in front of him with dark eyes widened in concern.

“Where are ye goin’?” he hissed.

“I- You- I don’t know,” Bilbo replied. “I don’t know, I just have to leave, I need to… Get some air, or-.”

“Ye can’t- where’re ye goin’ ta find air in a cavern?” Bofur interrupted. “An’ ye can’t go outside, so tha’s outta the question.”

“Why can’t I?” the Hobbit snapped, his frayed temper finally breaking. “Unlike you Dwarves, Hobbits tend to need things like fresh air and sunlight since we aren’t bloody made from stone.”

“I don’t think you’re goin’ ta find a lot of sunlight out there, lad,” Bofur huffed. He bit his lip and drew closer to Bilbo, his eyes wide and hurt when the Hobbit instinctively pulled away. Bilbo’s
throat burned with the memory of the pendant that had been shoved into his pocket moments ago, his fingers already numb with ice that begged to be released.

“Bilbo,” Bofur sighed. “Ye can’t go, ye need ta stay here. Thorin said-.”

“Thorin said that I don’t belong here, and he’s right,” Bilbo snapped. “I… I don’t belong here, with any of you. I’ll only get in your way or, worse, get the lot of you killed.”

The toymaker shook his head before Bilbo had even finished speaking and managed to rest a hand on the Hobbit’s slim, trembling shoulder.

“That bit out there was an accident,” he said firmly. “None of us knew about the Storm Giants, an’ it’s not your fault that ye couldn’t make the jump.”

“And what about the Trolls?” Bilbo insisted. “Yavanna, even that episode with the Wargs before Rivendell could have ended badly if I had slipped or fallen behind. I… I am a danger to this quest, Bofur. I shouldn’t have come on it, and I shouldn’t be here with any of you. Thorin is right, I don’t belong.”

“Now you wait just a minute,” Bofur started, his voice rising with a fury that had members of the Company stirring into wakefulness behind him.

All but Thorin, who remained oddly-still on his mat only feet away.

Bilbo winced and looked away from the angry, worried, and questioning eyes that were being turned his way. His gaze locked on the sword that was almost a constant fixture at his side, oddly comforted by the harsh blue glow that had begun to creep out from beneath its sheath.

“Blue?” he murmured above the furious words that had just started to rise from Bofur’s throat. “Blue…” His eyes widened. “Blue. Goblins!”

The Company stared at him as if he had gone mad even as Thorin finally shoved away from his mat with a ground and flashed a narrow-eyed glare towards Bilbo’s dagger.

“Get up!” the Dwarf king growled frantically. “Everyone move- now!”

The desperate scrape of leather, cloth, and metal against stone was suddenly lost beneath a loud groan that seemed to shake the very floor beneath their feet. Bilbo staggered and tried to push himself closer to Bofur before the ground disappeared and he was plunging into darkness.

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Ice… Ice… There was ice everywhere, he could feel it spreading, and he could hear the screams of a tortured soul begging for its “precious” before it was forever muffled by the cold…

Bilbo burst into a narrow tunnel with wild eyes and skin slick with sweat and grime, momentarily blinded by the light that he could see spilling through a small, roughly-hewn doorway. He heard shouting and the thumping of boots behind him and whirled around with his arms raised, his right hand curled around the frozen hilt of a short silver sword coated with the same ice that reached for the rocky ceiling above his head in twisting curls of snow.

The Hobbit nearly fainted in shock when Nori and Ori bounded towards him from the shadows, their own features going slack with shock even as they shoved the Hobbit before them out of the caves and into the sunlight. Bilbo stumbled across familiar earth, his bare feet numb from ice and scrabbling desperately for a hold against sloping dirt and loose rocks. He heard other shouts behind him and felt his heart lift at the familiar howl of Thorin’s voice on the wind, urging his Company to keep going. Bilbo kept running with the Company even as his legs burned and his fingers tingled with ice and fear, focusing only on the warm glow in his chest that flared to new life every time he remembered that Thorin was behind him and heard the Dwarf king yell. He finally halted just inches behind Balin (which was quite odd, now that he thought about it, for he hadn’t seen the older Dwarf run ahead of him) and turned back to watch the rest of the Company stumble through the trees to halt around him, their ranks bolstered by Gandalf’s familiar, towering grey figure. The grey Wizard spared Bilbo a look that was unashamedly relieved before he turned to count the remaining members of the Company with a small frown that gradually faded with every Dwarf that came into his sight.

“Fourteen,” he huffed with satisfaction. “That’s all fourteen members of our Company accounted for, thank the Valar, now we must keep moving-.”

“Where did you go?” Thorin yelled, his eyes blazing with fury as they locked on the Hobbit that still hadn’t quite managed to catch his breath.

Bilbo blinked up at the Dwarf in shock and curled his fists to hold back the shiver of ice that went through his nerves at the sight of Thorin’s anger.

“I… Pardon?” he spluttered.

“You were not with us when we were brought before the Goblin King, you fell behind and yet you found us in the tunnels,” Thorin snarled. “Where did you go?”

“I hardly think that this is the time for this-,” Gandalf began.

“I thought you lost!” Thorin screamed. “I thought you had fallen in the tunnels, and I counted you as lost to us. And now I find you running out of the caves with us with bruises on your skin and ice in your hair, and you dare to look at me as if it is nothing for you to abandon us and reappear at your own convenience.”
“I didn’t abandon you, I fell!” Bilbo shouted. Ice surged from his clenched fingers and stung the skin of his palms but he held his ground, his blood boiling with a rage that was equal parts fire and ice. “The Goblins passed over me, and when I made to follow you all I was found and basically shoved into this… this cave. The only reason I found my way back to you at all was because I was running from a grey thing that wanted to kill me because I had frozen its ring or something.”

“You did what?” Kíli blurted out from the other side of the clearing.

The blood drained from Bilbo’s face as quickly as it had entered it. He stared around at the confused and suspicious faces of the Dwarves, desperately searching for an answer even as ice continued to creep up the skin of his arms and wrists from beneath his clenched fingers.

A Warg howled to them in the distance, followed swiftly by a cacophony of piercing shrieks and twisted, vicious barks that sent a different kind of ice flying down Bilbo’s spine even as the joyless flame of relief burned in his heart. Thorin cursed and suddenly the Company was running again with a speed that made their flight from the Goblin tunnels seem slow in comparison. Bilbo wrenched his sword from its sheath and stumbled after them, only to find his way blocked by the snarling maw full of pointed teeth and rimmed with matter grey fur stained with dried red and black blood.

The Warg growled and leapt for the Hobbit just as Bilbo managed to raise his sword. Bone gave beneath glowing blue steel with a jarring crunch that made bile rise in Bilbo’s throat. Ice spread from the sword’s blade and mingled with the blood that had just begun to bloom from the hole in the creature’s skull until the Warg’s fur had been encrusted with red rosettes of ice that shattered the moment Bilbo yanked his blade away.

Fíli’s hand reached to him from the branches of a tree barely a foot away, its owner’s voice calling for Bilbo to take the hand and get into the tree with them. Bilbo shied away instinctively, his fingers still half-numbed with burning chill. The hilt of his sword was almost-entirely frozen by now- what would happen to the golden-haired prince’s skin if he was to touch the young Dwarf as well?

“BILBO!” That was Kíli now, screaming at him from above even as Orcs mounted atop howling Wargs poured out of the trees behind him and settled into a loose half-ring around Bilbo and the three lanky trees that had been mounted by the Dwarves in a last desperate bid for safety.

The Hobbit stumbled back just as several of the Wargs and their riders moved towards him, only dimly aware of the shouts that had risen from the trees behind him.

“Nadal!”

The Wargs and Orcs fell silent and came to a halt in response to the scream, their heads swivelling to watch as a white Orc mounted atop a giant albino Warg rode to the head of the gathering. Tiny yellow eyes stared at the Hobbit with a cold sort of curiosity before lifting up to the trees. The Orc
was silent for a long moment, his eyes combing the spare branches of the trees as if he was counting the Company as Gandalf had done not so long ago. Laughter rumbled in its chest and it called words to the Dwarves that made Bilbo’s ears burn even as he wondered what they meant. The Hobbit jerked back when the White Orc finally turned to look at him once more, its scarred features twisting into a hideous thing that may once have been a smile.

“Vras gismbur,” it purred.

“No!” Thorin’s voice howled from one of the trees behind the Hobbit.

Bilbo’s ears rang with the joyful snarls and shrieks of the Orcs and their mounts mixed with the cries of Dwarves and the odd, muted rustle of branches moving beneath an unaccustomed weight. The Hobbit stumbled back towards the trees, his vision filled with the sight of bared teeth and wicked weapons that had only just begun to swing his way. The first Warg lunged…

…And fell screaming onto the pointed spear of ice that had risen from the ground beneath its chest. Bilbo shuddered and whirled to confront the second Warg and its rider with a thick wall of ice, his sword swinging wildly until it connected with the stunned Orc’s shoulder and sent ice splintering across its split armour. Rough, warm hand fastened around the back of Bilbo’s worn jacket and threw him back onto the ground, leaving Bilbo’s vision blocked by broad shoulders covered by a faded blue-grey cloak trimmed with fur.

Thorin Oakenshield spared the Hobbit behind him a stunned, furious glare before settling into a firm, protective stance in front of him, curved sword glowing with silver defiance beneath the light of the moon. The flawless steel was quickly stained black with blood as it sliced through the throat of a lunging Warg and twisted to decapitate the creature’s rider. Bilbo gulped and gingerly pulled himself to his feet behind the Dwarf, careful to keep out of the way of the deadly clang of steel against steel and bone. An Orc that had been forced to attack on foot attempted to come at Thorin from the side, only to find its way blocked by pointed spears of solid ice. Bilbo smiled grimly and sent ice spiralling across the Orc’s leathery skin with a quick slice of his frozen sword, ignoring the numbness that was beginning to creep from his fingers into his arms.

A blur of white flashed across Bilbo’s vision and slammed into the Dwarf in front of him with a piercing shriek of triumph that nearly sent Bilbo to his knees. Thorin’s scream of pain slammed into the Hobbit’s ears and had him scrambling to the Dwarf’s side just as the White Orc’s Warg threw Thorin to the ground. Bilbo’s stomach turned at the sight of the pain on Thorin’s features and the thin slivers of blood that had begun to seep from several cuts on his exposed skin. The Hobbit threw himself between Thorin and the White Orc before it could charge at the Dwarf again, ignoring Thorin’s pained shout for him to stay away. Bilbo pressed his shaking fingers against the ground and watched the ground freeze in front of him with grim determination. The White Orc’s Warg reared back in alarm as ice began to pool around its paws and creep up its legs. Furious snarls dissolved into pained, frantic yelps and whines that rose higher and higher until the White Orc snarled and leapt off of its mount, its mace smashing into the ice around the Warg’s legs. Bilbo swallowed thickly and sent another wave of pointed ice in the Orc’s direction.

The creature smashed through the ice before it could even touch him. Bilbo flinched and struggled
to raise arms to send another blow at the Orc, his limbs heavy and numb with the icy cold that had seeped further into his bloodstream. Black spots danced across his eyes, nearly blocking his view of the White Orc that was moving towards him with its mace raised above its head.

A new shriek shattered the air and slammed into Bilbo’s ears moments before his knees buckled beneath him. The Hobbit stumbled and felt rough hands pull him out of the way just as the White Orc’s mace began to descend and his vision finally faded into icy darkness. Thorin’s voice mingled with piercing shrieks in a last flare of gentle warmth that accompanied him into the shadows.

Somewhere beneath him, the ground fell away and wind whistled through his hair with all the tenderness of a mother’s kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so two quick notes here: 1.) I’m just not going to deal with the Ring in this story because I think Bilbo has enough magical jewelry and angst to deal with. Whether he actually "destroyed" the Ring by freezing it or whether he just froze it and ticked Gollum off is up to you. 2.) Not sure if I actually translated the Black Speech right, but the words that Azog said are: "Nadal"- Enough, and "Vras gismbur"- Kill the half-man, or Halfling, which would be how the Orcs would identify Bilbo. Anyways, thanks so much for reading this and everything, you guys are awesome!
Right, so, I'm really sorry that it took me a bit longer to get this chapter up. Me, my roommate and a friend of ours got the insane idea to camp out on a sidewalk in New York for two nights to try and get SNL tickets and then we actually DID get tickets so... yeah, long story short, this has been the first day this weekend that I've actually had time to work on this. Anyways, thank you all so much for the support and the feedback that I've been getting for this fic, it's absolutely amazing. Thank you!

There are tales told in the Shire regarding those Hobbits who had pushed their Seasons too far. Wide-eyed children huddled around a festival fire are always guaranteed to hear at least one story of Miss So-and-so of Buckland who dissolved into the Autumn winds after creating a storm that was far too strong for her, or of Master This-and-that of Michel Delving whose body was nearly burned to a crisp following an ill-advised attempt at creating a gigantic Summer bonfire. The stories never failed to make child and adult alike shudder in muted horror, and several of Bilbo’s Spring cousins had refused to go near their herb gardens for days after hearing the tale of the Spring lass that had been turned to stone when she healed an entire legion of Rangers and an oak tree in one morning.

Bilbo had been one of the few young children who had refused to believe such stories, an anomaly that both he and Belladonna privately blamed on his inability to test the limits of his powers for fear of censure from their Hobbit neighbours and relatives. It wasn’t until Bilbo collapsed in front of his mother’s funeral pyre with ice in his hair and limbs that were slowly starting to turn blue as frost that he finally began to believe and to understand the ignored fears of his childhood.

Every Season had a limit, a line that should never be crossed. Bilbo had come close to crossing it once.

Now, huddled within the black, icy confines of his mind and shivering against the slab of cold stone that was suddenly pressed against his back, he wondered if he had nearly done so again.

He worried, briefly, that he had crossed the line entirely this time, that this was how it felt to slowly turn to ice.

A hot, searing flame at his throat shoved those thoughts away with the sort of painful bluntness that reminded Bilbo of several of his father’s older relatives. He felt his jaw work, heard his voice rise in muted, pained groans that sounded awfully distant, and resigned his half-frozen mind to wait for the burning fire to reach him and shove him back into consciousness.

Soft, gentle flames wrapped around his shoulders and pulled him back into a tender, fiery embrace.
that left Bilbo reeling in shock. He felt the pain at his throat recede into a dull ache and slowly began to drag himself out of the darkness before the burning fires could start once more. Sunlight slammed into his eyes and he groaned again, only to have the sound catch in his throat when a dark head bent over him and sapphire eyes glared down into his own with the strangest expression of angry relief.

“Master Baggins,” Thorin greeted him roughly.


The Dwarf king bobbed his head and Bilbo blinked, eyes momentarily dazzled by the thin rays of sunlight that slipped through the bobbing strands of Thorin's long dark mane.

“We are all well,” he informed the Hobbit. “Though there are many questions that we want answered, Burglar.”

Ice that had nothing to do with his Season trickled down Bilbo’s spine and he closed his eyes against memories of snarling Wargs and Orc faces twisted in shock and anger as ice rose from the ground. Thorin growled and shook him slightly, making the Hobbit realize for the first time that he was cradled in the Dwarf king’s arms beneath a worn, fur-lined cloak. He felt his cheeks flush and shifted slightly, only to be rewarded by another dark glare for his efforts.

“Lie still,” Thorin commanded. “The Wizard said that you would need to regain your strength.”

Bilbo nodded slowly and risked another, pointed glance at the strong arms that were still wrapped around his abdomen.

“Did he, ah, tell you to do this as well?” he asked carefully.

He felt Thorin stiffen but refused to look up at the Dwarf’s face until he fancied that he heard a sigh.

“Gandalf said that you were too cold, and once he placed that trinket from your pocket around your neck, you seemed to be in pain,” Thorin explained quietly. “My nephews suggested that perhaps you would… that it was possible that you would be more comfortable if you shared someone else’s body heat and… since I am responsible for the safety of everyone in my Company, I thought that it was only right if I-.”

“I’m not a member of the Company, though,” Bilbo interrupted, still too sluggish and weary with the rapidly-receding cold to stop himself from speaking. “You said so yourself, back in the Mountains.”
The Dwarf behind him took a deep breath and slowly, gently turned the Hobbit in his arms so that they were facing each other, his warm hands still braced against Bilbo’s back in a silent promise of support.

“I have never been as wrong about another inhabitant of Middle Earth as I have been about you, Master Baggins,” he whispered. “And I am sorry for all the times that I have doubted you.”

Bilbo stared at him for a long moment, only dimly aware that his lips had fallen open into an idiotic “O” of surprise at some point in the Dwarf’s speech.

“I- I-It’s okay,” he managed finally. “I would have… I doubted me, too.”

Thorin smiled humourlessly and shook his head before drawing the Hobbit into a gentle embrace of soothing fire.

“Never again,” the Dwarf murmured.

Bilbo would never be entirely sure how long he allowed Thorin to hold him, and when he finally thought to ask the Dwarf many days later, he would find that the Dwarf king was even less sure than he was. Neither doubted, however, that they would have remained in such a position for much longer than they did if it hadn’t been for the arrival of Balin.

“Master Baggins?”

Dwarf and Hobbit pulled back to look up at their snowy-haired companion with features painted red and white in irritation and fear. Balin merely smiled at them and offered Bilbo a strong, calloused hand to help the Hobbit clamber to his feet.

“Gloin has a fire going,” the elderly Dwarf told him kindly. “And Bombur would like to know if you wanted to have some stew before everyone bombards you with questions.”

Bilbo smiled wanly and shook his head, the pendant burning at his throat even as nervous ice danced across his fingertips. He stiffened when Thorin’s calloused hands wrapped around one of his and felt the burning fire and ice fade beneath the Dwarf king’s gentle warmth. He would have to talk to Thorin about that later.

“I think a bit of stew would do very nicely,” he murmured.

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He had never had to explain his powers to anyone in the Shire. Even the younger Hobbits were
raised with warnings of Bilbo Baggins the Winter child, and any Hobbit that had been alive for the Fell Winter was all-too-familiar with the ice that occasionally slipped from Bilbo’s fingertips. Understandably, it was a rather odd moment when Bilbo found himself standing in front of thirteen wide-eyed, curious Dwarrows and one solemn Wizard, his hands moving and flailing of their own accord as he told them about his life. It startled him when they gasped at his descriptions of his father’s death in the Fell Winter, their eyes darkening in horror and sympathy when he moved on to the day that his mother had been ripped from his arms and burned atop a pyre.

Bilbo waited for them to draw away from him when he coated the nearest rock in a tapestry of snowy flowers and intricate curls of ice. If anything, they only came closer to inspect his handiwork, throats humming with low noises of awe or approval.

The Dwarves were ready and eager to question him once he was done, demanding to know why he had kept such a secret from them, why he had not shown them his gifts in the first place. Bilbo found that he had trouble answering those questions, his mind filled and tongue heavy with memories of Hobbit children running from him in fear and elders glaring at him in bitter anger whenever the temperature dropped so much as a degree.

He was surprised by the anger that greeted such an explanation, and quickly found himself nearly suffocated by two Dwarf princes and a fiercely-protective toymaker that continued to grumble dark curses against the inhabitants of the Shire under his breath for the remainder of the evening.

Throughout everything, Thorin remained by his side, and Bilbo wished that he could be surprised at how nice it felt to have the Dwarf king next to him. He glanced at Thorin more often than any of the other members of the Company throughout the course of his tale, silently sending a prayer of thanks to all the Valar when each glance failed to show the disgust and fear that Bilbo had long been afraid of seeing in the Dwarf king’s eyes. True, Thorin did not attempt to touch him again once the Hobbit was done speaking, but as the Dwarf had hardly ever touched him to begin with, Bilbo tried to keep himself from being too disappointed.

The Dwarves- and Gandalf too, for that matter- flatly refused to allow Bilbo to practice his Season again until they had reached the home of Beorn, insisting that the Hobbit had to recover from his battle with the Orcs in case he began to freeze again. Thorin had stiffened at that particular argument, and had walked beside the Hobbit throughout the remainder of their trek to the Skin Changer’s abode. All of the Dwarves stayed close to the Hobbit when they could help it, and it was with no small amount of shock that Bilbo watched them nearly attack Beorn once the giant Man took to carrying the Hobbit about on his shoulders and loudly declaring that he had half a mind to keep the “little bunny”.

Bilbo was surrounded by Dwarves that night when he went to sleep, his slim frame pressed between Thorin’s warm chest and Kíli’s broad shoulders.

He smiled and fell asleep with Thorin’s arm wrapped loosely around his waist, and dreamed of gentle fires the colour of sapphire.
Thorin pulled him aside several days (weeks?) after they had entered the Mirkwood with a weary smile and cheeks hollowed by too many days without a proper meal. Bilbo followed him several steps away from their dark, miserable camp without question, pathetically relieved by the attention from the Dwarf king that had nearly stopped speaking to him ever since they had entered the wood.

“Master Baggins…” Thorin murmured once the muffled whispers and complaints of the Company had faded into a low hum in the distance.

“Is everything alright?” Bilbo asked quietly, alarmed by the unknown look in Thorin’s eye.

The Dwarf king hesitated and look away, his cheeks tinged a pale red in the forest’s murky darkness.

“I… When was the last time that you used your Season?” he asked.

Bilbo blinked and thought for a moment, his brow furrowing in instinctive displeasure when he found the answer.

“Not since we left Beorn’s,” he admitted reluctantly. The Skin Changer had expressed an even mixture of delight and anxiety over Bilbo’s powers, his fear for the welfare of his bees finally overriding his desire to see more of the Hobbit’s abilities.

Thorin nodded as if he had already known the answer and cast another, hesitant glance at a webbed tree next to them.

“Could you… would you mind using it now?” he asked hesitantly. “Would you mind if I watched you?”

Bilbo shook his head silently, choosing not to remind the Dwarf king that he had practiced in front of the entire Company at Beorn’s. There was a vulnerable glimmer in Thorin’s eye that made him think that such a comment would be unwelcome to the weary king.

The Hobbit stepped past Thorin without another word, fingers moving to unclasp the pendant and remove it from his throat. He hesitated for a moment before pressing the necklace into Thorin’s waiting hands, his lips quirking up into a small, hesitant smile.

“Would you mind holding on to that for me?” he whispered.

Thorin shook his head and curled his fingers in a loose fist around the necklace with a small smile.
Bilbo took a deep breath and turned away, his hands raising even as a sluggish, cool breeze forced its way through Mirkwood’s canopy and tickled at his curly hair. He flicked his hand out with a small flourish and watched the ice weave between the gossamer threads of the spider webs that coated the nearest tree trunks in a thick, sticky coat. Another gesture, and ice skipped across the black earth leaving frozen streams and swirls in its wake, only to come to rest at the feet of a softly-smiling Dwarf king. Bilbo brushed his fingertips through the air and willed a small, frozen mountain to rise from the ground at his feet, its summit glittering with a silver sheen just as the Dwarves claimed that the Lonely Mountain had glowed in the pink light of a setting sun atop the Carrock. A few flakes of snow drifted from the air and settled atop the frozen mountain like powdered sugar atop a cake and fourteen tiny, frozen figures popped into existence along the mountain’s ridges.

The Hobbit glanced up then and felt his breath catch at the sight of the tender smile that Thorin was sending his way. The Dwarf spared a glance at the icy mountain, his sapphire eyes soft and peaceful when the finally rose to meet Bilbo’s own.

“It is beautiful,” the Dwarf murmured with a low rumble.

Bilbo’s heart throbbed with a warmth that had nothing to do with the pendant that was still clutched between Thorin’s fingers.

“I’m glad that you think so,” he replied.

Thorin shook his head and closed the distance between them with one quick stride. Bilbo found that he didn’t really mind.

“Only a fool would be able to look at your gift without seeing its beauty,” the king insisted.

Bilbo’s smile became wistful and he nearly shook his head.

“You sound like my mother,” he whispered. “She always said that Hobbiton was a den of fools for… for everything. I’m- In a way, I’m rather glad that she didn’t live to see them give me the pendant. It would have made her furious.”

Thorin’s eyes narrowed, although his fingers did not tighten around the trinked in his palm.

“I’ve seen you wince sometimes, when it is around your neck,” he murmured. “Does it hurt you?”

Bilbo shrugged. “It is an amulet made with Summer’s fire to combat the ice. It only burns when the ice comes to close to the surface.”
“How often is that?” Thorin pressed.

Bilbo’s face reddened. “…A little more often than I would like.”

The Dwarf scowled then, his eyes nearly black with anger.

“You do not need to wear this among us if it hurts you,” he hissed. “We have told you many times, Master Baggins, we do not fear your powers. I feel no less safe with you now than I do whenever you wear this cursed thing.”

Bilbo’s answering smile was weary. “I know. Believe me when I say that I don’t wear that necklace for your benefit. I only wear it for my own.”

“Why?”

“It’s easy to think that I have complete control over my Season,” the Hobbit muttered. “There are days when even I can think for a few moments that I have finally found the ability to harness all of Winter’s powers. But… there have been too many times when I’ve lost control, too many people that I could have hurt and I cannot bring myself to risk hurting anyone in the Company. What’s a little pain if I can guarantee that I won’t accidentally freeze one of you in the middle of the night?”

Thorin frowned, obviously displeased and reached out to run his fingers through Bilbo’s tousled curls. The Hobbit shivered at the familiar, gentle warmth that slipped through his veins at the Dwarf’s touch and smiled.

“You are an incredible creature, Bilbo Baggins,” Thorin sighed. “I only wish that you could see that for yourself.”

Bilbo frowned then and opened his mouth to argue, only to feel the blood freeze in his veins when Kíli’s voice rose above the trees in a piercing scream. Dwarf and Hobbit whirled and ran back in the direction of the camp, only to find their path blocked by towering, skittering spider legs and thick pincers that continued to snap at their heads even after spears of ice had been driven through their brains.

Screams smashed against Bilbo’s eardrums and nearly drove him to his knees even as he struggled to keep the spiders away from him and Thorin. Ice crept through his veins and began to prick at his arms with cold numbness, and Bilbo wondered for a moment if this would be the moment when he finally pushed himself too far.

An army in green descended from the treetops and pointed arrows that gleamed in the darkness against Bilbo’s throat moments after the last of the spiders had been cut apart beneath elven blades and twelve dazed and grumbling Dwarves had been dragged out of the trees by grim-faced guards.
Bilbo shivered against the cold and instinctively pulled closer to Thorin’s side, seeking some small sliver of comfort before the Dwarf was pulled away, leaving a burning pendant in Bilbo’s hand.
There were many times throughout his rather long life where Thorin Oakenshield had decided that he finally understood the true meaning of fear. Once, when he had still been in his thirties, he had watched Dís fall into a mineshaft and disappear into the inky darkness of Erebor’s deepest tunnels. In those few hours when he had watched his mother sob into the arms of Thrain and paced with Frerin across the cold stone floors of the throne room, Thorin had known in his heart that this, above all else, was true fear.

Dragonfire destroyed that knowledge barely a decade later as Thorin dragged his grandfather out of the mountain and heard the dying screams of his comrades as they were crushed by falling rocks. The prince had continued to run with his people through the night, his stomach churning with every frantic pulse of his heart.

He saw Thror fall at Azanuambilzar and felt the first stabs of icy fear mixed with despair hours later while he cradled Frerin’s corpse in his arms and waited for Balin to tell him what had happened to his father.

He had watched Dís struggle to bring Fíli into the world, fearing for the first time that he would be left alone, and had faced down the lords of the Dwarven kingdoms, knowing in his heart that none of them would follow him.

Then Bilbo Baggins had been surrounded by Wargs and Orcs at the base of a worn tree, and Thorin had felt his heart stop. It did not truly beat again until the hobbit woke up in his arms with an adorably-furrowed brow and a slightly wrinkled nose, his bright blue eyes as sharp as ever beneath a lingering cloud of sleep.

Now, as he stared back at the shivering, pale Hobbit that suddenly seemed far too small beside a horde of stone-faced Elves, Thorin felt his heart throb with pure fear for his Company, for his quest… and for the Hobbit that stubbornly refused to see how important he truly was.

The Elves allowed the Company to walk together into Thranduil’s palace, which was a small mercy in and of itself. Thorin ignored the impatient huffs or grumbles of his Elven guards with every sharp, searching look that he sent over his shoulder to his companions. He stared back at Fili and Kíli, his shoulders slumping when he saw that his sister-sons were unharmed (though the golden haired prince of Durin’s line was currently wearing a rather spectacular pout, and it was entirely possible that Kíli had not torn his eyes away from a certain auburn-haired Elf maiden since their capture). Balin, Gloin and Oin met his wondering eyes with tight nods of acknowledgement. Dori offered him a brief, worried look, his strong hands fastened securely around the shoulders of his brothers. Dwalin and Bifur each granted him solemn, smouldering gazes that promised revenge on the Elves of Mirkwood, while Bofur gave him a cheeky grin and a wink from his post between Bombur and Bilbo, his arm wrapped loosely around the Hobbit even as Bilbo stumbled.

Bilbo smiled at him, his hands still curled around the pendant that he had yet to fasten around his neck.
The smile only seemed to make Thorin’s fear worse, somehow. Such smiles did not belong among the darkness of Mirkwood, and the Dwarf king found himself wondering how long the Hobbit could continue to look at him with that quiet, beautiful innocence before it was forever smothered by wickedness.

Bilbo, Fíli and Kíli twisted to look at him in blatant fear and anxiety when the Elves began to lead them away, leaving Thorin alone amongst his own contingent of guards. He offered them the closest thing to a smile that he could give, only to have his entire being stiffen when the silver-haired Elven prince pulled Bilbo aside, his cold blue eyes locked on the pendant in Bilbo’s hands. The Elf raised his voice in a sharp bark to the nearest guards, his eyes narrowing when several of them called back in confusion and muted irritation.

“…What need does a Hobbit have of such magic?” the prince finally demanded in the Common Tongue.

Bilbo seemed to shrink in on himself for a brief, tense moment before he straightened and glared at the Elf with a fire that made the Hobbit seem taller, somehow, than the tallest of the Elves.

“It is a token from the Shire,” he declared in a voice sharp and cool as ice. “The magic within it is but a simple enchantment, surely nothing compared to the spells that the Silvan Elves are rumoured to be capable of.”

The Elf nearly blushed for a moment, and Thorin felt his heart swell with pride for the small Halfling. The Shire’s Winter Son stared down the prince of the Mirkwood with all the grace and power of a king… or a consort.

All that was truly missing was a crown, one wrought from the most delicate swirls of gleaming mithril and embedded with diamonds that gleamed like ice beneath the moon.

Sharp gasps from Fíli and Kíli and a low, furious snarl from Bofur had Thorin’s head snapping up just as the Elven prince started to tug the pendant out of Bilbo’s clenched fingers. The Hobbit’s lips parted to release a low, frantic whine that made Thorin lunge against the restraining arms of his captors.

“Leave him be!” he snarled.

The Elf started and glanced over at him with wide eyes that almost seemed surprised. He glanced between the furious, frightened Hobbit and the burning anger of the Dwarves with slightly-raised eyebrows that forcefully reminded Thorin of the prince’s father.

A pale hand rose in the air and suddenly Bilbo was being shoved into Thorin, who caught the Hobbit’s slim shoulders without a moment’s pause and drew him close, his skin tingling with a strange, comforting flame. He felt Bilbo suck in a quick, steadying breath against his chest before
the Hobbit gently pulled away, his eyes hardening once more into chips of blue ice. Another signal from the silver-haired Elf sent the Hobbit and Dwarf on their way, their ears ringing with several shouted objections from the Dwarves below. Thorin sent a silent prayer to his Creator that Fíli and Kíli would keep their heads for once and refrain from doing anything foolish. He thought for a moment, then sent another prayer to the heavens on behalf of Bofur.

After all, it was going to be difficult enough to convince Thranduil to let them go without having the toymaker decide that an Elven prison was the perfect place to sing Dwarvish drinking songs at the top of his lungs.

King Thranduil stared down at them from high atop his throne, his lips curled into that faint, condescending sneer that had been burned into Thorin’s memory for far too many years. The Elvenking’s silver-threaded eyebrows rose in a brief flash of surprise when he caught sight of the Hobbit at Thorin’s side and he glanced at his son.

“I thought that I had made myself clear when I demanded to speak to Thorin Oakenshield… alone,” he murmured.

The Elf prince shifted in his position to Bilbo’s right and wordlessly pushed Bilbo forward despite Thorin’s growl of warning.

“The Halfling carries an object of powerful magic on his person,” he explained with a quick gesture towards the pendant in Bilbo’s hands. “When I attempted to confiscate it from him, the Dwarves loudly objected. I thought that the matter would concern you.”

“You are wrong, then, Legolas,” Thranduil shot back, voice thick with obvious boredom. “I am not concerned by the love that Dwarves and Hobbits hold for a mere trinket, though I am intrigued by it.”

Legolas’s eye twitched in the faintest hint of annoyance, while Bilbo’s lips seemed to quirk up in a brief flicker of reluctant amusement that immediately faded when Thranduil turned to consider him. The Elvenking frowned after a moment and pulled himself to his feet with impossible grace. The Elf slipped down the steps of his throne towards the Hobbit, only to pull to a slow halt when Thorin slipped between them with another low snarl. Thranduil snorted and raised his hand as if to brush the Dwarf aside, his eyes still locked on the necklace in Bilbo’s hands with an intensity that made Thorin fear all the more.

“There is a power in you, Child of the Kindly West,” the Elvenking murmured. “And I wonder at it. From what I have heard, the children of the Shire are barely more than earth dwellers, with nothing much to recommend them to the attention of the world.”

Bilbo’s features hardened with every word that passed from Thranduil’s lips, his body straightening until it seemed to Thorin that he was standing with a spine of pure mithril.
“Then I am afraid that you have heard wrong, your Highness,” the Hobbit said stiffly. “There are many extraordinary things and beings in the Shire, if only one would take the time to look for them.”

Thranduil blinked slowly and smiled with an imperceptible shake of his head.

“Oh, but there is a fire in you,” he murmured. “And yet there is a danger as well. There is fear within you, child, and a knowledge of death. In fact, judging by the look in your eyes, I would almost be willing to believe that you had been the cause of it.”

“No,” Bilbo snapped immediately, his voice trembling ever-so-slightly.

Thranduil simply smirked at him, prompting Thorin to draw even closer to the Hobbit.

“It makes me wonder what sort of magic lies within that trinket in your hands,” he mused. “It must be powerful, especially if it is meant to hold back the danger that lies within you.”

“He is no danger to us,” Thorin snarled.

Thranduil merely hummed. “I wonder.” He turned to Thorin then, his eyes bright with that cold, calculating gleam that never failed to make anger burn within the Dwarf’s stomach.

“I know what it is that you seek, Dwarf,” the Elvenking murmured. “I know that, to others, your quest is a simple one, born of the desire to reclaim a lost homeland, and slay a dragon. But I know the truth… You only seek that which will give you the right to rule. The Arkenstone.”

Thorin stiffened at the stone’s name, his every nerve tingling with an odd mixture of fiery longing and remembered fear. Thranduil sniffed and stepped away, his hands clasped loosely behind him atop silvery robes.

“I will offer you my help, Thorin Oakenshield,” he called over his shoulder. “A deal, if you will. For there are treasures beneath the Mountain that I would call my own as well.”

Thorin gritted his teeth against the shout of anger that he longed to throw in the Elvenking’s face, his entire being acutely aware of Bilbo’s anxious, questioning gaze on the back of his neck. Thranduil smirked as if he was aware of this and drew closer once more with a purposeful flourish that sent the edges of his robe brushing against Thorin’s shins.

“Of course, I am aware that I will have to wait for such a reward,” he continued. “And I know all too well how the minds of Dwarves change when they are brought to close to their beloved treasures. Therefore, I shall take something of yours as substitute: a pledge, if you will, that I may use to remind you of our promise once the Mountain is yours and your minds are full of glittering
gold.”

“And what… pledge would that be?” Thorin spit out.

The Elf king smirked.

“That,” he drawled, his white hand raised in a lazy gesture towards the pendant in Bilbo’s hands.

The Hobbit paled and visibly pulled away, his eyes flickering between Thorin and Thranduil with an expression that, to Thorin, was far worse than fear.

Bilbo Baggins was actually considering Thranduil’s deal, was honestly willing to hand over the one thing that promised him security in order to gain the Dwarves their freedom.

It made Thorin love him all the more, no matter how he hated it.

“Why would you ask for such a thing?” he demanded before Bilbo could say a word.

“A beloved trinket from the One of the King Under the Mountain is a special prize, even without the object’s magic,” Thranduil replied calmly. ‘Besides, if I do not receive the objects that I desire, I can comfort myself with the knowledge that it was on my account that Thorin Oakenshield first proved that he harboured the same madness as his grandfather and chose gold over the happiness of his One.”

Blood rushed in Thorin’s ears as he curled his lips away in an animalistic snarl, almost completely oblivious to the restraining hand that Bilbo had wrapped around his arm. His sapphire eyes locked on Thranduil and he finally freed his tongue from its previous restraint, his voice rising in a rough, savage roar to form the harshest of insults that he could fathom for the Elvenking.

He had the satisfaction of seeing Thranduil reel back with a disgusted snarl before the Elven guards finally dragged him away.

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They placed Bilbo in a cell beneath the earth with thick walls that allowed only the barest slivers of sunlight to slip through a single circular window near the ceiling. A slim pallet covered with a thick blanket spun from rough wool had been built into the corner of the cell next to a tray covered with bits of bread, cheese and fruit that had been left by one of the Elves who had accompanied Bilbo to his prison. The door was built of solid carved oak that had the look of something that could survive the end of the world and shut out all but the closest of sounds from the corridor beyond.
He could not hear any sign of the Dwarves, nor was he entirely sure where any of them were, which bothered him more than he had ever thought it would.

Bilbo Baggins had long been a solitary creature, a Hobbit who preferred the company of books and the muted conversation of crackling fires over the throbbing energy of parties and the bubbling laughs of his kin. Yet now, after barely half a year on the road with the Company of Thorin Oakenshield, the Hobbit felt his ears ring with the absence of the gruff, rumbling voices that had become so familiar to him. His body shivered with chills that had nothing to do with the ice that occasionally slipped from his fingertips to fall in silver streams upon the ground, aching for the gentle fire of thirteen bodies coated in armour and furs.

His hands tingled, longing for their brief contact with Thorin’s arms.

Bilbo bit back a whimper and collapsed wearily onto his pallet, dimly noting that it was the softest thing that he had rested upon in months. The pendant slipped from fingers numbed by burning flame and finally came to rest upon the packed dirt beneath the Hobbit’s feet. Bilbo stared down at it and watched it sparkle and glitter with blue and gold flame beneath the pale sunlight that had managed to sneak into his dungeon, his mind whirling with Thranduil’s words.

Why on Yavanna’s green earth would Thranduil want his pendant? Granted, even Elrond had seemed intrigued by the thing, and perhaps it had only been the Lord of Rivendell’s legendary wisdom and restraint that had kept him from demanding the trinket for himself. Bilbo would be the first Hobbit to admit that he didn’t know much about magic outside of the Seasons, yet even he knew the sheer power that had been channelled into the making the necklace by the most powerful Summer Hobbits of the Shire. So, in the end, perhaps it was no wonder that Thranduil desired it. Perhaps, to Elves, such a pendant was far more than a pretty prison meant to keep the terrors of Winter at bay.

And yet…

“A beloved trinket from the One of the King Under the Mountain is a special prize, even without the object’s magic.”

“What the blazes is a ‘One’?” Bilbo muttered to himself. Perhaps it was an insulting Elvish term for a burglar? Or even a Dwarvish term… Whatever it was, it seemed to have made Thorin angry enough on his behalf, which made Bilbo smile slightly in spite of everything.

The Hobbit hesitated and risked a glance up at the solid door that separated him from his Elven guards, his fingers already poised above the half-frozen ground of his prison. He took a deep, bracing breath against the cold and gently flicked his hand, his fingers fluttering up and down and to the side as thirteen tiny Dwarves rose from the ground and stared up at from frozen eyes beneath icy braids and- in Bofur’s case- a floppy hat carved from snow. Another flick of his hand had the tiny dwarves marching around on the ground, while a little Thorin stared up at him with a scowl that, somehow, was almost like a smile (Bilbo had been rather indecisive about what to make the Dwarf king’s expression). Fíli and Kíli both waved to him from their place beside Thorin, and
miniature Bofur reached up to doff his cap with a tiny, impossibly, calloused hand.

Bilbo smiled down at his tiny Company, his body shuddering with shivers even as his hands began to go numb from the cold. With a sigh and another flick, the thirteen Dwarves fell back into a shapeless stream of silver on the earth, leaving the Hobbit alone with his thoughts and a pendant that winked at him from the darkness with blue-gold fire.

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Thranduil watched Bilbo approach from the centre of his chambers with a faint smirk that suggested he had been waiting for the Hobbit. Bilbo met the Elvenking’s gaze with all the strength that he could muster, his fingers still tingling from the cold beneath the fire of the pendant in his hands.

“If I give this to you, do you promise to release us and let us go on our way?” he demanded.

Thranduil bowed his head in a nod, his features softening as they never had in the presence of Thorin.

“I give you my word,” he swore. “My guards are at your disposal as well, should you require assistance leaving the Greenwood.”

Bilbo felt his lips twitch at the thought of the Dwarves’ reaction to such an offer, though he considered it nonetheless.

 “…Yours is a generous offer, oh King, though I cannot see the others appreciating it,” he replied finally.

Thranduil actually smiled at that, his immortal eyes softening for a moment in genuine amusement.

“No, I believe you are correct,” he mused. “Although perhaps that is exactly why I am offering such a thing.”

Bilbo smiled thinly. “Then you will understand why I must refuse.”

Thranduil bowed his head again. “You should be able to find your way out of the Greenwood on your own, and I will have two of my guards shadow your progress until you leave the wood so as to ensure that you do not lose your way again.”

Bilbo nodded and stretched out his hand to drop the burning pendant into Thranduil’s waiting palm, his shoulders stiffening with tension when the familiar, burning fire disappeared from his
skin. The Elvenking watched him with old eyes that could not truly be called wise, his expression alternating between thoughtfulness and amusement.

“There is power within you, Halfling,” he murmured. “And a danger, whether you will acknowledge it or not.”

“I do more than acknowledge it, your Highness,” Bilbo said coolly. “I live with it.”

Thranduil chuckled and motioned for the Hobbit to be on his way, his hand rising in a quick, silent signal to the silver-haired prince that had been watching them all the while beside an Elf woman with fiery hair.

“Go, then, and tell your Dwarves that they are free to go,” he drawled. “And do tell Thorin Oakenshield that I expect him to return my jewels to me if he reclaims his mountain.”

Bilbo bowed stiffly and turned to follow Legolas and the She-Elf out of Thranduil’s chambers, his footsteps faltering for a brief moment as another thought crossed his mind.

“You said that I was Thorin’s ‘One’,” he murmured.

“I did,” Thranduil acknowledged, his voice abruptly bored.

“…What did you mean by it?” Bilbo asked.

The Elvenking blinked down at him in surprise, his lips twitching into another, briefly-genuine smile.

“I think that that is a question for Oakenshield to answer,” he purred. “It is, after all, none of my business.”

Bilbo frowned but accepted the king’s words with another slight bow before following the Elves back into the halls of Mirkwood, his heart lifting and pulsing with warm, familiar glow when the first loud complaints and groans of the Dwarves slammed into his ears.

It made him wonder, suddenly, what would happen when it was time for him to return to the Shire without them.
Hey guys! I am so sorry that it's taken me so long to update. This past week has been absolutely mad, and I didn't really have any time to write anything. Anyways, I'm also sorry that this is short and rather, well, angsty, and I swear that I will get another update done as soon as I can. Fair warning, though: obviously, we are starting to get into the angstzone of our story, so have fun with that and I can tell you that I usually write happy endings. Usually. Unless I get really pissed off and depressed, in which case the results can be rather painful. Anyways, enough of my ranting, have fun reading, and thank you to everyone who has read this so far!

The Dwarves remained silent as they were led out of their cells one by one, their eyes flickering between the Hobbit and his Elven guards with confusion mixed with rising fury. Thorin in particular seemed almost rabid in his anger, his sapphire eyes flashing like blue lightning the moment he focused on Bilbo’s chainless neck.

“You gave it to them, then?” he grunted.

Bilbo bowed his head in silent acknowledgement, his heart pounding with fear when the Dwarf king growled quietly and nearly tore Orcrist out of the hands of its keepers. Bilbo grimaced and shot a small, apologetic glance at the Elven prince, his lips quirking up into a tiny smile when Legolas stared back at him in dumb confusion. Each of the Dwarves accepted their weapons with muted grumbles that were little better than Thorin’s, though Bilbo noted that Kíli accepted the bow and sword that were offered to him by an auburn-haired Elf maiden with a wide grin and an exaggerated bow that made the woman smile thinly in return.

The Hobbit’s unease rose the longer the company of Dwarves remained silent on their trek out of the Elven city. He fell back into his usual place behind Bofur, Fíli and Kíli at the back of the group, trying to ignore the faint twinge that went through him the longer Thorin refused to look at him and the cold sting of ice at his fingertips. Bofur and the princes flashed him concerned glances every so often that only worsened his pain when they refrained from touching him.

He felt his fingers brush against the diseased leaves of a black fern and glanced back in time to see it freeze.

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The Dwarves gradually grew louder and louder the closer they came to Mirkwood’s edge. Every shout of laughter, however muted, sent a flash of warmth through Bilbo’s chest, and the army of frozen plants that had marked their progress through the forest gradually grew thinner. The princes jostled each other and shouted out responses to the loud jokes and provocations that were called
back to them, leaving only Bofur to continue to shoot Bilbo quiet, searching looks.

The Hobbit smiled when the first of the company were shrouded in muted rays of golden sunlight, his entire being yearning for the gentle warmth of daylight.

A low rustle came from the trees behind him, followed by a muffled curse that had half of the Dwarves in front of Bilbo whirling around. Kíli rushed past Bilbo before the Hobbit could even take a breath, an arrow already notched in his bow as he aimed at a flicker of movement in the trees.

“No- Stop!” Bilbo croaked, his eyes locked on the tiniest flicker of auburn through the trees that the Dwarf prince must have overlooked.

Kíli ignored him and pulled his bowstring taut, his fingers already weakening their hold to lose the arrow in their grasp.

Bilbo’s hand rose before he was even consciously aware of what he was doing. The Hobbit choked on another muffled cry, eyes locked only on the nearly-invisible flicker of blue ice that flew through the air to slam into the prince’s arm. Kíli cried out and fell to his knees, his eyes wide and terrified as they looked down at the deep, bloody gash rimmed by frozen blue skin.

“Kíli!” Fíli screamed and suddenly there were Dwarves pushing past Bilbo to get to the shivering prince, their strong bodies nearly enough to knock the Hobbit to the ground.

Bilbo staggered backwards, his stomach heaving and roiling with a sudden nausea. He glanced up in time to see Legolas and the auburn-haired maiden from Mirkwood burst through the trees with another muted rustle, their eyes flickering with impossible speed between Bilbo and the cluster of frightened and furious Dwarves.

“Where’s Bilbo?” Bofur shouted, his kind voice stained with a fear that made Bilbo tremble.

“Halfing,” Dwalin roared. “Where is he? How could he do this?”

“P-Please,” Bilbo gasped. His eyes locked on the wound on Kíli’s arm, his entire being throbbing with a knowledge that he had long thought was lost.

Thorin turned at the sound of his voice and stared at him above the heads of his kin, his eyes narrowed and flashing between cold anger and hot, painful betrayal.

“Burglar,” he rumbled. “What have you done?”
“Why?” Kíli wheezed from his place within Fíli’s protective arms.

“Please,” Bilbo tried again. “Please, just let me through. I can fix this.”

“Ye’re not comin’ anywhere near him,” Dwalin snarled. “Stay away.”

“Dwalin-,” Balin hissed in conflicted warning.

Bilbo ignored them both and carefully made his way through the Dwarves, ignoring the pain that went through him as each and every one of them scrambled away from him or were pulled out of his path. He hesitated before sinking to his knees nearly half a foot away from the two Dwarven princes, resisting the urge to flinch and run away from their wide, accusing gazes.

“I can fix this,” he whispered. “And I am sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you, Kíli. I just wanted to stop you from doing something that I thought you would regret.”

The youngest prince of Erebor glanced back in the direction of the red-haired Elf what was watching him from her post within the trees. He looked back at Bilbo and offered the Hobbit a tiny nod before extending his wounded arm, ignoring Fíli’s muted noise of protest.

Bilbo offered Kíli a small, reassuring smile and took the prince’s cold hand between his own, his eyes slipping closed even as waves of ice began to flow through his veins.

“Fíli,” he murmured. “Let go of your brother. This is going to feel very cold, and you are going to need to sleep and stay warm for a time after this, but I promise you, Kíli, you will be alright.”

He sensed more than felt the Dwarf’s answering nod, his entire body humming with cold power. The Hobbit heard Kíli gasp quietly and tightened his grip on the Dwarf’s arm even as several of the Dwarves behind him began to voice their own protests. Bilbo ignored them, choosing to focus instead on the sensation of ice flowing from his body into Kíli’s and dancing across the Dwarf prince’s veins until it reached the gash in his arm. The two beings took deep, identical breaths as the torn skin slowly began to knit itself together and harden beneath the Hobbit’s icy grip, leaving Dwarf and Hobbit shuddering from the exertion.

Bilbo pulled himself away once he felt that the task had been completed and opened his eyes to watch as Kíli stared down at his arm with weary surprise. Within moments, Fíli and Thorin were at the prince’s side with furs, their eyes flickering up with visible ghosts of wariness to lock on the Hobbit. Thorin’s eyes lingered far longer than his nephew’s, sapphires glowing with an unnameable fire from within that almost, almost made Bilbo want to throw himself into the king’s arms in search of the warmth that he had missed for so long.

He turned away with another shudder and carefully pulled himself to his feet, eyes focused on the ground so that he didn’t need to see the looks in his companion’s eyes. He stumbled numbly away
from the gathering without a word, unable to smother the quiet, impossible hope that one of the Dwarves would reach out and stop him.

The Elves were the ones who stopped him from wandering blindly into Mirkwood. Legolas’s cool hands startled the Hobbit and caused him to look up into a pair of cautious blue eyes that seemed far too old and yet so young at the same time.

“You have my thanks, Master Baggins, for sparing my companion,” he murmured.

Bilbo bit his lip and forced a smile onto his numb lips, only to start again when a light, warm cloak was wrapped around his freezing body. The Elven maiden gifted the Hobbit with her own, shaky smile.

“I am sorry, Master Baggins, for the trouble that my carelessness has caused you,” she whispered.

The Hobbit shook his head and pulled away before she could touch him again, his eyes locked on the thin tendrils of silvery ice that had begun to weave their way through the fabric of his cloak.

“Thank you for guarding our journey out of your realm,” he sighed. “Tell Thranduil that I am grateful for his… generosity.”

The Elves bowed in unison and eyed Bilbo with something akin to pity. He turned from them then and shuffled farther away until he found a wide tree trunk reasonably-untouched by the diseases of Mirkwood. The Hobbit carefully settled onto the ground and curled his arms around his chest, seeking to retain what little warmth that he could. He watched the Dwarves bustle around Kili with furs and materials for a fire until his eyes were too heavy with sleep to see any more.

With a final, weary sigh, Bilbo Baggins slipped into the void of unconsciousness, silently berating himself for thinking that Dwarves would be any different than the Hobbits of the Shire.

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Bilbo awoke to the feel of sunlight on his face and the sight of a worn wooden ceiling that seemed permanently stained with the scent of fish. He gagged before he could stop himself and rolled over to bury his face in the folds of a thin pillow with a groan, silently begging unconsciousness to take him once again.

“Bilbo.”

The Hobbit’s eyes flew open and he shot up into a sitting position, only to regret the movement moments later when blood flooded out of his brain and left his head spinning.
A blur of dark hair and silver furs moved closer and a warm hand pressed gently against his arm to steady him, leaving the Hobbit’s skin tingling beneath his shirt with a sensation that had little to do with cold.

“My apologies,” Thorin huffed. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Bilbo stared up at the Dwarf mutely, his mind whirling with memories of cold sapphires swimming with fear and anger and a dark-haired Dwarf prince staring up at him in silent accusation.

“K-Kíli,” he croaked. “Is he-?”

“My nephew is fine,” Thorin assured him. “He woke up barely three hours after you healed him and promptly threw a fit when he realized that Dwalin was carrying him in front of that… Elf.”

Bilbo smiled briefly, unable to deny his relief at the prince’s recovery.

“I didn’t mean to hurt him,” he whispered, begging Thorin to understand. “I knew that the Elves had been following us to make sure that we left the Mirkwood safely, and when I saw that Kíli was about to shoot the one lass that he seemed to be getting along with I- I panicked. I am so sorry.”

Thorin was shaking his head long before the Hobbit had ceased to speak, his eyes dark and heavy with…

“No,” he whispered. “No, you don’t have to apologise. I- All of us overreacted. You are not the first being to accidentally hurt one of your fellows, Bilbo, and the wound that you gave to Kíli was not the worst that he has ever experienced. We acted the way that we did out of fear, and we judged you unfairly after promising that we would not do so. Even after you healed my nephew, I was so blinded by my fear that I did not think of you until the Elves approached us and I noticed you sleeping beside that tree. I thought-.”

He stopped himself and looked away, his throat working as if to force the words past his tongue. Bilbo felt a chill run down his spine on the Dwarf’s behalf and started to reach out to lay a comforting hand on Thorin’s arm, only to pause when he remembered that the pendant no longer rested at his throat. Thorin glanced up and, noticing the Hobbit’s hesitation, took Bilbo’s smaller fingers in his own, his features still dark and twisted with regret.

“Forgive me, Bilbo,” he sighed. “Forgive all of us. Please.”

Bilbo nodded and offered the Dwarf a small smile, trying to ignore the unease that continued to nag at him from the dark corners of his mind.
What would happen, his mind whispered, when the Dwarves saw him use his powers against Smaug, assuming he even survived the encounter? What would stop them from turning against him again, from abandoning him?

What if the Dwarves still refused to touch him again, after everything? Had the acceptance that they had shown him at the beginning only been superficial after all?

Thorin returned the Hobbit’s smile hesitantly and squeezed Bilbo’s hand before releasing it reluctantly.

“I should inform the others that you are awake,” he muttered. “Fíli, Kíli and Bofur, in particular, are rather impatient to see you again, and Dwalin wants to apologize in person for his behaviour towards you.”

Bilbo nodded and watched as Thorin turned to leave the room.

“Thorin.”

The Dwarf paused and glanced back at Bilbo expectantly, causing the Hobbit to squirm in his bed. Bilbo thought back to his last words with Thranduil, his tongue already poised to ask the question that had been haunting him throughout most of their stay in the Elf-king’s palace.

“…Where are we, exactly?”

“Laketown,” the Dwarf informed him promptly. “The Elves took us here when it became obvious that both you and Kíli needed rest. The, ah, Master has generously provided us with lodgings until we can be on our way again.”

Bilbo nodded and watched Thorin leave, unable to truly relax until a pair of half-frantic Dwarven princes burst into his room and pulled him into a warm, bone-crushing embrace accompanied by several firm pats on the back from an apologetic Bofur and a quiet, surprisingly-gentle hug from Dwalin. The Hobbit smiled at them all to show his forgiveness, his body filled with a gentle warmth that he had missed fervently in the cursed Elven wood.

It almost made him believe again that this happy acceptance was real.
Hi everyone. So, first of all, I am so, so sorry for how long it took to update this thing, and thank you so much for your patience (aka, for not hunting me down and kicking my ass). I did mean to update this sooner, but I got so caught up in school and work that I had to put it off until now. I promise that I will not make you all wait so long for another update, and I will finish this up as soon as I can. Once again, I am soooo sorry, and thank you so much if you're still reading this. :3

Bilbo could not find it in himself to pretend that he was sorry to leave Laketown after everything was said and done. While the Dwarves had quickly regained their usual level of affection and protectiveness for him, there was a certain darkness that had been braided into every moment that he spent with them, a sense of fearful foreboding that only seemed to increase with every discreet glance that the Dwarves cast towards the Lonely Mountain’s shadow. Bilbo saw that darkness reflected in the eyes of the Master on the gentleman’s frequent visits to the Dwarves’ abode during the course of their stay. Though Thorin did his best to keep Bilbo out of the way during those meetings for the sake of his health (and, Bilbo suspected, to keep the knowledge of his powers from the Master’s beady eyes), the Hobbit had been able to eavesdrop on enough conversations and catch enough glances to gain a general idea of the Master’s character. There was a shadow in the fat man’s eyes, a shadow that seemed to seep into the very air of Laketown.

The Elves seemed to notice the darkness as well, if their stony looks of silent worry were any indication. While the Prince of Mirkwood and his red-haired companion had promised to remain with the Company for the time being, it was obvious that their discomfort only increased with every moment that they spent in Laketown among the Dwarves. Bilbo wasn’t blind, of course— he could see the way that Kíli smiled every time Tauriel approached him, and he saw the slightest hint of relaxation in the She-Elf’s bearing whenever she was around the youngest Dwarven prince. Granted, Legolas continued to adopt a martyred expression every time he saw the two together, but it seemed as if the Elven Prince was gradually, bitterly, becoming used to the idea. And yet, every time one of the Dwarves cast a glance in the direction of the Lonely Mountain, Bilbo saw his own discomfort echoed in the eyes of his Elven friends.

The Hobbit was back on his feet less than a week after the incident outside of Mirkwood, though Thorin refused to even consider leaving Laketown until several days after. True to the promise that he had supposedly made while Bilbo was unconscious, the Master provided the Company with a small flotilla of boats and supplies for the journey. Legolas and Tauriel both volunteered to stay behind, much to the dismay of Kíli, and promised to return to Mirkwood once they had received word of the Quest’s triumph… or its failure.

Thorin had graced their words with a cold nod and a quiet snort at the very idea of failure, unable to completely mask the worry in his sapphire eyes. He kept Bilbo close to him on the journey to the Mountain, and if his hand occasionally moved to curl around Bilbo’s beneath their cloaks, the Hobbit didn’t say a word. He tightened his grip on the Dwarf’s fingers whenever he could, silently
mourning the ice that settled back into his fingertips when Thorin pulled away for good.

Sunlight painted the sky in ribbons of gold and red that reached down to cover the Mountain in a layer of glistening heat, yet Bilbo could only shiver as they drew closer to the Mountain’s shadow and felt his heart slowly slip beneath a prison of ice.

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In spite of everything, Bilbo found it in himself to smile as the door to Erebor moved beneath Thorin’s hands and gave way to reveal a dark tunnel hewn with an incredible delicacy and smoothness out of the mountain’s rocky flesh. He fell back as the Dwarves rushed forward to breathe in the musty air beneath the mountain and exclaim over their success, his own lungs quivering around the final breaths of air that he would allow himself before slipping into the darkness.

The Hobbit’s eyes flickered away from the door and the ledge that the Company had gathered on, choosing instead to settle on the dark horizon painted silver in the moonlight and the empty fields of the Desolation, unconsciously searching for Gandalf’s shape amongst the shadows. The wizard had failed to meet them at the edge of the ruined city of Dale, as he had originally promised, and while Bilbo had given in to the Dwarves’ desire to move forward without too much protest, he had been unable to fully smother the thought that perhaps they should have waited for Gandalf after all.

“Bilbo?”

Bilbo blinked and turned back to look at the Dwarves, his heart falling in his chest at the odd mixture of eagerness and fear that had taken up residence in their eyes. Kíli, Fíli, Bofur, Ori and Balin had moved closer to him while he was absorbed in his thoughts, their features uncharacteristically sombre as they patted his arms and shoulders in gestures that they obviously viewed as comforting.

Thorin, Bilbo noticed with a slight pang, had remained just inside the door, his dark blue eyes distracted whenever he could tear them away from the inside of the mountain to glance at the Hobbit.

“It is time for you to fulfil your part of the bargain, Master Burglar,” Thorin declared with the sort of grim formality that Bilbo remembered from the beginning of their quest.

The Dwarven king’s eyes softened ever-so-slightly and he finally turned away from the tunnel to study Bilbo, his lips tightening and twisting as if they were fighting against the words that Bilbo could sense building behind his eyes. Thorin shook his head once, twice, in a quick, jerky movement and reached forward to clasp Bilbo once on the shoulder before he stepped away, apparently oblivious to the sharp glances that he had earned from Balin and his nephews as a result. Bofur quickly stepped in to take the king’s place and pulled Bilbo into a tight hug, his rough fingers curling around Bilbo’s cool hands before he pulled away with a strained smile.
“Don’t ya go getting lost on us, hey Bilbo?” he huffed. “And be sure ta let me know if you find anythin’ good down there.”

Ori elbowed the toymaker away with a huff and pulled Bilbo in for a quicker, gentler hug before he, too, moved away to make way for Fíli and Kíli. The brothers were silent and still before the Hobbit, their eyes locked unwaveringly onto his own light blue orbs. In one quick movement, the princes reached out and took Bilbo’s hands in their own, their warm fingers pressing two cool beads into the palms of Bilbo’s hands before they pulled away to shoot him small, hesitant smiles.

“We were working on these in Laketown,” Fíli explained softly.

“Come back in one piece, and we’ll braid them in for you,” Kíli added with a small, humourless smile that almost masked the desperate gleam to his eyes.

Bilbo swallowed and carefully slipped the beads into the pocket of his jacket before pulling the brothers into a quick, fierce hug that left them chuckling into his hair.

“Don’t get into any trouble until I get back, do you hear me?” he grumbled, earning a few chuckles from those Dwarves that were close enough to hear him.

“Honestly, Master Boggins,” Kíli huffed. “What kind of trouble could we possibly-.”

“Don’t,” Bilbo interrupted wearily. He pulled away and turned to find Balin waiting for him at the entrance to the tunnel, his own smile wan and tired as he gestured to the Hobbit.

“I’ll be walking with you until the end of the tunnel, if you don’t mind my company, Master Baggins,” he informed Bilbo.

The Hobbit gifted him with his first true smile since the door had opened and allowed Balin to lead him into the tunnel, unable to stop himself from glancing over his shoulder for one last look at the Dwarves before they disappeared from view.

Balin waited until the slivers of moonlight streaming in from the door had all-but faded before he spoke again, his eyes focused on the path ahead of them with the intensity that Bilbo had come to associate with those who did not truly know how to make the words on their lips sound less awful than they had a right to be.

“Just to make things clear, Master- Bilbo,” he corrected when Bilbo shot him a look. “There is nothing in the contract that obligates you to face the dragon, if such a creature remains alive within these walls. No Dwarf here would expect you to face the beast alone, no matter what powers you have hiding within your veins. Do you understand?”
The elderly Dwarf glanced at Bilbo long enough to make sure that the Hobbit had nodded before he turned away again.

“All that you have to do is to go in and find the Arkenstone— you can’t miss it, it’s a great, white jewel that far outshines anything else within these walls— without… without waking the dragon, if he is indeed alive— which he may not be, as no one has seen him outside of these walls since the fall of Erebor, and even a dragon should not be able to survive so long without food…”

Balin trailed off and slowed to a halt, his shoulders slumping beneath the long, heavy sigh that had slipped out of his lungs.

“Truth be told, laddie, I do not know what you will find within Erebor,” he confessed. “And I am not ashamed to say that it frightens me to think of you facing a creature like Smaug all on your own. I… I have lost far too many friends already, Bilbo, too many men that I have admired and respected. I do not want to add your name to the list of those who haunt me at night, and I know for a fact that most, if not all, of our Company feel the same. If you do not want to continue, if you want to turn back and find another way, no one would blame you.”

Bilbo shook his head and stepped closer to press a light, hesitant hand against Balin’s drooping shoulders. The Dwarf put his hand on top of Bilbo’s without a sign of fear, sending a brief flash of warmth and gratitude through the Hobbit before he pulled away and curled his fingers around the hilt of his sword— and it was a sword now, no matter how many times the Dwarves cared to call it a “letter-opener”. He pulled the blade and its scabbard from his belt and carefully handed it to Balin with a small smile.

“I will not turn back,” he told him. “I gave my word, and I believe that I must at least try. But, ah, since I doubt that swords will do much good against a dragon, perhaps you might hold onto Sting for me until I return?”

Balin accepted the blade with raised eyebrows and a smile that was almost amused. “‘Sting’?” he repeated.

“I named it,” Bilbo informed him, half-prepared to defend his decisions against the old Dwarf’s twinkling eyes.

Balin smirked and slipped the blade into his own belt with a sad wink. “It is a good name, lad.”

Bilbo bowed his head in silent gratitude and turned away before anymore could be said. He continued on into the tunnels, ever aware of Balin’s eyes on him until the Dwarf had disappeared from view, leaving Bilbo alone once more.

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There was a children’s game in the Shire that Bilbo had loved to play when he was younger, even if it was a rare thing that he actually had other children to play with. Belladonna had always been a willing participant, however, and Bilbo often found that his mother was a much worthier opponent in the game of Hide and Seek than any ordinary Hobbit child.

Bilbo found himself desperately thanking his mother as he crept through the gaping, faded glory of Erebor, where every wrong step sent coins and jewels scattering in muted chimes that made him tense and physically wrestle with an instinctive urge to vomit and faint. He hadn’t caught a glimpse of the legendary Smaug since he had entered the Dwarven city and its giant, glittering treasure room, hadn’t even found a sign that the creature continued to breathe the same cool, musty air that he did, and yet the Hobbit couldn’t bring himself to relax. His ears continued to ring with Balin’s fears and warnings, his fingers burning with ice that practically begged to be released.

The Hobbit took a deep, steadying breath- perhaps his hundredth since he had first set foot into the treasure room and carefully made his way forward once again, his eyes combing the towering piles of gold and gems for a sign of the Arkenstone.

*I don’t suppose Balin could have been a bit more descriptive*, he thought sourly. *Actually, any of the Dwarves could have bothered to give me a decent description of the bloody thing... But no, that would have been too damn helpful-*

A gleam of pure, indescribable whiteness caught his eye, stopping any form of thought in the Hobbit’s brain. Bilbo stumbled to an abrupt halt, hardly noticing the treasures that went skipping across the treasure room as a result, his entire being focused with an odd sort of intensity on the large, circular stone that gleamed up at him amongst its lesser neighbours. Bilbo scrambled towards the gem, hardly caring for the sounds of scattering coins and jewels that had so plagued him earlier. The Arkenstone- for what else could it be?- only seemed to glow brighter as he drew closer, inviting him to come closer, to touch it and cradle it close so that none could ever take it again-.

Hot, searing pain flared up around Bilbo’s fingers from where they had touched the stone, sending the Hobbit falling back against the gold with a scream of pain. Bilbo writhed against the gold, unable to stop himself, his mind burning with the fading ghosts of greed and desire that froze and melted away like winter snows in the face of a burning sun. The Hobbit rolled further away from the Arkenstone and choked on another cry of pain, his mind suddenly, awfully-clear of the odd golden haze that had settled across it after his first glimpse of the brilliant stone. It didn’t seem quite so brilliant now, its gleam darkened and stained with the memory of pain. It even seemed smaller, somehow, as if it had moved away…

*It had* moved away.

The gold was moving.

Bilbo’s breath froze in his chest and he scrambled to his feet, the blood pounding in his veins as he
whirled around, his eyes locking on a patch of gleaming bronze just as it grew and rose above the piles to fix Bilbo with a pair of gold eyes with the cool brilliance of a star.

“I see you, Thief,” the dragon hissed, his voice echoing around the cavern with a deep timbre that settled into Bilbo’s bones and left him trembling.

“Smaug,” the Hobbit breathed, his fingers burning and tingling with ice that he had barely managed to restrain until now.

“You know of me,” the dragon hummed, seeming pleased with the knowledge. “And yet I do not know of you, little Thief. What manner of creature to you claim to be?”

“I- I am called Luck-wearer,” Bilbo stuttered, his mind reeling. “And Fell-bringer. I am… I am he who heralds Death, I am the Bringer of Cold.”

A low growl rose in Smaug’s throat and stopped any further words from leaving Bilbo’s lips, though the dragon’s eyes looked more amused than anything else.

“Do you mean to impress me, Thief?” the dragon purred. “I am the destroyer of nations! My claws are steel, my skin harder than diamond. My wings have the force of a huracaine.” The dragon flapped its wings to make a point, his maw opening in a low, cruel laugh when Bilbo stumbled beneath its winds and scrabbled for a hold amongst the scattered gold and jewels.

Bilbo gritted his teeth and dug deeper into the gold in search of a solid grip, careful to avoid the gleaming surface of the Arkenstone as he passed by. Ice streamed from his fingertips and skated across the roiling surface of the gold, giving Bilbo an odd source of comfort amidst the cold multi-coloured fire of the Dwarven treasure.

“Your scent is strange to me, Fell-bringer,” Smaug sneered. “And yet there is a part of it that I know well, though I have only smelt its rotting echoes these many years: Dwarves.”

Bilbo’s blood ran cold and he forced himself to remain huddled against the gold, desperate to shield his friends from the dragon’s wrath if he should fail.

“Dwarves?” he reported, distantly proud when his voice only trembled slightly. “No, no Dwarves here. I came alone to... to see if the stories are true.”

Smaug gave another amused growl and flapped his wings once again, sending Bilbo tumbling amongst the gold as flashes of ice disappeared amongst collapsing piles of gold.

“And?” the dragon prompted dryly.
“S-stories and tales fall utterly short of your magnificence O Smaug, the Terrible,” Bilbo gasped, his body trembling with the effort of trying to hold his ground against the dragon’s might. He felt ice gather beneath his skin and flow from his veins, his fingers both burning and numb amongst heated metal. “Truly, there is no other being that could compare to your power.”

The dragon seemed to preen beneath his praise and sneered down at the Hobbit, his claws screaming and clinking against the gold as he made his way closer to his prey. Bilbo breathed slowly and carefully pushed himself to his feet, his hands open and hanging loosely at his sides.

“You are fair with your words, little Thief,” Smaug hissed. “It is a shame that our time together has run out.”

Smaug’s mouth opened wide, his throat already glowing with the first hints of fire that painted his teeth in shades of gold, orange and hot blue.

Bilbo forced his hands outwards, his blood singing with icy fire. A thick stream of ice shot from his fingertips and slammed into the dragon’s throat, leaving Smaug gasping and choking on ice that quickly melted into water. Bilbo dove behind a pillar littered with stacks of gold and jewels before the dragon could recover, neatly dodging a thin stream of fire that had managed to slip past his ice. He pressed his back against the surface of the pillar before slipping away again, his ankles hot and burning with another thin sliver of fire moments before he spun and shot a stream of ice at Smaug’s eyes and maw. The dragon roared in fury and lunged forward, his claws slamming into the gold to Bilbo’s right with enough force to send the Hobbit tumbling amidst a wave of gold and gems. Bilbo’s eyes ran frantically across the treasure room, locking for a brief moment on a set of worn stone stairs that reached up into the dim shadows of Erebor before they flickered away.

“What are you?” Smaug roared, his claws raking furiously against the gold in search of the Hobbit who had burrowed himself further into the depths.

Bilbo pressed his hand against the gold beneath him and watched as a thick spike of ice slammed up into Smaug’s underbelly, leaving the dragon roaring in irritation even if the ice itself didn’t seem to have caused any damage. Bilbo muttered a word that he had heard Dwalin use when the warrior was particularly frustrated and scrambled away with another blast of ice, stubbornly ignoring the chill that was starting to seep from his veins into his bones.

“Has Oakenshield sent you?” Smaug snarled. “Did he hire you, he who is so desperate to reclaim his throne yet too cowardly to fight for it himself?”

Bilbo ignored the jab and pressed his palms against the ground until a thick sheet of ice had spread out across the gold and covered it in a frozen wave. Smaug screamed and paused for a moment to lift his claw out of the ice that had closed around it, his other food slipping slightly along the ice. The Hobbit smiled grimly and darted across the floor, pausing every so often to spread more sheets of ice across the gold.
“The Dwarf is using you, Fell-bringer,” Smaug hissed following a blow from his claws that sent Bilbo tumbling and falling amongst the gold. “He expects you to perish here, no matter what powers you possess.”

Bilbo stiffened but kept moving, willing ice to spread across the ground and gather along the walls with every beat of his heart.

“What did he promise you?” Smaug urged, apparently sensing that he had hit a nerve. “Riches? The Dwarves will never part with their gold. He sends you into the fires of death to seek his Arkenstone, not caring if you perish in the process so long as you can deliver it to him.”

“Wrong,” Bilbo huffed under his breath, even as his hands trembled and the thin stream of ice that he sent across the gold splintered before it even reached Smaug’s claws and scales.

“He has weighed the value of your life, and found you lacking,” Smaug snarled.

“You’re wrong!” Bilbo screamed, his heart pounding and burning with a wintry fire. He whirled and lunged to slam his hands against the bottom of Smaug’s foreleg, his lips twisting into a pained, triumphant snarl as ice streamed from his fingertips and spread with frightening speed across the dragon’s shoulder before the dragon reared away.

The leathery edge of Smaug’s wing slammed into Bilbo’s side and sent him flying into the nearest pile of gold. Bilbo gasped against the burning pain in his lungs and ribs and tried to pull himself to his feet, only to cry out when his palm brushed against a smooth surface gleaming with brilliant white light…

“The Arkenstone,” Smaug hissed, his voice softer as he gazed down at the gem that had caused Bilbo pain. “I would almost let you take it, if only so you could watch Oakenshield go mad beneath its power.”

“No!” Bilbo snarled. His body was numb now, and shivering, his fingers and hands tainted with blue just as they had been on that fateful night when he had battled Azog alongside Thorin.

Thorin, who had left him to go alone into Erebor, who even now was probably huddled on a ledge along with the rest of the Company, either ignorant or uncaring of the danger that Bilbo had been thrown into.

Smaug gave a hiss of laughter and lunged forward with a gaping maw, only to reel back when Bilbo shot another stream of ice into his throat. The Hobbit dragged himself to his feet, taking care to avoid touching the Arkenstone as he trapped it and its golden neighbours beneath a sheet of ice. He lashed out at Smaug once more before the dragon could fully recover, his eyes following the giant creature as it reared back, revealing a tiny, barely-noticeable chink in the dragon’s dark scales. Bilbo stiffened and stumbled back, his thoughts flying back to the tales that one of the Men of Laketown, a fisherman named Bard whose son had become quick friends with the princes, had
told Bilbo on one of the nights when he had come with Fíli and Kíli.

“Then Girion, Lord of Dale, was left alone amongst the burning ruins of his city, armed only with an ever-dwindling pile of black arrows. He fired over and over again, and finally managed to hit his mark, but it wasn’t enough. The dragon’s armour had only been weakened. One more shot, and the beast would have fallen-.”

“That’s only a tale, though," Kíli objected over Fíli’s hissed demands for him to be quiet.

Bard stared the dwarf down, his brow raised in an irritated, sceptical glance that made the Man look remarkably like Thorin.

“So is your uncle," the fisherman countered. “He seems real enough.”

Bilbo sucked in a sharp breath and darted closer to the dragon, his skin tingling with fear and the dark, creeping numbness that had begun to take hold of his body and was sending waves of shadows against the edges of his vision. Smaug sneered at him and reared further back, his throat already glowing a weak orange as he prepared to scorch the burglar. Bilbo gritted his teeth and ran closer until he was almost hidden beneath Smaug’s belly, his eyes never wavering from the chink in the dragon’s hide. His arms and feet had turned blue as well now, and even his knees were beginning to seize and tremble with the effort of moving.

Fire rained down on him from above, burning through his clothes and dancing in flames across his skin. Bilbo screamed in pain and shot up at the chink in the dragon’s hide, eyes watching as the ice hit its mark before his vision was entirely obscured by the flame.
It is nearly a universal truth that societies once accustomed to the keeping of one large secret or another must be in want of another source of secrecy once the first has gone away. While it could be argued by most of Middle Earth that the Hobbits of the Shire had been harbouring secrets long before the events of the Fell Winter had plunged Bilbo Baggins into infamy, the Shire’s inhabitants had never truly made an effort to hide something from the Dwarves, Men and Elves that occasionally passed through their borders before the arrival of the Winter Baggins, and many an elder Hobbit found to his or her vague surprise that they rather missed the secrecy of it all, missed the superficial thrill of watching a Ranger ride away days after a retreating band of Dwarvish merchants knowing that another outsider had left the Shire with no knowledge of the curse that resided within it.

Perhaps it would have surprised Bilbo Baggins to learn that his neighbours rather missed his presence, in their own peculiar fashion. Doubtless is would have interested him to know that the Shire’s inhabitants hadn’t even bothered to see if he had taken his pendant with him once his absence had been realised; indeed, most Hobbits were satisfied with the knowledge that the Baggins lad had taken his curse elsewhere and their own dawning senses of encroaching boredom on the subject.

In the face of this rising threat of boredom, it made sense in a rather quaint way for several of the Shire’s crueller inhabitants to begin a search for another source of that secrecy that had brought them such enjoyment in the previous years.

It was mark of that cruel spirit of Coincidence that seemed to have been sent by the Valar to plague the Baggins family that such a secret was found in another Baggins child on the edge of Buckland. Frodo Baggins, the son of Bilbo Baggin’s cousin (and presumed heir), Drogo Baggins and Primula Brandybuck had been the recipient of the Shire’s easily-diverted attention in his own right in the weeks following Bilbo’s departure following his parents’ unfortunate demise in a boating accident that was secretly blamed on the Autumnal winds of his cheerful, energetic mother. Although the lad remained a source of dutiful pity and sympathy for the respectable inhabitants of the Shire, it was not until Lobelia Sackeville-Baggins was struck with a rather large snowball in the midst of a hot summer week following a rather scathing remark from the lady regarding Bilbo Baggins and his absence that many in the Shire began to realise that they had, in fact, never witnessed the use of the lad’s Season, though it had always been assumed that he had taken after his father’s Spring nature as most Baggins did (with Bilbo being the obvious and often-overlooked exception). So it was with a good deal of surprise (and no small amount of hidden excitement) that the Shire learned that Frodo Baggins was not, in fact, a Spring Hobbit, nor was he a Child of Autumn. The drops of blue that had often been taken for Spring dew at his fingertips were found to be miniature crystals of ice, and the Sackeville-Baggins took great satisfaction in publicly realising that the privacy that had surrounded Primula and Drogo since the birth of their son had not come about as a result of the damage done to the Baggins family name by Bilbo, but had in fact been a result of their desire to hide the Shire’s newest curse from its consciousness.

Several of the more progressive Hobbits (among them many members of the Took clan who had taken offense to the treatment of Belladonna’s son and a certain brood of Gamgees that had maintained close ties with Bilbo and his reserved relations throughout the years) pointed out with what volume they could muster that Frodo’s powers had brought no harm to the Shire, that in the
years following the young lad’s birth there had hardly been a frost worth noticing before its expected time and that no second Fell Winter had come swooping from the Blue Mountains as a sign of the Valar’s wrath. They argued that Frodo (and Bilbo, for that matter) had exhibited admirable control over his Season throughout his life, and that a single snowball thrown at a rather-unpleasant Hobbit woman who had been insulting a member of his family could not be a true basis for punishment, particularly when many Autumn and Summer children had exhibited far less control over their Seasons with far more disastrous consequences.

However, despite this admirable use of force and dispute from those who cared to exhibit it, it was soon decided amongst the Shire officials, with the support of the Sackeville-Baggins and the Bracegirdles, that a new pendant should be created by the more powerful Seasons throughout the Shire, and that Frodo should take up Bilbo’s former place in Bag End in order to keep him removed from other possible instances of harm, though this particular point was met with some grumbling from the Sackeville-Baggins, who had rather been hoping to obtain Bag End for their own usage once the new Winter Child was banished to some distant cottage in Buckland or Tuckborough.

And so it was that the young lad of no more than twelve was taken from his mother’s home in Buckland to be deposited in the gloom of Bag End until such time as a new pendant could be made and the Hobbit could once again be permitted to exercise limited interaction with his generous Hobbit neighbours.

This unfortunate occurrence served to illustrate a further truth that the Shire had not yet grasped in its limited universe. For while the Hobbits of the Shire were well on their way to admitting that once having tasted the thrill of keeping secrets they only longed for more, it was rather difficult for many to realise that the true strength and brilliance of the world is often found in those who are most oppressed by it, and that those actions that we could never attribute to anything other than the ordinary can often lead to something extraordinary.

In the face of the Shire’s preparations for a second hidden Winter and Frodo’s imprisonment within Bag End, the absence of a young Summer lad from Buckland and his Autumn cousin from Tuckborough could not be anything but a minor source of interest. Meriadoc Brandybuck and Peregrin Took were often allowed free reign by their respective clans (a source of scandal for the more respectable Shire-folk), and the combination of a Summer’s fiery courage and an Autumn’s impulsive desire for adventure was such that no one could find it in themselves to be particularly concerned when the two boys departed in each other’s company armed with small bags with rations and cloaks. The disappearance of the eldest Gamgee boy would ordinarily have been the cause of greater concern and surprise, but as the boy had been particularly wounded by Frodo’s predicament, and as Hamfast Gamgee was rather occupied with his arguments with the Sackeville-Baggins over the ownership of Bilbo’s tomatoes, young Samwise was able to slip away in the general direction of Bag End’s gardens without much trouble.

It was only after the back door to Bag End was found ajar several days later, once the necklace had been forged and a solemn contingent of rather smug gentle-Hobbits had been summoned to the hole to bestow the object upon its destined owner that a sense of worry began to rise amongst the Hobbits of the Shire, and the rising shouts of fear from Tuckborough, Buckland and the home of the Gamgees began to seep into the brains of even the most ignorant of Hobbits. Rangers were quickly summoned by Autumn Hobbits who were too concerned to note the Men’s surprise at their summons via wind and packs of Summer and Spring Hobbits began to scour the nearest trees and villages for signs of the missing lads, never seeing the hoof prints hidden beneath
well-placed scorch marks and the lingering scents of Hobbit children masked by the giggling winds.

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Later on in his life, once multiple horrors had passed him by and he had fallen into that relaxed sense of comfortable nothingness that falls upon the most fortunate of those who have reached old age, Bofur would reflect that his dislike of heights had likely begun with that awful night spent huddled against the slopes of Erebor with his ears pressed against the mountain’s rough stone, straining his ears for the faintest hint of life from the brave Hobbit who had disappeared within its depths.

He felt the soft brush of weathered fabric and armour against his shoulder before Fíli and Kíli settled down onto the ground beside him, their eyes focused with a dark sort of worry on the form of their uncle as Thorin continued to stand at the very edge of the ledge, his cold blue eyes focused on some distant point beyond the horizon rather than on the half-open door to Erebor that had earned the undivided attention of every other member of the Company aside from Balin and Dwalin, who had taken to shooting Thorin Oakenshield looks that contained a strange mixture of fear and anger.

Thorin alone failed to look back at the door when a furious roar from below shook the very stone that they stood upon and sent several of the younger dwarves stumbling to their knees. Bofur sucked a sharp breath into lungs that were suddenly devoid of air and made as if to lunge at the door, only to be held back by Bifur’s calloused hand on his shoulder and Bombur’s wide, frightened eyes.

“Wha’ was tha’?” Dwalin snarled, his features paling beneath his beard even as he drew a thick, muscled arm around Ori’s shaking shoulders.

“Was that an earthquake?” Dori demanded shakily.

“No,” Balin croaked in a voice that had the air freezing within Bofur’s lungs for the second time in as many minutes. “No, it was not an earthquake, my lad. That… was a dragon.”

“Bilbo,” Kíli gasped. The youngest prince of Erebor scrambled to his feet and joined Bofur in a second mad dash towards the door, their every step shadowed by Fíli and Ori (though how the scribe had managed to break free of Dwalin’s hold, Bofur would never truly know).

“Stop,” Thorin hissed, his eyes finally leaving the horizon to linger on the doorway with an expression that was almost pained. “Give the Halfling a moment more, we do not know if he is still within reach of the dragon’s wrath.”

A second roar rose up from the depths moments later with a force to rival the one before. Bofur shivered beneath the blasts of hot air that tickled against his features from within the cavern and leaned as close to the shadows as he dared, silently begging the silent Hobbit to appear from the shadows as he always did, his eyes wide and bright with that brilliant warmth that defied the ice at
“He’s not coming,” Fili muttered, his voice thin and hoarse with worry.

“I’m going in,” Kili grunted, his bow already taut and ready in his hands.

“No,” Thorin snapped. “We stay where we are. The Burglar can handle-.”

“His name is Bilbo,” Balin snarled.

Thorin jolted as if he had been slapped and glared down at the snowy-haired dwarf for a long moment, his sharp blue eyes flickering over Balin’s shoulder as Dwalin and Dori drew closer to the elderly dwarf with twin expressions of strained worry.

“Give him time,” Thorin muttered.

“We’ve given him time, he has had nothing but time to get himself killed by a dragon that wasn’t even his enemy before this moment!” Bofur yelled from Erebor’s doorway, unable to keep the raw, burning fury out of his voice even in the face of Thorin’s thunderous glare and Balin’s brief look of warning. “For all we know, he could be dead because we’ve wasted time arguing over whether or not he’s had enough time to be burned to ash!”

Thorin flinched again, and perhaps it was a product of Bofur’s desperate mind that made it seem as if some small shred of sanity had returned to them.

“Uncle,” Fili pressed, perhaps sensing that same spark of consciousness that had made Bofur pause. ‘Please, we cannot sit here and wait to see if Bilbo will come back on his own. We’re Dwarves, we’re made for action- you cannot expect us to sit here doing nothing while our friend is in danger.”

Thorin’s expression turned stony for a long moment before he nodded in something like approval, his hand already curled around Orcrist’s hilt. Bofur, Fili and Kili dove into the tunnels almost before their king had finished nodding and Bofur felt his heart stutter within his chest as a final, desperate roar echoed through the stone above his head and beneath his feet, only to be cut off with a deep, piercing whine that gave him more unease than any thundering roar or flash of fire had managed to produce thus far. His hands shook around the handle of his mattock, his muscles trembling even as Nori slipped up behind him to press a warm hand between his shoulder blades in silent encouragement and comfort.

Bofur, Fili and Kili were forced to fall back as the tunnel began to branch off into twisted, curving paths, though they remained close behind Thorin and Balin when the two natives of Erebor pulled ahead to lead the way. Thorin’s stride grew longer, his footsteps more hurried and almost frantic the closer they came to the treasure room of Erebor. His eyes, when they flickered over his
shoulder to ensure that his nephews remained behind him, were clearer than they had been since their departure from Laketown, and amidst the frantic pulse of worry within his chest, Bofur tried to allow himself to hope that his king had returned, that this, now, was the Thorin that had waited beside Bilbo’s bedside for days on end in Laketown and had made Bombur smile with pride after a quiet compliment to the larger dwarf’s cooking.

The darkness of the tunnel began to lift in the face of Erebor’s cavernous shadows, then faded altogether in the face of the treasure room’s silvery-golden light. Bofur skidded to an abrupt halt mere inches behind the young princes of Erebor and felt the breath fly from his lungs at the sight that awaited them.

Sheets of thick, blue-white ice coated the treasure room from the smallest of its golden coins to the very heights of its nearly-invisible ceiling. Gigantic cracks inched across the ice’s slick surface in a frozen blood trail that led to the still-twitching scales of a towering corpse.

“Mahal’s beard,” Dwalin breathed behind them, his voice faint and unstable for the first time that Bofur could remember.

“W-Where’s Bilbo?” Bofur managed to croak because the Hobbit wasn’t there, he couldn’t see him, only the ice and the cracks and the blood and the muted glimmer of Dwarven gold trapped forever beneath glittering ice-

There, slumped within a single circle of melted ice that still steamed with the heat of quenched dragon-fire. Bilbo didn’t move when the Dwarves ran towards him with a collective shout of dismay, hardly even stirred when Fíli and Kíli drew his pale, burned body tinged with blue against their chests and Bofur threw a patched cloak across the Hobbit’s shoulders to make up for the shirt and jacket that had been burned away to ashy scraps that clung with an unnatural stubbornness to his raw, bloodied shoulders. His hands trembled beneath Balin’s fingers, shooting fragile streams of ice onto the already-frozen ground.

Bofur felt something lodge in his throat when a choked, strangled noise broke through Kíli’s lips, his eyes locking on two cracked and smouldering beads that had rolled away from the Hobbit’s body to rest against a small pile of half-melted gold. The youngest dwarf reached out and cupped the beads in his gloved hand, stubbornly ignoring the smoke that rose from his palm as the hot stone struggled to burn through tough wool.

Thorin hovered near the edge of the makeshift circle of Dwarves that had gathered around the Hobbit, his features pale and stricken with something that Bofur almost took for fear and concern.

Bilbo groaned from within the princes’ arms and carefully opened bloodshot blue eyes rubbed raw by smoke and heat, his mouth lifting into a small, tired smile when he was met with the drawn and frantic faces of most of the Company.

“… Hello,” he croaked, his voice so hoarse and wrecked that it nearly sent Bofur reeling back into Nori’s waiting arms.
“Hey there, lad,” he managed to force past the waves of relief that were almost painful in their intensity. “Thought we had lost you for a moment.”

Bilbo shook his head carefully, his lips twitching again when the movement caused his head to brush against Fíli’s chest. Ori shuffled closer and added his own arms to the group’s embrace, his smile quiet and steady despite the tell-tale trembling in his limbs.

“Are you warm enough?” he asked carefully.

Bilbo shrugged and slowly managed to ease himself into a sitting position with the help of two anxious princes. He offered each of them a grateful half-grimace, his brow furrowing in troubled confusion as he finally became aware of the cloak around his shoulders.

“….Shirt?” he mumbled.

“As it appears that Hobbit shirts are not, in face, fireproof, Bofur elected to loan you his cloak for the time bein’,” Balin informed him with what cheer he could muster.

Bilbo hummed in irritation, his eyes widening in a brief flicker of alarm as he seemed to recall something.

“Beads-?”

“I have them, Bilbo,” Kíli assured him quickly. “Ah… Fee and I may have to make new ones, though.”

Bilbo winced at the sight of the scorched beads in the prince’s palm. “….Sorry.”

“Don’t you dare,” Fíli huffed. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

“Unless you were planning on apologizing for your decision to single-handedly take on a dragon,” Kíli chirped. “In which case, we accept your apology.”

Bilbo chuckled and allowed the princes to wrap his arms around their shoulders as they carefully drew him to his feet, his tense muscles relaxing slightly when he caught sight of Thorin hovering at the edge of the group.

“Thor-.”

“Where is it?” Thorin interrupted gruffly, his eyes blazing with a clouded fire that Bofur had hoped to never see again.
Bilbo blinked up at the Dwarven king and cocked his head to the side even as Fíli and Kíli stiffened and Balin and Ori subtly drew closer.

“Where is… what?” he mumbled.

“The Arkentstone,” Thorin hissed. “The gem that ensures my right to rule, that gives me the power to call upon our Dwarven allies for assistance, where is it?”

Bofur watched Bilbo’s eyes widen in recognition, his arms jerking instinctively to help the Hobbit when Bilbo stumbled forward with a wild look in his eyes.

“Thorin,” he whispered. “There is something wrong with that stone-.”

“Where did you hide it?” Thorin roared. Bofur felt something like suspicion slither across his spine and he glanced at the Hobbit, his brow furrowing despite his best efforts at the open fear and unease in Bilbo’s eyes. Nori and Dwalin had already drawn closer to Thorin, and even Ori and the princes seemed to be fighting the urge to step away from the Hobbit.

“-I saw it just before Smaug woke but, Thorin, something happened when I touched it-.”

“Did you steal it then? Was the lure of riches too strong for such a descendant of snakes?”

“-it burned me, Thorin! I could feel… There is something wicked within it-.”

“Thief!” Thorin roared. Before any of the dwarves could move to stop him, the Dwarven king had thrown himself at the Hobbit and hauled the smaller being to him, his fingers tightening around Bilbo’s scalded throat even as the Hobbit scrabbled at his fingers and gasped for breath.

“Th-Thorin-,” Bilbo croaked.

“Thorin,” Balin cried out, his voice nearly drowned by Fíli and Kíli’s outraged yells.

“Why have you taken it from me?” Thorin screamed. “Where have you hidden it?”

Bofur yelled and scrambled towards the Dwarven king, his heart pounding in sudden fear as Bilbo’s eyes began to droop and his skin slowly began to turn red. The Hobbit wrapped his hand around Thorin’s wrist in one last gesture of defiance that sent Thorin reeling back with a scream even as ice started to skate across his skin. Bilbo fell to the ground with a breathless yelp, his eyes widening in silent horror as Thorin collapsed to the frozen ground with a howl, his writhing body...
soon shielded from view by Dwalin, Bifur, Gloin and Oin.

“Th-Thorin,” the Hobbit whimpered.

“Bilbo-,” Fíli began, his voice cautious despite the fearless hand that he offered beside his brother.

“No!” Bilbo screamed, voice broken and chopped with fear and smoke. “N-No, don’t touch me, d-d-don’t touch me!”

Balin stepped forward with a frown, his eyes flickering over towards his brother and the king that had gone frighteningly-still within his grip before he took another step closer to the Hobbit and forced a gentle smile onto his face.

“Calm yourself, lad, you won’t hurt us,” he murmured. “I know you won’t. I trust you, Bilbo, we trust you.”

“Don’t,” Bilbo cried. He pulled away before any of the Dwarves could touch him and started to run, his feet gliding easily across the smooth ice despite the heaviness in his step and the obvious exhaustion in every line of his body.

“Bilbo,” the princes yelled, their own steps slower and more hesitant against the ice. Bofur raced past them, Bombur and Ori on his heels, only to find his way blocked by a low wall of ice that only just masked the image of a fleeing Hobbit clad in scorched clothes and a borrowed cloak.

“Bilbo!” he howled, his voice echoing strangely in the empty shadows of Erebor.

Bilbo gave no reply, his footsteps as silent against the stone as they had been on ice while his pale skin slowly disappeared into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Yoo-hoo! So, yeah, here's another chapter. Quick note here regarding Frodo: I have obviously decided to ignore the canon regarding his age (and Sam, Merry and Pippin because I love them dearly). In case it wasn't clear, Frodo's parents were aware that he was a Winter, and they chose to keep it hidden because of all of the crap that happened to Bilbo. Merry, Pippin and Sam were also all aware of it (whether Frodo's parents knew that his friends knew is unknown, but I'm thinking that they did), although Bilbo never was since a) he was generally kept away from Hobbit children and b) he generally kept HIMSELF away from Hobbit children, especially those related to him, since he was always afraid of hurting them.

Also, apologies for making Thorin a bit of a dick but, well, he does become a bit of a dick in Erebor, as we all know.
Anywho, thanks for all of your awesomeness and support regarding this story, and I'll see you all next chapter. :)

The cold lingered in Bilbo’s bones with every step that he took away from the Dwarves and the treasure room, a constant, aching presence that contrasted oddly with the sharp, burning pain that still skipped across his burnt skin beneath the rough fabric of Bofur’s cloak. The Hobbit shoved any notion of pain to the back of his mind as best he could, hardly seeing the sheets of ice and crept up from the cracked and ancient stone beneath his feet to coat the mountain’s walls in tapestries of silver frost and snowy flowers. He didn’t slow to peer into the wide, twisting tunnels that beckoned to him from every dent in Erebor’s walls, his entire being focused and desperate to leave the dark, shadowed caves that still echoed with Thorin’s screams and the cries of his friends as they called after him, insisting that they trusted him, that he wouldn’t hurt them even after everything that they had seen, everything that he had done.

His mother stared up at him with frozen eyes, only now her eyes were blue, a deep, sapphire blue that morphed into Thorin’s eyes and now it was Thorin staring up at him, Thorin’s features blank with silent accusation, Thorin frozen, Thorin, Thorin, Thorin.

Bilbo bit back the raw, frantic scream that was clawing at the inside of his throat, his heart hammering against his chest with every wave of ice and searing cold that passed through his fingers and feet to spread across the walls. The Hobbit finally stumbled to a halt beneath the latest wave of wintery chill, his red-rimmed blue eyes wide and dazed as they took in the ice that now coated the walls and earthy ground around him, reaching higher and higher until it covered the earthly sky of Erebor in moons and stars of glittering ice and frost. Bilbo pressed a cold, shaking hand to his mouth and silently fell to his knees against the hard surface of the ice, hardly noticing the loose shards that stabbed into his knees and shins with the movement, as if winter itself sought to punish him for the chaos that he had unleashed.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Bilbo whimpered against trembling fingers and freezing palms, though even the Hobbit could not rightly say who he was apologizing to. “I’m so sorry…”

The Hobbit dragged himself into one of the few alcoves untouched by ice and carefully curled into a tight, shivering ball that didn’t quite block out the cold that continued to settle into his bones and whisper through his veins. He couldn’t stay here, he knew that very well. Whatever their feelings regarding him, the Dwarves would come looking for him- though whether that search would be born of a desire to care for him or to seek vengeance against him for whatever he had done to Thorin, he could not say, and did not care to make an effort to discern.

Bilbo drew closer to the rough, earthy surface of the wall beneath his shoulders and thought of the mountains and the trees that he had passed to reach this cursed mountain, his weary mind already stopping on memories of snowy mountain peaks and ruined treetops in a quiet debate over the best place to make his rest, away from friends that he could freeze with a careless move and neighbours that could not look at him without seeing the phantoms of loved ones that his Winter had killed. The mountains, he decided, he would rest in the mountains amongst the snow-capped towers of a winter tomb, where hardly anyone ever travelled and no one would risk being hurt by him again. He would run away, withdraw from the world and Hobbits with too much fear and Dwarves with too much trust and greed, he would leave it all and wait for Winter to die…
The Hobbit sucked in a sharp, streadying breath and pulled himself to his feet again, his eyes locked on a small sliver of light that seemed to beckon to him from within Erebor’s depths, promising him sunlight and freedom and the chance to leave before he could freeze any more of Thorin’s home. Bilbo smiled tiredly and continued onward, taking care to keep the ice that pooled around his feet from spreading any further than it had to on his trek towards the Desolation.

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In the grand, grand history of Hobbit libraries, there had never been a mention of the speed of Elven horses.

The reasons behind this grave exclusion of knowledge were no doubt long and varied, possibly centred around the inability of most Hobbits to go farther than Bree on their occasional treks beyond the boundaries of the Shire and the instinctive reluctance of those Hobbits who were adventurous enough to go farther to speak of their experiences once they had returned to the warmth of their Hobbit holes and the cold stares of their neighbours. The secrecy of Elves should also be taken into account, as it was rare for a creature unpossessed of Elvish grace and stature to be honoured with a place atop those coveted horses that normally belonged solely to the Elven race.

These reasons and arguments were rational ones, filled with all the careful thought given to any well-thought-out statement made by the most respectable of Hobbits.

At the moment, however, with his small form cradled by the steady arms of Elladan, son of Lord Elrond of Rivendell, Meriadoc Brandybuck found that he could not truly appreciate any argument that would deny any being the knowledge of the grand, breath-taking freedom that came from riding atop the swift, muscular horse between his flailing legs. Fire sang through his veins and laughed against his fingertips, whispering of Summer’s freedom and the simple joy found in a fire allowed to reach towards the stars with dancing tongues of flame. He felt a cool wind tickle across the back of his neck and turned to smile at Pippin. The younger Hobbit grinned back at him from his place in front of another Elf who had introduced himself as Elrohir, his hair wild and dancing in the wind that swirled between all of the riders that had chosen to accompany them from Rivendell.

To say that the Elves of Rivendell had been surprised at the sudden appearance of four exhausted Hobbit children on their doorstep would perhaps be an understatement, although Merry suspected that Elrond’s sons weren’t quite as shocked as he could have been when Frodo accidentally froze a rather unfortunate fountain when a harried Elf with long dark hair (Merry thought that he had called himself “Lindir” during one of his more coherent moments) had frightened him. The Lord of Rivendell’s sons and daughter had listened to the Hobbits’ tale in respectful silence, and had seemed genuinely dismayed when they relayed the news that Bilbo Baggins had passed through the Elven residence many weeks before while in the company of thirteen Dwarves, and that the lord of Rivendell himself had departed with Glorfindel to answer to the summons of the lady Galadriel. Following several pleading glances from Frodo and a surprisingly-intelligent argument courtesy of Pippin, the Elven lord’s children had agreed to accompany them on their search for Bilbo and his Company.
Though the statement had been met with happiness from each of the four Hobbit lads, Merry and Pippin found that they were the only Hobbits that continued to truly enjoy the journey after several days atop the backs of Elven horses. Frodo and Sam had both uttered quiet complaints of motion sickness when they were certain that their Elvish hosts were not listening, as even rogue Hobbit lads were reluctant to exhibit open examples of rudeness, and Sam in particular seemed to grow increasingly uneasy as the small horde of riders drew closer to the dark, shadowy depths of forest that Elladan had identified as Mirkwood several leagues past.

Ensconced within Mirkwood’s deepening shade and comforted only by Pippin’s unceasing breeze and his own cheerful fire, Merry found that he did not much care what the rotting forest was called. He didn’t need the sight of Sam’s pale face to know that the very earth beneath them was dark with something that he could only guess at, and the brief glimpse that he had caught of gigantic spiders before they were taken down by several of Elrond’s guards had only cemented his wary fear of the wood. Frodo alone of all the Hobbits had seemed to benefit from their time beneath Mirkwood’s shadow, his confidence boosted by the half-melted remains of winter ice nearly hidden amongst the crowds of blackened tree trunks. The young Baggins had taken care to add his own layer of ice to what all agreed was Bilbo’s work under the careful supervision of his fellows, his bright blue eyes gleaming with a fiery hope and determination that reminded Merry more of Summer fires than of Winter’s chill.

The Summer lad of Buckland found himself frowning in thought at the memory as Elladan guided their horse along the path to bring them close to the Silvan King’s realm within the forest. While it was true that the ice that streamed from Frodo’s fingers was often frightening to his inner Summer fire, was the Shire’s second Winter lad truly so different from any other Season? Merry had seen many a Season exhibit that same cold anger that had often seeped into Frodo’s eyes in the days after the Shire had discovered his Season and taken to locking him within his cousin’s deserted Hobbit hole, had seen the cheerful glow of Autumn winds light the eyes of many a Spring or Summer lad in his youth. Were the Hobbit Seasons truly so different after all, or were they merely glimpses of similar emotions played out across different canvasses?

“Tithen naur,” Elladan whispered into Merry’s ear, startling the Hobbit from his thoughts. “We are getting close to Thranduil’s realm.”

Merry nodded and instinctively straightened in the saddle as green-clad figures detached themselves from the surrounding trees and descended upon the group of riders. He felt a stronger, more fearful wind skate across his skin and risked sending a tiny flame back to rest a few inches above Pippin’s outstretched hand. The young Took awarded him with a brief, nervous smile, his eyes flickering warily across the unreadable faces of the Mirkwood Elves.

“Mae l’ovannen,” Arwen, the daughter of Elrond, called out to the Silvan Elves, her arms tightening ever-so-slightly around Frodo’s form in front of her. “Well met, Elves of Mirkwood.”

“Nathlo, Lady Arwen Undómiel of Rivendell,” one of the guards called back warily. “Elladan. Elrohir. My king was unaware of your coming, particularly as your father has already passed through.”
“We come on our own business,” Arwen replied coolly. “To fulfil a promise made to our young friends in the West.”

The guard glanced down to where Frodo rested between Arwen’s arms and seemed to blink in surprise, the first true emotion that Merry had glimpsed on a Silvan face since their appearance.

“If they search for their kin, he has already passed through this realm, accompanied by our prince and the captain of our guard. According to our latest word, both remain in Laketown under the care of Men.”

Arwen bowed her head and urged her horse forward a few more steps, apparently unaware of the dark-haired rider known as Estel that shadowed her with a pale-faced Sam held within his arms.

“If your king will allow us to rest and pass through his realm, we will continue on our journey as soon as we may,” she told the guard.

The red-haired Elf had shaken his head before the lady was truly finished speaking, prompting Elladan and Elrohir to frown and draw closer to her as well.

“While my king would never deny your request for shelter and rest, I am afraid that we cannot allow you to pass through this realm. Lord Thranduil has stalled all passage from our lands to those around us.”

“And why is that?” Estel asked quietly.

The Silvan guard glared at the Man, his lips curling into a small sneer. “It is not your place to question the ways of the Elven King-.”

“You will treat his questions as if they were one of ours,” Elrohir interrupted coolly. “Estel is our kinsman.”

The guard stiffened but bowed his head in reluctant acknowledgement, his fingers flexing around the surface of an intricately-carved bow.

“There is a darkness gathering within these woods that has only grown worse in the passing days,” the guard reported reluctantly. “Despite the reported success of the White Council at Dol Guldur, there are reports that a great, dark force has marched through our trees.”

“And you would hide from them?” Elladan remarked casually, earning himself a scowl from the guard.
“Our king will not endanger us needlessly.”

“And yet his son is allowed away from safety to remain amongst Men, who may very well be the target of this force,” Elrohir argued.

“King Thranduil has ordered the return of his son, but was met with refusal,” the guard muttered. “He has already departed with many of our soldiers to ensure our prince’s safety in Laketown.”

Merry felt his stomach roil at the expression of unease on Arwen’s face and craned his neck to see if the look was copied in the features of the Elf riding behind him. Elladan spared him a brief, reassuring smile before returning his own eyes to those of his sister. Arwen glanced back at him, eyes widening and narrowing in that silent communication that only Elves seemed to have truly mastered.

“Would our horses be able to make the journey to this city of Men?” she asked the guard.

He nodded and frowned in obvious unease. “…Does the lady not intend to partake of the Woodland realm’s hospitality?”

“If my company can manage it, I am afraid that we must keep moving,” she replied airily, her gaze shifting lower to look to the Hobbits in a silent question for their approval. Merry waited until Sam and Frodo had bowed their heads in agreement before he gave his own nod of approval, not even bothering to turn to watch Pippin bob his head eagerly.

“You may offer our apologies to your king when he returns,” Elladan added cheerfully. “Though I believe that we shall be able to offer such statements ourselves once we meet him.”

“The king has ordered-,” the guard argued weakly.

“We are aware,” Arwen replied. The Elven lady urged her horse forward without another word, a pale hand clasped around the hilt of a gleaming sword the only sign of tension in her slim, beautiful form.

Merry instinctively leaned forward as Elladan and Elrohir guided their horses behind Arwen and Estel, his fingertips warm with fire that was just waiting to be used against any who dared to challenge them. A strong wind whistled past him, and he heard the earth rumble around them, silent pledges from the other Hobbits that any move made against their Elven allies would not be met with steel alone.

No Elf made a move to stop them as they made their way down the path of Mirkwood, and soon all traces of the guards had melted away into the darkness of the trees, though Merry caught the occasional glimpse of muted green and silver amongst the trees on their journey through the forest.
The Elves of Rivendell and their cargo continued on through Mirkwood, not daring to stop until they had crossed the dark waters of a lake atop the creaking surface of a wooden bridge, their arrival greeted by a pair of Elves clad in forest green and a lone, half-familiar figure clad all in grey.

Frodo sucked in a sharp gasp that even Merry could hear from his position behind him, his voice laced with awe even as he drew the edges of his cloak closer to his body as if to ward off a sudden chill.

“Gandalf.”

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Bilbo stumbled out of the ruined, crumpled gates of Erebor to find a sky still dark with shadows broken only by the faint glimmer of the stars and the moon. He paused to take in the sight before continuing on his way, his eyes flickering in the direction of Laketown despite his best efforts.

He wondered suddenly if Legolas and Tauriel remained there, if they had taken Bard up on his gruff offer of shelter after a few too many instances of the Master’s sickening hospitality. They, at least, would welcome him if he should appear at their doorstep, would not question him too much if he wished it, although judging by the affection that had grown between Kíli and Tauriel during their time together, Bilbo doubted that the Elf’s curiosity would remain silent for long. Despite their patience, they would eventually question him, would learn of the events that had occurred within Erebor and what had happened to Thorin as a result. Perhaps they would seek to comfort him, as several of the Dwarves had, would insist that it was not his fault, would seek to stop him from fulfilling his desires to go off on his own and…

No, the Hobbit could not go to Laketown, could not return to the strange friends that he had managed to pick up through his travels. It would be best for him to avoid it, to go past Esgaroth entirely and escape into the southern reaches of Mirkwood, where Thranduil would be less likely to intercept him and no sharp-sighted Elves could find him should they so desire to. Bilbo nodded to himself and continued on from the Mountain’s slopes, choosing to ignore the exhaustion that had started to join ice within his bones in his determination to get as far from Erebor as possible before any of the Company could come looking for him.

The thought made Bilbo pause for a moment before he forced himself to continue on, his mind reeling with the sudden realisation that he did not doubt that the Dwarves would come looking for him, that they, at least, would not follow in the footsteps of his Hobbit neighbours and allow him to fade into memory rather than risk further exposure to his curse. It was an odd, almost-reassuring thought in spite of everything, in spite of the fact that a good many, if not all, of the Company would only come after him so that they could exact revenge for what he had done to the Arkenstone, to Erebor, to Thorin…

Bilbo shuddered and quickened his pace, endeavouring to put all thoughts of his friends behind him. It didn’t matter now if they truly cared to come after him or not; he couldn’t allow them to
find them, couldn’t risk hurting them any more than he already had.

The Hobbit squared his shoulders, wrapped Bofur’s cloak tighter around his bare, burned shoulders, and risked quickening his pace to a light run, his footsteps utterly silent in the darkness of the night.

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It took hours for the few miners in the group to pierce through the wall of ice that Bilbo had left behind him in his flight from the treasure room. Several of the Dwarves less experienced in the art of drilling and digging had offered assistance where they could, only to find their efforts systematically rejected by Bifur’s impatient grunts and Bofur’s steely glare. Kíli and Fíli had been some of the first to be dismissed from the group at the wall, much to the former’s dismay and the latter’s quiet resignation. Neither of the princes had ever been particularly adept at waiting, but it was Fíli who had always been forced to learn patience, to wait for word that his mother had survived the birth of a younger brother, to wait behind his uncle in every official gathering or meeting that he couldn’t escape from, to wait with growing dread for the day when he would be forced to succeed Thorin onto the throne, to accept the burden of the crown.

He had always hated waiting, but never more than he did now, when every passing moment brought him the memory of Bilbo’s terrified features burned red and white with ice and dragon fire and the faintest echoes of footsteps disappearing into the shadows.

The blond turned away from the wall and the small, growing hole that the Ur family had managed to form as the time passed by, choosing instead to focus on Thorin’s still body where it lay sprawled across the frozen treasure room floor. The Dwarven king had fallen into silent, eerie unconsciousness shortly before Bilbo disappeared from the room, and despite Oin’s frequent reassurances that there was nothing physically wrong with him, despite the fact that the ice that had fastened itself around Thorin’s arm had long since fallen away to shatter against the floor, his uncle had shown no signs of regaining consciousness.

Fíli gritted his teeth and turned away from his uncle as abruptly as he had turned toward it, struggling to tamp down the fear and anger that continued to course through his veins even hours after Thorin had attacked Bilbo, had violated every promise of trust and safety that they had made in offering him the beads, in asking him to be a part of their family.

He knew, logically, that it had not been Thorin’s fault, that his uncle would never have attacked the Hobbit if he had been in his right mind, that it was the gold madness of their forefathers that had made him act the way he did…

“It burned me… There is something wicked in it.”

The memory of Bilbo’s voice made Fíli’s frown deepen despite the concerned, questioning glances that his brother and Balin were now sending his way. The Arkenstone… Was that the true source of all of this trouble? Was that why Bilbo had hidden it, why the Hobbit’s touch had sent Thorin
reeling back and screaming in pain?

“Kee,” he called quietly, barely waiting until the brunette had darted expectantly to his side before he set out towards one of the frozen piles of gold, his eyes combing their frozen, silvery depths for any sign of the stone that he had only heard tales of in his youth.

“Fee?” Kíli mumbled. “What are we-?”

“The Arkenstone,” Fíli muttered in return, purposely ignoring the wide-eyed look of alarm that his brother was now giving him. “We need to find it.”

“I… Are you sure that that’s a good idea? Bilbo said-.”

“I know,” Fíli interrupted quietly. “That’s why we need to find it. If it really is cursed, if it hurt Bilbo… Maybe it hurt Uncle, somehow, and if we could destroy it…”

“…Uncle might wake up,” Kíli finished breathlessly, his features hardening with that cool determination that had always reminded Fíli of their uncle.

The blond nodded tightly and started scouring the piles of frozen gold and gems for any sign of the stone, taking care to keep an eye on Kíli when the younger Dwarf pulled away to look at a neighbouring pile. Ori joined them after a few moments, followed closely by Nori and Gloin once the situation had been explained to them. The Dwarves quickly descended into silence broken only by the quiet splintering of ice and the occasional rustling of half-frozen coins.

“Fee…” Kíli called after what seemed like an eternity, his voice oddly-strained.

Fíli was by his side in a moment, his breath freezing within his lungs when he caught sight of the white, muted glow of a brilliant stone nearly hidden beneath the ice.

“The Arkenstone,” Gloin whispered somewhere behind them, his voice dripping with a twisted sort of awe that had Fíli flinching away from the stone with a grimace. He wrapped his fingers around Kíli’s sleeve and jerked his brother backwards as well.

“Dwalin!” he yelled.

The warrior glanced up from his place beside Thorin, his tired eyes narrowing slightly when he caught sight of the lose circle of Dwarves gathered around a frozen pile of gold.

“Wha’ is it?” he asked warily.
“I need your war hammers,” Fíli informed him tightly. He felt Kíli stiffen beneath his fingers and glanced down just as a pair of wide brown eyes stared up at him in confusion and alarm.

“Why-?”

“This stone has caused enough trouble for our family,” Fíli grunted. “I won’t let it… I’m not going to live my life waiting for it to drive me mad; I will not live in fear of a stone.”

His brother frowned but nodded all the same, his hands open and ready when Dwalin carefully pressed two identical war hammers into the princes’ hands.

“Ye sure ye want ta do this?” he grunted.

The princes nodded in unison and placed themselves at either side of the stone, the borrowed hammers raised and steady with a confidence that Fíli had almost convinced himself to feel.

“Ready?” he muttered.

“Ready,” Kíli grunted.

Fíli brought the hammer down with a low shout, his movement followed almost immediately by Kíli’s own blow. The princes stumbled back and watched the stone shatter before their eyes, momentarily dazzled by the multiple shards of glittering gem that scattered around them like frozen fire. Fíli choked as something cold burned through his veins and left him gasping for breath, his shoulders braced against Kíli’s shaking form. He heard sharp, muted gasps from those around them and wondered for a brief, dazed second if this was what Bilbo had meant about burning.

He heard Thorin groan from somewhere past his shoulder, heard his uncle croak his name in a way that sent him scrambling after Kíli to kneel by the king’s side. Thorin stared up at them through tired sapphire eyes that were clearer than they had been in days, his calloused hands reaching to grasp his nephews’ even as Dwalin bent to help him to his feet. Fíli tightened his grip around his uncle’s fingers, trying to ignore the quiet, lingering anger that continued to trickle through his veins at the chilled touch of Thorin’s fingers and saw the faded pattern of ice across the Dwarf’s wrist. He felt Thorin shift beneath his fingertips and glanced up to meet his uncle’s haunted gaze.

“Bilbo…” the Dwarf whispered roughly. “Where…?”

“He ran away after he hurt you,” Kíli bit out, unable to keep the anger out of his voice.

Thorin flinched and took a quick, unsteady step forward that had Dwalin hovering next to him with a frown.
“Easy,” he grunted.

“Did anyone go after him?” Thorin pressed. “Did I… Was he…”

“He’ll have bruises around his neck,” Balin informed him bluntly. “Though somehow I think that that’ll be the least of the lad’s problems.”

Thorin’s skin visibly paled in the muted light of the treasure room, his eyes combing across the icy walls and the still, frozen corpse of a dragon against the far wall.

“He’s- He’s used too much power,” he whispered. “He needs to stay warm, we need to find him…”

“Working on it!” Bofur snarled from his place at the icy wall. “An’ I don’ care if you’re king or not now, Thorin, it won’t stop me from beatin’ ya over the head when all of this is over.”

Thorin nodded without hesitation and stumbled towards the miners, his features set with stubborn determination.

“Give me an axe,” he ordered them gruffly. “I want to help.”

Bifur handed him a tool with a low, approving grunt, blithely ignoring the half-hearted glare that Bofur shot him in response. Thorin wrapped his hands around the handle and attacked the ice with a ferocity matched only by Bofur, his pale arms trembling with every blow against the silvery wall. Fili sighed and settled onto the ground beside his brother, eyes never straying from the small group of Dwarves assembled against the wall.
Right, I'm sorry if this is kind of awful but... yeah. And no, before anyone asks, I do not, and never will, condone the involvement of children in war or anything, but damn these Hobbits are stubborn, and I swear I will keep them as safe as possible in all of this. (F.Y.I., they are the only ones who are guaranteed to be safe at the end of all of this. Just putting that out there so you know~)

Anywho, next chapter things start getting more fun (for me), so I'll have that up when I can, okay?

Thank you so much to everyone who has read this. Seriously, you guys make my day everytime I put something up here. <3

Also, quick thing here, but the rhyme that Bilbo references is actually based on a real rhyme that my mom always used to tell me while I was growing up.

"Red sky in morning,
Sailors take warning;
Red sky at night,
Sailor's delight"

So... Yeah. Nice little bit there. Right, moving one.

It took Bilbo far too long to leave the Mountain’s shadow and descend into the desolated valleys that had once belonged to Dale. His slow progress frustrated him, although logically he supposed that he was making good progress, all things considered. The cold had settled into his bones and stiffened his joints long before the first blushing hints of sunlight had risen above the horizon to paint the Mountain behind him in shades of scarlet. The Hobbit took a few, precious moments to study the Mountain against the morning sky once the sun had fully risen and the waters around Esgaroth were glittering beneath him in ribbons of fire and gold, his chest aching with the fleeting memory of an old rhyme from the Shire.

*Red sky in morning,*

*Spring farmers take warning.*

The rhyme had always been geared more towards the threat of foul weather than anything else, yet now, trapped in the ruins of a dragon’s desolation, Bilbo couldn’t help but feel that the old Hobbit rhyme had taken on a darker tone that had nothing to do with rain.

He braced his shoulders and took in a deep, steadying breath before continuing onwards, stubbornly ignoring the ache in his bones and the throbbing flow of ice through his veins. The waters that they had used to travel to Erebor from Laketown continued to wink at him from the desolation below, a constant, glimmering presence in his vision as the Hobbit continued to inch his
way south, his eyes focused intently on the thin line of dark trees that he could see far in the
distance.

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“My dear boy,” Gandalf breathed, his grey eyes widening in a look that was almost comical as the
Hobbits and their Elven guides came to a halt before him. “Boys,” he corrected himself barely a
moment later, his already-pale skin seeming to grow even paler at the sight of the four Hobbit lads.
“What on earth…?”

Frodo shifted uneasily atop Arwen’s horse, his hunched shoulders lowering almost instantly when
Estel and Sam drew closer, allowing the older Hobbit to press a soft, warm hand against his wrist.

“I- We have come to seek my cousin,” he declared with as much confidence as he could muster
under the circumstances. “Please, could you- would you be willing to take us to him?”

The Wizard studied him with that sharp, searching stare that his father had always described when
telling some of Old Belladonna’s famous tales before pulling back with a low, thoughtful hum.

“I’m afraid that I cannot do that at the moment, my lad, although I will be more than happy to wait
with you until he returns.”

“Where is he, then?” Pippin demanded loudly from his place in front of Elrohir, his rosy cheeks
flushing a darker shade of red when Merry hissed at him to be quiet and the Elf lowered his
squeezing body to the ground with a chuckle. Merry and Sam were quickly placed on the ground as
well, leaving Frodo to be deposited onto damp, salt-encrusted boards by Arwen’s gentle hands.

Gandalf smiled and bent to remain at eye level with the young Hobbits while the Elves behind him
moved forward to greet their kin from Rivendell.

“Why don’t we move to a more comfortable location, hm?” he suggested. “I know a Man who has
been more than generous to many of the travellers who have passed through here, including your
Master Baggins.”

Frodo nearly nodded but caught himself, his eyes flickering unwillingly over his shoulders to
where the Elves continued to speak in low, muted tones. Arwen met his eyes over the shoulders of
a fierce, petite Elven woman with vibrant red hair, her perfect lips curling into a small, encouraging
smile that did little to ease the ache in his chest. The Elves had been his first friends outside of the
Shire, had travelled with and protected the four young Hobbits without asking for anything in
return. It made the boy reluctant to leave them, despite knowing all along that he would have to, in
the end.

“Your friends are, of course, welcome to follow us later,” Gandalf informed him casually, his eyes
twinkling with a faint spark of amusement. “Legolas and Tauriel of Mirkwood have already received my friend’s hospitality, and no doubt his daughters will be more than happy to meet more Elves.”

The bright grins that the Wizard earned from Merry and Pippin in response to that statement only widened the small smile that had risen to Frodo’s own lips. The Hobbit gave the Wizard a brief nod of thanks and accepted his offer of a wide, calloused hand still stained with dirt, only to pull his hand back a moment later when a small flash of white ice slipped from the Hobbit’s fingertips to dance across Gandalf’s palm.

Frodo felt his lungs freeze within his chest and opened his mouth to try and force an apology from between his numb lips, only dimly aware of Sam’s solid presence at his side and the tense, wary stances that Pippin and Merry had taken just beyond them. Gandalf himself seemed oblivious to Frodo’s struggles and the resulting, worried glares from his companions, his expression abruptly thoughtful as he studied the ice that was rapidly changing into water in the palm of his scarred hand.

“Ah,” he murmured. “I think I understand now.” The Wizard slowly pulled himself to his full height and glanced over the heads of the assembled Hobbit children to find the Elves of Rivendell and their Human companion eyeing him with no small measure of wariness.

“If you wish to follow us, you are more than welcome to,” he offered them with some of his usual cheer. “Your father and grandmother have already set up a sort of camp alongside King Thranduil and our host.”

Arwen bowed her head and strode forward to place herself at Frodo’s side, her lips quirking into one of those bright, lovely smiles that never failed to make the younger being smile quietly in return.

“We will follow your lead, Mithrandir,” she informed him quietly.

Gandalf bowed his head in return and started to make his way through Laketown, his eyebrows quirking upwards in a small show of surprise when the two green-clad Elves that had appeared with him chose to walk beside Frodo and Arwen instead.

“Are you a relation of Master Baggins?” the female Elf asked quietly, her eyes soft and attentive beneath a curtain of neat auburn hair interspersed with braids.

Frodo bobbed his head in the affirmative, his hands already seeking Sam’s solid grip and Arwen’s gentle fingers. The Elf smiled widely at him and pulled her blond companion closer.

“Bilbo did me a great favour,” she informed him quietly. “He… put himself in no small amount of danger in order to keep me safe. My name is Tauriel.”
“F-Frodo Baggins, at your service,” Frodo managed after a gentle nudge from Sam. He gestured weakly at the sandy-haired Spring Hobbit at his side. “This is my best friend, Samwise Gamgee.”

Tauriel’s smile only widened and she tugged the blond beside her even closer, ignoring the fond, half-exasperated look that he shot her in response.

“This is Legolas Thranduilion, the Prince of Mirkwood,” she told them. “He’s a friend of your kinsman as well.”

Legolas offered them a smile that was only slightly smaller than Tauriel’s and gave a quick, formal bow of greeting.

“It is an honour to meet the kin of Bilbo Baggins.”

Frodo shifted slightly and exchanged a quick, wide-eyed look with Sam, unable to ignore the brief flash of warmth that went through him at those brief expressions of admiration for a Hobbit that he had always been taught to fear by everyone besides his parents. He bit his lip and gestured for Tauriel to draw closer, his fingers going cold and numb with nerves at the concerned look she shot him even as she crouched by his side.

“H-He didn’t…. Did he freeze anyone?” he asked quietly, still holding on to the impossible hope that the Elves and Hobbits surrounding them wouldn’t hear.

He sensed more than heard the sharp breath that Legolas drew in above them, his eyes fixed intently on Tauriel’s. The Elf’s eyes widened slightly in response to his question, her perfect, ivory teeth flashing into appearance for a brief moment as she worried at her bottom lip before resolutely shaking her head.

“No one that he did not mean to,” she murmured. “Your Uncle is a powerful being, Master Frodo, but he is also a good one. He would not hurt someone if he could help it.”

“He’s not my-.” Frodo stopped and frowned even as Tauriel pulled away and their small group moved on into Laketown.

After all, what else would I call him? He could be my Uncle- It’s not as if I have any others to claim the title.

Gandalf didn’t say a word to the Hobbits until they had slipped into a creaky, lopsided wooden home built on the edges of one of Laketown’s many canals, allowing the young Hobbits to catch snatches of hushed conversation from within the confines of a cozy, if rather rustic, eating space. Two Elven men, one with long, silver-blond hair crowned with a ring of branches and one sporting the same dark brown locks that showered the shoulders of Arwen and her bothers, looked up at the
party from their places beside an Elven woman with gleaming golden hair and ancient blue eyes. A Man watched them all from a corner, his shoulders stiff and proud beneath worn, patched clothes that were only slightly rumpled by the trio of children pressed against his side. The Man merely raised his eyebrows at Gandalf’s reappearance, his lips quirking up into a slight smile at the small gasp that rose from the throat of the younger girl that had established her position beneath one of his arms.

“Exactly how many friends are you planning on bringing into my home, Wizard?” he asked flatly.

“You played host to thirteen Dwarves and a Halfling before I even appeared at your doorstep,” Gandalf returned airily.

“Dwarves and a Halfling are smaller than Elves,” the Man pointed out. “…Though I see that you’ve managed to find some Halflings to offset the Elves.”

Gandalf chuckled and gestured towards the inhabitants of the room with a rough, dirty hand.

“Allow me to introduce the Lady Galadriel of Lothlórien,” he said with a gentle sign towards the golden-haired Elf woman. “King Thranduil of Mirkwood, father of Legolas.” The silver-haired Elf bowed his head slightly and continued to eye the Hobbits with something akin to guilt. “Lord Elrond of Rivendell, I believe you have already met his children.” Elrond stood from the table and offered the Hobbits a full bow, his mouth quirking upwards into a small smile that matched Arwen’s in its brightness.

“And that Man in the corner is called Bard,” Gandalf continued cheerfully. “Along with his children, Sigrid, Bain, and Tilda.”

Bard gave the Hobbits a tight smile and a wave that was only half-hidden behind his daughters’ kind smiles and his son’s curious grin.

“Everyone, may I introduce Master Frodo Baggins, relation to Bilbo Baggins, and-.” Here, the Wizard paused and glanced down at the remaining Hobbits for explanation.

Merry huffed and stepped forward with his head held high, his trembling fingers wrapped tightly around Pippin’s smaller hand.

“Meriadoc Brandybuck, son of Saradoc,” he proclaimed stiffly. “And this is my cousin, Peregrin Took, son of my mother’s brother, Paladin.”

“… Samwise Gamgee, son of Hamfast,” Sam added after some hesitation and a gentle nudge from Frodo. “I’m a gardner.”

Gandalf hummed in approval and waited until the other Elves had gone to join their kin before he gently pulled Frodo aside. A low, wry chuckle broke through his lips when Sam, Pippin and Merry
followed them, his grey eyes dancing with something that Frodo fervently hoped was amusement.

“Your companions are rather protective of you, young Frodo,” the Wizard pointed out.

“We have good reason ta be,” Sam bit out, his skin only slightly less pale than it had been in the depths of Mirkwood.

“Yes, I suspect that you do,” Gandalf agreed, abruptly subdued. “… I assume that the Shirefolk did not take kindly to the revelation of Frodo’s Season?”

Frodo shrugged and resolutely focused his eyes on a sooty stain on the floorboards, ignoring the wave of cold that swept across fingers that were pressed against the sides of his trousers.

“They… They were going to make me a necklace like… U-Uncle Bilbo’s,” he mumbled. “I wasn’t supposed to leave Bag End until they were finished but, ah, we decided not to stick around.”

Gandalf nodded slowly, his frown growing deeper and darker with each word that passed through Frodo’s lips. A quick glance over the Wizard’s shoulder showed that the other inhabitants of the room had stopped their conversation to listen in with varying expressions of concern and confusion.

“Did anyone else leave the Shire with you?” he asked them carefully.

“No,” Pippin broke in, voice unaccountably proud despite the all-too-vivid memories of the fear, cold and near starvation that had plagued the Hobbits until they reached Rivendell. “We were on our own until the Elves agreed to come with us.”

Elrond shot a quick, almost-amused glance at his children that did not go wholly unnoticed by Merry, who was quick to dart to his companions’ sides and fix the Elf with a stubborn glare.

“They were really nice about the whole thing, too,” he declared with all the pride of a Brandybuck exclaiming over his tobacco crop. “Let us ride on their horses an’ everything.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Elrond informed him quietly. “Although I confess that I am rather alarmed that the Hobbits would allow four of their young to leave unaccompanied, and that they would willingly imprison one of their own for something that he could not control.”

“They were doing the same thing to Bilbo for years,” Gandalf informed him tightly. “That pendant that Thranduil has in his possession was yet another means that they had of controlling him.”

The Elf with silver-blond hair frowned and lifted a glimmering pendant from the depths of his
robes, his delicate lips twisting in disgust before he dumped the thing onto the table. Frodo instinctively flinched away from it, his slim shoulders bumping reassuringly against Pippin’s thin chest and Sam’s calloused hands. The Elf, Thranduil, hastily shoved it out of sight once more, his expression creasing into something like regret.

“I suppose my plan to hold this hostage was not as effective as I had hoped,” he mused.

The others chose not to give a response to this, though Frodo himself was rather intrigued and alarmed by the presence of the pendant without Bilbo.

“… Where is Bilbo?” he asked quietly, forcing himself to look up into the Wizard’s eyes as he spoke.

“Bilbo is helping a group of very… dear friends reclaim their home from an incredibly dangerous creature,” Gandalf replied slowly. “I came to the Shire for Bilbo all those months ago because I believed that he was the one most suited for the job, and now he has gone to prove that I was right.”

“Dangerous?” Frodo repeated, his voice rising slightly even as Gandalf seemed to fall back with a sheepish expression on his face. “Wha- How dangerous? What is he doing?”

“Can we help?” Pippin piped up curiously, his brow furrowing briefly when Merry smacked the back of his head in response.

“No one wants you helping, Pip,” the Brandybuck huffed in fond exasperation, though his eyes remained dark and troubled with worry.

“Bilbo and the Dwarves are all fully capable of taking care of themselves,” Gandalf told them firmly. “No doubt they will be sending us word of their success very soon, and then we can take you to meet them and explain the situation to Bilbo. I’m sure that he will be very happy to see you all.”

That statement earned a small, snorting noise from Thranduil, though his face was as cool and impassive as ever when Frodo turned to look at him. Legolas and Tauriel deftly stepped in front of Thranduil before anything more could be said, allowing Tauriel to kneel and press a gentle hand to Frodo’s shoulder before she turned to Gandalf and spoke a few, quiet words in Sindarin. The Wizard frowned but bowed his head in silent agreement, his eyebrows rising slightly when both Elrohir and Elladan stood as well.

Frodo bit his lip and inched back until he was closer to Sam, his eyes flickering over Pippin’s shoulder to meet Merry’s gaze in a silent question. The Brandybuck shrugged, his round features still shadowed with worry as he watched his Elven companion move towards the door alongside his twin.
“My sons are only going with the Prince of Mirkwood and his companion to ensure that all is well within the Mountain,” Elrond informed the Hobbit from his place across the room.

Merry turned and fixed the lord of Elrond with a sharp, wary look.

“I thought Gandalf said that Bilbo and the… Dwarves were more than capable of taking care of themselves.”

“I am sure that they are, under normal circumstances,” Thranduil broke in. “However, even Dwarves must allow for some help against a dragon, no matter how stubborn they are.”

The four Hobbits whirled back to stare at Gandalf with wide, accusing eyes, altogether missing the reproachful looks given to the Elven king by many of his kin.

“Dragon?” Sam squeaked, his voice nearly overwhelmed by the loud, worried yells that had already risen from the throats of his companions.

“I am sure that Bilbo is perfectly-,” Gandalf began in a voice that was no doubt meant to be soothing.

“Take us with you,” Frodo demanded of the Elves that still lingered by the door. “Please, we can… we can help you-.”

“I will not take children into Erebor when there may yet be a dragon within its halls,” Legolas interrupted with no small amount of regret.

“You sent Bilbo in there!” Merry barked.

“Though he is young, by our standards, he is not a child,” Tauriel argued.

“Please,” Frodo tried again, his eyes flickering desperately between each face gathered in Bard’s home. “Please, he’s all I have left, you have to take us- take me, at least, I need to see that he’s alright-.”

“Bard!” a Man called from the doorway, startling the Elves that had been gathered before it. The Man faltered and look around him at the eyes that were suddenly fixed upon his face, his shoulders hunched and stiff with nerves.

“It’s alright, Gavin,” Bard called. “What news do you bring?”
“Sir, movement has been spotted near the Mirkwood,” the Man reported hesitantly. “Or, rather, at the edges of the Mirkwood. Scouts believe that it is an army.”

A shadow fell across Gandalf’s features at the Man’s words, causing Frodo to shift closer to the warmth of his companions.

“Where are they headed?” the Wizard demanded before any others could speak.

“To the Mountain, sir,” the Man replied after another moment’s pause.

The Wizard nodded and looked to Bard, who was already moving to collect a sword and bow from another corner of the room, a quiver of arrows strapped between his shoulder blades. His son, Bain, shadowed his movements, earning himself a quick, worried glance from his father that seemed to have gone unnoticed by the others in the room.

“Are your men ready?” the Wizard inquired softly.

“As you told them to be,” Bard huffed. He stumbled slightly when he saw that the Elves at his table had risen to follow him, eyes lingering on the weapons at their belts and shoulders. “…Right.”

“The forces that came with us to Dol Guldur are at your service,” Elrond informed him.

“As are the Elves of Mirkwood,” Thranduil added with a bare hint of reluctance.

Bard bowed his head. “Keep as many archers as you can with me, then, but take the rest to the Mountain. Oakenshield will not have many resources at his disposal with which to defend himself.”

Elrond’s lips quirked slightly even as he turned to look at Thranduil and Galadriel expectantly.

“My sons and foster-son are all skilled with both sword and bow,” he said casually. “And the Lady Galadriel already knows my daughter’s skill.”

“Legolas and Tauriel will no doubt wish to go to Erebor,” Thranduil sighed. “And I would rather keep my distance from the Mountain if I can help it. I will stay to help the people of Laketown, along with my men.”

“My people are best with boats,” Galadriel added calmly. “And I would welcome the presence of my granddaughter, as well as her companion as Estel seems reluctant to be parted from her.”
Estel bowed his head at Galadriel’s words, carefully ignoring the sharp glance that Elrond sent him in return.

“We will accompany our sister,” Elladan informed them. “Father-.”

“I will keep some portion of our forces to assist Thranduil,” Elrond told him. “I leave the rest of the Elves of Rivendell under the command of my children.”

The brothers bowed and waited for Arwen, Estel and Galadriel to join them before they moved to the door once more, their steps followed closely by Tauriel and Legolas. Gandalf rose and made an aborted motion to follow Galadriel, his brow furrowing slightly even as he cast a quick, regretful glance towards the Hobbits.

“I am afraid that I must go to the Mountain as well,” he told them. “I-.”

“We’re coming with you,” Merry informed him.

The Wizard blinked and raised a single eyebrow. “Young Master Brandybuck-.”

“There’s no use arguin’ with him,” Pippin broke in cheerfully. “He’s awful stubborn once his mind’s made up, an’ you know tha’ we can all help in some way. Besides, you need people with intelligence on this here… mission. Thing. Whatever this is.” Gandalf’s other eyebrow rose to join the first. “Then, I suppose that must count you out, Master Took.”

Pippin frowned and look as if he were about to argue the point before Frodo gently pushed him aside, his pale blue eyes hard and glittering with that determined stubbornness that had first drawn Belladonna Took to one quiet Master Baggins in the first place.

“We won’t fight,” he told the Wizard softly. “We’ll stay out of your way. We will hide in the Mountain if you wish us to, but you must let us come with you, if only so we can see U-Uncle Bilbo and ensure that he is safe. The Shire may not be perfect, but we who come from it learn to look after our own.”

“We cannot spare the resources needed to keep you safe in the coming battle,” Gandalf argued. “You will only be a liability, my young friends.”

“We. Are. Coming,” Merry snapped. “We are going to get to that Mountain whether you allow us to or not.”

“You need a boat to reach the Mountain, Halfling,” Bard informed them wryly. “And I can promise you that no Man in Laketown will give one to you, even if we had any to spare.”
Sam, who had been quiet and thoughtful throughout all of this, who loathed to raise his voice or place himself in any sort of spotlight, Sam turned and fixed the dark-haired bowman with a stern look that had sent many a younger, sillier Hobbit stumbling back and murmuring about his resemblance to his Gaffer.

“Mister Frodo is a Winter,” he informed the Man tightly. “He can freeze water if he needs ta. We don’ need your boats.”

Bard blinked down at the Hobbit and looked up to give Gandalf an incredulous look, only to find that the Wizard was already considering the Hobbits with a look that was not quite angry but resigned.

“… You will stay away from the fighting,” he told the boys sternly. “If the front gates are not open- and indeed they should not be- you will climb up to the ledge that I will show you and go in to a door that will be open for you. You will not go wandering too deeply into Erebor unless you must flee from something, nor will you look at what is happening below you. You will stay hidden, you will stay safe, and if any being- Elf, Man, Dwarf, or Hobbit- decides to watch over you, you will let them. Do I make myself clear?”

The Hobbits smiled up at him with all the innocent joy of those who do not comprehend battle and nodded.

“We’re goin’ ta see a dragon,” Pippin hissed into Merry’s ear, earning himself another sharp smack to the head.
In the end, Bilbo found that he had managed to travel tolerably far through the Desolation by the time that the sun had risen to a half-way decent position and the last vestiges of scarlet were bleeding from the sky to reveal a deep, cloudy blue shot through with thick pillars of silver clouds. The lakes and rivers of Esgaroth glittered somewhere far to his right, their dark waters broken only by the pale white bows of a small flotilla of ships...

What?

Bilbo stumbled to a halt and stared out at the water that had had only been a source of torment to him up to this moment, another reminder of companions that he could not go near again for fear of Winter’s frozen touch. Now the rippling surface winked at him in silent accusation beneath the sun’s muted rays, its waters wrecked with tiny waves formed by a small army of dipping oars that bit into the water with unnatural grace and speed. Heads crowned in hues of gleaming blond, shimmering chocolate and vibrant red stared up at him from all but the furthest boats, making the ice in Bilbo’s veins go thicker still with confusion and an odd, vague fear when he realized that these were Elves coming towards him now, Elves approaching the Mountain, Elves... coming for what? To fight a Dragon who last flames still licked feebly at Bilbo’s skin despite the cold and whose very ghost haunted Bilbo with the true extent of destruction that he could wreak if he ever lost control? Did they come to claim that treasure that had so concerned Thranduil, to lay claim to that stone that had burned Bilbo’s soul and made Thorín’s eyes burn with a mad, unfamiliar fire?

Someone shouted from within the nearest boat, prompting a pale hand to rise and point towards the Hobbit frozen far from shore atop a ruined crag. Bilbo stumbled backwards, loudly cursing himself for his carelessness, for wasting time staring at Elves when he could be running away.

“Uncle!”

Bilbo froze again, whether at the voice or the words that were spoken, he would never truly know, and slowly turned his eyes to one of the boats. Four mops of curly hair caught his eye as they bounced above the edge of the boat beside a vaguely-familiar mass of grey. A breeze rushed towards Bilbo even as he hesitated, carrying with it the sound of a young voice that he had only heard in those rare moments when a kind cousin or relative had dared to stop by his home to make sure that he was still living.

“U-Un- Mister Bilbo?”

“Frodo?” Bilbo breathed, unaware that he had spoken aloud until the breeze shivered around him and seemed to speed back across the water towards the boat. Drogo’s son- was the lad an Autumn, then, as his mother had been? But why was he here, of all places? And who were the boys with him?

The Hobbit frowned and found that he had taken a few, hesitant steps closer to the crag, eyes automatically seeking out the quickest route to the water’s edge in order to meet them and find out what in Eru’s name Gandalf thought he was doing.

Images of a tiny Hobbitling with Prim’s dark, curling hair and Drogo’s bright, brilliant blue eyes flickered to life in his brain, the child’s skin pale and stained with blue ice that crept across his body and left the tiny body frozen... lifeless...

Bilbo whimpered and hastily pulled away from the crag once more, ignoring the winds that pulled at him with young Hobbit voices that still carried the Shire’s desperate hope and innocence. No, no he couldn’t stay here, he couldn’t risk hurting them- couldn’t risk hurting children. He had to get away, had to keep moving before they landed and came after him.

The Hobbit whirled and ran, all exhaustion forgotten in the face of the stark, searing panic that swept through him and turned every inch of his body to ice even as fire raced through his veins. His feet slipped against frozen ground and he paused one, two, three precious seconds to look at the stripe of thick ice plastered across the earth before an idea formed and his lips quirked into something that would have been a smile an era ago. Bilbo steeled himself and took a deep,
steadying breath before pushing his hands away from his body and focusing on the ground in front of him, watching it freeze and harden before he leapt upon it, feet slipping and sliding and flying across the ground, tearing him away from the boats that still glared at him from the water’s surface, skin burning beneath winds loaded with the clear, bewildered cries of young Hobbit’s desperate for answers and reassurance.

*~*~*~*~*~*

Frodo leapt from the boat before it had truly touched the blackened banks of earth in front of them, stubbornly ignoring the quiet murmurs behind him when the water froze beneath his feet and spread out towards the shore.

“Bilbo!” he screamed, not caring that the older Hobbit had long since disappeared from view and that Pippin’s winds had retreated back to them in dejected confusion mere moments ago when the Winter had moved beyond their range.

“Frodo!” Arwen called from her own boat. The dark-haired elf leapt from her perch and darted across the melting remains of ice to join Frodo on the shore, her lithe arms reaching down to wrap around his waist and lift him against her chest.

“He ran away,” Frodo told her, voice still flat and numb with confusion.

“I don’t understand,” Legolas murmured, his voice carrying clearly across the water even as he and Tauriel helped to pull more of the boats to shore. “Where are his companions? And why would he run? Did he believe that my father had sent an army after the Company?”

“Stranger things have happened,” Elrohir remarked. “Your father is hardly the friendliest being.”

Legolas bristled but held back whatever comment he had been prepared to make, his eyes still locked on that point on the horizon that had swallowed up the Hobbit’s smaller form. “I fear entering the Mountain now, if Bilbo himself has fled.”

“Bilbo would not his Companions behind,” Tauriel argued, though her voice was stained with far too much doubt and uncertainty for Frodo’s liking.

“Arwen,” Elladan murmured. “Take the Hobbits back to Laketown while we-.”

“No,” Frodo growled, his voice joined by Merry, Pippin and Sam’s as the smaller Hobbits scrambled out of the boat to join him onshore. Frodo shoved away from Arwen’s embrace to join them, his fingers curling and uncurling around the frayed edges of his cloak.

“You said we could stay,” he insisted. “You said we just had to stay in the Mountain. You said we could stay.”

“That promise was made on the assumption that all was well within the Mountain,” Gandalf snapped. “Clearly, something is amiss and I will not endanger children who are too stubborn to know when they should quit.”

Frodo gave an involuntary flinch at the Wizard’s harsh words and recoiled against Sam’s steadying hands, his muscles tensing when he felt the stiffness in Sam’s body and saw the beginnings of grim determination in Pippin’s eyes.

“Pip-,” he whispered.

“They promised,” the younger Hobbit replied stubbornly moments before the winds came and wrapped around them in a wild yet tender embrace, pulling and tugging at Frodo’s clothes and hair even as the Elves and Wizard fell away in a cloud of water and dust. Frodo felt Sam move behind them, urging the earth to move beneath their feet and push them forwards as the Hobbits began to run. Frodo pressed his palm against Sam’s and silently added a layer of ice to the ground beneath them, allowing the wind to push them further and faster, towards the Mountain that only grew the closer they came to its rough, blackened peaks.

“There,” Frodo yelled, his eyes locking on a set of stairs carved into the Mountain’s sides. He felt Pippin and Sam shudder in response and waited until the wind and earth had calmed before he stepped away and watched the Took and Gamgee slump against each other. Sam’s features had hardened and stiffened like rock, a sharp contrast to the pale, nearly translucent fingers that sought his wrist from beneath Pippin’s ragged sleeve. The Autumn and the Spring remained still and slumped for a long, agonizing moment that filled Frodo with a familiar sense of guilt and panic. He jumped when he felt Merry’s warm hand press between his shoulder blades and turned to look
at the older Hobbit boy whose eyes remained focused on Pippin’s pale skin.
“He doesn’t mind doin’ it, an’ it’s not your fault,” Merry muttered. “We told ya that the first time
we did it, and I’ll tell ya so again.”
“The first time we did this, we were running from wolves,” Frodo mumbled. “Not friends.”
“They made a promise,” Pippin mumbled, his skin already filling with hints of colour even as
Sam’s slowly softened and paled. “An’ I wanna see what scared Bilbo away.”
Sam grunted and gave the Took a half-hearted smack to the head before he finally pulled away, his
mouth curving into a small smile when Frodo instantly pulled him into a tight hug.
“You’re cold now, Mister Frodo,” he murmured. “Sure ye don’ wanna rest for a bit?”
Frodo shook his head and pulled away, ears straining for any sounds of pursuit.
“We need to move before they find us again,” he murmured. “Can everyone climb?”

Looking back, Dwalin supposed that he could have reacted better to the sudden appearance of four
miniature Hobbits in the midst of a half-frozen treasure room largely occupied by the corpse of an
ice-encrusted Dragon. After all, it wasn’t as if the Dwarf could particularly blame the one tiny lad
with curly red hair for screaming “Merry, look at the dragon!” at the top of his lungs the minute
they stumbled into view, and after living with one Bilbo Baggins for several months, perhaps he
should have become more used to the eerie silence of Hobbit footsteps against any surface.
Though, in all honesty, after the long night filled with piercing cold and grunts that didn’t quite
hide condemnation and guilt and pain, Dwalin didn’t really think that Ori and his brother had any
right to glare at him like that. After all, it wasn’t as if the four lads could really understand the
curses that had poured from his lips like water from a fountain, and two of the Hobbits had seemed
more fascinated with the war-hammer that had nearly bashed their brains in than anything else, so
it wasn’t as if any real harm had been done.
“….Lads? Are there Hobbits in here righ’ now, or have I been workin’ for far too long?”
Dwalin bit back a growl and carefully place his war-hammer against the frozen floor before he
could be too tempted to use it because Mahal, the rest of the Company had been staring at the
Hobbits in fascinated shock for a good minute or so and Bofur only just noticed the presence of
four additional bodies in the room?
“They’re real,” Thorin croaked, his voice raw and cracked despite the stubborn silence that he had
maintained throughout the night. “How- Where did you come from?”
“The Shire,” the red-haired Hobbit child that had originally startled Dwalin with his scream about
the dragon.
A second Hobbit with hair only shades darker smacked the other boy on the back of the head
despite the hand that he had wrapped protectively around the speaker’s fingers.
“We came here lookin’ for Mister Bilbo,” he informed them stiffly, his eyes darker and sharper
than those of his companions, their hazel depths lit from within by a strange sort of fire that wasn’t
quite the same as Bilbo’s had been.
Thorin nearly flinched at the child’s statement, his fingers tightening reflexively around the handle
of the pick-axe in his hands.
“He… He’s not here,” Fili broke in, eyes flickering between his uncle and the children with a
desperate sort of weariness.
“We know,” another boy with hair the colour of ink and bright blue eyes that reminded Dwalin of
Bilbo. “We… We saw him before the boats landed.”
“Boats?” Gloin grunted. The auburn-haired Dwarf made as if to say something, only to be stopped
by stern looks from Oin and Balin when the dark-haired boy visibly trembled.
“Did he say anything to you, lad?” Balin asked, his voice quiet and gentle, as it had been so many
times in their childhood when he had tried to teach Dwalin how to be an intellectual, how to know
more than killing and fighting.
“N-no,” the boy mumbled. His fingers flexed, just as Bilbo’s often did, the skin beneath his nails
going pale, nearly blue in the dim light of the treasure room. “He ran away an’… an’ the Elves
were gonna take us back, but they promised that we could stay here so we… came here.”
There was a bit of a commotion after that as a dozen Dwarves all raised their voices and began shouting over one another, struggling and desperate to be heard. Dwalin felt his own voice die in his throat when the four Hobbits slowly began to inch closer to each other, their eyes wide and frightened. The warrior frowned and grunted, his feet taking him closer to the Hobbitlings even as Thorin’s voice seemed to fade away from the shouting and the chaos as well before it rose above the noise, silencing all others.

“Enough!” the Dwarven king shouted, causing the Hobbits to flinch even as a brief flicker of regret flashed through his dark blue eyes.

Dwalin sighed heavily and continued on his way towards the Hobbits, his lips quirking up into a small grin when he heard Ori’s quiet footsteps follow after him. He bent to kneel in front of the boys with a low sigh and the faint, aching comfort of creaking knees.

“Don’t be afraid, lads,” he grunted. “We Dwarrows can jus’ be a little loud sometimes when we aren’t careful.”

The boy with dark hair smiled at that and seemed to take a small step away from his fellows, though his fingers remained curled around those of the broader boy at his side.

“Now,” Dwalin continued gruffly. “Why were the Elves goin’ ta take you back? Where were they goin’ ta take ye?”

“Back to the town on the Lake,” one of the red-haired boys- Merry?- told him. “They were there with Gandalf when Arwen an’ Elrohir an’ Elladan an’ Estel brought us here.”


“Why were you with Elves?” Dwalin asked quietly.

The other red-haired lad shrugged. “We tried to leave the Shire on our own. It wasn’t really the best idea, I guess, but we all know how to control our Seasons so we figured we’d be alright an’ we were, ’cept for that one thing with those wolves but then-.”

“I told ‘em I wanted ta see the Elves,” the brown-haired boy stated stubbornly. “An’ we saw the Elves, an’ they offered ta help once Mister Frodo-.”

“Just Frodo, Sam,” the dark-haired boy begged him quietly.

“Once Mister Frodo told ‘em what we was tryin’ ta do, so we let ‘em,” Sam continued, apparently unaffected by Frodo’s pleading.

“Why was the Elves taking you to the Mountain, Frodo?” Ori asked quickly. “Were they bringing you to see Bilbo?”

Dwalin frowned when Frodo pulled away from them again, his rough hands instinctively moving to press against Ori’s shoulder when the younger Dwarf shifted uneasily behind him.

“They were going to lock me up,” Frodo mumbled, his hands curled into tiny fists at his sides. Someone- Kíli, probably- sucked in a sharp, angry breath behind him. Frodo glanced towards the rest of the Dwarves at the noise, blue eyes dark and more nervous than before.

“Was it- Are you like Bilbo?” Ori wondred aloud. “Can you… Can you freeze things?”

“Not like this,” Frodo mumbled, gesturing to the ice that coated the treasure room from floor to ceiling. The Hobbit lad paused and for a moment Dwalin imagined that he could see a fear in the boy’s eyes that made his heart sink, reminding him of those times when Bilbo would stare down at his hands, his kind face twisted with fear and self-loathing.

Then the boy whispered “I’m not strong enough to do that” and Dwalin nearly laughed aloud when he recognized the awe in the child’s eyes.

“I don’ think Bilbo thought he was strong enough to do this either,” he murmured.

“Is he okay?” Frodo blurted out before the Dwarves could ask another question. “He hasn’t- He won’t freeze, will he? Seasons can do that, you know. We can push ourselves too far.”

“No,” Thorin croaked from somewhere beyond Dwalin’s shoulder. The warrior turned to look at his king, vaguely surprised at how close Thorin had gotten to them without his noticing. “No, Bilbo knows his limits- he won’t… We’ll find him.”

Frodo frowned but nodded slowly, plump lips pursed and doubtful.

“Why were the Elves taking you to the Mountain, Frodo?” Ori asked quickly. “Were they bringing you to see Bilbo?”
Frodo shook his head, his blue eyes darkening further with obvious unease. “No,” he mumbled. “They said there was an army coming this way. They wanted to help.”

Dwalin stiffened and nearly leapt to his feet, eyes locked on Thorin as the king swore and whirled around to study the ice that still trapped them in the treasure room. “We need to get out of here,” Thorin growled. “We need to find Bilbo, and those… Elves.” “We’ve barely made a dent in the ice,” Bofur snapped, his worry evident even from this distance. “How exactly do ye recommend we-.” “Sam an’ I destroyed the ice that blocked the way in here,” Merry broke in. “So long as Pip an’ Frodo stay close to us, we should be able to do it again.”

The other Dwarves stared blankly at the Hobbits, though they dutifully stepped away from the ice to make way for them when the four boys carefully picked their way to the small hole that the Ur family and Thorin had made in the ice. Dwalin bit down on a small gasp at the fire that spread from Merry’s fingertips and danced across the ice when he pressed two small, soft palms against its frozen surface, his heels grinding stubbornly against the hard earth beneath them when the very walls of Erebor seemed to shake, sending thin cracks and slivers flying across the ice as if the wall itself was fleeing from Merry’s flames. “By Mahal,” he murmured, hardly caring to note the rough hand that his brother had pressed between his shoulderblades. “Remind me ta look into an army o’ Hobbits when all of this is over.”

He sensed more than saw Balin roll his eyes, his muscles tensing instinctively beneath the tightening grip of the older Dwarf’s fingers against his armour. Dwalin sighed quietly and turned to clasp his brother’s shoulder beneath his palms, studiously ignoring memories of another, similar gesture that had come after another battle so many years before. “We’ll find him, brother,” he grunted quietly. “We’ll get through this, we always do.” “I’m not so sure this time,” Balin whispered. “This is different- we have no army.” “Don’ be pessimistic,” Dwalin snapped. “Tha’s my job. An’ we do have an army… jus’ happens ta be made of Elves, Mahal damn them.”

Balin snorted and pressed their foreheads together with more gentleness than he usually allowed himself to show before he pulled away, his calloused hands already reaching for the weapons that had been discarded on the frozen earth floor of the room. “If any of you find armour on our way out, you had better take it,” Dwalin called above the crackling of ice and the heavier breaths of two young Hobbit children. “We’ll probably end up needing it, the way this day is goin’.”

He heard Thorin sigh and glanced over at the king to see him lift a small, gleaming shirt of mithril from beneath a half-melted pile of gold, his features dark and twisted with guilt. Dwalin fought to swallow past the lump in his throat and turned away to guide Ori towards the war hammer that he had given the younger Dwarf back in the Goblin tunnels. “We’ll find you, Bilbo…”
season of sacrifice

Chapter Notes

So, given that the Hobbit trailer came out today (yes, I have seen it, and I still feel like I'm going to cry THANK YOU VERY DAMN MUCH PETER JACKSON AND J.R.R. TOLKIEN), I figured I could at least give you guys another chapter, da? Now, ah, please keep in mind that I'm actually on vacation right now, as in at the beach with my family, so I do not in fact know when I will next be able to update this, though I promise that I will try to update it when I can. Please have patience with me (you all have been amazing so far, it's just a little longer, I swear), and I hope that you like it~ Also, I'm sorry.

Bilbo continued to slide across the ground long after the cries of Hobbits and Elves had faded away into the wind, deafened and faded beneath the odd roar of winds that swept across the plains and the deep rumble of the earth beneath his numb, frozen feet.

It was only when the rumble of the earth failed to fade away as wind and the cries and the voices had faded behind him that the Hobbit came to a slow, careful halt behind the rising crag of one of the outer ruins of the Desolation bare feet away from the ragged edges of Mirkwood. Bilbo crouched low to the ground, an old habit born of months on the road with suspicious Dwarves and Orcs all but breathing down his neck. He pressed his shoulders close to the sharp edges of the rock, finding a rare comfort from the earth’s strength even as the chipped stone edges dug into his shoulder blades and seemed to draw blood beneath his worn clothes. The earth continued to rumble beneath him and around him, an odd, resonant thumping that made his thoughts race with thoughts of ancient armies and had his skin crawling with memories of rough bark and flames.

The Hobbit took a deep, steadying breath and slowly pushed his head above the edge of the crag, just as he had once pushed his head above the tops of sprawling mountain tops miles and eras ago, his blue eyes locking on the sallow forms, vicious images of prowling Orcs just as they had done before. There was no pack of Orcs atop Wargs now, no group of potential predators that still seemed to fall short when compared to the solid strength of the Dwarven Company. An army marched before the Hobbit’s eyes, masses of thick, scarred bodies dappled in greys and shadows that almost seemed to dwarf the unmoving forces of the trees behind them. A single pale Orc rose above the rest well beyond the front lines, the mace that had replaced his hand glinting with a dull, wicked light in the gathering shadows of the late afternoon, the very glimpse of his face enough to send Bilbo shrinking back against the stone, his heart nearly frozen in his chest despite the frantic pounding of blood in his ears.

Azog…. Azog is here- what the blazes was he doing here? Why-?

Thorin.
The very thought of the Dwarf’s name sent a flash of cruel fire through Bilbo’s veins and had his heart pounding with renewed fervour somewhere within his chest. Thorin, Azog had come for Thorin- why else would he come? What need had Orcs and Goblins- for there had been Goblins somewhere within those ranks of Orcs, their dark, twisted forms nearly hidden behind their taller companions- for gold or treasure? No, they had to have come for Thorin, for revenge against the Dwarrows that had beaten them now, when the numbers were so overwhelmingly in their favour…

His thoughts flew back to the Elves that had landed on the banks of the Desolation far behind him, teasing his brain with thoughts that perhaps Gandalf had known that this would happen, perhaps he had gathered the Elves, had convinced them to come to Erebor in order to help the Dwarves.

But, then, why did he bring Frodo with him? Bilbo asked himself suddenly. Why would he endanger a child? Why would he not have sent word to Thorin earlier?

He didn’t know, couldn’t understand, and it terrified him even as a sort of vague fury rose within him to join panic and adrenaline. No matter Gandalf’s intentions, the Hobbit couldn’t allow this massive force to reach the Elves gathered along the banks of Erebor and the Desolation, not now when he knew that there was a small Hobbit child amongst their ranks that shared his blood. Not when he knew that there was a small Company of Dwarves even further beyond them, trapped and unaware within the Mountain that he had nearly destroyed in his foolishness.

“I need to protect them,” Bilbo whispered aloud, distantly surprised at the thrill that he felt at the thought, at the lack of fear or reluctance. He could not survive this fight, not when he had nearly died fighting off a much smaller force in the mountains outside of Goblintown, when his skin was already tinged with white and blue and the feeling had begun to bleed out of the bottom of his feet and the tips of his fingers.

He would die here.

“Less time running, I suppose,” he mused quietly even as he gathered his strength, stealing himself for the moment when he would strike. “And at least I don’t have to walk through that damned forest again. I hated that place…”

Bilbo took a deep breath and forced himself to smile one last time, his eyes flickering back across the Desolation for a final look at the Lonely Mountain that had barely shrunk with the distance.

“… I love you, Thorin,” he whispered, because he had to say it at least once, didn’t he? Just once, before the end. “I’m sorry.”

The Hobbit scrambled up above the rock and watched the ice gather beneath his feet once again, his hands twitching down towards the place where Sting had once rested before he had relinquished it to Balin. He saw Azog pause amidst the roiling ocean of his army, felt the Orc’s glittering eyes lock onto him even from that immense distance. Bilbo forced himself to raise his chin in defiance, silently daring the Orc to make it past him.
Bilbo pushed away from his hiding place, ice flowing through his veins, and nearly flew across the ground towards his enemies.

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True to the promise that they had supposedly made to Gandalf and the Elves, Frodo and his companions agreed to remain within the Mountain once the entrance to the treasure room had been reopened and the Dwarves were free to move through the frozen halls of Erebor. Bofur made sure to stay close to the young Hobbits, his eyes creasing in unwilling amusement when he noticed Thorin and the princes doing the exact same thing. He watched the Hobbits falter slightly at the sight of the ice that had spread across the walls on either side of them, reaching up into the shadows above them until all that could be seen was a dull twinkling of silver in the darkness. Bofur bit his lip, forcing down his own feelings of awe and fear when he saw the lads’ eyes darken and flicker across the twisting swirls of ice and snow that lined the walls.

“…It’s beautiful,” he heard Frodo mumble in a quiet, hesitant voice that made his heart swell in his chest and nearly had the Dwarf pulling him into a tight hug.

“It always is,” Thorin murmured, his cheeks flushed despite the admiring, defiant gleam in his eyes.

Bofur watched Frodo glance up at the Dwarven king with a surprising level of intensity for one so young. The lad’s footsteps faltered slightly as he studied the king, his eyes narrowing slightly before his lips quirked up into a faint smile.

“You need to find some bluebells,” he informed the king cheerfully, prompting Pippin to let out a sudden bark of laughter.

Thorin ground to an abrupt halt that had Kíli slamming into his back, his own eyes narrowed and questioning.

“…What?”

“Bluebells,” Frodo repeated carefully while Merry smacked a giggling Pippin over the top of the head. “Mum… My mum always said that they were Bilbo’s favourites, and his father used them to court his mother, so there’s a tradition- Hobbits like tradition, you know.”

“I…”

“I’d pair it with thyme, if you can,” Frodo continued thoughtfully. “Assuming you wish to praise his courage- which you should, my Uncle is very brave, and perhaps an iris?”

“Definitely a daffodil,” Sam added with a gruff sort of conviction. “Can’ appear too certain an’ all, an’ hope is a very special thing for Hobbits.”
“Always include a rose!” Pippin piped up. “They’re classic, especially the red-.”

“But the Baggins family always prefers yellow,” Merry broke in with a huff. “They value companionship over passion, whatever that means.”

“And a lilly of the valley,” Frodo finished triumphantly. “Because you want him to be happy.”

Thorin stared down at the Hobbits for a long moment, either unaware or uncaring of the barely-muted chuckles that were breaking from the lips of his nephews and Bofur.

“… Why am I giving Bilbo flowers?” he finally asked, his features creased into a martyred expression that suggested that he truly did not want to know the answer to such a question.

The Hobbits frowned as one and regarded Thorin with faintly exasperated expressions so reminiscent of Bilbo that it sent Bofur into another fit of muted laughter.

“How else are you supposed to court him?” Merry asked slowly, as if the Dwarven king was being particularly difficult.

Thorin visibly started and continued to stare at the Hobbits with a renewed intensity, his dark blue eyes flickering towards his nephews and Balin in search of an assistance that would not come, if the gleam of amusement in their eyes was anything to go by.

“I- I am not courting Bil- Master Baggins,” he told them stiffly.

Frodo’s frown deepened. “But you love him, don’t you?”

A half-strangled noise rose from Thorin’s throat just as the king bowed his head in something like acknowledgement.

“I hurt him,” he whispered, voice so quiet and broken that it nearly made Bofur regret the harsh treatment that he had given his king since the incident in the treasure room.

“…And he hurt you?” Frodo guessed quietly, eyes locked on the faint silver scar that still wrapped around Thorin’s wrist.

“He was defending himself,” Thorin assured the Hobbit, voice abruptly fierce. “It was not his fault.”

The young Hobbit nodded slowly, expression thoughtful, and turned his bright blue eyes towards Merry and Pippin. The two red-haired Hobbits looked back at him and smiled, their small hands lifting to push back the sleeves of their worn coats to show tiny wrings of faded scars.

“Pip burned me once when we were younger,” Merry chirped. “Idiot thought I was tryin’ to steal his mushrooms-.”

“You were stealin’ ‘em,” Pippin grumbled.

“He got really scared when he did it, an’ he wouldn’t touch me again for weeks,” Merry continued as if the other Hobbit hadn’t spoken. “I didn’ even know that he’d been burned, too, until Frodo pointed it out to me.”

“Merry found me one night an’ took me out to the Party Tree,” Pippin added with an odd sort of pride. “An’ he told me that he wanted ta take care of me.”

“I didn’t really care about the burns,” Merry finished. “Pip was more important, an’ it’d been my
fault anyways.”

Thorin looked between the two Hobbits with a frown, his lips pursed slightly in confusion.

“…What are you trying to say?” he asked them finally, after all four of the Hobbits had looked up at him expectantly.

Merry and Pippin sighed heavily and shook their heads in childish disappointment before Sam stepped forward with another sigh.

“The point is,” he stressed. “You don’ care that Mister Bilbo hurt you: you care about him. An’ if Mister Bilbo likes you, he won’t care that you hurt him ‘cause all he’ll care about is you.”

“What if he doesn’t care about me?” Thorin murmured. “What if I have caused him too much pain?”

The four Hobbits fell silent again and looked at each other for a long moment, apparently oblivious to the sharp, intent gazes that they had gained from nearly every member of the Company.

“…You might want to add asphodel, then,” Frodo mused. “To say you’re sorry.”

Bofur choked on another laugh, his every muscle abruptly tensing when he heard a half-familiar voice ring through the frozen halls, followed by a host of other voices cloaked in that musical timbre that seemed to belong exclusively to the Elves. Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin glanced at each other in obvious unease and huddled closer to the edges of Thorin’s cloak, their small faces creasing in gratitude when Fíli and Kíli drew closer to flank them with their weapons drawn. Bofur drew his mattock closer to his chest, arms tensed and ready to lash out at any creature that dared to attack them now.

Gandalf’s grey-clad form appeared to them several feet away, his movements carefully followed by the two Elves from Mirkwood and a third female Elf with long dark hair and pale skin that glowed like starlight in the dim shadows of Erebor. A Man closely followed the group with a certain regal intensity in his bearing that made the miner think of both Thorin and Bard at once.

The Wizard came to an abrupt halt at the sight of the Hobbits and the Dwarves surrounding them, his shoulders seeming to slump in relief even as shadows gathered about his head.

“Save me from the stubbornness of Dwarves and Hobbits,” he grumbled, voice carrying easily through the halls. “I take it that you found the rest of Bilbo’s company without much trouble, then?”

“They were very helpful to us,” Balin interrupted carefully. “We had been trapped by an… unfortunate accident inside of the treasure room, and the boys were very helpful in freeing us.”

Gandalf studied the Dwarves with a look that suggested he knew very well that that accident had been. Bofur felt himself bristle defensively on his friend’s behalf, his dark eyes flickering over to Thorin to see the king react similarly. The Wizard said nothing more on the matter, however, and suddenly Bofur noticed that the man’s gnarled fingers were curled around the hilt of the sword that he had found within the Troll cave near the beginning of their journey.

“The boys mentioned an army,” Dwalin called before any of the others could say anything more.

“Orcs,” the Man that had come with Gandalf informed them gruffly. Now that Bofur studied him, the Man hardly seemed to be human at all; his muscular shoulders were covered with gleaming robes and armour wrought in the complex patterns favoured by the Elves, and though his
movements lacked some of the easy grace shared by the Elves around him, the weapons that rested in his hands and across his shoulders had obviously been made with Elven hands. “We were unaware of their movements while we travelled, but scouts from Esgaroth and Mirkwood have told us that there are many.”

“They come from Dol Guldur,” Gandalf added grimly. “Led by the might of Azog himself.”

Thorin’s features darkened at the name of Azog, his jaw working to hold back the instinctive curse that always rose from his lips at the mention of the Pale Orc’s name. Bofur’s eyes travelled unwillingly to the coat of mithril that Thorin had carried with him from the treasure room, his body stiffening in cold panic inspite of the warm strength that Nori offered just behind him.

“Bilbo,” he whispered, silently cursing himself for the outburst when Frodo and the princes turned to look at him with wide eyes filled with obvious fear.

“Have you seen him?” Thorin demanded of Gandalf, hardly bothering to hide his concern over the Hobbit’s safety. “Is he with you?”

Gandalf began to shake his head before the Dwarf had finished speaking, his expression eerily solemn and knowing.

“Bilbo ran from us when he saw that we were coming,” he told them coolly. “He seemed rather frightened by something. We have not seen any sign of him since, though Legolas and Elrohir claim to have seen signs of ice across the ground.”

“We need to find him,” Kíli insisted, his dark eyes lingering for a little longer than was strictly necessary on Tauriel.

The red-haired she-Elf offered the youngest prince of Erebor a comforting smile strained by her own evident worry.

“Bilbo is smart, and his eyesight is sharper than all but our kin,” she insisted, voice lacking that easy confidence that Bofur had come to attribute to her during their time in Laketown and Mirkwood. “He will see the army before they catch sight of him, he will have time to hide himself.”

Thorin growled, unconvinced, and made to stalk forward, only to pause and glance down at the young Hobbits that continued to hover just behind his cloak.

“…We cannot leave them here alone,” he murmured.

“I took responsibility of the Hobbits when they first came to my kin in my father’s realm,” the dark-haired Elven woman stated calmly. “I will take responsibility for them now, if you wish.”

“I have many archers posted near the entrance to Erebor,” Legolas added with a quick glance towards the Man that had come with them. “Should the armies come too close to breaching the Mountain’s gates, they will fall back and help to defend those inside.”

“I’ll stay with the Elves,” Oín grunted sourly. “I need ta be able ta care fer the wounded if any are brought ta me, an’ it’ll be easier ta do tha’ if I have a place ta put ‘em.”

Thorin bowed his head in silent thanks and turned to kneel before the young Hobbits.

“Do not leave the Mountain unless you must,” he told them quietly. “A battle is no sight for young eyes.”
The Hobbits nodded with varying degrees of willingness and stepped away to join the dark-haired Elven maiden as she came towards them until only Frodo remained at the king’s side. The Hobbit and the king studied each other for a long, silent moment before Thorin bowed his head with a deep sigh and placed a broad hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“I will find your Uncle, young one,” he whispered. “I promise you.”

Frodo nodded and shot forward to wrap his thin arms around Thorin’s neck. The Dwarf rocked back on his heels, eyes widening in shock before they slipped shut and he pulled the lad closer to his chest, his face lowering to bury itself in the boy’s chocolate curls. Thorin pulled back after a few precious moments and gently knocked his forehead against Frodo’s, his mouth curving into a small smile when Fíli and Kíli both rushed forward with their own whispered promises and brief hugs. Bofur caught a glimpse of charred beads passed from Dwarven hands to soft Hobbit fingers and smiled a small, bitter smile that only faded when Nori leaned forward to press his face into the back of the miner’s hat.

“Stay close to me,” the thief murmured.

Bofur nodded, smile widening when the movement caused Nori’s lips to brush against the back of his neck.

“Aye,” he sighed.

Dwarves, Elves, Man and Wizard continued onward through the halls of the Mountain, hardly faltering in the brilliant light of the setting sun that greeted them when they stepped away from the shadows. Bofur paused for a brief moment to cast his eyes across a Desolation turned to gold, his gaze caught by a brief shimmer of light on the horizon. Elven armour, perhaps? Plenty of Elves were already gathered along the banks of the Mountain and its ruined plains, perhaps several of them had gone ahead to serve as scouts?

That thought soon vanished into ash when two Elves with the same long, dark hair that had graced the heads of the Elven maiden and (now that Bofur stopped to think of it) Lord Elrond, their perfect skin nearly sallow in the golden light of the sun that reflected off of their armour.

“Gandalf,” one of the Elves called in frantic greeting. He faltered at the sight of the Dwarves, eyes widening and narrowing in brief flickers of confusion and recognition. “Are these the Dwarrows of Erebor that my father spoke of?”

“Aye,” Thorin told the Elf impatiently. “Who are you? What has happened?”

“I am Elladan, son of Elrond, Lord of Rivendell, and this is my brother, Elrohir,” the Elf explained hastily. “Gandalf, the Orcs-.”

“How close are they?” Tauriel demanded. “We can have a defensive perimeter around the gates, and archers posted atop the-.”

“It is not their distance that is my concern,” Elladan snapped. “They have already been attacked.”

Bofur felt the breath freeze in his lungs and he stumbled forward, his steps shadowed by Nori and his brother while Bifur growled from behind him.

“Who?” he whispered roughly. “Who is attacking them?”

“A being of ice,” Elrohir reported regretfully. “I believe that we have found your Hobbit.”
Thorin swore and turned on Gandalf, his eyes flashing sapphire and gold in desperate fury.

“Take me to him,” he snarled.

“Where are they, Elladan?” the Wizard asked heavily.

“Across the Desolation, nearly at the edge of the Mirkwood,” the Elf replied. “I have already sent many of my men to assist him where they can, and horses have been prepared so that my brother and I may offer our own assistance where we can.”

“Can you take more than one on your mounts?” Thorin demanded, though the very idea of sharing a horse with an Elf seemed to physically pain him.

“These are Elven horses,” Elrohir huffed. “They are strong creatures.”

“Take me with you,” Thorin insisted. “I drove the Hobbit away in my foolishness, and I made a promise to his nephew to deliver him back safely. I- Please, allow me to make up for the wrongs that I have done to him.”

“Let me go, too,” Bofur added, ignoring the way Bombur’s fingers reached out to grip the back of his tunic in silent protest. “He’s my friend.”

Other voices rose in protests of their own from among the Dwarven ranks, putting forth their own arguments and opinions as to why they had to be with the Hobbit, why they had to defend him, why they—.

“I may not have the prophetic abilities of my grandmother, but I do pride myself on being able to think ahead,” Elrohir broke in, voice heavy with exasperation. “Seven horses were made ready for our use, and as my sister does not seem to be among you, I believe that we can take eight Dwarves with us into the fray.”

Bofur and Thorin stepped forward immediately, followed quickly by the princes (much to Thorin’s obvious hesitance), Dwalin, Bifur, Nori and Ori, which elicited a loud, if brief, protest from both of his brothers. The remaining Dwarves fell back with obvious reluctance to assist the Elves in guarding the gates to Erebor, their eyes lingering with a wild sort of anticipation on the growing shadows on the horizon half-hidden behind the ever increasing flickers of silver and white. Legolas seemed to consider the shadows as well, for the Elf grudgingly voiced his own decision to stay behind and help to lead the ranks of Elves that had been left behind, allowing Dori to step forward and join his brothers. Precious moments slipped by while Tauriel and Legolas parted ways and those members of the Company that remained behind gave gruff farewells to those that would not. Bofur allowed Bombur to press their foreheads together with all of the larger Dwarf’s characteristic gentleness, his lips twitching when his brother turned to fix Nori with a stern glance and an order to look after his brother and cousin. Nori bowed his head and carefully pulled Bofur after him towards the horse that had been given to them by Legolas. The miner settled uneasily across the horse’s back and watched Dwalin pull Ori up onto the horse in front of them while Thorin settled stiffly behind Elladan’s broad shoulders. The son of Elrond exchanged a brief glance with his brother, who had accepted Bifur’s presence without protest, and gave the order to move forward.

The banks of the Mountain pulled away from them and Bofur rocked forward, his fingers curling desperately around the folds of Nori’s robes and what little armour the thief had managed to take for himself from Erebor’s treasures. He turned his eyes to Thorin, as he had done so often throughout their journey, seeking leadership and courage from that dark, brooding figure that had first approached his family in the Blue Mountains to humbly thank Bombur for his food.
Thorin Oakenshield rode with his head held high and Orcrist ready at his side, his eyes never wavering from the ever-growing gleams of silver ahead of them.

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A curved, wicked sword came at Bilbo from the side, forcing the Hobbit to whirl away with a yelp and lash out with another stream of ice. The Orc’s answering scream echoed in his ears alongside hundreds of its fallen kin, its cries quickly muted by the shouts of living monsters and the unending thud of feet against the earth. Bilbo stumbled away from another attack and bent to press his palms against the ground, his eyes moving to the next threat before the sharp walls of sharp, jagged ice could rise from the ground to tower above them all in a silent promise of protection to the Mountain and its inhabitants. Ice skated across the surface of Bilbo’s skin, encasing him in an ever-moving armour of ice and cold that didn’t truly bother him as much as it should have.

He knew that he was reaching his end, recognized the harsh, numbing cold and exhaustion that was creeping ever closer to his brain and leaving deepening shadows in their wake for the warning that it was: he was freezing.

A Goblin lunged at him this time, its approach nearly camouflaged by the attack of a towering Orc moments prior. Bilbo shoved his arm past its defences and slammed his palm into its chest without a second thought, his lips curling in lingering disgust and dismay when the creature fell, shrieking, to the ground and hardened into a mound of ice that was quickly shattered by another set of pounding feet. Dimly, the Hobbit could hear the cries and shouts of voices that did not belong to the Orc’s terrifying roars and the Goblin’s piercing shrieks. He saw dark blurs scramble past and across the walls and towers of ice that he had erected earlier in his personal battle and took a few precious moments to watch them slam into the racing forms of Orcs and Goblins that had managed to slip past the Hobbit towards the Mountain. He saw the flash of white-gold steel, heard the singing of arrows through the air, and realized suddenly that these were Elves. Other, dimmer cries reached him from the direction of the water, pulling his attention to where additional shadows were fleeing from the trees of Mirkwood to meet another mass of dark brown, green and gleaming silver.

Steel cut through the ice along Bilbo’s arm, drawing hot blood that slithered down to his wrist in a river of fire. Bilbo hissed and lashed out at his attacker, his movements faltering for a brief moment when he was met with the cold fire of wicked yellow eyes set against pale skin marred with dark steel. He dodged another blow from the Orc and shot another stream of ice at its chest, trying to freeze it as he had frozen the Goblin. The Orc dodged the attack and came closer, his axe slicing through the air with enough speed that it sent a cold whisper of air against Bilbo’s neck. The Hobbit stumbled backwards until ice pressed against his back, his entire body shuddering with cold and adrenaline and exhaustion, eyes locked unwaveringly on the axe that was coming ever closer.

An arrow, shorter than the others that had sailed above his head in a gathering cloud, lodged itself in the Orc’s shoulder, sending it reeling backwards with a shocked roar. Bilbo leapt forward without hesitation and pushed both of his hands against the Orc’s midriff, eyes locked onto the Orc’s poisonous gaze as ice spread across its skin and seeped into its veins, leaving it frozen in eternal fury while Bilbo shuddered beneath another wave of cold and exhaustion.

“Bilbo!”

The Hobbit stumbled, nearly falling to his knees at the sound of the voice- his voice.
Thorin.

He turned, eyes unconsciously seeking that familiar dark head, desperate for that fire that always came with the Dwarf’s presence, no matter the circumstances. He saw Thorin’s head, hair dark and wild against the deepening shadows of the sky, saw the Dwarf leap from the back of a towering Elven steed with a roar and slam into the body of the nearest Orc, his cries echoed and followed by a golden-haired blur and another shadow clad in that ever-present hat. Other Dwarves soon followed, dark-haired blurs and the gleam of Dori’s hair, the savage tones of Bifur’s voice…

Bilbo took a small, unsteady step forwards, unable to look away from Thorin as the Dwarf came ever closer, Orcrist bright and glowing in the sunlight even as it was quickly buried beneath thick waves of thick, dark blood. He saw Thorin’s eyes lock onto him, watched the Dwarf’s features darken with regret and concern even as those sapphire eyes brightened with relief and sent a fresh wave of fire through his veins.

He saw Azog towering above them all, watched the Pale Orc knock Tauriel off of her horse as if she weighed no more than a fly and stalk towards Thorin, heedless of Kíli’s scream of fury and the twin blurs of brown and gold that signalled the approach of the Heirs of Durin.

Bilbo sucked in a sharp breath and launched himself across the earth on one last stream of ice, past Thorin’s frantic gaze and reaching arms towards the Pale Orc that was now eyeing him with curling lips, his mace descending in a quick blow that laid Fíli across the ground and had Kíli falling at his brother’s side with a howl of fear.

Fire and ice mixed within Bilbo’s veins, pushing him forward even as the shadows thickened across his eyes and exhaustion threatened to drag him deeper into the cold. He slid around the Orc and launched stream after stream of ice at the Orc’s unprotected chest, his jaw clenching tighter and tighter with every blow that hardly seemed to phase the Orc. The creature lashed out with his mace, catching Bilbo just above the earlier wound to his arm and sending the Hobbit rolling off of the ice onto the blood-stained ground. He heard a roar of fury somewhere above him and carefully pushed himself off of the ground to see Thorin block Azog’s next blow with Orcrist’s blade, pushed the Orc back into the roiling mass of his fellows. Azog roared in something like triumph and forced himself back towards Thorin, only to find his feet frozen to the ground by another wave of ice. Bilbo’s lips curled into a faint, humourless grin when the Orc turned to stare at him in fury just as Thorin brought Orcrist down in a final blow against the Orc’s neck.

He hardly noticed Azog’s last hand rear back in a final throw, barely registered the gleam of cruel metal against the gold and midnight sky until it had disappeared beneath the blood and ice encrusted in makeshift armour around his stomach. Frozen fire pooled around his abdomen, dragging Bilbo’s eyes away from the pale gleam of Thorin’s skin and the wild anger and fear in the Dwarf’s eyes. The Hobbit stared down at the twisted hilt of the blade that had embedded itself within ice and skin, his eyelids slipping lower and lower as the cold finally pulled him under, promising him rest and peace…

He heard Thorin scream his name in desperation, allowed the cry to join the echoes of a thousand dying Orcs that continued to haunt him until everything disappeared and he sank into oblivion.
The procession that returned to the Lonely Mountain was a solemn one compared to the lines of battle-ready Elves and grim, determined Dwarrows that had set out from its slopes mere hours before.

Even Frodo, unaccustomed as he was to the traditions of war and battle, could sense that something had happened once he and his companions were allowed to leave the mountain under the careful eyes of Arwen and those Elves that had remained behind.

The Hobbit swallowed the rising ball of dread and forced himself to step forward to meet the mass of red, gold and green armour that was slowly making its way towards him. Sam’s gentle, solid fingers twined between his before he had taken more than a step away from the gates, followed almost immediately by Merry’s warmer, fiercer grip and the whisper of a breeze from Pippin. Frodo twisted to give them a small, strained smile that faded beneath the tired, pitying eyes of the Elves that passed them on their journey to the Mountain. Several of the Elves had chosen to go on foot rather than ride atop the horses that they had ridden across the Desolation, their slender hands clasped around the corners of makeshift litters draped with dusty, ragged cloaks that didn’t quite hide the sallow pallor of the wounded. Frodo stumbled slightly when he caught a flicker of half-familiar red hair amongst the litters, which was immediately joined by a pale-faced Legolas.

A horse broke through the slow-moving mass of Elves before the young Hobbit could get a closer look at the wounded Elf, as well as the smaller, slower litter some ways behind it which seemed to be heavily guarded by a small horde of Dwarves led by one of Thorin’s nephews- Kíli?

Sam’s hand broke from Frodo’s fingers as the horse drew closer, only to fasten around the younger Hobbit’s collar and pull him out of the animal’s path. Frodo stumbled back into the Spring Hobbit, sensing more than seeing Merry shove Pippin backwards with a similar gesture as the Horse stormed past, allowing the Hobbits a brief glimpse of its silent cargo. Frodo stiffened at the sight of Thorin’s wild dark hair and took a hesitant step forwards, only to stop, ice flooding through his veins when he caught a glimpse of silver and blue through the folds of fur and fabric that the Dwarf had wrapped around a rather large bundle clutched within his arms.
“No,” the Hobbit whimpered, oblivious to the steadying hands that Merry and Pippin pressed against his shoulder-blades and the small stream of ice that slipped from his fingers to coat the ground at his feet. “No, nononono- He promised.”

“Frodo-,” Sam began, his words lost to the ever-increasing roar in Frodo’s ears as the younger Hobbit pulled away and began to run after the horse, his feet slipping and stumbling across the ground before he was pulled back into a warm chest lined with hard mail and leather.

Kíli looked down at the Hobbit, his small smile contrasting sharply with the raw, scarlet rim around his eyes and the tears that still glistened across his cheeks. The Dwarf set off without a word, his feet pounding across the uneven earth with more speed than Frodo had ever managed. The Hobbit risked a quick glance over the prince’s shoulder to the litter on which the Dwarf’s golden-haired brother had been laid with obvious care, his fingers clenching reflexively in around a few links of Kíli’s mail beneath a brief flash of guilt. The Dwarf only tightened his grip and ran faster, his lips pressing into a grim line when they passed the litter carrying the She-Elf from Mirkwood.

“Fee’s fine,” he whispered. “He- He’ll live without me for a few minutes. Your Uncle needs you more right now.”

Frodo bit back a whimper at that and managed to nod against the Dwarf’s chest, fighting back the ice that continued to gather at his fingertips the closer they came to the Mountain and the horse that had finally come to an abrupt stop at the gates. Dwarf and Hobbit staggered to a halt just inside Erebor’s shadow to find Arwen, Oin and Gandalf already crouched over the bundle half-cradled within Thorin’s arms. Both the Elf and the Dwarf king glanced up at Kíli’s approach, their expressions ranging from resigned understanding to utter devastation.

“Frodo-,” Arwen whispered.

“You promised,” Frodo insisted, eyes locked on Thorin even as the great Dwarf seemed to crumple and shrink beneath his words as if they were blows. “You- You promised you’d bring him back!”

“I am sorry, young one,” the king croaked, his voice ragged and destroyed in a way that the boy hadn’t heard since his uncle Rorimac had collapsed at his feet in his parents’ smial and told him that he was an orphan. “I- I am so very, very sorry.”

Frodo gritted his teeth and wriggled in Kíli’s arms until the younger Dwarf loosened his grip, allowing the Hobbit child to leap to the ground and dart towards the small group gathered around Bilbo Baggins’s frozen form. He halted just beside Oin’s broad shoulders, his heart aching in his chest at the sight of Bilbo’s skin painted in shades of pale blue in silver that glistened in the dim light of Erebor like diamond, leaving one with the impression that the Hobbit was no more than an intricately-carved ice sculpture. Frost coated the hair atop the Hobbit’s feat in a delicate, glittering dust that matched the snowy whiteness that had coated each of his golden curls. A hilt carved from black steel and a dark rose of scarlet, garish against the stark whiteness of Wintery ice, glared up at Frodo from Bilbo’s midriff, making bile rise in the young Hobbit’s throat even as Oin’s rough
fingers started to pull him away with surprising gentleness.

“Lad doesn’ need ta see this,” the elderly Dwarf murmured. “Take him-.”

Frodo shook his head and pushed forward, fingers trembling visibly when they brushed against the cold skin of Bilbo’s open palm. He heard Thorin take a deep, shuddering breath behind him and tensed when another pair of fingers tugged at the fringes of his clothes, urging him back and away from the cold, lifeless-.

No. No, that wasn’t right.

Frodo sucked in a sharp breath and shrugged off the hands that tried to pull him back, eyes widening even as he pressed his hands more firmly against Bilbo’s skin.

Sharp, staccato bursts of cool energy and an odd sort of frozen fire pulsed beneath his hands and fingers, making Frodo’s breath catch in his throat even as his pulse began to pound furiously in his ears.

“Wait,” he gasped, his own voice strange and hollow in his ears. “Wait, this- I can… I can save him.”

He heard someone make a choked noise beyond his shoulder and felt the hands return to his shoulders, trying to pull him back with quiet, soothing noises that only served to make his blood boil with fire that could rival Merry’s in its ferocity.

“I want Merry,” he snapped, choosing to go another route. “And- And Sam. Please, I need my friends.”

“I will take you to them, Frodo,” Kíli offered quietly, his own voice rough and so terribly weary that it reminded Frodo of the older Hobbits that still stared out at the Winter snows with sorrow in their eyes.

“I want them here,” he insisted, unable to restrain the slightest twinge of guilt at his breach of politeness and propriety. Bilbo hadn’t cared, he realized, he had not cared about propriety when his mother was dying, when Dwarves came to his door and offered him the chance for freedom…

“Frodo-,” Thorin began, voice pained.

“Bring the Hobbits,” Gandalf interrupted, his sharp, grey eyes staring intently at Frodo with a faint, knowing spark that gave the Hobbit the first flicker of hope that he had felt since that first, quick glimpse of Bilbo running across the Desolation.
Kili and Oin frowned at the Wizard but moved to do as he requested, even as Arwen drew closer to Frodo, her bright eyes intent. He heard Thorin suck in a sharp breath and felt the Dwarf shift slightly beside him, visibly uneasy by the Elf’s proximity.

“What are you planning to do?” she asked carefully.

“I… I can fix this,” he said slowly. “Bilbo- I think- I just need Merry here.”

The Elf frowned questioningly but nodded all the same, her gaze flickering over Frodo’s shoulder moments before a warm presence pressed against Frodo’s side and Merry’s curly auburn hair dipped into the young Hobbit’s vision, his eyes widening in silent horror at the sight of Bilbo. The Brandybuck took a deep breath and turned to look at Frodo with eyes flashing orange and scarlet with a familiar Summer flame, his small hands clenched into tiny, determined fists at his side.

“What are we doin’ then?” he asked brightly.

Frodo bit his lip and motioned for Thorin to lay Bilbo onto the ground before he placed his hand against Bilbo’s wrist, feeling the faint, reassuring pulse of energy beneath his fingertips.

“As we do,” Arwen offered quietly.

“Like that time Da helped Lily Proudfoot after she sliced her foot open,” Merry mumbled. “I’ll need to…. I can’t close it when it’s frozen like that.”

“Will you- Can you melt the ice, then?” Frodo murmured.

Merry shot him a look that would have been scathing if it weren’t for the dark traces of fear in his eyes.

“Of course I can,” he huffed.

*~*~*~*~*

Bilbo woke to the sight of a meadow.

In some deep, half-forgotten corner of his mind he found the energy to be rather smug about the whole thing. He had thought about what awaited the children of Yavanna after death as much as the average Hobbit, and his quiet suggestions that whatever place the Valar had promised them could resemble those meadows between Hobbiton and Buckland had often been met with scoffs by Hobbits more comfortable in their smials and private gardens than in the wild meadows.
It was rather nice to be right about something for once.

“So, You’re the Hobbit.”

Bilbo squeaked at the unexpected voice and scrambled to his feet, only taking a brief moment to marvel at the easy comfort that came with moving, where for months there had only been weariness and pain. He whirled around in the direction of the speaker, his eyes widening in dumb shock when he came face-to-face with a Dwarf, of all things. The creature smirked at Bilbo’s obvious surprise, his bright blue eyes- not quite as dark as sapphires, but damn close to it- glittering with a familiar sort of mischief that made something ache deep within Bilbo’s chest.

“By Mahal, you are a pretty one,” the Dwarf mused appreciatively. “I don’t usually go for beardless ones, but I think he may be on to something with you, Master Baggins.”

“Sorry, but I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage,” Bilbo managed to croak, his eyes flickering over the Dwarf’s thick golden mane and the rough beginnings of a beard. “Who-?”

“Frerin!”

Hobbit and Dwarf jumped at the next voice, and Bilbo abruptly found himself wondering if one could faint in the afterlife when another Dwarf stomped into view, his dark hair shot through with strands of silver that were woven expertly into the folds of intricate braids. The Dwarf paused to give Bilbo a deep bow and a small, tight smile before he rounded on the golden-haired Dwarf with an exasperated sigh.

“Why did I bring you along?” he grunted. “Your mother wanted to come just as much as you did, and at least she would have had the sense to refrain from flirting with the poor lad.”

“I was only remarking on Master Baggins’s fair looks and bearing!” Frerin objected with a false innocence that tugged at some memory in Bilbo’s mind. “And Thorin won’t mind-.”

The other Dwarf growled something in Khuzdul that drowned out whatever words had been about to spill from Frerin’s lips, leaving Bilbo to wonder over the mention of Thorin. How did they-?

Oh, by Yavanna…

“Frerin,” he whispered, immediately catching both Dwarves’s attention. “Th- Thorin’s brother? You-.”

The golden-haired Dwarf smiled and now, now that Bilbo thought of it, he recognized the yellow
locks that curled across Frerin’s shoulders as the same ones that Fili always brushed away in moments of unease, saw Kíli’s bright glimmer of mischief in the Dwarf’s light blue eyes that were only shades lighter than Thorin’s. Without another word, Frerin swept into a deep, graceful bow that was only slightly ruined by the gleam in his eyes.

“Frerin, son of Thrain, son of Thror, prince of Erebor, at your service,” he purred.

The older Dwarf sighed heavily and offered Bilbo another bow as well.

“Thrain, son of Thror, son of Dain, at your service,” he added, his voice rough and gravelly and so like his son’s that it left Bilbo biting his lip beneath another wave of remembered grief.

“I- Your Majesty- Majesties-,” he stuttered.

“Please, call me Thrain,” the older Dwarf interrupted with surprising gentleness. “Titles mean less after our time on Middle Earth has passed, and the One of my eldest son and heir need not address me like a mere supplicant.”

Bilbo blinked and cocked his head to the side, silently wondering if he should be offended or not. He saw Frerin roll his eyes towards the clouds and bit back a small smile even as he offered his own bow in return.

“…Forgive me,” he said finally. “I didn’t realize that our people shared the same places of waiting.”

“We don’t,” Frerin told him cheerily, ignoring the sharp glance that Thrain sent his way in response. “However, as this is not, technically, one of the Halls of Waiting, and as you are the One of my brother, the Valar have allowed us to temporarily depart from our places of rest so that we could greet you.”

Bilbo blinked again, dumbfounded, his mind whirling with so many questions that his tongue rippled in his mouth, struggling to form everything at once.

He finally settled for that one question that had been teasing him ever since the Company had departed from Mirkwood.

“…What is a ‘One’?” he asked quietly, hating how small his voice was, hating the instinctive feeling of ice gathering at his fingertips. He was dead- why had Winter followed him into death?

Thrain and Frerin stared at him for a long, silent moment, their expressions almost identical for the first time since Bilbo had seen them as they went blank in pure, simple shock.
“You- What do you mean?” Frerin asked cautiously.

“A ‘One’,” Bilbo clarified hesitantly. ‘I- Forgive me, but I have heard… the Elven King, Thranduil, he mentioned something similar and I- I never got to ask Thorin, but he seemed rather… upset when the term was brought up.”

“Oh, for the love of Mahal,” Frerin groaned, earning himself a sharp jab to the ribs from his father.

“You wouldn’t have been much better,” the older Dwarf snapped.

“I beg your pardon?” Frerin squawked. “I like to think that I would have at least had the sense to speak of my feelings before I actually began courting—.”

“They had not officially begun to court, so it was not as if—.”

“You saw the beads—.”

“Thorin did not gift them, your nephews—.”

“Am I ever going to get an actual explanation out of a Dwarf?” Bilbo murmured under his breath while the two Dwarves quickly descended into bickering.

“Not likely,” a third voice informed him with warm humour.

Bilbo was beyond jumping at this point- he merely turned his head to look at the man that had come to stand just beyond his shoulder. A Hobbit, finally, with a head of dark chestnut curls and warm hazel eyes that brought Bilbo back to evenings spent alone in Bag End sitting in his father’s study, looking up at the painted portrait that his father had had commissioned of himself with his young wife in a rare moment of spontaneity.

“….Father,” he whispered.

Bungo Baggins smiled and reached out to clasp Bilbo’s shoulder with hands soft and stained with the faintest shadows of ink and dust. Bilbo swallowed thickly, feeling his father’s fingers tighten through the soft fabric of his tunic.

“My dear boy,” Bungo murmured, his voice rougher than Bilbo had always pictured it. The older Hobbit cleared his throat and blinked eyes that gleamed with a thin sheen of tears despite his best efforts. “Your mother wishes me to tell you that she is- that we are both incredibly proud of you, Bilbo. She says that she expects a detailed account of your adventures when you come to join us.”
Bilbo smiled slightly at the thought of his mother, stubbornly ignoring the faint twinge in his chest at the mention of joining his people.

“Am I to follow you, then?” he asked quietly.

Bungo frowned and cocked his head to the side, lips pursed in quiet confusion.

“Bilbo,” he said gently. “You are not coming to the Halls of Waiting just yet.”

“I- But I thought-.”

Bungo sighed heavily and spared a quick, irritated glance for the two Dwarves that were now watching them in silence. Frerin shrugged sheepishly in reply, though Thrain remained as impassive as his elder son often did on Arda.

“You are not dead yet, my boy,” Bungo told him gently. “You- you’re close, you’ve pushed yourself farther than any Hobbit truly should, but you have not passed, yet, and young Frodo and Meriadoc are working to save you.”

Bilbo blinked in shock at the mention of the two young Hobbits that he had occasionally glimpsed running through Hobbiton and the Shire.

“How-?”

“Mériadoc Brandybuck is a Summer, much like his father,” Bungo informed him casually. “Frodo, however, is a Winter.”

Bilbo reeled back in shock, hands shaking and freezing with ice and he wasn’t supposed to be a Winter here.

“Bilbo,” Bungo called, voice abruptly firm. “Calm down, son.”

Bilbo blinked up at his father, struggling to regain some sense of calm. He heard Frerin and Thrain say something beyond the faint buzzing his ears and instinctively turned to look at them, wide blue eyes catching sight of Frerin’s quick, encouraging smile before Bungo gently urged him to turn back.

“There has never been anything wrong with what you are,” Bungo told him sternly. “Anyone who says otherwise is a fool- which I believe you have already heard.”
“The Fell Winter-.”

“... was not your doing,” Bungo insisted. “Nor were you responsible for what happened to me. It was my choice to leave Bag End to try and help the others, if only so that your mother would not insist on going herself. I... I thought it better to make sure that my boy would grow up knowing a mother’s love, even if it came at the cost of a rather boring father.”

Bilbo choked on something that might have been a laugh and surged forward to pull his father into his arms, tears spilling freely from his eyes for the first time in years.

“Thank you,” he whispered thickly.

He felt arms curl around his shoulders and pull him closer before Bungo gently pushed him away with a shaky smile.

“Now then,” he huffed, eyes flickering over to the Dwarves observing them with no small measure of embarrassment. “Where were we?”

“Don’t mind us,” Frerin insisted wryly. “We were merely discussing my brother’s idiocy.”

Thrain glared at his youngest son, though his dark eyes remained faintly sheepish.

“...Aye,” he admitted. “My apologies, Master Baggins.”

“I- That is... quite alright?” Bilbo replied hesitantly. “Though I am afraid that I still do not understand what a ‘One’ is.”

“And we will not tell you,” Thrain told him with the first hint of mischief that Bilbo had seen in the Dwarf. “It is tradition,” he added in response to the look that Bilbo gave them. “Only Thorin can explain things to you.”

The Hobbit bit back a groan and managed to smile at the sight of Frerin’s unapologetic smirk.

“Though if you could possibly encourage him into beginning that conversation within the next week or so, that would be rather convenient,” Thrain added casually. “I have a wager going, you see.”

Bilbo snorted and offered the older Dwarf a short nod that earned him a low chuckle from Frerin.

“Grandfather is going to murder you,” he whispered loudly.
Thrain shrugged, his lips curling into a small smile that made Bilbo want to smile in return. Bungo merely hummed and gave Bilbo’s shoulder a final squeeze before stepping further away.

“I’ll have to inform old Gerontius that he owes me some Old Toby, then,” he mused smugly. His smirk faded slightly after a moment, eyes abruptly serious. “You should also inform Master Oakenshield that your mother has promised to string him up by his braids if he threatens you again.”

Bilbo grimaced on Thorin’s behalf and saw Thrain’s expression darken out of the corner of his eye, though Frerin merely shrugged with a slight gleam in his eyes.

“Mother and Grandmother have already made similar statements,” he offered. “And I’ll be more than willing to assist in stringing my brother up, if you will allow me to.”

Bungo gave the Dwarf a warm, wicked smile and reached out to place his palm against Bilbo’s neck.

“I will see you again, my boy,” he told him quietly. “Take good care of Frodo, and please be sure to keep the Sackville-Baggins out of my home.”

Bilbo choked on a laugh and managed a short nod before Thrain and Frerin stepped closer to bump their heads against his own.

“You will be good for my son, I think,” Thrain declared, apparently unaware of the bright blush that spread across Bilbo’s cheeks in response. A small knot of ice and fire was forming within Bilbo’s stomach and spreading through his veins, leaving his lungs burning for air and his body aching with the first hints of pain.

Frerin’s smile dimmed even as Bilbo’s surroundings began to slip into shadow, his next words echoing strangely in Bilbo’s ears.

“Farewell, Bilbo Baggins of the Shire,” he called in a voice that didn’t quite manage to be solemn. “Take good care of my brother.”

Bilbo nodded and kept his eyes on Frerin’s bright blue eyes, watching them fade into shadow before another pair of ice-blue eyes set against soft, pale features half-hidden beneath messy dark curls took their place. The eyes widened when Bilbo looked at them, crinkling at the edges in the wake of an awed smile.

“Un- Bilbo!” a small, youthful voice hissed as those eyes flickered warily towards a small pocket of warmth near Bilbo’s feet.
Bilbo grunted and, ignoring the stab of pain that went through him at the movement, carefully lifted himself onto his elbows to look at the three additional Hobbits that were curled up in the blankets around his feet, their auburn, red and brown curls mixing into a blur of messy curls and peaceful faces.

“Good heavens,” he croaked, mentally cringing at the rough tone of his voice. He blinked slowly, mind still whirling with what he had seen before he turned to look at the young Hobbit that remained awake at his side. “My dear Frodo…”

The boy bit his lip and offered him a small, hesitant smile, his fingers curling into tiny fists at his sides. Bilbo forced himself to smile in return and reached out to ruffle the boy’s curls beneath his aching fingers.

“I am very greatful to you, my boy,” he told him solemnly. “Thank you.”

Frodo’s cheeks flushed a bright pink and he glanced down at the small mound of blankets and furs that had been tucked around Bilbo while he… slept. Bilbo smiled at the action and risked a quick glance up at his surroundings, noting the dark stone walls inlaid with gold and jewels with no small amount of surprise.

“Where are we?” he mumbled.

“Thorin said that it’s where his family used to sleep,” Frodo told him. His features brightened suddenly at the mention of the Dwarf, his small body nearly vibrating with glee. “We should tell him that you’re awake! He’s been waiting outside the room for days, but he won’t come in when the others do, an’ Dwalin finally forced him to get some sleep. He’s been so sad,” he added quietly.

Bilbo hummed noncommittally, his heart fluttering strangely in his chest at the mention of Thorin’s actions.

“… What are you doing here, Frodo?” he asked quietly.

The young Hobbit winced. “I- My mum and da’ are gone.”

Bilbo sucked in a sharp breath and slowly reached out to pull the boy into a gentle hug, his heart aching in response to the tears that had started to seep through his thin shirt.

“They don’ like me because I’m a Winter,” Frodo admitted. “Merry an’ Pip an’ Sam helped me get away an’ I thought you could…”

“Yes,” Bilbo interrupted before the boy could finish. “I- That is to say, if you would like, I would
be more than happy to have you stay with me, my boy.”

Frodo smiled up at him shyly. “….Does this mean that I can call you ‘uncle’?”
season of love

Chapter Summary

Yes, this is sort of a play on the 'Rent' song. Sue me.

Chapter Notes

Hey, so, here's another update. I'm still debating on how exactly this work is going to end (as in, whether or not I will be expanding this into a short series), but I can promise you that this story will end with some really unexpected romance for a character that honestly doesn't get enough in my opinion. Anywho, I actually moved into my dorm room today, so consider this my move-in gift to you, and here's hoping college doesn't make the updating too terribly awful.

In the days following Bilbo's awakening, the royal quarters of Erebor were crowded daily with various members of the Company, along with several Elves and a Dwarf called Dain that had come from the Iron Hills to offer aid. Despite the Hobbit's (natural) alarm at the news that he had remained unconscious for the better part of a month following Frodo and Merry's first attempts at healing him, he was quickly assured by Bofur and Balin that all was well both within and without the Lonely Mountain. Only a handful of Elves had been lost in Azog's attack, and most of the wounded had recovered with little difficulty, including Fili and Tauriel, much to Kili's obvious relief. The princes of Erebor and the scarlet-haired Elf of Mirkwood had quickly become some of Bilbo's more frequent visitors, with Tauriel gently taking control over the remainder of Bilbo's healing from a lovely Elven maiden introduced to him as Arwen. The rest of the Company came in with the princes or without when they could, features always worn and dirty from Erebor's reconstruction yet bright with a triumphant sense of purpose that Bilbo had not seen in them before.

He smiled at Bifur and Bofur's enthusiastic descriptions of their work in the mines alongside Dain’s men, his stomach growling appreciatively whenever Bombur joined his relations with what food he could scrape together from the kitchens. Dori and Nori regaled Bilbo with stories of their reconstruction of the main halls and the markets between Dori’s constant fussing and Nori’s occasional, gruff offerings of trinkets that he had ‘found’ in Erebor’s wreckage. Merry, Pippin and Sam often features in those stories, much to the Gamgee’s obvious embarrassment and Merry and Pippin’s fierce pride, their seasons used with careful regard to the Hobbits’ safety to clear wreckage and fortify damaged pieces of stonework. Frodo, as Bilbo was constantly- and needlessly- assured, had never left his uncle’s side, though Dori quietly hinted that many of the Dwarves would not object to both Bilbo and Frodo using their Seasons to replicate some of the intricate, icy patterns that Bilbo had created in his despair. Ori and Dwalin made him laugh with the guard’s complaints over the lack of discipline found in Dain’s men and Ori’s awed ramblings over the miraculously-preserved library- hadn’t that been a splendid piece of news when Bilbo had seen the cautious hands clasped between the warrior and the scribe and the hints of a new braid hidden within Ori’s auburn hair. Both Dwarves had flushed a brilliant scarlet when Bilbo had congratulated them, an action which Balin and Oin continued to chuckle over whenever the older Dwarves could take time
away from healing and the inevitable paperwork that apparently came from reforming a kingdom. Gloin often came alongside his brother, his body fairly quivering with excitement as the days passed and his wife and son came closer to Erebor from their former home in the Blue Mountains.

Bilbo’s introductions to Dain and the children of Lord Elrond had been rather awkward, mainly due to the Hobbit’s frustration at his own inability to bow from the confines of his bed, though the twin sons of Elrond and the Dwarven lord of the Iron Hills had quickly put him at ease with various jokes that reminded the older Winter of his brief time with Frerin. Arwen and Legolas were both kind, though the prince of Mirkwood was not quite able to hide his growing chagrin at Tauriel’s apparent reluctance to leave Erebor and its youngest prince, and Bilbo’s shock at seeing Thranduil and Elrond’s presence within the mountain was almost eclipsed by Thranduil’s solemn declaration that Bilbo (along with the four young Hobbits that had become his loyal companions) was now an Elf-friend.

Throughout everything, Thorin had never once appeared in the doorway to Bilbo’s chambers, and a few careful questions directed towards Dwalin informed the Hobbit that the Dwarven king had retreated from his usual post outside of the door once he had been assured that Bilbo was awake and well. Bilbo tried to swallow the hurt he felt at this statement, struggling to remember how he had felt when Thrain and Frerin had spoken to him, had implied that he and Thorin…

“Uncle Bilbo?”

Bilbo shook himself from his thoughts and glanced down at the boy that rarely left his side, his lips curling up into an automatic smile. Frodo rarely spoke when there were others in the room—excepting the children of Elrond and a few members of the Company— and with Ori and Dwalin having just stepped out of the room, it hardly surprised him that the boy would turn to tug impatiently at his sleeve.

“Yes, my boy?” he prompted.

“You don’t think Mr. Thorin doesn’t like you, do you?” the boy asked, his little fingers curled into tiny fists as they always did when he was uneasy.

Bilbo blinked at him, his chest aching and cold as if he had been dunked in ice water.

“I- What do you think, Frodo?”

The Hobbit lad lunged for his hand, his icy eyes wide and bright with a surprising intensity.

“He doesn’t, Uncle Bilbo, he really doesn’t,” the boy insisted. “He just feels really bad because he said he… he hurt you, and then the fight…” The boy trailed off, his features darkening and twisting as they always did at the mention of that terrible day when so many things had gone wrong and Bilbo had been given up for dead. Bilbo reached for him instinctively and cradled the boy close to his chest just as his mother had always held him.
“He doesn’t hate you, Uncle,” Frodo insisted quietly. “I, um, I don’t know why he hasn’t come to see you... I told him to bring you flowers.”

Bilbo laughed in spite of everything and pulled the boy closer.

Trust a Hobbit to tell a Dwarf to find flowers in the middle of a desolated mountain.

The two Hobbits remained huddled together atop Bilbo’s too-large bed, each silent and alone with his own thoughts as the minutes ticked by and the muffled sounds of Dwarven footsteps passed beyond the door. Bilbo carefully pulled one of his hands away from its perch around Frodo’s shoulders, his fingers moving unconsciously as if they were juggling a small marble. He risked a glance after a few moments, vaguely concerned by the small, cool weight against his skin and watched a small bead of crystalline silver-blue ice roll across his palm. He stared at it for a long moment, feeling Frodo’s breaths slow against the skin of his neck, remembering the beads that he had seen adorning the braids in the hair of most of his Company. He recalled the four small, silver beads that he had glimpsed in Thrain’s dark locks, remembered the mischievous glint in the older Dwarf’s eyes when he had quietly urged Bilbo to speak with his son about this “One” business.

“Frodo?” he whispered, careful to keep his voice hushed in case the lad had fallen asleep while he wasn’t looking.

He needn’t have worried- Frodo looked up at him immediately, his childish features set expectantly.

“Could you run and get Fíli, Kíli, Balin and Merry for me, my boy? I need to speak with them about something.”

Frodo frowned slightly, his eyes widening when he caught sight of the ice bead cradled carefully within Bilbo’s hand.

“Uncle,” he began hesitantly. “You’re not supposed to-.”

“Frodo, my boy, do you know what made both of our mothers such extraordinary creatures?” Bilbo interrupted.

The boy blinked and shook his head with a slight, mournful frown at the mention of Primula Baggins.

“It is a proud thing to be a Baggins,” Bilbo continued, pointedly ignoring the look of hopeless confusion that was now present on Frodo’s features. “The Bagginses are known throughout the Shire to be a respectable folk, our gardens are often large, and our pantries are always full. Occasionally, a Baggins may be capable of great bravery and intelligence, but there is always one
thing that we are guaranteed to fail at. Do you know what that is, Frodo?"

The boy shook his head with another frown of confusion.

“Every Baggins from the beginning of time has always failed to gather their wits enough to
approach the object of their affection and state their feelings within an acceptable amount of time.
Throughout the years, this has caused many a Baggins- male and female- heartache. The
extraordinary thing about our mothers, Frodo, is that they did not wait for their particular Baggins
men to muster up the courage to approach them- they gathered their own wits and went after their
men first. Now, you know that I am Baggins enough to be guilty of many idiotic things in my
lifetime, Frodo, but I pray to Eru that there is enough of a Took in me to allow me to be sensible in
this, and I hope that you have enough of a Brandybuck in your dear soul that will allow you to help
me.”

Frodo stared up at him, his mouth parted slightly even as his ice-blue eyes began to gleam with a
long-hidden streak of mischief. The Hobbit lad leapt off of the bed without another word and
darted out of the room, leaving Bilbo to stare down at the bead, his own brow furrowed in thought.

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The room that housed Bilbo Baggins did not become quiet until late into the night, its every crevice
filled with the rumblings voices of Dwarves and the quieter tones of eager Hobbit children long
after that point in the night when Bilbo and his Hobbit companions had become used to slipping
into weary slumbers curled up amongst the various beds and pallets that the Dwarves had dragged
into the room. When the Dwarves finally departed for their own chambers, the shadows of Erebor
had lengthened and deepened in the fading light of weary torches. Their footsteps were louder than
usual in the corridors devoid of their usual signs of life, their own flickering shadows long and dark
enough to mask the fourth figure that had crept out of the room after them. Balin left the group
shortly after their departure, leaving the princes of Erebor alone with their silent companion as they
crept further into the royal wing. All three drew to a careful halt outside of a set of intricately-
carved doors that had somehow withstood its years beneath a dragon’s rule, their breaths rising in
silvery clouds in the suddenly-cool air.

“You ready, then?” Fíli murmured, his lips quirking up into a nervous smile beneath his
moustache.

The third figure bowed his head in agreement, his hands trembling slightly where they were
clasped in front of his chest.

Kíli sucked in a sharp breath and gently clasped his companion’s shoulder before pulling his
brother further down the hall, his dark eyes flickering over his shoulder every few moments to look
at the small figure in front of the door.

Bilbo waited until both of the princes had disappeared into the shadows of the hallway before he
pressed a cautious hand against the door, his shoulders slumping in slight relief when the door
opened easily under his touch. He slipped through the doors as quickly and quietly as possible, his
blue eyes locking almost immediately on the gentle orange glow of the hearth across the room and the hulking figure that seemed to be hunched in front of it.

The Hobbit took a deep, steadying breath before inching forward, silently praying that the Dwarves had been right, that Thorin would actually be-

“If you are here to lecture me again, Balin, I would rather that it wait until morning.”

Well, he’s awake, Bilbo’s mind supplied wryly, carefully not commenting on the way Bilbo’s breath froze in his chest at the sound of the Dwarf’s voice.

Thorin sighed, apparently frustrated by his companion’s silence and twisted around just as Bilbo took another step forward, his sharp, sapphire eyes widening comically in the dancing shadows cast by the fire.

“Bilbo?”

The Hobbit smiled shyly. “Hello.”

“You- What- You’re not supposed to be out of bed yet, are you?” Thorin demanded, voice rising rapidly in what the Hobbit fervently hoped was concern.

“Technically, no, though I certainly don’t intend to tell Oin that I disobeyed his instructions,” Bilbo replied, voice shaking slightly despite the effort that he put into keeping it steady.

Thorin took a quick, halted step forward, his entire body hovering awkwardly between the glow of the fire and the deeper shadows surrounding the Hobbit in the doorway. Bilbo found himself smiling at the movement and took the opportunity to move closer, his heart sinking slightly when the Dwarf nearly stumbled back to avoid him.

“….I have a question to ask you, Thorin,” he informed the Dwarf, his fingers curled into one, tight knot at the front of his chest that fairly ached with the cold. “I must confess that it has been bothering me for quite some time, though I hardly dared to ask it until now.”

“Master Baggins- Bilbo, I-“ Thorin began, eyes wide and dark with a queer sort of desperation.

Bilbo cut him off with a glance and felt the ice in his chest melt slightly at the warmth that he could practically feel emanating from the Dwarven king as he drew closer.

“Thorin Oakenshield,” he began solemnly, unable to truly repress a streak of wry amusement at how nervous the Dwarf looked at the address. “What in the name of the Valar is a ‘One’?”
Thorin froze, his very breath seeming to still within his lungs until Bilbo had to close what little distance remained between them and press a cautious hand against his warm wrist to ensure that the Dwarf in front of him was still flesh and blood. Thorin relaxed slightly at the Hobbit’s touch, his sapphire eyes still wide and dull with confusion.

“You- Where did you hear such a word?” he managed to croak.

“In Thranduil’s halls, if you remember,” Bilbo reminded him gently. “You… seemed upset by the term, and it made me think that perhaps it was a form of Dwarvish insult but I never could build up the nerve to simply ask and… Well, I’ll admit that I did not think much of it for a time afterwards, but then your father brought it up, and Frerin was entirely unhelpful-.”

“Frerin?” Thorin repeated, voice hoarser and weaker than it had been before.

Bilbo winced at his own carelessness and carefully led the Dwarf back to the bare couch that he had rested on before the Hobbit’s arrival, his quiet voice slowly gaining strength as he recalled the vision that he had seen when Frodo had been healing him. Thorin was silent and still throughout his tale, the slight tightening of his fingers around their new position at Bilbo’s wrist at the mention of his relations and Bilbo’s father the only sign that he was conscious of the Hobbit’s words. Bilbo’s voice trailed off into a long, deep silence by the end of his tale, leaving both Dwarf and Hobbit immersed in a heavy quiet broken only by the steady crackling of the fire within the hearth.

“I had no right to see you,” Thorin said finally, his voice breaking through the Halfling’s thoughts with all the ease of a war-hammer.

Bilbo frowned at the king’s words and edged closer, his body filled with a gentle warmth where it brushed against Thorin’s side.

“What in Yavanna’s name gave you that idea?” he demanded hotly, his cheeks flushing slightly beneath the weary stare of those deep sapphire eyes.

“I nearly killed you,” Thorin croaked. “I left you to face a dragon alone and watched the boys lift your burned body into their arms thinking that I had sent you to your death. Yet when you proved me wrong, when you opened your eyes and called for me, the very being who had sent you into that inferno, what did I do but slip back into that… that madness that had made me send you to Smaug in the first place.” The Dwarf fell silent for another long moment, his fingers moving to release Bilbo’s wrist until the Hobbit’s cool hand came down to stop him.

“When Fíli and Kíli destroyed the Arkenstone, I could still feel your throat beneath my hands,” the king confessed in a bare whisper. “All I could see was the pain and fear in your eyes, I hardly noticed the ice that you had created until Balin pointed it out and… I was terrified. I remembered how you had looked after facing Azog, and it was obvious to anyone that you had already used far more energy in Erebor than you had shown against the Orc. I was afraid that my foolishness had
driven you away to die alone and when the battle…” Here Thorin stopped, unable to continue, though his eyes glistened tellingly in the firelight.

“I don’t blame you,” Bilbo insisted quietly when silence fell between them once more. “For anything. I- I knew that you weren’t in your right mind before I even faced the dragon, and when I… felt what was in the Arkenstone, I understood. To be perfectly honest, I didn’t run because I was afraid of you, I didn’t really care about myself, yet I was devastated at the thought that I had hurt you.”

“I deserved it,” Thorin murmured.

“No, you didn’t.”

Silence reigned once more within the room, yet Bilbo felt that it was a gentler quiet now than it had been, and the fingers that grasped his wrist had relaxed and fallen to intertwine with his own fingers on the warmed surface between them.

“You still haven’t explained to me what a ‘One’ is, you know,” Bilbo remarked casually. “And I would hate to cost your father a wager.”

Thorin chuckled slightly and shook his head with a muted murmur of “Hobbits” before he fell silent again, expression abruptly thoughtful in the firelight.

“There is a legend among our people that Mahal made each of us with a piece missing, created us as only the half of a greater whole. We believe that this missing piece, this one soul that was meant to join with ours, is our greatest sign of Mahal’s love for us, and we are told to treasure such a being if we are ever lucky enough to find them. There are no specific rules- a person’s One can come from either a different gender or the same, it makes no difference, but there has rarely been an instance when a Dwarf would claim their One as a member of a different race. When I first realized that you were my One, I thought that I had been mistaken as such an instance is so rare. I pushed you away, thinking that my feelings would diminish with distance as well. I knew that I had been wrong when I saw you fleeing from the Misty Mountains- I hadn’t thought that I would see you again after the harsh words I spoke to you.

“I have known that you were my One for some time now, Master Baggins, though I was never able to tell you… What could I have offered you? I was still a king without a throne with no riches to give you, no comfort to promise, and I swore to myself that I would speak of my feelings once the Mountain was reclaimed and all danger eliminated.”

Bilbo frowned and nudged the Dwarf when he fell silent once again, his left hand still curled into a loose fist in front of his chest.

“Why didn’t you speak to me of this when I woke up?” he asked. “Erebor is yours once again, there is no danger, and I would have listened-.”
“I know that you would have listened, Bilbo,” Thorin interrupted gently. “And what is more, I still found room to hope that you would not be disgusted by my words, but I was no longer worthy to say them to you. What right did I have to speak to you when I was the one who had nearly caused your death? I drove my One away, I hurt you- I cannot ask you to overlook that in order to consider a life with me.”

Bilbo allowed the silence to stretch longer after Thorin fell silent, careful to keep his eyes focused on the fist at his chest rather than lift them to the sharp blue gaze that he could feel against his skin. He tightened his grip when he felt Thorin begin to pull away and looked up at the Dwarf with a small, wry smile, his fingers finally falling open to reveal a carved bead made of pure, silvery-blue ice.

“I had Merry test it to make sure that it wouldn’t melt,” he informed the Dwarf casually. “Balin and the boys helped me to finalize the designs- Fíli in particular was very helpful in showing me the design for the line of Durin.”

“I- Bilbo,” Thorin began hesitantly.

“Yes, I am aware of what this means,” Bilbo told him airily. “If I recall, you said that you were not worthy to court me; I believe this implies that I am perfectly able to court you, if I so wish to.”

“You are,” Thorin managed. “But… Why?”

“Will you allow it, then?” Bilbo pressed. “I, ah, must admit that I’m not the most proficient at braiding, though the boys tried to teach me some of it earlier-.”

“Why?” Thorin pressed. “Bilbo, why would you wish to… after what I have done, how could you want this with me?”

“Because I love you,” Bilbo murmured, his lips quirking up into a small, sad smile at the look of utter shock that crossed the Dwarf’s features at the statement. “You make me feel warm, you… you showed me that what I could do could be beautiful and not cursed. You loved me when I… couldn’t, and I can’t for the life of me understand how you managed to do that, but I’m not about to let you go now-.”

A pair of warm, soft lips crashed against his mouth before he could finish, swallowing his words before they could ever reach the fire’s golden light. Bilbo gasped and leaned instinctively into the touch, lips moving naturally against Thorin’s as fire spread through his blood and sent him burrowing closer to the Dwarf’s solid presence in search of more warmth. He felt Thorin’s hand clasp his own above the cool bead, cradling it between their palms.

Bilbo was the first to draw away from the kiss, his heart aching at the immediate flicker of panic across Thorin’s features before he flicked at the Dwarf’s thick hair.
“Where do you want this braid, then?” he asked cheerfully, breath catching in his throat at the awe and wonder in the Dwarf’s eyes.

Thorin bent his head without a word and helped Bilbo separate a small section of thick dark hair shot through with silver, his dark sapphire eyes never leaving Bilbo’s flushed features as the Hobbit deftly folded strands of hair into a simple braid. The bead slid perfectly into place near the end of the braid, its clear surface shimmering like a diamond in the orange glow of the fire. Thorin leaned forward slightly to press his lips in chaste touch against Bilbo’s cheek, his mouth moving inches above the Hobbit’s skin in a muted whisper.

“I will spend the rest of my life working to be worthy of what you have given me.”

“Dwarves,” Bilbo huffed before leaning in for a kiss of his own.

It would not truly surprise any future hearers of the night’s events (for though Bilbo and Thorin were rather private about the whole thing, neither had quite realized the true strength of curiosity and mischief that ran through the veins of Frodo Baggins and the princes of Erebor) that neither king nor burglar spoke many words after the braiding. And perhaps no words were needed that night, for it is a hard yet pure truth that actions are often more healing than words.
Hi guys! First of all, I am deeply and truly sorry for how long it has taken me to get this last chapter up. I would use school as an excuse, but it still does not make up for how incredibly long it has taken me and I am really sorry. Second, please consider this as a late Christmas/New Year gift, if you will, because you all deserve one for sticking with me for this long!
Also, quick note for the New Year: I will not be posting any new stories until I have finished them, that way I can have a steady updating schedule without having to worry about making time to write every week. I already have an idea for another Hobbit fic, but it may take a while to get up so if you ever want to deal with my writing again, something new will be coming, I promise!
Anywho, thank you all again for your patience. You are really amazing and I love you all <3

The return of Bilbo Baggins to the Shire would come to be a tale that lingered amidst the gossip of old Hobbit crones and such for many decades, though not for the reasons that the Hobbit in question would have assumed.

It had come to Bilbo’s attention early on in his recovery that, while Frodo may not have been missed by many in the Shire, Sam, Merry and Pippin all had families that, as far as he was aware, were perfectly well and no doubt frantic over the whereabouts of their children. Though admittedly reluctantly to return to the place that had shunned him for so many years, the Hobbit had quickly made it known that he would be accompanying the fauntlings back to the Shire once he was well enough to do so and quietly took some sheets of parchment to compose a few letters expressing that same intention to the families involved. No member of the Company made any particular sign that they were aware of his intended journey aside from a few vague noises of acknowledgement or agreement when the arrangement was first proposed, which should have been the older Winter’s first sign that his Dwarves were up to something.

Later, he would blame his gradual recovery and distraction over repair efforts in Erebor and his engagement to Thorin for the pure, dumb shock that went through his system when he began to pack for the journey and found himself faced with a towering pile of packs and supplies.

“What…” he whispered faintly, his fingers curling automatically around the small hand that pressed against his palm.

Frodo was still loathe to leave his uncle’s side for an extended period of time, though Thorin, the princes, and, surprisingly, Dwalin, were occasionally able to pull the boy away.

“Are we taking all of that with us?” he asked quietly, his ice-blue eyes raking across the miniature mountain of equipment with a small, troubled frown.

Merry whistled quietly behind them, his small fists braced against his hips as he came to stand beside the duo with Pippin and Sam trailing behind him.

“Does this mean we’ll have more ponies this time?” Sam asked quietly, unable to keep a small
twinkle out of his eyes at the prospect. The young Spring had discovered an affinity for the four-legged animals somewhere on the course of his journeys, and it was rare for a day to go by without him slipping down to the stables of Erebor to whisper to the ponies and horses that had accompanied the Dwarves of the Iron Hills and those few Elves and Men that had opted to remain within the Lonely Mountain for the time being. Elrond’s sons and Tauriel had amassed some reluctant acceptance from the Dwarves of Erebor and their kin, though Legolas continued to be met with suspicion by all but Gloin’s recently-arrived son, Gimli, on his occasional visits to the Mountain.

The Elven twins had already given their assurance that they would accompany the Hobbits to Rivendell, at the very least. Perhaps it was their equipment that made the pile seem so big?

“Oi, would you mind moving aside for a minute? I think I’ve forgotten my wire…”

The Hobbits pulled away with varying expressions of surprise as Nori pushed past them and began to rummage through the bags, his star-shaped hair bouncing slightly when he pulled away moments later with a small scowl.

“Damn,” he sighed. “Maybe Dori took it…”

“I have it,” Bofur informed him, his arrival followed almost immediately by his brother and cousin. “Bifur wanted to use it in one of his carvings.”

“Tell ‘im to ask for permission next time,” Nori grumbled, mouth twitching when Bifur merely pressed a small wooden carving into his hands in lieu of a response.

Bofur shrugged, unconcerned, and added the pack on his shoulders to the pile.

“Brought it back, didn’ I?” he hummed. “Alright there, Bilbo?”

“You- What are you doing?” the Hobbit asked faintly.

“Step aside if you don’t wish to be squashed,” Dori grunted before Bofur could reply, quickly adding his own pair of packs to the pile despite a chorus of muted grumbling from the scribe behind him. Ori’s features brightened when Dwalin and Balin came to stand beside him, the warrior’s calloused hand slipping easily into the scribe’s smaller one after weeks of practice.

“You-,” Bilbo tried again, any further words drowned out by Merry and Pippin’s excited squeals as they were lifted onto the shoulders of Fíli and Kíli.

The Hobbit shook his head and felt a warm, strong arm wind its way around his shoulders, his body leaning instinctively into the familiar body beside him even as he directed a frown at the warmth’s owner.

“Thorin,” he greeted flatly. “What is going on?”

“We’re going to the Shire,” the king replied with a small smirk.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Ye said yerself that the lads needed ta be taken home,” Dwalin reminded him, one eye watching his brother as Balin drifted away to greet a small army of ponies and horses brought to them by Elrond’s sons and Tauriel.

“Yes, but- I didn’t think all of you- when did you-?”
“We started planning right after you told us,” Kíli explained easily, barely batting an eye when a giggle from Pippin had his hair flying around his face in a sudden breeze.

“None of us wanted to stay behind,” Fíli added. “Dain said he’d be willing to watch over things while we were away, and Mum will be able to keep things running smoothly where he can’t.”

Bilbo bit back a shudder. He had been introduced to the Lady Dís when she had arrived in the same caravan bearing Gimli and Bombur’s families and had promptly lost all ability to form a coherent sentence when she glared down at him with Thorin’s piercing blue eyes rimmed with ice. He had watched her give Thorin a sharp scolding that would have had any Hobbit faunt in the Shire scrambling for cover before turning her full and undivided attention to himself and Frodo, had had to clasp his nephew’s shoulder to keep from sprinting away from that dark look as fast as he possibly could.

His ribs were still groaning from the bone-crushing hug that she had given him soon after.

“And… All of you are going to come with us. To the Shire,” he clarified slowly.

“Aye,” Oin agreed as the white-haired Dwarf joined the group alongside his brother and nephew. “It’d be unseemly of us ta let the future Consort go without a proper escort, after all, let alone the King and heirs.”

“Especially since my brother would have been absolutely miserable if forced to stay behind,” Dís mused, taking time to ruffle Sam’s curls with her hand before gifting Bilbo with a rather feral grin. “Even my sons are not as bad as he is when it comes to pouting and brooding.”

Bilbo rolled his eyes at the loud objections such a statement earned from the king and princes, his hand tightening around Frodo’s when the boy giggled quietly in response.

“You… All of you… you’re alright with coming?” he clarified slowly. “You would leave your home again, for this?”

The Company sobered immediately and gave the Hobbit what could only be described as a look. Bilbo found that he didn’t much like such a look, though he was prevented from saying so by a light pressure on his shoulder and a sudden view of Thorin’s bright sapphire eyes.

“Bilbo,” he murmured. “You left your home to bring us to ours. It is only right that we do the same for you and your kin.”

“The Shire isn’t my home,” Bilbo murmured, choosing not to make such a statement too loudly for the sake of Sam, Merry and Pippin.

Thorin smiled softly and leaned forward to press their foreheads together, the braid that Bilbo had put into his hair swinging gently just in front of his ear.

“No,” he agreed. “But we are still coming with you.”

Bilbo found himself smiling and nodded, his skin brushing against Thorin’s before the king pulled away with a quiet grin.

“To the Shire, then,” the Winter Hobbit declared drily, his smile widening at the squeals of delight that came from Merry and Pippin when Fíli and Kíli began to bounce the fauntlings on their shoulders.

“And may Yavanna help us,” he added under his breath, unable to keep himself from wondering
just what he had gotten himself into this time around.

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The journey was fairly painless, in the end, which did wonders for Bilbo’s hopes of surviving to a decent age without his hair going prematurely grey. The Company failed to attract as much bad luck as it had the last time (though there had been a moment, while crossing through the Misty Mountains, where Frodo had nearly fallen, only to be caught by Thorin just feet above a patch of ice that made Bilbo shudder from the familiarity and wonder at the echoes of a creature’s desperate screams…).

True to their word, the sons of Elrond (with the odd addition of Tauriel and Legolas, much to the glee of the princes and Gimli- who had only been allowed to come out of sheer stubbornness) accompanied them to Rivendell before they departed, leaving Tauriel and Legolas the sole Elven guides of the Dwarrows and their Hobbits. Bilbo and Frodo grew quieter the closer they came to the Shire, so much so that Thorin pulled his intended aside one night while the others huddled around the fire, quietly whispering encouragements into the Hobbit’s ears until a nearby tree had been covered in beautiful, curling tendrils of ice and snow.

“… I do not know what they will say to us,” Bilbo admitted. “I no longer have the pendant, the Valar know I would never let Frodo wear it, and… they may decide to… I have no wish to cause Merry or Pippin or Sam any pain because of how the others will see us, and Frodo is worried enough as it is.”

Thorin said nothing, only drew the Winter Hobbit close, his strong arms an unspoken promise of support and protection whenever Bilbo should have need of it.

The strange caravan drew much attention in Bree- as Bilbo had known that they would- and yet, surprisingly, it was not until the Company came to the very edge of the Shire that he found the other Hobbits.

…Perhaps “found” was not the right word.

The Shire was silent when they entered it, its streets and paths empty in a way that they never were on fine summer days when any respectable Hobbit (with a respectable Season) would be out for a stroll. Bilbo frowned and carefully maneuvered his pony until he was closer to Thorin and the small Winter child that rode in front of the king. He felt the unease of the Company rise around them all like a fog, and experienced a sudden burst of gratitude for the presence of Tauriel and Legolas when the two Elves dismounted and came to walk beside him and Thorin, flanking them both in a way that Dwalin and Bifur could not on their own mounts.

Bilbo’s unease only grew the further they rode into the Shire and Hobbiton, his eyes combing the empty fields even as his fingers tingled with a familiar cold that even Thorin’s warmth could not offset.

“Master Baggins,” Tauriel murmured suddenly, her light, gentle voice as sombre as it had been when they had first encountered each other in the Mirkwood.

Bilbo looked down at her, then looked up again when she wordlessly pointed ahead of them, his eyes following hers until he took in the large crowd gathered at the front of his home.

“…Oh,” he whispered, his chest tightening around a sudden lack of air in his lungs.

“Ghivashel-,” Thorin began, his words dying when Bilbo shook his head and dismounted with an
ease that he had never known before his adventure.

“Merry, Pippin, Sam,” he called quietly. “If you all would come with me?”

The three young Hobbits nodded solemnly and allowed themselves to be placed onto the ground by Dwalin, Fili and Kili with their eyes fixed uneasily on Bag End.

“Thorin,” Bilbo whispered, immediately grabbing the king’s attention. “Keep Frodo with you.”

Thorin’s eyes darkened but he nodded slowly, his arms tightening around Frodo even as the fauntling began to squirm.

“Uncle-,” he started.

“Hush,” Bilbo told him with a small smile. “Just… let me try and handle this, Frodo. It will work out alright.”

He paused and held out his hands to Pippin and, after another moment, Sam, waiting until Merry had taken hold of Pippin’s other hand before he began to move towards the crowd and left his friends behind him.

Lobelia was the first to see him- something that did not actually surprise him now that he thought about it.

“He’s here!” the Summer Hobbit shrieked, voice as high, shrill and unpleasant as Bilbo had remembered it to be.

The others turned at the sound of the Hobbit woman’s voice, their eyes soon locked on Bilbo and his companions with such intensity that it sent a flicker of ice down his spine.

“Where’s the pendant?” another Hobbit- who sounded suspiciously like Tiberius Chubb- called.

“I don’ see it,” cried another.

“He has the children!”

“Let go of the children, Master Baggins,” the Thain called warily.

Bilbo took a deep, steadying breath to stop the ice numbing his fingertips from spreading to Pippin and Sam. He felt the boys grip onto him tighter than they had before, sending a brief flicker of air and an odd, cool warmth through his skin as their Seasons slipped past their control. Merry’s eyes had begun to flicker like dull embers beneath the eyes of the Shire, gradually glowing brighter the closer they came to the group assembled outside of Bag End and the small crowd of familiar Hobbits that had pulled away to meet them.

“Da!” Sam yelled, his small hand slipping easily out of Bilbo’s as the Spring lad ran straight into his father’s arms.

Hamfast Gamgee scooped the boy up without hesitation, his kind, weary eyes never leaving Bilbo’s even when his wife and children huddled against and around him, all of them striving to embrace the oldest Gamgee child. The entire clan came to a halt a respectful distance from Bilbo and his remaining companions, though whether this was due to their fear of Winter or a true inability to move, Bilbo could not say. Paladin and Esmerelda Took had no such reserve, striding neatly past the huddle of Gamgees with their spouses and Paladin’s daughters in tow. The Tooks plucked their sons out of Bilbo’s grasp without hesitation and handed them off to their spouses.
before turning back to the wayward Baggins, hands settling neatly onto their hips in an action so reminiscent of Belladonna that it made a lump rise in Bilbo’s throat.

“So,” Esmerelda said flatly, her bright copper curls- the exact shade as Paladin’s- twisting and dancing in a sudden Autumn breeze. “You look well.”

Bilbo blinked in shock and bobbed his head in a quick, automatic nod, his eyes flickering past his cousin to Paladin in blatant confusion. Paladin merely raised his eyebrows, his hands lifting from his hips to cross in front of his chest.

“I trust that my Pippin was not too much trouble,” he said, eyes flashing with something that could have been humour or anger.

“I- No, no, I’m told he was very helpful,” Bilbo explained quickly. “He- all of them- their help was very much appreciated by the Dwarves of Erebor.”

Esmerelda’s eyes widened even as Paladin’s narrowed, their eyes flashing in quick succession beneath a sharp blast of wind before Bilbo could even reconsider his words.

“Erebor?” Esmerelda repeated, voice deceptively sweet. “And where is that, exactly?”

“The Lonely Mountain, Mum!” Merry piped up helpfully from his place within Saradoc Brandybuck’s wide arms. “Got all the way through the Mirkwood forest, we did. Even went through the Misty Mountains.”

“The Elves helped us,” Pippin added helpfully from where he was perched upon his mother Eglantine’s hips. “They were real nice.”

“That’s nice, darling.” Eglantine and Paladin murmured in unison even as another blast of wind nearly took Bilbo off of his feet. Saradoc and his wife were no better, the Brandybuck’s eyes glowing with a bright, cruel flame that had Bilbo taking an instinctive step backwards in alarm.

“You led our children through the Misty Mountains?” Saradoc growled.

“It’s not his fault!” Sam squeaked from somewhere in the middle of the Gamgee huddle. “We was tryin’a help Mister Frodo, we were. Mister Baggins had nothin’ ta do with it.”

“He’s right!” Merry added, his small limbs flailing in an effort to break free of his father’s grip. “It’s our fault, he just brought us back.”

“Meriadoc-,” Saradoc began, voice thick with exasperation. His sentence was cut off quite abruptly by the loud, piercing shriek of laughter of a Bracegirdle.

“Really, Master Baggins?” Roselia Bracegirdle sneered, her pinched features twisted in a way that even her sister Lobelia had never managed. “Are you so desperate that you would force children to plead for you?”

“I hardly forced them to do anything,” Bilbo snapped. “I am sorry that you suffered such pain and worry, and I am sorry for any danger that your children have faced, but believe me when I say that I never asked them to do what they did, and would never cause harm to anyone here if I could help it.”

“And yet I fear that you cannot help it,” Tom Sackeville mused coolly. “We have all witnessed the things that happen when you cannot control yourself, Master Baggins.”

Bilbo clenched his hands into fists and forced his head to remain high, noting with a dim sort of
surprise that Esmerelda, Paladin and Hamfast were all looking at the Sackevilles with varying shades of irritation.

“Be that as it may,” he stated firmly. “I did not ask these children to come to my aid, though I am glad that they did for all three had a hand in saving my life. For that, I will be eternally grateful.”

“More’s the pity,” someone whispered.

“ENOUGH!” Saradoc shouted, his golden curls whipping around his head like the flames that still glowed in his eyes and licked at his fingertips. The future Master of Buckland glared at the surrounding Hobbits and carefully passed a subdued Merry to Esmerelda before moving past her to stare at Bilbo with a furrowed brow and questioning eyes.

“Is that true?” he asked quietly. “Did my son… All of our sons, they helped to save you?”

“And Frodo,” Bilbo murmured. “I fear I would have been lost without them.”

Saradoc sighed and shook his head, his lips quirking up into a small, wry smile.

“There will be no living with him after this, you know,” he murmured. “Saves one life and suddenly the lad’s a bloody hero.”

“The Dwarves probably haven’t helped any,” Bilbo admitted shyly. “I know my lot can be terrible flatterers when they’re in the mood for it.”

Paladin and Esmerelda snorted loudly, brief flickers of amusement that faded when the Mayor of Michel Delving stepped forward with the Thain and all twelve of the Shirrifs in tow. The Mayor and the Thain were stout Summer Hobbits with muted fire in their eyes and a weary gravity about them that nearly masked the way their figures trembled beneath Bilbo’s gaze. The twelve Shirrifs were more varied folk, differing in their appearance and Seasons yet united in the fear that spread through their eyes like blood.

It made something in Bilbo’s gut turn to look at them, to see the fear in their eyes that, until recently, he had seen mirrored in his own. He had seen and faced many things in his travels, dragons and beasts and greed that made his earlier fears seem baseless and petty, and yet he still found it within himself to tremble at the blind, ignorant fear directed at him by those who did not know better.

“Enough of this,” the Thain announced quietly. “You have done what you promised, Master Baggins, and for that we are thankful. However, I am afraid that I must ask you to depart.”

“Fortinbras-,” Esmerelda began sharply.

“By the Valar, cousin, he has barely arrived!” Paladin broke in.

“At least give ‘im time ta rest,” Hamfast growled, voice muffled by the family still gathered around him.

“I am sorry, Bilbo,” Fortinbras Took continued firmly, though his eyes wavered in genuine regret. “But I cannot do otherwise. The Shire has… made its views known on the matter.”

“Not all of the Shire, I’d wager,” Saradoc mused airily, eyes lingering sharply on where Lobelia stood amongst her relations with her hands braced against her ample hips.

“Please,” Bilbo interrupted before anyone else could speak a word. “Please, at least give me leave to rest with my companions. It has been a long journey, and I would give them a place to recover
and gather supplies, if I could.”

“‘Companions’?” Old Cordelia Chubb repeated shrilly. “Who in Arda would travel with you? Or do they not know what you are?”

“Tha’ would be us,” Bofur called out, causing Bilbo to jump at his sudden proximity. The miner’s rich, lilting voice was cold in a way that Bilbo had rarely heard it and his eyes, when Bilbo turned to meet them, were hard as stone. “An’ we know exactly what Bilbo is.”

“He’s one of us,” Kíli declared shortly, his footsteps muffled by the heavier tread of his brother and Dwalin.

One by one the Dwarves of Erebor came to stand beside the Winter Hobbit. If he craned his neck, Bilbo could catch the barest glimpse of copper and silver gold standing over the last of the Dwarves, a quiet hum of taut bowstrings the only noises earned from Tauriel and Legolas.

Thorin was just as silent, a slight hitch in his breath and a frightening gleam in his eye the only sign of his fury. His arms were dusted in snow and melting ice where they remained wrapped around Frodo and yet his fingers were warm when they brushed against Bilbo’s in silent support.

“And who are you, then?” the First Shirrif demanded gruffly.

“I am Thorin Oakenshield, King Under the Mountain and Lord of Erebor,” Thorin replied coolly. “Those with me are my Company, those who retook the Mountain and assisted in its repair. I hired Master Baggins at the beginning of our journey, and would count him as one of my own without hesitation.”

“That is hardly comforting,” Lobelia snapped. “What do men of stone have to fear from ice and winter?”

Thorin’s eyes flashed and he made to step forward just as Dwalin, Bofur and Bifur moved to do the same. Bilbo stopped them all with a glance and a hesitant hand pressed to the edge of Thorin’s sleeve.

“I know the power of Bilbo Baggins,” Thorin declared instead. “I have seen its beauty, and I have felt its power. It was Master Baggins who freed me from the curse of my forebears, and it was through his efforts and those of his nephew that hope was brought back to my halls. I respect his abilities as I would respect those of any other warrior, but I do not fear him as one would an animal.”

Several of the Hobbits shifted uneasily at that, including Paladin and Eglantine, who glanced at Bilbo with something akin to regret. Fortinbras bowed his head in acknowledgement, dimmed eyes meeting the challenging gazes of the Sackevilles and their ilk with pursed lips and a muted sigh.

“I bid you welcome, King of Erebor,” he greeted. “But I am afraid that I cannot reverse my decision. Bilbo Baggins may not linger here, he can have no place amongst us.”

“This is his home!” Fíli argued, Durin blue eyes flaring brighter than any flame in his anger. “Look, his very house stands behind you all.”

“It does not have to,” Bramble Grubb shrieked, her voice echoed and hailed by a small crowd gathered at the fringes. Sparks and flames danced across the heads of the Summer Hobbits, carried by flashes of Autum air and the rumblings of Spring. Bilbo felt the blood drain from his features as tongues of fire licked at the edges of his former home, seeing beyond the walls to his mother’s glorybox and his parents’ portraits, his father’s library…
Lobelia cried out in savage delight and added her own stream of glimmering fire, letting the flames lash against the walls of Bag End until they began to catch at the faded green shutters.

A stream of ice shot past her outstretch hand and killed the flame before it could even think of spreading beyond its lonely perch. The crowd of Hobbits drew away from the ice as one, watching it centre around a singed shutter before it faded, leaving Bag End little change from how it had been before.

“…Do you see now?” Lobelia hissed. “He nearly took my hand off!”

“He was defendin’ his home!” Nori roared.

“What, by destroying ours?” Bramble yelled back.

“Don’t be a fool, Bramble Grubb!” Esmerelda snapped. “His powers did not even come near you.”

“Of course a Took would support this,” Tom Sackeville called.

“The Brandybucks will stand by both her and Master Baggins,” Saradoc snapped.

“Aye, an’ the Gamgees, too!” Hamfast declared, finally parting from his family to stand before Bilbo alongside Saradoc and the Tooks. Others followed after a pause, some more and less familiar to Bilbo, including a cautious lass whose appearance heralded a few loud calls of protest from the Proudfeet clan.

The voices of the Shire continued to rise in tumultuous protest, mingled here and there with the cries of Dwarves and the song of Elven voices. Beneath it all came the whimpers of the children, unwilling to cry and yet too frightened to do anything but.

Bilbo heard the children, more than the cries of his kin and friends. He cried aloud and smacked his foot against the ground, sending a single spear of ice reaching for the sky beyond. All voices quieted immediately at the sight, with several of the Hobbits fainting outright into the arms of those closest to them.

Thorin merely smirked, though only those closest to him would have been able to make out such an expression. For, hidden amongst the ridges of newly formed ice, the king had caught sight of carved winter flowers, and a tiny mountain made of silver.

“No more fighting,” he declared, voice carrying easily as it always had amongst his kin. “I did not come to this land to watch you spit at one dear to me, nor did I come only to supply meaningless support. Although I cannot easily forgive the slights that you have given to my intended, my people owe your children and Master Baggins a debt that will not be easily repaid. I would count my kingdom blessed to see more of Merry, Pippin, and Sam, and as they are yet young, I know that this sentiment may not be welcome here. But know this: for Bilbo’s sake, and for Frodo’s and Sam’s and Merry and Pippin’s, I would welcome any Hobbit of the Shire, of whatever Season, if they were willing to come to Erebor. My people will welcome any of your kin, no matter if they return with our Company or if they should follow years into the future. We will welcome you, so long as you understand that we will not allow any additional cruelty to be shown to either Bilbo or Frodo Baggins.

“My Company will depart from the Shire once Master Baggins has declared himself ready to leave it. Any who choose to accompany us will be welcome, provided that Master Baggins approves.”

Bilbo blinked when Thorin turned to him expectantly, his gaping mouth snapping shut long enough for him to give a slow, cautious nod born more from the wide-eyed expectancy present in
his nephew and the younger Hobbits than out of any extraordinary goodwill form his own spirit. More than a few Hobbits stared openly at him in response to such an action, though he would be hard pressed to determine whether they were more shocked by his acceptance of Thorin’s offer or the offer itself. Bilbo decided then that he did not wish to linger to find out and cast a longing glance in the direction of Bag End before he reached out to press his hand to Thorin’s arm.

“Let’s go, Thorin,” he murmured. “The Prancing Pony will offer us rooms, if you are not against travelling a little longer.”

Thorin frowned at the statement. “But… this is your home.”

Bilbo smiled, remembering the chambers in Erebor that had been set aside for the Mountain’s resident Hobbits soon after their battle with the Orcs. He remembered the library deep in the heart of the Mountain stacked high with books and tomes that he and Ori were still exploring and the kitchens that had become Bombur’s miniature kingdom. He thought of the mines and the caverns lined with faded tapestries and portraits from bygone eras, of the simple room that somehow managed to hold his old travelling companions at least once a week for dinners that always ended in songs that brought tears to his eyes and laughter to his lips.

“No it isn’t,” he murmured.

The Dwarf king blinked, features going blank in surprise before they softened into an expression that never failed to make the breath fly out of Bilbo’s lungs in a quick burst of inner fire.

“Very well,” Thorin said quietly. The King Under the Mountain turned to bark a few, quick orders at his companions, lips quirking at the muted grumbles that arose in response even as the Dwarfs moved to follow him without question.

“If I may,” Paladin interrupted quickly, his voice shaking slightly beneath the immediate attention of fourteen Dwarrows, two Elves and two Hobbits. “You are all more than welcome in Tuckborough. Granted, our halls are not as extensive as those of the Brandybucks, but I am sure that we can find room for all of you.”

“If it is space that you need,” Saradoc broke in with a grumble and an unsubtle pinch from his wife. “We have plenty of room to accommodate you all in Buckland. I- It is the least that I can do.”

Bilbo stared, open-mouthed, at his relatives, his pale blue gaze meeting Frodo’s equally-wide, cautious gaze. His throat worked against something that might have turned into a sob and he gave a quick, curt nod to both Saradoc and Paladin.

“I- If you do not mind, I would go with my companions to Tuckborough, as it is closer,” he said. Paladin smiled quietly and bowed his head in a nod, his features screwing up into a wince when Pippin squealed in delight from within his mother’s arms.

“I get ta share with Frodo!” the young Autumn declared loudly, young jaw set as if to dare anyone to object.

Paladin merely hummed and stepped forward to offer his hand to each member of the Company, his grimace steadily growing more and more pronounced as each Dwarf took the opportunity to crush his smaller hand beneath their own. The Took almost looked relieved when Bilbo cautiously took his hand after Thorin, muttering under his breath about Dwarves being made of stone after all. The two Hobbits paused to look at each other, Bilbo’s hands tightening unconsciously at the sad glimmer in Paladin’s eyes.
“Forgive me, cousin,” Paladin whispered. “I am as much at fault as anyone here, and more so because I failed to stand beside you when you needed me. I… There are many things that I need to discuss with Eglantine and the others, but I will be honoured to stand at your side, whether in the Shire or in Erebor.”

Bilbo bit his lip and slowly pulled Paladin into a loose embrace, giving the Autumn plenty of time to pull away if he wished to do so. Paladin simply snorted and surged forward to wrap his arms around the Winter, a low groan breaking from both of their lips when a low thump alerted them to Esmerelda’s addition to the huddle.

“Thank you,” Bilbo whispered, oblivious to the whispers and hisses that still traveled amongst many of the assembled Hobbits and the quiet grumbles and chuckles of his Dwarves behind them.

He listened to Esmerelda and Paladin giggle in his ears and felt gentle warmth spread through his limbs that he had only looked to feel from his Dwarves and the young Hobbits that had followed him to Erebor. He burrowed closer instinctively, lips quirking up into a tiny smile of his own.

He did not belong in the Shire, but for this one moment, he could believe that it was still his home.

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In the end, it took some careful negotiation from Saradoc, Paladin and Hamfast (Thorin was explicitly banned from that meeting) to convince the Thain to limit his earlier ban to Hobbiton rather than the entirety of the Shire. Both Took and Brandybuck families were quick to follow the examples of Saradoc and Paladin in the offering of their homes, though none had yet to openly accept Thorin’s earlier offer of a home in Erebor. Granted, Bilbo had caught sight of a few scattered groups of Hobbits glancing at him and the Dwarves with expressions that bordered on longing, and Merry, Pippin, and Sam could hardly be convinced not to plan future exploits in Erebor with Frodo upon their apparently inevitable return. Still, the Hobbit remained convinced that none would make the return journey to Erebor at the end of the few weeks that both Bilbo and Thorin had allowed in the Shire for the Company’s recuperation and Bilbo’s own form of recovery. They were Hobbits, after all, and relatively sane ones as well (for the most part). How could he expect anyone to give up their homes- and would he even want them to, at the end of it all?

Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin slipped away one day towards the end of their stay in the Shire, much to the chagrin (and near panic) of their parents and the Company. Bilbo swallowed his own worry in favour of calming the others, quietly assuring them that the boys would no doubt return and were only looking for one last adventure together before Frodo was taken back to Erebor. Both Eglantine and Saradoc lapsed into uncomfortable silence at that, while Esmerelda and Paladin merely nodded. Out of all of the Hobbits, Bilbo would almost have put money on Esmerelda and Paladin taking up Thorin’s offer, if not for their respective positions in the Shire. Paladin was next in line to take over as Thain and head of the Took clan, while Esmerelda and Saradoc were likewise obligated to remain as the leaders of the Brandybuck clan. No doubt Merry and Pippin would someday be required to remain in the Shire for similar reasons, though Bilbo was loathe to speak of such a thing to Frodo. Let the boys have their dreams and adventures for a little while longer- he would be the last one to take them back into reality before their time.

Bilbo jumped at a sudden thump behind him and turned just in time to catch Bifur glaring at the door. His gnarled fingers were curled gently around a block of wood and a few tools, his beloved harpoon notably absent following a rather spirited lecture from Esmerelda regarding weapons in the Shire. The Dwarf grimaced and signed something apologetically, eyes flickering regretfully to the cup of tea that had nearly been upset by Bilbo’s sudden movement. Bilbo waved him off with a
small smile and watched the toymaker tromp out of Brandyhall with a few, muted grumbles.

“I wonder where he’s off to,” he murmured.

“I wouldn’a worry too much,” Bofur announced, his features creasing into an easy smile when Bilbo jumped once again at his sudden arrival. “’e just needs a little time alone, is all. Hobbit holes are far bigger than we had expected, but it’s still good for him ta get some time alone.”

Bilbo nodded, lips quirking up into a smile of his own when Bofur settled into the armchair across from him without another word, his dark eyes watching the Hobbit carefully beneath the brim of his hat.

“You alright?” the Dwarf asked.

Bilbo nodded again, choosing not to mention the twisting flickers of pain and odd, unfamiliar gratitude when faced with the inhabitants of the Shire. For every Brandybuck or Took or Gamgee that had begun to bob their heads to him and offer small smiles of greeting, there were still plenty of Hobbits who simply didn’t know what to make of him and were only too happy to turn away.

Bofur raised his eyebrows, unconvinced, but let the matter go. His own fingers were dancing across a block of wood similar to the one that Bifur had taken away, carefully carving and moulding the wood into the familiar figure of a Hobbit woman with loose curls and her mouth curled in a grin.

“Is that Esmerelda?” he asked.

Bofur hummed and offered the half-finished carving for Bilbo’s perusal, his hands disappearing into the folds of his tunic to reveal two other carvings of Saradoc and Merry.

“Have others o’ the Took back in the room,” he reported cheerfully. “Something ta thank them for takin’ us in.”

Bilbo nodded and turned the carving over in his hands, marvelling at the smoothness of the wood and the incredible detail that the Dwarf had put into it.

“It’s lovely,” he murmured as he handed the carving back. “She’ll love it.”

Bofur beamed at the praise, his eyes flickering up and brightening further even as he got to his feet.

“Right, I think it’s time I went looking for that brother of mine,” he chirped. “Bilbo. Your Highness.”

Bilbo blinked and craned his neck to look behind him, catching sight of the slight, exasperated smile on Thorin’s face just before Bofur managed to scurry away.

“I keep telling them not to call me that,” Thorin muttered, his eyes flickering pointedly to the chair that Bilbo had taken for himself. The Hobbit merely raised his eyebrows, lips quirking up into a smirk that disappeared immediately when Thorin bent to lift him unceremoniously into his arms and redeposit him on top of the chair in the Dwarven king’s lap.

“Thorin,” Bilbo hissed, his cheeks flaring a bright, hot scarlet at the Dwarf’s resulting chuckle. “This is hardly appropriate, you know.”

“We’ve done worse in Erebor,” Thorin replied. “And I distinctly remember you sharing my bedroll on the road, Master Baggins.”
“We are in my cousin’s home,” Bilbo snapped.

“I asked their permission to court you last night,” Thorin murmured. “I doubt they will mind a few innocent gestures now that they are aware of the situation.”


Thorin shrugged, his expression abruptly uncomfortable. “I… I thought that it would be best to ask, and your relations were very… supportive.”

“They asked you if we were sleeping together,” Bilbo guessed flatly.

“Repeatedly.”

The Hobbit winced and grumbled a few words that would have offended any respectable inhabitant of the Shire had they been within earshot. Thorin chuckled again, quieter this time, his cheeks flushing a light pink colour when Bilbo looked back at him.

“You… Are you alright? With me asking them?” the Dwarven king asked hesitantly.

Bilbo hummed and twisted around to press his lips against Thorin’s in a quick, fleeting kiss. He pulled away with a smug smirk and took in the Dwarf’s dazed expression.

“I love you,” he whispered.

Thorin’s features softened immediately and he pulled the Hobbit closer, burying his features in Bilbo’s growing curls.

“I love you, too.”

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Bifur wasn’t entirely sure where he meant to go once he left the home of Bilbo’s cousins. Despite the days and weeks that he had spent in the area, much of the Shire still looked the same to him, with none of the warm stones and mines that he had learned to love again in the halls of Erebor. Nor were the rolling plains, meadows and hills anything like the home that he had known in Ered Luin, surrounded as it was by trees and the fingers of babbling brooks. The Shire was a different world, one more apt to remind him of long nights on an open road than the comforting walls of a mountain.

That wasn’t to say that he didn’t like the Shire. It was a peaceful place, and he had found one late, lonely night that several of its fields and riverbanks were lovely places to carve and to think.

So it was that the toymaker with an axe in his head settled himself in the midst of the emptiest meadow that he could find, acutely conscious of every stare and uneasy murmur that followed after him whenever he passed a Hobbit out for an afternoon stroll. He was used to the stares and whispers even amongst his own kind, and to find such treatment in the Shire had hardly been a surprise, though it still hurt somewhere deep down. He knew that the other Dwarves were stared at, knew that it had taken days before the bravest of the Hobbits had dared to walk up to any of them, but none of the others had to watch eyes focus on an axe-blade in their skull, and no one else had to revert to careful gestures and the efforts of his cousins to even be understood. Bifur growled, his mind filled with curses and swears that would never pass his tongue the way that he wanted to. He glared down at the block of wood in his hands, forcing himself to wonder what he would carve it into.
“Pardon me.”

The Dwarf blinked and slowly turned around, momentarily dazed by the sunlight. A Hobbit lass stared down at him, her lips pursed and thin even as her bright green eyes studied him with open curiosity. She was beautiful, her black hair thicker and curlier than that of others that he had seen. She was dressed much like the other Hobbits were, with a bright blue skirt that stopped just above her ankles and a warm golden waistcoat visible beneath a smart violet jacket. Her hands were rough and stained with flecks of dirt, her fingers curled uneasily between her palms as she stared down at the Dwarf in the grass.

“I- I’m sorry to bother you,” she began, voice strong and confident for all that it trembled over the first syllable. “But I was wondering if- if anyone had taken a look at your head.”

Bifur blinked up at her again, unsure how to answer that one. Of course someone had taken a look at it- the healers had nearly had fits when he had first received the wound, and his cousins both took turns poking at it at least once a week to make sure that it hadn’t killed him yet.

“Yes,” he tried to say, his eyes tightening in a familiar sense of frustration when the word came out garbled and twisted into Khuzdul. He settled on a nod when the poor girl appeared confused.

“Ah.” The Hobbit shifted and glanced down at the ground, her brow furrowing slightly while a series of emotions flickered across her features. “I- It’s just that, it doesn’t seem as if any Springs have had a look at you.”

Bifur shook his head hesitantly, wondering if he should have a better idea of what that meant.

“Springs can heal, you understand,” the girl continued. “We’re very good at it- My mum always said that it was because of the plants. And I figured- if, perhaps, you had a Spring tend to you, maybe you could… lose the axe?”

Bifur was staring openly at her by the time she had finished, mouth open and gaping like a mindless fool. He struggled to close it immediately when she looked at him expectantly, scrambling to find something to say, some way to acknowledge her so that she would know that he had at least understood, that he wasn’t an idiot…

The girl grimaced when his silence stretched on and glanced back at the earth beneath her feet. The gesture sent a flash of panic through the Dwarf and he started to stand, desperate to explain-.

“I’m sorry,” the girl sighed. “I realise that that was very impertinent of me. By Yavanna, I didn’t even introduce myself first, but I am confident that I could help if you would only-.”

“Yes!” Bifur grunted, his frustration growing when the word was only garbled again. The girl blinked and smiled before he could nod, apparently understanding what he had said this time around.

“That means yes, doesn’t it?” she guessed eagerly. At his slow, answering nod, her smile widened and she offered him her hand. “I’m Violet Proudfoot.”

Bifur took her hand cautiously and pointed at his chest with his free one.

“Bifur,” he pronounced carefully. He neglected to add his ancestry- it had stopped being necessary long ago.

Violet nodded and gestured for him to sit down again, daintily crossing her ankles beneath her skirt as she settled down beside him in the dirt.
“Right,” she huffed. “You don’t need to give me your hand, I suppose, if you don’t want to. I just need to touch your head, if that’s alright with you.”

Bifur bowed his head in answer, his hands tightening around the wood that was still clutched between them when she pressed warm fingertips to his scalp, her touch gentle and comforting as no other had been in so long. He stiffened when strange licks of cool warmth spread through him at her touch, curling around the tops of his skull before centring on the old wound in his scalp. His hands began to tremble, tightening around the tools and the wood in an effort to settle. He glanced up at the Hobbit that knelt in front of him, watched her brow crease in concentration and her bright green eyes close. A flower had begun to grow somewhere beyond her skirts, its deep purple petals unfurling to greet the sun. He felt his hands and fingers move without really thinking about it, his eyes flickering between the girl and the flower as cool warmth continued to dance across his skull. He wondered idly if he should feel completely different, if there should be a large burst of light to let him know that he was better.

They stayed together, the Dwarf and the Hobbit, until the sun had begun to drift towards the edge of the sky and the flower behind Violet had started to wilt and slip back into the earth. The shadows of nearby trees and hills began to lengthen, painting the girl’s clothes in strips of shadow when she finally settled back onto her heels with a groan. Her features were paler than they had been before, tainted with a shade of light grey that had Bifur inching closer, his own brow furrowing in concern.

Violet waved him away with a scowl, seeming more frustrated than angry.

“I’m sorry,” she sighed. “I don’t- It may take me a bit… longer than I had anticipated for me to fix this. I can fix it!” she insisted when Bifur began to frown. “I just can’t do more than what I’ve already done now or I’ll risk… well. Bad things happen when Hobbits push themselves too far, you know?”

Bifur thought of the ice that had coated Bilbo’s skin and the blue of his skin where he had been cradled in Thorin’s arms. He tried to imagine Violet in such a position, eyes unable to look away from the greyness of her skin.

“Dangerous,” he grunted, his eyes widening when he heard the word leave his lips exactly as he had intended it to. Common. He had spoken in the Common Tongue.

Violet’s frown disappeared beneath a wide, blinding smile. She settled back, palms braced against the earth with a smug glint in her eyes that made her seem more beautiful than before.

“Yes, well,” she hummed. “At least I got something right. I’ll have to do this again, of course. Not tomorrow, obviously, or I’d probably end up killing myself but if you give me a few days…” Her voice trailed to a stop, her attention caught by something in his expression.

Bifur felt himself frown and glanced down at the carving that was hidden within his hands, wondering if he could say this right as well.

“Not… here,” he said slowly. “Going… back.”

Violet frowned. A pair of small, white teeth flickered into appearance above her lower lip, pressing against the skin until Bifur worried that she would draw blood.

“Oh,” she murmured, voice small and tiny in a way that Bifur had rarely heard Hobbits sound. “Oh, I- Oh.”

Bifur smiled sadly and carefully made his way to his feet, his hand outstretched to help her out as
well. Violet took it with a quiet smile, her green eyes still dark and pensive. It suddenly struck Bifur that he wanted to see her smile again, wanted to see those eyes sparkle as they had when he had accepted her offer. He held out the hand that was still curled around his carving and waited for her to take it, his lips quirking up into a hesitant grin at her expression of shock.

“Violet?” he guessed, gesturing towards the flower. “…Beautiful,” he added, his hand moving to encompass her as well.

The Hobbit flushed violently and began to mumble something that he couldn’t quite make out, though she reached out to accept the flower regardless.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her voice awed.

Bifur smiled and carefully reached out to brush his fingers across her shoulder.

“Thank… you,” he replied, his features twisting when the second word came out in Khuzdul rather than Common.

Violet frowned as well, quickly accepting the arm that he offered her as they began to walk away from the meadow. She murmured directions to her family’s hall as they made their way, though she carefully withdrew her arm from his before they could come too close.

“I am sorry that I couldn’t do more,” she muttered, her fingers still curling and twisting around the carved flower in her grasp.

Bifur shook his head and gestured to the old wound in his head.

“No… Good,” he whispered with a smile. “Beautiful,” he reminded her gruffly. She smiled at that, her eyes gleaming and glittering as they had before, and he felt something warm and content settle in his chest even as he turned to go on his way. He began to hum to himself somewhere along the road, an old song that hadn’t come to his lips in ages, not since the attack that had robbed him of so much. And now…

He heard the commotion before he cast eyes on the lit windows and towering edifice of Brandyhall, his brow furrowing and fingers itching for a knife out of instinct. He took in a strange cart that had taken up a position next to the doors of the hall at some point in the day, his eyes sweeping over a small pile of books and china and- was that a dressing gown? And a handkerchief? Bifur shook his head in silent wonder and carefully crossed the threshold into Brandyhall. He winced at the sudden onslaught of noise and slowly followed it to the hall’s large sitting room. The room was packed to the rafters with Hobbits, Elves and Dwarrows, including the four young fauntlings whose disappearance had caused such a stir earlier in the day. Bifur caught sight of Hamfast Gamgee and his wife near the front of the crowd, their plump features flushed and proud of the son that was huddled close to Frodo, Merry and Pippin, his pinched features half-hidden in Frodo’s shoulder. Esmerelda and Paladin were howling with laughter over some joke that the toymaker had missed, their glee joined enthusiastically by Bofur, Gloin, and the princes. Even Thorin and the Elves were grinning, while Bilbo and Saradoc seemed to be torn between grudging pride and horror.

“Bifur!” Bofur shouted, immediately drawing the attention of most of the room’s inhabitants. “Bifur, ye’ve got ta hear about what the lads did!”

“They took back all of Uncle Bilbo’s things!” Kili crowed, his arms thrown around Fili’s shoulders and Tauriel’s waist with little regard for the duo’s fond exasperation. “Smuggled them out right
under the nose of that Sackeville-Baggins woman!"

“Oh, I can’t wait to see her face at the market tomorrow,” Eglantine murmured, her small smile growing when Esmerelda gasped and laughed in response. “It’ll be worth whatever fuss she manages to raise over the subject.”

“And it’s not like she can do anything about it, either,” Paladin pointed out gleefully. “Not when Bilbo is leaving so soon.”

Bifur smiled at the laughter and smiles of his kin, the warmth knot from earlier softening and spreading when he saw the young Hobbits looking up at him expectantly, as if for approval. The Dwarf cleared his throat and moved forward to crouch in front of the four young Hobbits, his heart pounding under a sudden wave of nerves when those close to them began to quiet.

“Good… work,” he said slowly. “Proud.”

The boys beamed immediately, the surprise and awe in their eyes enough to make Bifur’s smile widen before it died at the sudden silence in the room. The Dwarf craned his neck to take in the shocked features of those around him, his skin flushing a bright red when he saw Bofur and Bombur staring at him with their mouths hanging open.

“B-Bifur?” Bofur hissed, his kind brown eyes wide beneath his hat.

Bifur bit his lip and straightened to offer a slight bow to the room’s inhabitants, his mouth working for a few moments before he could manage to speak what he had been meaning to say for decades.

“…At your service.”

Bofur let out a loud yell and charged forward to sweep his cousin up into a bone-crushing embrace, the gesture mirrored bare moments later by Bombur. The princes slammed into the huddle with twin shouts of laughter, followed closely by Nori and Ori and, after a half-hearted grumble about propriety, Dori. Balin and Gloin came next, dragging their gruff brothers by the hands, and then Bilbo, his kind features red with laughter that had started to spread to Thorin. Four Hobbit children weaved their way between tangled limbs with loud giggles and slammed into Bifur’s legs, nearly bringing the Dwarf to his knees if not for the bodies pressed against him in support. Bifur laughed alongside those that had become his kin over the years, whispering and babbling some sort of explanation into the hair of demanding Dwarrows and Hobbits, and hardly caring for the first time in his life that half of the words still emerged in Khuzdul.

What did it matter, when the other half were now in Common?

*~*~*~*~*~*

It took another week and two separate outbursts from the Sackeville-Baggins’ for Bilbo and his Company to ready themselves for the journey home. If the Hobbit was being completely honest, they could have been ready to leave earlier if not for Bilbo’s lingering desire to give Frodo as much time as possible with his friends and Hamfast’s sudden declaration early on in the week that he and his family would be willing to come with them to Erebor if the offer still stood. While Frodo’s excitement at the announcement would have been enough to convince even the most stubborn Dwarf to allow the Hobbits to come with them, it had been Bilbo’s quiet remembrance of small acts of kindness in the past and Hamfast’s pointed arguments that the Lonely Mountain needed at least one decent gardener that had finally won over the last of the sceptics. Bilbo’s happy surprise over that particular development had only deepened when both Paladin and Esmerelda had taken him aside a day later to confess that they were both preparing to make a trip to Erebor in the
future, once a few issues regarding succession and the division of authority over the Brandybuck and Took clans could be decided upon.

A handful of Tooks and Brandybucks and a few hardy Baggins came forth shortly after with their own cautious declarations of interest, eventually forcing Thorin to send word to Ered Luin for additional Dwarves to be sent as escorts for the Company. Bilbo could only shake his head in silent disbelief at the ever-growing pile of supplies that had taken residence in front of Brandyhall, careful to offer a hesitant smile and an offer of assistance to each Hobbit that came to add to the pile and tentatively ask for permission to travel. He had received more apologetic bouquets and cards in the past few days than he had ever received in his lifetime (although it had taken a long night of explanations with a sullen Thorin to explain that the legions of flowers were only meant to apologise and were not declarations of intent, thank you very much), and with each quiet request to see his Season at work Bilbo found himself beginning to hope that, perhaps, he could learn to find acceptance in his own kind as well.

Bifur began to grow quieter as the day of departure drew closer, his newly-discovered ability to speak Common all but useless as he stubbornly refused to say little and engaged with those around him even less. Both Bofur and Bombur failed at hiding their worry for their cousin, though Bilbo couldn’t help but wonder at Bifur’s silence when he caught sight of a dark-haired Hobbit woman lingering at the edges of Saradoc’s property and slipping out of sight whenever Bifur came into view.

At long last, the day for their departure arrived, with many varied farewells exchanged between the Hobbits and heated promises from Merry and Pippin that they would return to the Mountain soon. Bilbo watched the proceedings from the back of his pony, having already given his farewells to his cousins earlier, away from the crowds. Thorin and Dwalin stayed close to him, two young Hobbits lingering in their arms before Fíli and Kíli swept in to claim Sam and Frodo as their own travelling companions. The other members of the Company had accepted the claim with grace, having already wrestled cautious agreement from Hamfast and his wife to allow the remaining Gamgee children to travel with several of the Dwarves and Tauriel, much to the Elf’s satisfaction. By the time the sun had fully risen above the horizon, the company of Dwarves, Hobbits and Elves had begun to make its way out of the Shire, even as several Hobbits grumbled about warnings of no second Breakfast. Bilbo smiled slightly at the complaints and caught Thorin’s answering smirk out of the corner of his eye, remembering his own grumblings at the beginning of his first departure. At least this time he hadn’t forgotten his handkerchief-

“WAIT!”

Bilbo blinked and immediately pulled his pony to a halt, whirling around in time to see a dark-haired blur running towards them from the direction of the Shire. He saw Bifur brighten out of the corner of his eye and, somewhere beside him, heard Dwalin sigh.

“By Mahal, again?” the warrior grumbled.

Bilbo shushed him immediately and carefully dismounted from his pony to go and meet the Hobbit now bent nearly double beside the caravan, noting dimly that both Thorin and Bifur had moved to do the same. She had a pack strapped to her shoulders, similar to the one that Bilbo himself had worn at the beginning of his own journey so long ago.

“…Violet?” he muttered. “Violet Proudfoot?”

The Hobbit woman waved and carefully straightened up, her shoulders still heaving with deep, wheezing breaths.
“Yes,” she gasped. “Hello. So sorry I’m late, I couldn’t find my handkerchief.”

Dwalin snorted behind them, heedless of the glares that were shot at him by both Bifur and Bilbo. The injured toymaker was cautiously edging closer to Violet’s side, his expression brightening when the Spring Hobbit caught his eye and gave him a shy smile.

“I, ah, was wondering if you would be so kind as to allow me to travel with you,” she added after a few moments more. “I realize that I don’t have a pony, but I am quite able to walk, I assure you-.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Thorin interrupted roughly, his sharp eyes flickering between Bifur and the Hobbit with barely-concealed interest. “A few of our number have horses instead of ponies, and they are more than able to hold some extra weight until we can purchase another pony in Bree.”

Violet nodded hesitantly and fiddled with the straps of her pack.

“I do apologize for not asking sooner,” she muttered. “Only, I couldn’t very well let this one leave without finishing the job, could I? By Yavanna, he still has an axe in his skull!”

Bifur barked out a laugh and simply grabbed Violet’s hand to lead her back to his pony with a final, challenging smile at Thorin. The King Under the Mountain shrugged and motioned for Bifur to continue, his lips twitching into a smug smile at the open shock and glee on the features of Bofur and Bombur. Bilbo laughed aloud and took a last, careful look around them to ensure that no other arrivals were charging towards them before returning to his pony, where Frodo was waiting for him. The younger Winter beamed at Bilbo’s approach and offered a small hand in an ineffectual gesture of assistance that Bilbo took nevertheless. They remained at rest until Thorin had mounted as well, his eyes still dancing with mirth even as he gave the order to move forward. Bilbo grinned and leaned forward slightly in the saddle, imagining for a moment that he could see Erebor in the distance, see the Halls that he had learned to call his home. His smile widened and softened at the image of those Halls as they would be soon, filled with the laughter and the song of Dwarves and the bustle of Hobbits along its slopes. There would be smials to build along the Mountain’s slopes and at the edges of its halls, gardens to plant and things to be rebuilt and homes to be prepared for the Dwarves that were still pouring into the kingdom from the Iron Hills and Ered Luin.

And somewhere, in the middle of it all, there was a home filled with warmth and acceptance and far too many Dwarves for a Baggins to even think of keeping up a respectable pantry.

Bilbo tightened his grip on his nephew’s waist and quietly began to hum, his song growing within his chest until a few, quiet words were sung into the boy’s ear.

Road goes ever on and on...

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