A Shire Scorned
by Nyrah, saint2sinners

Summary

Bilbo Baggins came home one sunny spring day exhausted, half starved and pregnant. His heart was broken, his name cursed by the dwarves he had saved and his house was on auction by the worst relative you could imagine. It was, understandably, a terrible day. Once it comes out that Bilbo is *expecting,* however, even the most prim and proper hobbits are scandalised at the poor treatment he received by the conspicuously absent father (and, by extension, all his kind). The Shire rallies around their poor, ill-treated and half-starved kinsman, and the climate of dwarvish relations takes a decidedly chilly turn.

Notes

Created by saint2sinners and Nyrah
Written by saint2sinners
Edited, bullied into existence and dragged kicking and screaming into the light of day by Nyrah.

Dedicated to the amazing Lionesspuma for her generous gift of a kofi. After a terrible day in a terrible week in a terrible month after a terrible year, your gift made us smile. Thank you for that. It’s the first money my writing that has ever earned and put me in such a happy mood I started a little side story for a fluffy break from Creatures that we’ve been talking about for a
while. I am working on the next chapter of creatures as we speak and you’ve inspired me to write more regularly so it won’t be too long away. Thank you dear

As always, if you feel like getting to know us or asking a question, visit our tumbler at: https://www.tumblr.com/blog/saint-n-nyrah
Some say the last mile of a journey is the longest. In his worn and shabby coat, and with a heavy step echoing how tattered he felt in body and heart, Bilbo could agree. He made his way up the hill with a large wooden chest tied to his back, a small pack of dwindling supplies and only the thought of his chair and his bed kept him from collapsing to the wayside in the buttery afternoon sun. There was still a short way to go though, and true rest at the end – rest his body was desperate for. So, he trudged past surprisingly quiet fields and even an empty market place. Bilbo spared a vague thought to wonder if there was a party or some other occasion that was drawing the hobbits away from their normal afternoon pleasures of tea and conversation. He lumbered laboriously on.

It was around then, during that brief thought, when he saw his mother’s favourite settee trundled past him down the hill. Bilbo froze, and called out a moment too late to stop the pair of Bricegirdles making off with his mother’s bedroom divan, merely catching the yelled response that they had bought it at the auction fair and square.

His strides became decidedly shorter and certainly faster as he pounded up Bagshot Row and around the corner, reaching Bag-End to catch view of the soft-beaked crows plucking the flesh off the carcass of his home with raucous caws and flashing talons.

On the day that Bilbo Baggins returned to the Shire, it was to find his home invaded and everything he held dear put up for auction. A drawn sword and some adventurous words later, he was left with a mostly-empty Smial, a basket of hot food from Mrs Gamgee, weary feet and an even wearier heart.

For the first week of his return Master Baggins, bearing a walking stick in a manner so adventurous it might has well have been a sword, made his way around the green hills of Hobbiton. He stalked from one smial to another, hunting down the listed names of successful bidders to restore his home to a condition similar to the way he had left it one year ago.

What had been a moment of change and daring in his life now left a memory of little humour in the wake of the completion of his contract. Against the abandonment by the dwarves he held so dear, little could bring solace as the spring wind chilled the morning, carrying imagined traces of snow from mountains too far away to see. It was a wind cooler than the one he raced when he left last year, but warmer than the one that brought him home again.

Dubbed ‘`mad Baggins,’” he was shunned. Hobbit kith and kin neither sought his company, nor called on him with their past regularity. His dwarves had turned their backs; Gandalf was off doing… whatever it was he did in-between causing trouble… possibly causing other kinds of trouble. Bjorn was a mountain range away, and so was every elf whom he called friend, and who called him friend in return.

Instead, in the green and beating heart of his homeland, he was more alone than ever. Until, of course, he remembered.

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It was just after second breakfast, with that peculiar, languid stretch of warmth and comfort spreading through the household. A golden ray of light bathed the newly cleared kitchen table. For once there was no chore to undertake, and no meal to cook as the last was just done. There was no need to rush
off and, best of all – with the fauntlings on a trip to the nearby fields to learn their green tales– no rush of tiny, fluffy feet galumphing across the immaculate parquet hallways.

Mrs Gamgee breathed a deep sigh, a contented sigh of life’s satisfaction. Deeper than the satisfaction of the morning though was the knowledge that somewhere, not too nearby, Lobelia Sackville-I-Wish-I-was-a-Baggins was seething, foiled in her grasping endeavour. Bag End was restored to rightful hands and now, for the first time in a year, Bell Gamgee felt she could enjoy the sunlight and jaunty breeze of a chilly spring morning.

Of course, that was when a visitor knocked at her door. Her kitchen door.

Bell tsked, but rose to answer, only to halt abruptly when she realised the knock had come from the back door. Only the very intrusive or the very familiar visitor – sometimes both in one person – came to the back door before reasonable visiting hours! Bell gathered up her most disapprovingly polite smile and swept open the door.

“Good M- Oh! Mr Baggins!” The ice melted into honey and her face softened. “Hamfast is just getting ready and will be back at fixing that fence of yours today.” The wretched thing had been knocked over after a year of disuse and a hasty escape by a fleeing crowd a few days before.

“Good morning… Mrs Gamgee.” The hesitance there, so unlike their story-telling Mr Baggins, struck her into pausing. Bilbo Baggins. Run off with some scuffy dwarves in the middle of the night and returned to become a warning tale to every fauntling tempted to do the same.

She’d heard already, down in the market.

“Shame to the family… such a good reputation until now.”

“Mad, I tell you! Swinging a sword and making threats for a right, honest purchase!”

“But nothing to be surprised at, you know,” the barely veiled implication was dripping off the tone, “You know… with that one for a mother.”

Mrs Knobbs had best not hope for any of Bell’s homemade marmalade anytime soon after a crack like that at the sainted Belladonna Baggins! Bell Gamgee grew up Bell Goodchild, neighbours to the Tooks, and Belladonna’s deepest co-conspirator. When her dear friend had moved to Hobbiton she’d come along to see her settled. While there, she had met her Gaffer, and simply never went back. A silly little thing like death couldn’t touch a friendship like that. She wondered what Belladonna would have thought of her little Bilbo’s adventure, then had to catch a snort before it escaped. Belladonna would’ve been after him halfway to whatever dwarfish destination he’d been to, and brought enough supplies for them both.

A gentle cough brought her back to the present. Greeting the worn face there, she couldn’t help but consider the vibrant gentleshobbit of a year ago. After all, she’d been holding him firm in her memory far longer than the waif-like apparition that now haunted her back step. Even his voice seemed thin.

“You’re looking well Mrs Gamgee. I’m awfully sorry to disturb you this early in the morning.”

Bell tapped at her curls, her lips pursing for a moment as she took in the worn face before her. More lines and less meat than any respectable hobbit should carry. He seemed almost faded in the gentle sunlight. Bell ushered him in, waving the apology aside.

“Nonsense, Bilbo dear. You couldn’t disturb me if you tried!” His brows lifted in simple amusement, but he didn’t argue. “Now what can I do for you this morning? Have you had second breakfast yet? Would you like some?”
She gestured at the table. There wasn’t anything much left there, but there was more on the stove and in the pantry. She was the mother of six healthy faunts – one always made extra. He took a half step back and placed a hand to his stomach. He turned… green. Distinctly green at the gills, shown quite clearly by the wretched pallor of his face.

“No! No, thank you but… I’m making something… light. For my stomach. I’m afraid after everything, I’m having trouble getting it to settle. I just wanted to ask if you have any of your – uh – famous ginger preserves? I thought I might try some on a scone or two.”

Bell laughed out, the sound ringing, “Ginger preserves on scones! Now Mr Bilbo, that wouldn’t be any good to settle a turned tummy! The only reason to have ginger scones is… is…”

The thought caught up to her and she froze. The moment seemed still, hanging in a fragile balance like a storm waiting to break. For his part, Bilbo broke eye contact, finding the wood of her kitchen floor suddenly fascinating; he even took the time to dig at the edges with one toe. For all his previous pallor, he was finding colour enough in his face now.

“My mother used to tell me that your ginger preserve… helped. When she was. Um. Unsettled.”

Bell Gamgee reared back, reassessing his pale, clammy skin, aversion to her offer of food and – most tellingly – his hunched posture. She stepped forward, placing a hand tenderly against his arm. “It did. She needed a bucket of it every month when she was… when you were still…” She swallowed hard, her heart breaking for the miserable figure of her dear friend’s only child.

Mr Bilbo had been on an adventure. “Do you need ginger preserves, Mr Bilbo?” She asked meaningfully.

At the gentle touch he looked up and met her eyes. There was a sheen there but no more than that. He swallowed past the knot in his throat. “Yes please, Mrs Gamgee. I think I might be needing buckets of it myself. Just like she did.”

Bell Gamgee saw in his face that Bilbo had not missed the stories of Mad Baggins either. Judged and socially maligned for daring to chase after whatever, or perhaps better whoever, he had all those long months ago. Her gaze darted from his shadowed eyes to his sunken cheeks, to his thin wrists and then down to his flat belly. Even in early months, it was far, far too flat a belly. It couldn’t have been a long time since… then again, he’d been very ill; Yvanna keeps a seed asleep until the field is ready, after all. No good trying to grow a crop in a lean winter.

She stepped into his space and wrapped her arms around him. Her voice cracked as she whispered “ginger snaps. Your mother preferred it mixed with dough and made into ginger snaps when you were seeding inside her. Oh, my Bilbo. My little acorn.”

It had been a long time since she’d called Mister Bilbo that old name, and longer still since he’d accepted it without complaint. Age and the natural changing of their relationship over the years had relegated that little custom to the fondly remembered past. She felt him tremble in her arms, tiny shudders running through him, and for all his tears hadn’t fallen, she had no such reservations. Belladonna and Bungo gone, family embarrassed and all alone, battered by life and his travels. It broke her heart, and as she held him, she cried for them both.

But she was a Gamgee, and a Gamgee always had matters in hand. For moment she pulled Bilbo closer. Then she snatched a handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped off her nose even as she reached into the cupboard and pulled one of the bottles there.

Grabbing a basket, a fresh loaf and a small pat of salted butter she popped it all into the basket. “You
go home and rest now. The preserve with bread will be good enough for right now. Eat what you can and I’ll get to work on some scones and biscuits and we’ll see which you like best. Just because your mother—” She sniffed, pushing thoughts of Belladonna never meeting her grandchild to the back of her mind. Forget the Baggineses and the Took; she would be grandmother enough for both kin. “Well. You’ll see which works best for you.”

Bilbo, taking the chance to draw himself together, took the basket. His voice was heavy these days, so he tried consciously to lighten it. It wasn’t his best effort. “Oh, thank you Mrs Gamgee but the jar is more than enough—”

She rounded on him like a goosed cat. “Bilbo Baggins, I made every ginger preserve and biscuit that saw you into this world; I’ll be damned if I don’t do the same for your babe. Now get back to Bag End and get some rest before you fall over! I’ll be over soon as I can with more.” She shooed him away, chasing him out of the small smial and towards the larger one up the hill.

It was slow in coming - all the way up the hill and in his kitchen door before it curled in like a contented cat - but Bilbo smiled. It felt like the first honest smile since the fresh snow lit the ground where Thorin had fallen, before everything had gone wrong for that final time in their great quest. That is, before healers and a miracle brought Thorin back from the gates of Mahal’s Halls. Before King Thorin Oakenshield, Scion of the line of Durin, decided he no longer wanted a damaged hobbit.

Still, Bilbo smiled and placed the basket on the table. He rested a hand on the still-sunken curve of his belly. His hand trembled, a shudder of fear at what was to come, not least of which was worry that his lack of girth could harm the little life there. Hopefully, he’d be able to keep something down now long enough to replenish his previous, healthy stature. Bilbo shook his head, grimaced at the basket and moved to fix himself a plate of fresh bread with ginger preserves.

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A short while later, with the cheery mid-afternoon sun warming her cheeks, Belle Gamgee was elbow deep in dough, and miles away.

“I’m all set for the day, my lovely!” Hamfast’s robust timbre preceded him into the kitchen. “Oh, lovelies from my lovely! What a treat!”

Like a viper she struck. The wooden spoon whistled with a speed that would have made an archer jealous. As fast as that, the seemingly innocuous implement gained a malevolent kind of sentience and met flesh on her husband’s hand. Hamfast yelped, yanked back his hand from the biscuits on the tray and cradled the injured appendage to his chest. Belle didn’t even look up, her mind far more occupied with the unmarried gentlehobbit next door. Well, on him and the disreputable, dishonourable and - most importantly - disappeared wretch who’d left him alone at a time like this!

“They’re not for you, Hamfast. They’re for Mr Baggins.”

“Mr Baggins? But they’re my favourite, my morning blossom. You know that.”

The wooded spoon did not yield its vigil. He could tell that, regardless of his wife’s focus on her cooking, it was watching him with all the deathly nonchalance of a hawk on a fencepost. Warily skirting the estimated range of attack, he peered over his beloved’s shoulder to see what she was concocting for tea.
“Ah! Scones! Yours are the fluffiest and most delicious scones this side of the Party Tree, Bell. Are those for -um, well, that is to say, I could perhaps have- just for my tea, that is…”

“They are ginger scones Hamfast, and not for you. Mr Baggins is… expecting… these scones.”

At last she popped the second batch into the oven before turning to face her husband. He sputtered his outrage at her denial of one flaky, delicious, hot-from-the-oven, butter coated scone. As he was a hobbit, after all, this sort of distraction was to be forgiven; in his desire to convince the love of his life and keeper of his hearth to part with the mouth-watering morsel, he missed most of her response. Until he registered that the lovelies he wanted for his tea were, in fact, ginger scones.

He caught up after a moment or two as he watched his wife use the honey dipper and the last of the breakfast honey to drizzle a thick layer of gold over the scones. “Honey! On ginger scones! That’s an abomination my precious. Why, they’ll taste… they’ll be… did you say Mr Baggins was…” Hamfast’s voice trailed from pleading revulsion to gentle confusion.


Hamfast collapsed into a chair, disbelieving, his eyes wide with shock. The normally taciturn hobbit, for maybe the first time in his life, felt betrayed by his natural disinclination towards expression. He searched for some way to convey his feelings on the matter. “But… but he’s so thin.”

Bell shook her head and took up a basket to start packing the scones in. After she’d taken them up to Mr Bilbo, she’d start another tray of snaps and a bit of tea. He should be able to handle some stew by dinner if he had the scones soon. “Very thin, Hamfast. It’s a shame and a sin, it is.”

“He came back alone,” Hamfast said slowly, patting at his pockets. He pulled out the old cob pipe that he used for everyday purposes. One end found his teeth, and with the motions of long years of habit he settled it there for a comfortable channel of thought. He knew better than to light it in the sacred space of Bell’s kitchen.

“Exhausted too, Hamfast.” Belle’s mouth was pinched.

“He was travelling alone, in winter…”

Belle snapped the pantry door closed with rather more vigour than might be considered polite. Her voice turned frigid. “It’s the only way to arrive in spring, my dear.”

Hamfast Gamgee rose abruptly. He needed air. And room to think. Suddenly, the kitchen seemed wretchedly cold, and he needed the sun to chase those thoughts away.

Outside in his beloved garden, he found a seat on the small half barrel at the kitchen door. A trail of smoke rose into the air, unheeded. Hamfast’s thoughts never raced; he was not that sort of hobbit. Instead, his thoughts moved with the methodical stability of a plough turning a field, considered and inevitable.

He was not a very educated man, but he was a practical one. There was no mother or father to see to Mr Bilbo, and the Bagginses had done little enough for their kin as far as he was concerned – except perhaps Drogo, who’d helped him to see to Bilbo’s tenants while he was away. There was no one to chase down the errant father and insist he do the proper thing. In fact, there seemed to be no father to be chased down, either. Becoming a Widower-before-marriage would be a tricky thing when Mr Baggins’ scandal was so well known. This gossip was on everyone’s tongues, and sharpening those tongues with every word.

All alone... Not so anymore, really. Hamfast took a deep draw on his pipe. The embers flared, and
dulled, and he rose from his seat. He tapped the dottle into the flowerbed and pocketed the empty pipe. The child would come soon, surely, but then what? Nothing but simple Gamgees to call friend, mocked and ridiculed every time he and the faunt went out the door? For Mr Baggins, such a future was possible - even likely - but no decent hobbit would ever wish such on a fauntling. Hobbits were by nature a family-oriented sort: you cared for your kin’s well-being. Fauntlings were blessings and not to be used as weapons in social scandals; not until they were of age, at least. Shameful thing, that.

Trudging back into the kitchen proper, Hamfast made for the pantry. “Mr Baggins been to market yet?”

His wife shrugged from where she was scrubbing at a baking tray. “Not since he’s been back, I expect. Not a proper visit at least.”

Hamfast moved to the row of hooks and the coats hanging there. “I expect the Bag End accounts are still open. What with him being returned and all.” He retrieved a note from a well-worn pocket. The heavy paper was stamped with the Baggins acorn sigil, permitting him to buy on behalf of Mr Bilbo’s needs.

“I expect so,” she replied neutrally. His wife could tell he was not pleased. Understandably. There was still the matter of how this sorry circumstance had come about and who was responsible, but those were matters of speculation, and not matters of doing. Hamfast might not be a hobbit of great action like some, but he was one who could see to the doing of that which needs must done. He’d leave the moral outrage to the Missus. Without another word, he took his hat from the stand and a sack from the larder and made for the market.

Belle watched him head down the lane, a small, proud smile on her face. “Good man.”

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A short while later, Hamfast Gamgee was waiting at yet another stall for his packages to be wrapped. The sack was largely empty still. He’d made enquires and perhaps should have gotten a list from his wife, but still…

“There we are! Broccoli, spinach, dried beans, lentils… oh! is Mrs Gamgee in the family way again then, Mr Gamgee? Congratulations.” Mrs Proudfoot smiled, packing the pile of greens carefully into the sack. Hamfast, for his part, kept his face placid, not rising to the conversational gambit, but simply said, “No, no. Not Mrs Gamgee.”

Daisy Proudfoot hesitated for a moment before shrugging and preparing more fresh vegetables. Perhaps, then, it was a for a recipe. Still, she looked at the package under his arm. Herbs and the like; she knew who’s stall they had come from. Still, peppermint and slippery elm bark were not commonly used together in any recipe she could recall.

“Soup then maybe?” came from the empty stall next over in the market. Paupa Brandyback’s hands didn’t stop as he cleaned and wrapped a large piece of fish for a later order. Few lingered over the fish monger’s stall to chat; he was used to receiving his conversation by proxy from his neighbours.

“No, no. Not for us.” Daisy handed him back the sack and instead of the handful of coins she expected, he presented a letter. “The Bag End account. If you’ll give me a receipt, his solicitor will settle the bill in the usual way.”

For a second, Mrs Proudfoot paused. They’d been renting their farm from the Baggins estate for so long that they barely considered it as belonging to the Gentlehobbit of Bag End. She knew the solicitor though, and knew he would pay promptly. For all that they’d been allowed to slip the rent a
time or two in a thin year, Mr Bilbo never wretched on his own paying.

Still, Daisy Proudfoot eyed the pile of vegetables in the sack. “Um, these aren’t for…? Perhaps… for Mr Baggins?”

Hamfast shrugged. “His pantries are empty after he’s been away, I’m afraid. Nothing left fit for a mouse.”

“Huh!” Paupa shrugged, “No wonder, it’s been a year. He’s lucky that they weren’t ruined with a mess of spoiled food.”

Hamfast sighed and accepted the sack and receipt. Leaning over to sign it, he coughed lightly. “Yes well, there are hands seeing to that now. But he’ll be needing it back full, especially what with his… condition.”

Both vendors leaned in close enough to almost topple their stands. New gossip of the up-to-now reclusive Mr Baggins! And on a quiet market day to boot! “Condition?” Daisy enquired delicately.

Mr Gamgee nodded absently before freezing. “Ah, I forgot the ginger. We’ll be all out now after the scones. I don’t suppose you would mind changing the total, would you?”

“Ginger scones?” Paupa’s wife, who till now had been quietly twisting twine at the back of the stall, sat up straight. “Ginger scones? But he’s so thin!” Her scandalised face peered out from behind Paupa’s shoulder.

“And? What’s that to say about ginger?” Ignored by his wife and wilfully uneducated in their young and thus far childless marriage, Paupa looked to Gamgee in confusion.

A moment after Mrs Brandybuck’s squawk, Mrs Proudfoot had gasped and looked to her friend. “Can’t be, Marigold, he’s too thin. It wouldn’t take. No one could carry through and look like that.”

“Look what you packed and say that! Why, Mr Gamgee, is Mr Baggins expecting?”

With three sets of eyes on him, Hamfast inspected the pebbles between his toes with the same care he’d give to new leek shoots. “The ginger please,” He said with finality.

The mixed gasps were enough of a response. Mrs Proudfoot grabbed a bushel of potatoes and, after a pause, some fresh eggs as well, shoving them carefully into the bag. “No, no, no, not as thin as he is! The babe could be lost. Here, you take these too. No charge! And I’ll have my Pansy come by with some things. Some good cottage pie will put weight back on those bones! Why, poor Mr Baggins, with never a cruel word for anyone.”

Paupa was surprised when his wife, not to be outdone, pried the wrapped salmon out of his hands and shoved it at the Gaffer. “Oh my, does the family know yet? Terrible, just terrible!” she lamented, tutting. “Poor thing. And traveling in winter on some scraggy pony, with not even a decent cart as shelter? Take this. Some nice fish will do him the world of good. No charge!”

“No charge?” Paupa’s outrage was swiftly quelled by his wife’s sharp elbow. “Right… uh no charge. Because….?” Mrs Brandyback rolled her eyes and poked the back of her husband’s head. “Because if he doesn’t put on weight he might lose the baby, you daft fool. And he’s your cousin!”

“Baby? What baby? Bilbo’s having a baby? Since when?”

His startled cry drew the attention of a passer-by and they lingered close. “Bilbo? Baggins? With child? From who?”
“Who knows? He’s been away. Here Hamfast, send him these and let him know we’ll be by later with a nice package for him.” Marigold Brandybuck tucked some fillets into his coat pocket.

“Oh, poor thing.” The baker from two stands across had wondered over. “And he almost lost his home, too! Could you imagine? Coming back, widowed-before-marriage and no home to come back to! What a near horror! Let me get some loaves for him. You can take them with you, if you’re going.”

As soon he was back at his stand, and as Hamfast left the fresh goods row, he heard the baker’s customers enquiring why he was being so generous, probably in the hopes that it would spread in their own direction. As Hamfast walked, it seemed that the gossip was starting to outpace him.

“Never you say? How ever did he survive?”

“Poor thing, and all alone! Shameful what his family’s doing, turning their backs on him like that.”

“And then he said ‘Mad Baggins,’ and I almost gave him one right in his nose! It’s not proper talking like that about the poor soul after such a journey. And expecting, too. Can you imagine!”

“Of course, it was the Bracegirdles running off with his things. Shameless; glad I never married into the family. But weren’t you at the auction too?”

“What? Me? Never! I was only there to –uh… to stop it, of course. I tried to speak up but no one would listen. Dirsten was worse! He bought two end tables!”

“Only because I didn’t want those nasty Sackvilles to make off with his things! I was a friend of his father’s, after all and it’s my duty to help him. I’m only, well, having them repaired. They were damaged. I was planning on returning them soon as they’re done.”

“Make sure to stop by this afternoon with some apples, then!”

“…some lettuce…”

“…some pies….”

“Have you heard…?”

“Do you know?”

“Terrible shame!”

“And the father?”

“Must have been a dwarf.”

“A Dwarf?!?”

“Who else?”

“Dwarves…”

“…Dwarves.”

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Goody basket packed and stew simmering on the stove, Belle Gamgee was leaning in the kitchen
window at Bag End. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to go in, rather that it was such a good reason to get Bilbo to lean out into the sunshine as they spoke. If it also happened to let her keep an eye on him until enough food passed through his lips for her liking, she surely hadn’t planned it that way.

“And you remember, soon as Gaffer comes back, to make some tea with it and sip on it tonight. Slippery elm and peppermint will calm your poor tummy so you can eat and sleep comfortably.”

“Yes, Mrs Gamgee.”

“And have an early night, Bilbo Baggins. No reading till dawn anymore.”

“I’ll try, Mrs Gamgee.”

“I’ll be by later with some of my oldest and we’ll give Bag End a proper seeing to.”

Bilbo felt the unfamiliar curl of his lips again and took a sip from his glass to hide it. More food entered his severely shrunken stomach, which seemed to be remembering the pleasure of fullness. Surely a few more bites would do well. “That’s really not necessary. I’m quite capable of seeing to it.”

Just then a loud knock echoed through Bag End. The sound was so unfamiliar that Bilbo startled. Ironically, the last unexpected knock had come during a meal as well. Bilbo pushed the thought away, along with the familiar hurt that accompanied it. Bilbo looked at Belle before stepping away to peer at the door.

Belle, for her part, leaned around to see if she’d be able to catch a glimpse of who it was. Bilbo, no longer concerned with the kind of manners and proprietary that once ruled his life, merely glanced at her before moving to let in whoever was demanding entry.

She might not have seen who was at the door but Belle did see the gaggle of women making their way up Bagshot Row, arms full of pots and bowls and even small bundles of pastel coloured cloth. She felt a terrible premonition as to why they might seem fixed on the smial at the top of the hill. She turned back to find Bilbo returning to the kitchen, the one person he’d wilfully let into the house following behind him.

“…can’t thank you enough,” he was saying. “I’d heard that you did what you could for my estate while I was away.”

Drogo Baggins followed behind his cousin, his face drawn. “It’s alright. I can’t say I approved but you’re family, Bilbo. I’m just so sorry I couldn’t stop the auction. I would have, if I’d known.”

Bilbo shrugged. He had wondered why the Bagginses hadn’t put their collective foot down, or even seen fit to show up. “What brought you today then? Uh, scone?”

Drogo’s cheeks pinked at the offer before shaking his head. He did tip his head in greeting to Belle. “Mrs Gamgee. Apologies for the interruption.” He sighed, “I am sorry Bilbo, but the news has travelled very fast since cousin Aster was in the market this morning.”

In tandem, Belle and Bilbo froze before sharing a look. “Oh?” Bilbo inquired politely.

Drogo shuffled uncomfortably, his face turning an interesting shade of puce. “Well, Grandmother has said to tell you… well, that is to say… you’ve been invited for tea this afternoon.”

Drogo darted forward, catching his cousin, who had faced a dragon eye to eye, and whose knees had just given out on him.
“No!” Bilbo gasped reflexively. "Tea? At her own home? Alone?"

Drogo sat beside him. “Not alone, at least. And I didn’t see them taking out the Skye china, so there’s that, at least.” He patted his cousin’s hand soothingly. “But yes. I suppose congratulations are in order. Over the um, the baby. Not the tea.”

Belle gasped, shaking her head frantically. “Bilbo, Hamfast wouldn’t have said a word. You know he doesn’t hold with gossip!”

“Cooee! Mr Baggins, are you home?” The shrill call echoed unpleasantly around the corner and into the open kitchen window. “We’ve brought you some things for the little one!”

Belle flinched. “He never was the most subtle of men, though.”

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Across the grand expanse of Middle Earth, over the invaded and occupied caverns of the Misty Mountains, past the ever-lightening breadth of the Greenwood, looming above the great Lake bordering the city of Dale, sat the Lonely Mountain. There, called Erebor by some, was an ancient and once grand city, being made grand once more. Among the travellers, refugees, soldiers and home-comers were thirteen heroes among the dwarrow. The leader and King to all those within the mountain was one of the Line of Durin, first and greatest of all their race, he who was born to lead and fallen to strife for most of his two hundred years. He had lost and then regained his home, kin, love and mountain kingdom. His mind was seized by gold in a grip that tightened and eased like the tide.

This tide was on the ebb. Cracks were forming in the clammy hold that gold and wealth kept on this mind. Once again, this mind drew strength from pain, old and familiar companion that it was. Where friends and advisors could not dent the curse of his blood for more than a day, now pain and panic wrenched into the heart of him.

The gold sickness did not simply weaken to allow rational thought for a few short hours. Instead, it broke. It broke under a crushing sense of loss; a sense of loss for something so small as to be worthless, but tied to a greater loss than he could imagine. On the edges of Thorin Oakenshield’s thoughts were panic and loathing and fear. In one moment, as he was surveying the wealth of his kingdom, the ever-growing glint of golden splendour, his fingers tracing the shapes of countless treasure, he stumbled. Thorin stumbled, and the little trinket slipped from his grasp and fell into the shining hord below.

He scrambled through mountains of gold and jewels, tearing at the spot beneath his feet. The empty handkerchief lay discarded there like a rag in his desperation to find the treasure that it had concealed. His breath began to sob from exertion, his wounds pulling and his newly-set bones screaming fiery objections. Terror clawed at his throat as his hands grew chilled and his skin stretched and parted under the fevered digging.

It was gone. All that he had left that mattered was lost into the wealth of a thousand kingdoms.

It was a tiny thing, really. One small thing, tied to the memories that were all that he had left of a light in the dark days. Lost; a tiny brass button embossed with an acorn.

And, through growing horror and a loss deeper than the Lonely Mountain itself, Thorin Oakenshield was at last truly free.
Cannon Divergence note:
In this Universe, Haldir was born much earlier and fought in the War of the Last Alliance. When Isuldur refused to throw the ring into Mount Doom, and since Great-Grand-Uncle Elrond did bugger all to stop him from going on tour with the One Ring – Haldir planted his pointed elven boot on Isuldur’s left butt cheek and booted him into the seething maw of roiling lava. It was fine though; he made sure Lothlorien sent flowers and a tree to honour Isuldur’s noble… sacrifice...

#PushInTheRightDirection #SuchATragedy #ThoughtsAndPrayersForGondor

Bilbo’s ring is just a random magic ring of speaking tongues and invisibility and such.
Rocks and Stones

Chapter Summary

“When the rocks start to roll downhill, it’s time to be elsewhere, lad.”

Chapter Notes

Saint:
Hi everyone. I know I promised Creatures would be next, but with the great response to A Shire Scorned we decided it needed a bit of continuation before the world took over our lives again. Hope you enjoy, and as always if you’d like to see who we are or want to join in the endless plot debates while the typing slave is chained to the keyboard visit our tumbler at: https://www.tumblr.com/blog/saint-n-nyrah
PS. I’m the typing slave.
PPS Can you spot the Easter Eggs?

Chapter 2: “When the rocks start to roll downhill, it’s time to be elsewhere lad.”

“Have you heard…?”
“Do you know?”
“Terrible shame!”
“And the father?”
“Must have been a dwarf.”
“A Dwarf?!”
“Who else?”
“Dwarves…”
“…Dwarves.”

Just more than halfway down the gently meandering aisles of the Hobbiton marketplace was a dwarf. He flattered himself that he had good ears, and had an even better, unseen sense for reading the lay of the land. He smiled politely at the suddenly distracted hobbit across the table; she parroted his
greeting, but her eyes were already darting away, and her pointed ears practically flapped towards the growing hubbub in the market, where a few stray words from increasingly strident voices were drifting down.

He handed her her change and the spade she’d purchased. As soon as she moved away - towards the growing murmurs, he noted - Garrak Tramson turned to the sturdily-built racks behind him and started packing away his wares. He’d emptied the entire shelf into the boxes waiting alongside and had started unlatching the mechanism that stopped the whole thing from folding up when Nel, his apprentice, finished a set of forks he’d been set to sharpen, and noticed his unscheduled industry.

There was a pause as his apprentice seemed to look around, no doubt trying to figure out why they were closing up shop in the middle of a market day. “Master Garrak?” Nel sidled over and watched for a moment as the shelf was deftly folded and his teacher stood, hefting it over into his hands.

“Time to go, lad.” With no more than that, Garrak turned to the second shelf, deftly lifting their more expensive wares and carefully wrapping them. Best to pack them first; deeper in the wagon meant theft was less likely. The halflings were more inclined to steal your lunch than a trinket, but once they left these lands all bets were off.

“For the day?” came the cautious query.

Garrak took the lad’s delay as a chance to pack the wrapped packages and squirrel them away on the back of the small wagon, poking some straw around and rearranging some lashings, making them invisible and even less likely to disappear. “No lad,” he grunted. “We make for Bree. If we push, we can be there by tomorrow night. My cousin is working the smithy. He can see us a bunk until we know where to next.”

Back to Ered Luin perhaps, or even… “Erebor maybe. The caravans are moving again.” A sharp pang of nostalgia lanced through him at the thought of his once-upon-a-time home. A tiny, nigh-extinct flame bloomed around the foundations of the hard labour of his current life, hawking his hard-made goods. “You’re too young to remember it lad, but if you ever saw the market halls there…” He sighed, and for a moment heard again the crash and ebb of a thousand voices bargaining, arguing, shouting and whispering, filling the grand market cavern like a tidal rush. “You’d be ashamed you ever thought to call this country fair a market place.”

He gave the lad a quick smile and pushed a small, heavily strapped iron box into his empty hands. “Stow that under the seat, there’s a good lad. If all else goes, we’ll need that.”

“But we only arrived last week!” Nel exclaimed, his hands automatically securing the box while thinking of the pretty hobbit-lass with the wild chestnut curls from the Green Dragon. Only that morning, she’d sent him the cheekiest smile and most mischievous dimples over breakfast. He’d looked forward to the chance to see if she still smiled like that when she wasn’t working.

Garrack’s smile turned knowing and his eyes rolled at the besotted look on the boy’s face. “And we’ll be leaving this week. Today, in fact. We’ve made fair coin and I’ll not throw good gold down a dead shaft when we could tap sweeter veins, lad. You’ve not been about long enough to know when it’s time to leave a place before the hospitality runs thin!”

As he spoke, his voiced had not risen, but had grown increasingly stern. His movements remained slow and steady – in no hurry to draw any eyes with hasty actions; hasty movement looked guilty, and as the talk was spreading faster than any wild fire he’d ever seen, Garrack was less and less inclined to see halflings, and rather more inclined to see wargs sniffing out blood from injured prey.

“I don’t understand! The Shire’s been good to us!”
No matter how long you’d lived under the open sky, there were some things no dwarf ever lost. So, no matter what his mind told him about the steady depths of rich loam beneath them, when he felt the faintest tremor from a growling depth of rock far below, Garrack froze. He looked up to see Nel had done the same, but without deep-mine experience the boy seemed confused at his own instinctive reaction. Glancing surreptitiously around, he saw the hobbits hadn’t even noticed, moving about as if their day had not just been punctuated by unnumbered tons of earth twitching and shifting deep below like the tremble of a moth’s wing.

Garrack swallowed and stepped carefully closer to his stall, packing quicker now. No hobbit that walked passed approached but there were several raised noses clearly meant for his notice. Nel moved to him, hands clenched uneasily. The boy opened his mouth and Garrack sighed, suddenly fist the scruff on Nel’s chin and leaning close.

“Listen lad, when the pebbles start rolling down the mountainside, you don’t ask questions. You grab what you can and make for Bree. Understand?” The gruffness of his voice brooked no argument and his less-than-savvy apprentice finally nodded before moving to help pack up the cart.

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Lord Nurim, fourth in his line to lead the council of Ered Luin, stood forward, his arms bracing his considerable muscled bulk on the grand council table. He loomed now over Talak, head of the Merchants’ Guild. Unlike the rich – and, more importantly - practical browns of Nurim’s dress, Talak looked very much like an oversized grape lined with fur. He wore the golden key of the grand market on a chain that itself dwarfed the man’s amble brown beard. The intricate braids that, according to rumour, were redone every morning seemed to pull back, trying to hide behind one of Talak’s chins as Nurim’s own neatly trimmed Firebeard locks shifted in for the kill.

A fading ember did not, however, become the head of the Merchants’ Guild without a touch of real heat. “Well, what is it you want me to say, my Lord? I can’t exactly take back the truth!” His third chin wobbled defensively as he swallowed.

Nurim collapsed into his chair, rubbing at his greying temples through the thick braids holding his hair from his face. “Half the damn Longbeards are already in Erebor, and the other half are packing to leave within the month. The Blue Mountains will be at safe capacity and without overflow, for the first time in two generations, and King Thorin has generously offered to continue his support of Thorin’s Halls even in his absence. Princess Dis left this council with the understanding that we would be able to continue without them as we did before their unfortunate arrival.” He glared at the Master of the Stores, who studiously failed to meet his gaze. “Could someone therefore tell me how, with a full quarter less population, we are still somehow eating ourselves out of house and home?”

A cacophony of excuses broke loose in the room, each voice trying to blame another and offer the most reasonable and self-excluding of explanations. “That would be because there is no longer any food coming in, my Lord.” Berrin, Captain of the City Guard, was the one to finally break through the din.

He paused at this; not for the message per se, but for the speaker. She was far from lovely: a tall and somewhat thorny female with plain, sharp features and closely cropped locks. Only the top of her mane had been allowed to grow long, and even that was braided down her back. Scars painted her
skin almost as thickly as ink, but there was a calm patience in her gaze, much like a warg at rest. A female at work was strange; one working as a guard was stranger, and one on a Kingdom’s council seat was absolutely unheard of. But still, as much as he made sure his unspoken disapproval very clear when others were watching, in private, hers was an opinion he greatly valued and - more importantly - trusted. She would never have gained the seat without the personal endorsement of Captain Dwalin, and he was very grateful that, before the Captain himself had run off, the man had left the city’s safety in her very capable hands.

“Explain, Captain.”

The braying ceased, everyone straining to hear a reason for the dilemma clean of politic and intrigue. For all the flaws of her gender, Berrin was unquestionably direct. “Every day, maybe a hundred cows die for Ered Luin; so do a flock of sheep and a herd of pigs and the gods alone know how many ducks, chickens and geese. Flour?” She scoffed. “Eight tons, and about the same amount of potatoes, and maybe twelve tons of barley.”

In the ringing silence she leaned forward, shaking her head. “Every day, four thousand eggs are laid for this city. Every day, tens, dozens of carts and boats and barges converge here with fish and honey and apples and olives and eels and quail. And then think of the horses dragging this stuff, and the windmills... and the wool coming in, too, every day, the cloth, the tobacco, the spices, the timber, the cheese, the coal, the fat, the tallow, the hay… every damn day!”

The silence was strained now with disbelief. Even Talak, whose job it was as the Head of the Merchants’ Guild to know these things, who could tell you the gold quotas, taxes in twelve kingdoms and average out the price of a dozen reams of silks of different qualities, swallowed hard. He didn’t want to think of how many of those things ended up on the tables of those in this very room. Especially since, as well as they were coping in the end, there were still many lean and worrying days between summers for the average dwarf. It was a good thing, he thought privately, that the Longbeards were leaving before the tide of good fortune turned on them.

Berrin met Lord Nurim’s astonished gaze. “Look, I didn’t particularly want to know this kind of thing, but once I started having to sort out the everlasting traffic problems, these were the facts that got handed to me. And let me tell you, traffic has gotten very light coming into the city the last day or two… almost non-existent. A Kingdom like Ered Luin is only two meals away from chaos at the best of times.”

“Four months, actually.” Melin, a rather thin, decrepit dwarf looked up from the tome in which he had been rapidly scribbling. His neighbour glanced over to see the meticulous handwriting of the Keeper of the Treasury, having made exact notes and calculations based on the numbers the Captain had just reeled off. “And that’s if the Erebor caravan leaves on schedule, and we begin rationing within a fortnight.” The man rolled his words in a peculiar, lilting way that left a short, sharp whistle to slip out between his whiskers with each sibilant.

Taking a deep breath to calm himself, Nurim spoke, slamming his hand onto the council table for emphasis. “Then why the hell don’t we have food coming in?” The deep breath hadn’t helped so much as tied boots of running to his voice and let it loose across the room. Collectively, around the table, everyone swallowed. Well, almost everyone. One didn’t swallow, but as his chair sat empty, this was a technicality. A shadow detached itself from the wall, and spoke. “Well, that’s because the halflings aren’t sending it anymore.”

Umbar was also slight for dwarf, but where Melin was frail, he was lean, like old leather stretched over bone and wrapped in a motley collection of browns and greens. His chin was bare and most of the table forced themselves not to look away, for to look on a shaven face was nearly shame in and
of itself. If it weren’t for the intricate spirals rising along his neck, it would be too much to face – shaven, but not shunned. Bare faced by choice. But then again, their discomfort might have been why he did it in the first place.

“But we have contracts. Ironclad contracts!” Talak squawked, outraged.

“Hobbits don’t have much use for iron, I’m afraid.” Umbar sneered at the oversized grape looking to be juiced on his golden stool, and turned to address only those he considered worth a damn. Unlike the council collective, he came from bastard stock, common as mud and married common as dirt. Loyalty and skill kept his seat safe; he didn’t need his arse on a cushion to keep his place for him. A voice like a slicked blade flickered out. “Only thing we could get out of them was to talk to the Old Took, but he’s in the heart of Tookborough and we can’t seem to get back into the Shire anymore anyway.”

“But that doesn’t make sense!” Airn, son of Nairn, spoke up at last. The head of the Miners’ Guild didn’t have much care for food and the market, and never had a worry beyond arguing a bigger share of winter quota for them that deserved it, working hard in the deep down to keep the wheels of the Blue Mountains turning. He was a Blacklock, showing it proud in the thick curls that almost overwhelmed his face but for the glint of squinting eyes therein. No one had the stone sense he did, and the mountain seemed to whisper all its dirty secrets to him. And, quite frankly, he’d rather converse with stone and rock than in dwarrow halls and with the dwarves that filled them.

He neither picked at his nails nor stared at the table like some of his fellow councillors, but listened intently. His boys worked hard, and to work hard they needed food; they needed drink to spend coin on; they needed the wheels to keep turning, and if some above ground – here he snorted ironically to himself - shits were getting in the way of that… “Why are we letting some little creatures’ whims keep us out? I thought they didn’t know how to fight!”

“That would only matter if they were the ones keeping us out,” Umbar responded, unwilling to raise his voice to meet the other councillor’s belligerent challenge. He frowned though, the lines of his face pulling, and seemed almost embarrassed to go on.

Nurim looked about to press the issue and as the other dwarf parted his lips, the Spymaster got it over with. “No one is keeping us out. Not directly. But no matter what road, what shortcut or pasture my people take, even ones they’ve used before… within minutes they’re dazed and aboutfaced, with the Shire behind them.”

“Witchery!” Berrin growled out the word with all the venom reserved for an offer of a bribe. “Bah, damned halflings.”

Voices around the table erupted once more, yapping demands, ideas and accusations in equal measure. Nurim sighed, scrubbing his eyes tiredly as he leaned back. The Spymaster’s explanation made no real sense, but he knew how little the Spymaster cared for being told he could not go where he wished. It was unlikely that he’d left any avenue unexplored. “What we need is some information,” he sighed. “We need to know what is going on, and if no dwarrow can tell us, then perforce we need a hobbit.”

It was not immediate but around him, those nearest took in his words and went quiet. Like a school room with teacher’s eyes on them they nudged those next to them, and passed on his words. Those nudged the next and the next until the entire table was facing him. “Surely in the entirety of the West, there must be some hobbit still willing to speak to us? An entire race does not turn their favour overnight!”

The dwarves mulled between themselves, each wanting to assist but unable to contribute.
“Come on,” Nurim demanded, “We have herders, we have a few farmers. Someone must be friendly with the hobbits!” The lingering moment was broken at last by Talak. “Isn’t Trask the mushroom farmer married to a hobbit?”

Blinking awareness started to emerge as those there tried to pull the image of a mushroom farmer to the forefront of their memory. For most there was a dull lack of regard. Why would men of their status care for a simple mushroom farmer, after all? After a moment though, the trickle of an old petition came to a few minds - a request for spousal invitation for a residency of some kind.

After a second, Nurim remembered, eyes lighting up. “Oh yes… the hobbit with the… with the, um…” His hands curved halfway down his beard as though he was holding a fair-sized melon in each. The dwarves surrounding the table chuckle at the bountiful, well… bounty of the halfling women.

“…the what, Councilman Nurim?” Berrin's cool query scotched the masculine amusement, leaving shamefaced silence in its wake.

He didn’t dare turn. He could hear the arched eyebrow in Berrin’s voice, and the not so hidden axe asking for a careful reply. Dammit, he could remember the days when women wouldn’t be allowed in the council chamber without a crown.

He coughed, dropping his hands, “with, hopefully, some perspicacity.” Drumming the table, he coughed again. He could still feel the ice of her gaze. Turning to an aide lingering nearby he waved a hand. “Tell someone to bring the hobbit married to Trask the mushroom farmer.”

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They heard her long before they saw her. Coming down the corridor was a voice that would have rattled the glass in windows if there had been any in the council room.

“…bossing your way into my home at dinner time like a bunch of thugs! And you! You are kith to my own husband! You’ve eaten my own food, Thrall, and yes, sat in my sitting room too! Now it’s herding me down the corridor like a cow to the parlour!”

The busy scolding was followed into the council chamber by the halfling herself. She waddled awkwardly through the door, the only part of her more impressive than her much-appreciated assets was the bulging belly that entered the room before them. The entire package was round: round apple cheeks, round chestnut curls, round chest, round stomach and round, ranting mouth raining vitriol on the infantry line that followed. The soldiers walked shoulder to shoulder, shuffling abreast, moving forward with the inexorability of a landslide, herding her into the chamber as they blocked the entirety of the corridor behind without laying a finger on her diminutive person.

The one on the end, Nurim couldn’t help but notice, was the one most determined not to make eye contact as she listed his many, deeply personal faults - some of which caused the surrounding dwarves to pink in shared embarrassment.

“…the next time you forget your own mother’s name day, you back-stabbing, ill-shorn wretch!”

With this parting animadversion on his character and morals, the lady dismissed him as an enemy soundly thrashed, and swung around with a precision impressive in one carrying such front-heavy momentum. She regarded the room, and the council held its collective breath for several uncomfortable moments. The halfling drew herself up to her full, not very significant height. “Well!
Aren’t any of you going to offer me a chair? I’m pregnant!”

There was a mad scramble in the room to be the first to offer up their chair. Of course, it was Umbar who simply slipped his own forward, the thing being unused as it was. He took the opportunity for motion to circle behind the diminutive creature, careful of the large hairy feet, to stand out of her direct line of sight. Nurim caught a flicker of thieves’ cant Iglishmêk as the Spymaster subtly questioned another one the guards, his eyebrows rising as the guard responded in kind. He tried to follow the reply, but the rapid, slick flick of fingers – much faster and more abbreviated than standard Iglishmêk - was quickly replaced by the realisation that the entire council was scurrying around this halfling and the guards hadn’t laid a finger on her. In fact, they seemed inclined to stay as close to the door as possible.

Umbar seemed amused as he stood well back of the firing line, propped comfortably against a wall. Coughing to hide his amusement, Nurim refused to be cowed by the tiny hellion and addressed her with firm patience. “Madam, thank you for coming today.”

She ignored him, glaring at the unadorned seat before looking to the guards and then the councilmen themselves. The glare intensified as she crossed her arms and stared at the chair as if it had personally offended her. For a long moment, they all stared blankly at the empty seat before realisation dawned for Nurim. He found himself moving before thought had properly caught up, darting forward to remove his own chair’s cushion and placing it on the cold, carved seat.

Without uncrossing her arms, the hobbit rounded the chair and collapsed into it. She stared at them, staring at her, before abruptly bursting into tears.

“What are you going to do to me?” she wailed, tears hanging like diamonds on her lashes.

Every unmarried male in the room shared a look of pained desperation in the face of feminine tears; the married ones simply winced and refused to make eye contact lest she sense weakness. One and all, however, they looked to Nurim, desperate for the council head to earn his keep and take the lead. As a craft-wed politician, though, he was at a loss. Consoling a female, let alone one who was pregnant and crying, had rarely come up in his life. Her heaving seemed to slow as Berrin stepped forward, placing a goblet of water on the arm of the chair. The hobbit picked it up and sipped at it, still hiccupping.

Bless the Captain, Nurim thought fervently. He made a silent promise to give her a raise, and support her opinions more in the near future.

“We aren’t planning to do anything to you, madam.” Yes, yes that seemed right, one woman calming down the other - that would work. “We simply need to ask you some questions.” Berrin’s calm good sense seemed to be making an impression.

The wailing eased to a sniffle and then a sniff as she looked up at the rather large woman. “Questions?” The voice, so loud on entrance, was surprisingly small now. She managed to sound curious and at the same time imply – quite unfairly, Nurim thought resentfully - that she was relieved to know that no one would be bringing out the hot coals and spikes.

He took the opportunity to intercede, stepping forward. “Yes. Yes, uh, um… madam…?”

A watery smile greeted him as she bobbed in place. “Peony nee-Bricegirdle.”

He smiled in return, a politicians smile. “I am Lord Nurim Firebeard, head of this Council. I apologise for summoning you so precipitously, but we have some questions and you are the only one in the entire mountain who might be able to assist us.”
She pulled a dainty handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed at her eyes. Tucking it away, she sipped on her water again. “Well my Lord, I don’t know how I could possibly help, but I shall try.”

“Marvellous” he said, rubbing his hands. Progress at last. “If you happen to have any contact with the Shire, we would appreciate you finding out for us anything you may regarding the delay in delivery of the shipments we were due to receive. We uh,” his eyes darted to Umbar leaning against the wall, “are struggling to ascertain the reason they might have stopped, you see.”

The blank disbelief that met his enquiry made her eyes look rounder than ever. She blinked, her curls bobbing as if denying that he could be so simple. “Of course they aren’t going to send you anything! We can hardly expect to deal with dwarves after what you did! Why, the whole Shire is in a perfect taking about it!”

Nurim’s eye twitched and he rubbed at it distractedly. How the hell did she know, cooped up as she was in the mountain, and pregnant to boot? “What we did?” he asked with forced patience. “The Blue Mountains have been the most generous of neighbours and allies to the halfling nation.”

She snorted. The woman snorted at him, actually snorted! “Not a candle to Rivendell’s generosity,” she replied smartly. As one, everyone in the room twitched, and he could feel the annoyed tension building behind him. “They don’t call us halflings, for a start.”

True as that might be, it was nothing in the face of the growing aggravation the tiny creature was provoking. “Whatever was done to offend, we would most sincerely apologise, given the chance.” His words were clipped and precise.

She snorted again. Twice! He’d not been snorted at twice in the last decade. Did the woman not realise the stature of those in the room? Who it was she spoke with?

“No. It wasn’t you who did it, so what possible good is an apology?” She shook her head disparagingly. “It was kin of my kin you know, and a simple apology wouldn’t mean anything.”

Behind him another voice spoke up, the head merchant’s voice rang out. “A gift perhaps, to show our apology to the wounded parti? Surely a dwarven gift would-”

“Excuse me very much! You can’t bribe your way into forgiveness! That’s disreputable, it’s conniving! It’s- its…” With all the grace of a beached whale, she tried to raise her awkward bulk out of the wooden chair. Very much like a beached whale, no matter how she heaved and levered herself, she was going nowhere unaided. Heaving a sigh, she flailed briefly, then subsided, her voice plaintive. “Somebody help me up.”

Even as she spoke, three guards moved forward to assist her only to leap back again in shock as she took a swipe at them. “Not you! I don’t know you! Don’t touch me!”

The dwarf on whom she had been raining particular abuse stepped up to her, and placing his hands delicately on her waist and arm, lifted her with easy familiarity into standing once more. In the ensuing silence, a brief but still faint ruckus could be heard in the distance.

She gave the supportive hands a friendly pat and smiled up at the guard. “Thank you Thrall.” A second later she smacked his hands away with a resounding thwap. “Now get off of me, you treacherous knickerbocker!”

His patience at an end with this foolish female, Airn erupted. “We can hardly apologise for something we don’t damn well understand, halfling. Now calm down, be rational and explain what this is all about!”
It was with surprisingly good aim that the heavy goblet flew towards Airn’s face. It was only the reflexes born of a lifetime of training that allowed Berrin to intercept the missile; she didn’t catch it so much as interrupt its laudable trajectory. Absorbing the force of it knocked her knuckles into his cheek and set him to swearing. The rest of the council was still, eyes wide as the halfling suddenly burst into tears once more. “I *am* calm!”

Thrall had darted forward almost as soon as Airm had spoken, but stopped short when the ready missile was launched well ahead of any attempt of his to intercept it. Now he merely shook his head in defeat, face buried in his left hand and said *sotto voce* “Well done my Lord; exactly the right thing to say.” And then, slightly louder “Peony, could you try not to have me arrest you?” He caged the halfling’s fluttering hands, stuffed a hanky into one stubbornly clenched fist, and patted it soothingly. At least a hanky wouldn’t do much damage.

With the notable exception of Umbar, who was curled into the wall, trying not to collapse with his suppressed laughter and who seemed to be greatly enjoying himself, the council turned to Berrin, hoping that she could shed some light on this inexplicable feminine hysteria. As lost as the males, she returned to each a quelling look, daring anyone to insinuate by direct inquiry that shared reproductive biology meant shared mental instability.

Even as the guard spoke, the door was flung open – deferentially, of course – and yet another person bounced into the chamber. The dwarf that rushed in was sturdy and handsome enough, although a little soft around the middle. He darted in, ignoring the council. “Peony, love! Are you alright?”

He snatched her hands from Thrall, anxiously petting at them. At her dewy-eyed assent, he rounded belligerently on the council. “I demand to know on what grounds my one has been detained!” His outrage trembled his voice almost as much as his trepidation even as Peony dumped Thrall’s hanky on the floor, reached to him and stole *his* handkerchief, dabbing at her eyes. Having thus soothed herself, she shook her head. “I’m not arrested! They just had some questions.”

At the farmer’s straight look, Nurim nodded his head, exasperated with hobbits in general. “Yes, madam, exactly so. If you could share what has happened, we would gladly cease imposing on your time and person.”

She looked at them, truly startled, one arm still holding her husband’s hand as if the dwarf was keeping her stable. “You mean… you really don’t know?”

Nurim wondered if it was possible to actually bite through steel; right now, he felt that he might make a more than passable attempt. “No,” he said slowly. “We have no idea what we have done to offend, madam.”

She blinked again, more horrified than disgusted at this ignorance. “Well, if you don’t know then I’m not going to tell you.” She declared with perfect clarity.

There was an instant uproar and Nurim, finally losing his grasp on his civility, bellowed like an injured bull. “And why in Mahal’s Halls will you not?”

Peony sniffed – a sound distinctly different from her previous, damp sniffle – and crossed her arms over her ample bosom, turning her face away. “It wouldn’t mean anything if you didn’t figure it out yourselves. If you must be told what that wretched dwarf did, it might be false sympathy. We won’t be fooled again,” she declared, and clearly considered the matter done. The hobbitess had had enough, and moved, with all the grace of a beached whale, towards the door, ignoring her husband. Trask, who was simultaneously exchanging hurried words with Thrall in Khuzdul while the council rose in uproar, vainly tried to forestall her.
At the sight of most of the room nearing apoplectic temper, Trask tried to intercede, cajoling. “But my love, there are so many wandering dwarves nowadays. My jewel, could ya just tell us which dwarf? Just a hint precious, anything. Where, who, any little detail to help us understand.” The besotted dwarf inched closer to his determinedly waddling wife. “Please my Pearl, just… uh a hint? For the council… for me…”

She looked at him with a loving smile, kissed his cheek fondly and murmured “No!”

Seeing that none of the guards were moving to stop her, she made for a door even as her husband drew himself up. “No, see here Peony! I am your husband and demand you speak to us!”

Thrall winced. He didn’t have enough hands in which to bury his face at the clearly panic-fuelled idiocy that erupted from his best friend’s mouth. Even by hobbit standards, Peony was a wilful female. She spun with the first touch of grace she’d shown since entering, fuelled by pure rage. “Demand? You’re demanding? I demand you not speak to me in that tone! I am your wife, not your mule! Bad enough you defended him!”

She froze, then straighted, brushing down her skirts and calming with the most suspicious speed possible.

“…defended…?” Her husband’s brows folded into puzzlement. She’d received a letter and they’d argued so badly he’d spent half the night unpacking her things as fast as she could throw them into her bags. He still didn’t know what set her off so badly, only that he’d mentioned how grateful the Mountains were to King T- “No!” His eyes widened, searching hers frantically.

Seeing she’d shown her hand, she looked away, gritting her teeth so hard it felt they might splinter in her jaw. “Fine,” she snorted. “So you know it was that Oak Branch scallywag. Fine.” It very obviously wasn’t fine, but she knew that Trask would clarify for the rockheads in the room.

Nurim sat up suddenly, electrified. “Oake branch? Oakenshield? You mean King Thorin?”

Her knife-sharp gaze fixed on him. “That treacherous, heartless, murderous lout you call king, yes. He has betrayed kin of my kin. We will not be fooled again!” For such a fragile little thing she projected an air of viciousness rather well.

Berrin’s eyes narrowed. ‘Murderous?’ She flashed Iglishmêk at Thrall, who just shrugged helplessly.

At the table, Melin leaned over to Talak, confused. His whisper carried along with the faint whistle of air between his front teeth. “She’s not a noble of some kind, is she?” The Merchant, refusing to take his eyes from the opera unfolding before them, shook his head. “Not as far as I know.”

Melin sat back. “Then what’s this we she keeps throwing around?” he demanded of no one in particular.

They were distracted by Airn standing and slamming his fist to the table hard enough to crack the wood. “Watch your tone and words carefully Madam!” he growled, his face still throbbing from Berrin’s unintentional backhand. “You speak of our king-”

“Who’s king? Not my king! Hobbits know no silly king to tell them what to do and get away with murder and worse!” She bit back at the incensed dwarf, seemingly uncaring for the other’s size.

Having dismissed Thrall, Berrin’s eyes sought out Umbar. Her hands flashed again, demanding ‘what murder?’ of the one person in the room who might know. He raised his eyebrows sardonically, replying ‘I’m more in the business of doing than solving such things.’ Then, more sombrely ‘if I knew, we wouldn’t be here, would we?’
Meanwhile, oblivious to this exchange, Trask stepped forward, making conciliatory gestures at the council while his face paled beneath his beard. “My Lords, she doesn’t know what she’s saying, she’s upset, you must understand.” He gestured expressively around his waistline.

Thrall really didn’t know how his friend had survive marriage for as long as he had. He glanced to the powder keg in a maternity dress, watching her fuse burn as her husband tried to play peacemaker; as his friend simply picked up a shovel and dug the hole deeper still.

“My jewel, you cannot say things like that of King Thorin in King Thorin’s own halls. We are in dwarven lands, and he is our great king.” He smiled at her, hoping that she would subside in the face of logic.

Instead of the expected explosion, Thrall was surprise to see a smile as sweet as wasp honey. “Oh? Thank you for explaining that to me; I didn’t know. I’m glad you told me I was not allowed to speak of that traitorous swine that way here.” Her smile faded and her eyes hardened. “So, I’ll go to where I can speak of him. MY MOTHER’S!” With that, she turned and stormed emphatically through the door, her voice betraying the oncoming tears. As she turned the corner, she threw back to her husband, “You are welcome to accompany me or not! As you like, I’m sure!”

Trask darted forward to the door, swearing under his breath and then calling to her, “My jewel? My Pearl! Givashel? I’m sorry! Come back. Please my love, don’t leave!” Leaning out the doorway he frowned, looking left, then right down the two ends of the corridor. Swearing again, he leaned back through the great doors. “I’m sorry my Lords, but she is my one!” With that he nodded and looked to his friend. “Thrall, you take the left, I’ll take the right! We’ll see if we can find her before she reaches the gates.” The two rushed out, Thrall looking to Berrin for a lenient nod first.

Lord Talak dabbed at the sweat on his oversized brow before frowning and asking the question still not answered. “But what did King Thorin do?”

Berrin and Umbar shared a long look. The spy strolled out, murmuring something to the outer guards before returning after a few moments. “Not sure where she disappeared to. I’m going after them. On the off chance that farmer gets into the Shire, I want to know.” A moment later he too was gone.

Silence settled over the chamber; eventually, Berrin spoke. “Did anyone else notice her throwing around accusations of murder?”

Several members of the exalted council squawked in outrage, while others demanded an explanation. Nurim scowled heavily, distractedly tapping his fingers on the embossed armrest of the great seat of the Council Head. One could not simply accuse a king, nor could one speculate without just cause; moreover, not even the ancestors would forgive such an accusation levelled against the saviour of the Dwarven peoples. It would be unforgivable indeed to voice such base allegations… but nobody had ever said anything about writing them down. Nurim rose and cleared his throat. “I shall repair to my study to pen a letter to the Lady Dís to apprise her of this baseless slander.” He bowed, and made a rather more hasty than stately exit.

The remaining council members sat, pondering the events of the morning. How had one such tiny, insignificant creature overset their morning, and reduced their normal, relatively tranquil meeting into such a farce?

How had a race of such significantly insignificant creatures reduced their hallowed halls to such straights in so short a time?

The head of the stores frowned. “Are we sure they aren’t magic?”
The echoes of the song lingered in the still air of the clearing, the magic carried in the notes winding through leaf and tree. The ageless voice had dropped away, but its echoes drifted though the wood beneath the artisan’s delicate hands, following the path laid down by the ancient art. Shifting wood with both magic and limb, easing it into place and calling its form from the roots up, the artist lingered. Calloused fingers guided a chisel and took long minutes to shave a fraction of a sliver away, leaving the shining pale weirwood smooth and even, unable to prick or splinter.

The solid curve of the heavy haunches rose up from legs folded in to create a gentle rocking. The roots twisted away even as he placed the last touches, inspecting every inch of the product with a thousand years of wood-crafting skill; ensuring that this piece, commissioned and prepared with a full winter’s focus, was a mastery of perfection. His apprentices held back, some clearing shavings with their hands while still others gently strummed the closing notes of the spellwork.

Following the line of the back up to the strong neck, twisted to overlook the babe, the great antlers lofted in guardianship of the most precious slumber there. A throat cleared behind him, but he didn’t have eyes to turn now, not even for his lord. Dark hair slipped over the wood, finding not a single rough spot on which to tangle as the master craftsman finally reached the deep, empty hollows that marked the eyes of the noble face.

The bassinet was small in all, by the standard of an elf; big enough for one of their new-borns but it would quickly be outgrown. Still, the slight size of the bassinet, juxtaposed with the mighty elk that guarded it, gave it a certain delicacy, gave strength to the lightest flow of the wood grain. He stood back at last, and almost immediately the golden robes of King Thranduil glinted beside him.

“Well done.” The sleek, cultured voice spoke its praise slowly, with the weight that only a King could bring to bear.

Reawin, master of the Greenwoods Carvers, faced his Lord to gauge his reaction. Not for Thranduil the fondness of inspecting a satisfactory commission, but a saudade gaze that lingered on the stag’s face, modelled on the King’s own fallen mount, looking so near life as to be reborn.

Catching himself, Reawin stepped back, bowing deeply as his apprentices tapered their playing to an end. “It is done, my Lord.”

“No. It is pleasing, but not yet done.” Thranduil’s own hand slipped across the warm, even grain before reaching in to lift the pillow - so small it could only be used as decoration for most elves. He gestured imperiously behind him, and his aid handed him a shimmering cloth; a soft cloak, made by the lady Galadriel herself for his son’s hundredth birthday when the boy barely reached his father’s knee. Thranduil crooned softly as the cloth moved and the thread rewove itself without stiches, enclosing the small pillow. For now, the fabric felt cool, but would warm, or cool as needed, soothing against an infant’s skin.

Placing the cushion into the crib, it sat as a mattress, awaiting the halfling babe who was yet to enter the world. Standing back, Thranduil took in the sight of it and slipped from his robe two stones, his mind set even as his fingers were reluctant to part with just these two. Reaching forward, he clicked them into the empty, hollow eyes of the stag, overlooking their tiny cargo and setting the crib to motion with the gentle force of it.

The stones shimmered to life with a soft flicker of starlight. A great white stag, overlooking a weirwood crib, with stones of starlight for eyes – a fitting gift for one named elf friend.

“Well it is done. Pack it well, for we leave within the week.”
Bilbo and his grandmother faced off across a table set with white linen and West Farthing china. Her voice was gentle and even pleasant as she supervised his Aunt Violet reaching over to pour the first cups of tea. The woman was old steel: steel in her hair, steel in her veins and steel in her eyes, no matter that it was wrapped in silks and lace. The matriarch of the great Baggins clan ruled over the family with a light but firm touch, her hands like iron on the reins of the family affairs.

Her skin, though wrinkled, was still fine and pale, hinting at the beauty time had begged to ease. The loss of her love was second only to a love of her family and name. More than a gentlehobbit, more than a Grand Dame, more than a skilled politicker of social waters… she was Grandmother Baggins. Unquestionable, unchallenged and without patience for foolishness or failing.

Her voice, still strong despite her age, floated with the steam of the tea kettle, as if asking after nothing more than the recent blooming in his garden. “So, tell me Bilbo. When did you decide to drag the Baggins name through the mud?”

Bilbo regarded her evenly, pausing to sip at his tea, not even blinking as the battle lines were drawn. “I don’t know grandmother,” he replied pleasantly. “When did the Baggins clan decide to take up pig farming and leave me to the cold of the stye?”

Around them, the family went quiet, as perfectly still as portraits. Nobody wanted to move lest they become caught in the crossfire. Tea dripped into saucers and hands were held looming over tea cakes and sandwich corners; as a collective the table swallowed hard, unbelieving. Bilbo had taken very much after his father, inheriting the calm steel spine of the Baggins, but he had undeniably inherited his tongue from the dreaded Belladonna Took.

Bilbo smiled at Grandmother Baggins, all teeth. The battle was joined.
An Update update

Hi
I absolutely promise it has not been abandoned. I am halfway through the next creatures chapter and then I will be busy with Shires next chapter.

Unfortunately it's been a mad year for us. Nyrah is handing in her master's in animal science while working 6 days a week 9 hours a day in sales. I'm studying my honours, working full time as a teacher to 128 ten year olds and going through an intensive assistant principal training program. We are 6 months into a 4 month process to buy a house and have had a run of shitty luck from both our cars loosing tires to thousands in vet bills to stolen water pumps just to name a few things in the last 2 months. My anxiety acting up also blocks my wanting to write with self depreciation and apathy.

Not a passive aggressive anything just trying to explain to everyone why it's been so long but we absolutely have never thought of abandoning this story. Every comment you make makes a rough time a little better
We read and talk about each one and are so so so thankful for your patience and that you like our story. Thank you. Wholey and sincerely. I'm on holiday in a week for 2 weeks with no deadlines and I will be writing. I'm hoping to Finnish the creatures chapter and a Shire chapter.

Please hold on a little longer. More is coming soon I promise.

Saint

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!