Summary

Bilbo didn't care what Mister Proudfoot said, he was sure that he had a baby dragon. This belief only grew when the dragon began to hoard things. Shiny things. A glass bead, a shiny silver spoon, his father's spectacles were an obsessive favorite. Ember would always take them straight back to the fireplace and lay on them in the fire, but Bilbo scolded him harshly and told him that stealing things was bad, and he shouldn't take things that didn't belong to him, then made the dragon give them back. The little dragon was so sad about this that Bilbo gave him his bag of marbles, which Ember examined happily in great detail. Since shiny objects were apparently something his dragon needed in order to be happy, and he didn't want the little one stealing, Bilbo went around to the neighbors, collecting old bottles, and beads and brass and silver buttons, bits of copper and slivers of tin and steel and anything else shiny that they didn't want anymore, broken brooches, rusted old tools, chipped teacups,
jewelry chains that were broken and tangled beyond recovery, an earring that had long ago lost its pair, a silver ring that no one wanted, and six pairs of broken spectacles that Ember hoarded fiercely.

Notes

More of my birthday postings. I had a few days of work, so I am a bit late on this one, but better late than never!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Finding Friends, Fire, and Flying

Bilbo was just turned six years old when he'd found the egg deep in the woods, it was the biggest egg he'd ever seen, off-white, strangely soft and leathery. It wasn't in a nest like it should have been, it was just laying in the dirt, forgotten, abandoned, a trail of dried blood leading from it off into the woods. Something bad had happened to it's mama, eggs like this were usually in a clutch, but there were no others. It didn't feel right, just leaving it there, though it had probably been too cold for too long to hatch, Bilbo wanted to help it. The egg was huge, he had to mark the path back to it and go get a satchel to even get the egg home safely. He knew eggs needed to stay warm, he'd helped Farmer Chubb hatch chickens before, and a leathery shell meant it was a reptile, either a turtle or a snake or a lizard. There was no way his mama would let him keep a huge mysterious reptile egg in his bedroom, but there was a garden shed in back that was nearly empty because Gardener Gamgee always used his own tools, and his parents didn't have much of a green thumb.

He cleaned it up, and packed it in a wooden crate that he filled with straw and blankets and kept near the southern window of the shed so it would get a lot of nice warm sunlight. He cradled the egg to keep it warm and he talked to it and read it stories and sang it songs. Every once in awhile he'd tap the egg to let the little one inside know he was there and that things were going to get better and that everything would be alright.

He found out purely by accident from Diggle Proudfoot who raised corn and grass snakes to keep away mice and rats from the fields and stores, that soft eggs shouldn't be moved much at all, and kept quite warm at all times, because he watched the man take care of a clutch of eggs, and he felt sad that his egg wouldn't have any brothers or sisters, and also caught the man saying soft eggs needed to be kept moist, and how the man did it for his snakes, so he got some sawdust from the wood mill, and soaked it just right and put that in the nest to help it.

After a really bad thunderstorm that had kept him inside all day he knew the egg had been getting cold for too long, so after his parents went to bed, he brought the egg into the bathroom and let it get warm again in the steam as he took a bath. He didn't want to put the egg back out in the shed, so he became very sneaky. There was a chest in the smoking room near the fireplace that was big enough for the egg, the room also had the sunniest window in the smial and was always nice and warm, and was very close to the desk where he did his lessons. Best part was it only had a few mathoms in it. He put them in one of the spare rooms and tucked his egg into the chest after he lined it with the blankets, straw and sawdust. It was easier to tend his egg without having to try and sneak out to the shed, and at night, after his parents had gone to bed, he made sure everything was just right before going back to bed himself.

But mothers of course know everything. It was the third night of having the egg in the house and he was just opening the chest and cooing to the egg that everything was alright, and letting it know what had happened during the day, and deciding which lullaby to sing it, when his mother walked straight in and asked him what he was up to. He was caught egg handed and he started to cry, the egg had
become very special to him, he couldn't bear to give it away now.

His mother held him and hushed him as he sobbed out the whole story, and she kissed his hair and called him a silly little dear. She didn't chastise him for wanting to help a little one in need, and she took some hot coals from the fire and put them into an old iron pot with a little hole worn into the side that she had never gotten around to having fixed. But it had a lid and she tucked it in the chest to keep the egg warm as he checked the dampness of the sawdust. When everything was right, she put him back in bed. The next day she took him back to the Proudfoots to make sure he was doing everything he was supposed to.

Mister Proudfoot even came over to see the egg Bilbo had found, and was impressed with its size and quite curious what it was as well, and told them to keep the pot in the chest filled with hot or even live coals at all times, because bigger eggs needed more heat, but to keep the lid of the chest cracked just a bit so it wouldn't get too hot or damp. Then showed him how to candle an egg to see if it even had a baby inside, and from what they saw, it was either a snake or a lizard. And Bilbo even saw it move, so he knew that it was alive.

Bilbo's father merely smiled and shook his head when he learned what Bilbo's secret was, and chuckled and said he definitely took after his mother most times, but that this was a good experience to learn responsibility, however, whatever it turned out to be, Bilbo had to know it wasn't a pet, it was a wild animal and had to be set free when it was old enough. Bilbo agreed.

Days turned to weeks, turned to months, and Bilbo still watched over his egg religiously. Mister Proudfoot came by to check on things about once a week, since they didn't know what they were dealing with, they didn't know how long it could take the egg to hatch. But Bilbo never gave up. It was almost a year after he found the egg, when he noticed that the egg was getting dimples, as if it were drying out. He rushed to Mister Proudfoot's because the added water to the sawdust wasn't helping. Mister Proudfoot just smiled and said this was supposed to happen right before it hatched.

Three days later a sharp little spike on the end of a little reptilian nose poked through the shell and just sat there breathing for hours. Bilbo was delighted and encouraging, letting the little one know it was safe to come out, practically bouncing with excitement to see the baby. He had insects and mice and even a frog all ready for whatever the baby might want to eat, and he told the little one that there was food out here, ready and waiting.

It was late at night, when the little one finally crawled out of it's shell, and Bilbo was shocked. It was a black lizard... with *wings*. The little one went straight for the food, ate all of it, then curled around the ember pot so tightly Bilbo was sure it would get burned, but it just started with this rumbling sound, nearly a purr, and lowered its head in contentment as Bilbo bravely stroked the crest of its head, delighted when the lizard leaned into his touch as if it enjoyed it.
The little one had a voracious appetite, chirp hissing for more food at least twice a day, mice and rats disappeared down its gullet almost as fast as Bilbo could get more, within a week he was just giving him pieces of raw chicken and rabbits instead. Mister Proudfoot had never seen anything like it, had no idea what it was, and said if he didn't know that dragons were just a myth, he'd swear that this was one.

He was able to tell that the lizard was a male though, the lizard nearly bit him when Mister Proudfoot checked, Bilbo didn't blame him, he would have been upset about it too. He named him Ember, because he loved fire, in fact, the second he was big enough to escape the chest, he dashed straight into the fireplace and curled up happily on the still burning grate. It was soon apparent that heat was essential, the fireplace was lit night and day and Ember played in the flames as if they were no more dangerous than feathers. Bilbo didn't care what Mister Proudfoot said, he was sure that he had a baby dragon.

This belief only grew when the dragon began to hoard things. Shiny things. A glass bead, a shiny silver spoon, his father's spectacles were an obsessive favorite. Ember would always take them straight back to the fireplace and lay on them in the fire, but Bilbo scolded him harshly and told him that stealing things was bad, and he shouldn't take things that didn't belong to him, then made the dragon give them back. The little dragon was so sad about this that Bilbo gave him his bag of marbles, which Ember examined happily in great detail. Since shiny objects were apparently something his dragon needed in order to be happy, and he didn't want the little one stealing, Bilbo went around to the neighbors, collecting old bottles, and beads and brass and silver buttons, bits of copper and slivers of tin and steel and anything else shiny that they didn't want anymore, broken brooches, rusted old tools, chipped teacups, jewelry chains that were broken and tangled beyond recovery, an earring that had long ago lost its pair, a silver ring that no one wanted, and six pairs of broken spectacles that Ember hoarded fiercely.

Whenever Ember needed a distraction or had been particularly well behaved, he gave him another new shiny 'treasure'. Bilbo soon found that Ember's nimble claws could undo the most stubbornly knotted chain, could somehow get the tarnish off any piece of silver no matter how blackened, his fire could burn the rust off a tool no matter how long it had lain forgotten. Anything put in his dragon's claws and fire gleamed brighter and shinier than anyone could think possible. Nothing got the least bit sooty or singed, everything gleamed and glowed and caught the eye irresistibly. No one but Bilbo could put their hand anywhere near Ember's 'treasures' without getting a hiss, a snap, and possibly teeth in their hand for their trouble.

Bilbo however was given things to look at and admire before they were returned to the pile, and his praise and attention was hoarded almost as much as Ember's treasures. He loved curling around Bilbo's neck and shoulders, curling up in his lap when he was reading, sneaking into his bed when he was sleeping. As much as his father was now concerned about the circumstances, he didn't think he would be able to get Ember to go anywhere unless Ember wanted to leave. Whether Belladonna and Bungo liked it or not, Bilbo had a pet dragon.

Ember was about the size of a full grown house cat when he started to change colors, Mister
Proudfoot said that several species of reptiles changed colors as they grew, and it was nothing to be concerned about.

Ember first got little spots that became paler and paler and grew larger with time. They turned from white to pale yellow that darkened and darkened, first to orange and then finally to a bright, vibrant red. Mister Proudfoot warned that bright colors usually were a warning to beware of danger, and that Ember could be poisonous, but when Bilbo asked Ember to let Mister Proudfoot see his teeth to check, they were sharp, no doubt, but there were no fangs like venomous snakes had.

Ember's pile of treasures was soon too large for them, the fire, and the dragon to all fit in the fireplace at the same time, and Bungo put his foot down. He turned the garden shed into a proper nest for Ember, complete with a fire pit. Bilbo helped Ember move his treasures to the new nest, and made sun catchers to hang in the windows with broken bottles and shiny pieces of quartz and brass and copper. The dragon was up to eating a whole rabbit or chicken once a day. Ember still snuck in Bilbo's window at night and slept curled up with him, and after awhile Bungo stopped fighting it and just let Ember in at night. Bella was quite fond of Ember, and treated him as part of the family, picking him up treats or trinkets at the market when she went out, and scratching his head just right when she was reading a book.

It was nearing Ember's birthday and they decided to have a special dinner for him. Bilbo saw a group of tinkers set up at the market and bought a special, especially shiny present for Ember. When the day came his father spent the afternoon roasting a pig, and his mother strung up decorations in the back garden. Ember was given a new bag of marbles, a ring of old keys, and Bilbo gave Ember his gift last, a golden bracelet with blood red garnet cabochons in it. Ember just stared at the gift, could barely turn his eyes away from it, and looked at Bilbo as if he hung the moon and stars in the sky. He would show it to anyone who would look, but absolutely wouldn't let anyone touch. Except Bilbo.

By now Bilbo knew how Ember cherished praise and compliments and being told he was pretty and his treasures amazing. His vanity knew no bounds, but Bilbo didn't mind, especially since it made Ember so happy and proud.

Bilbo's was twelve and Ember was five when Bilbo's great aunt Belina Baggins died. She hadn't had any children, and had the most hideously tacky taste the shire had ever seen. No one wanted her stuff because it was so garishly ugly, not even what had been left to her relatives in her will. In the end, it all went to Belladonna, who whimpered at the very idea of forcing her eyes to go through it, so Bilbo asked to help, to see if he could find anything shiny Ember might like. His mother told him the dragon could have anything he wanted. Anything. At all. In fact he could have all of it, and just throw out or burn whatever he didn't want, including the dead woman's house.

Bilbo took the keys from his mother and explored the Smial that was on the other side of Hobbiton. Everything was ugly, but a lot of it was also SHINY. There was a lot of potential if he modified some things, took things apart, and remade them into others. She had more jewelry than he'd ever known twelve rich and vain hobbits to own, and it was real jewelry, gold and silver, platinum and mithril, with actual jewels and precious stones. Ember would love them no matter how ugly, but Bilbo wanted to give Ember pretty things.
There were Tinkers in town who were willing to teach him, and though jewelry wasn’t a popular item in the Shire, he was determined to learn. He learned how to disassemble everything, sorting the jewels and metals, and then reforge the metals into what he wanted and setting the stones the way he liked. It was a long arduous process, and his fingers were constantly burned and pinched and sore at first, but he enjoyed it.

When he presented the first piece he was quite proud of to Ember, a cascade necklace made of gold with topaz, ruby, garnets and little tiny brightly winking diamonds on the strands, Ember purred so loudly as he tackled Bilbo to the ground and loved all over him, that it tickled. As much as Ember loved his treasures, there were only two pieces he ever wore, the bracelet Bilbo had given him, and now the necklace. He wore the necklace everywhere, showing it off to anyone who would look, preening and cooing to passersby. Ember was the size of a sheep now, and had taken to following Bilbo anywhere he went. He was friendly with anyone Bilbo liked or who was kind to him, but held a near vicious grudge against anyone who hadn’t earned his approval of them.

Lobelia Bracegirdle was one such person that the dragon absolutely despised. He hadn’t even met her for five minutes before he was the surliest Bilbo had ever seen him, hissing, snarling, snapping, no matter the compliments she gave his necklace. Perhaps because she seemed a bit too interested in the necklace. Ember watched her relentlessly, tracking her every movement, tail thrashing in wary agitation. He also wouldn’t let her anywhere near Bilbo's back garden. The shed had been enlarged, and it was an ever hot magpie's nest full of shiny treasures. The children in town often came by to admire Ember’s treasures, knowing better than to try and touch, and if he was especially fond of a child, he might give them a shiny bead or marble or piece of glass, or a sliver of tin twisted and melted into an interesting shape, or a chunk of quartz or shiny stone. Belladonna was often gifted with shinies that she hung up on strings or put in lace, and Ember was always so pleased about it. So for him not to let Lobelia even near the back garden spoke volumes about how he felt about her.

When Ember was seven, he spoke. He rumble purred to Bilbo as he was curled up on Bilbo's lap 'Billlllllllbooooooo. Miiiiiiine.” Bilbo was so thrilled to be speaking to his friend that he spent hours a day coaching and praising the dragon learning new words. Within a year he could speak quite clearly, and was able to voice his needs, and talk with Bilbo, and loved singing songs with him. When Bilbo asked him why he hated Lobelia so much he replied curtly, 'She has the smell of a thief.’ and that was all that needed to be said on the matter.

The people of Hobbiton were quite used to Bilbo and Ember, so much so, that when Bilbo was invited to birthday parties, Ember was usually given an invitation too, and quite often a shiny gift. The farmers gifted the Baggins family with chickens and piglets, lambs and vegetables if they were allowed to keep Ember for a bit to get rid of any pest problem they had. Moles, gophers, voles, rats, mice, prairie dogs, rabbits, even destructive birds, Ember spending a week on their farm got rid of them most effectively.

All of Hobbiton was fond of Ember, and with such an effective pest control dragon, Hobbiton was
producing the best crops in the Shire, which made business increase. Most anyone could earn Ember's momentary attention and favor with the right shiny or bit of food, but Bilbo held the dragon's unwavering adoration. And the dragon continued to grow, and the people continued to care for him. Outsiders were mostly kept unaware of Ember, he was Hobbiton's special secret, unless of course someone caught a glimpse of a young hobbit riding on the back of a bright red dragon that was larger than a sheep right through the middle of the market, a beautiful necklace that grew larger over the years shining smartly around his neck.

When Ember was ten, he breathed fire. It startled both of them, but Bilbo knew that Dragons were well known for being able to do all sorts of amazing things. As Bilbo grew and got better at jewelry making, he started having Ember help him. Ember could melt the impurities out of anything, it's what he did with his treasures, why they always shined so brightly, he was revealing their true potential. Ember gave up almost all of the old tools and broken useless mathoms to Bilbo to make into even better treasures, and Bilbo did, he crafted Ember rings and bracelets and shining caps for his claws, made him necklaces and circlets, and shiny things to hang from his head until he was the shiniest, prettiest thing in the Shire.

Ember was a very happy dragon, now the size of a pony, and helping farmers in other towns of the Shire burn chafe faster than ever before. The ashes mixed with his droppings and a bit of compost made some of the best fertilizer Hobbits had discovered so far. Ember more than earned his well fed keep in the Shire, and no one ever got tired of seeing Bilbo ride into town with his dragon.

He had long outgrown the garden shed, so Hobbiton got together and built Ember his own smial hill behind Bag End, completely hollow for all his treasures, with a great domed roof and a huge fire pit in the middle. The Hobbits made it bigger than man sized to hold all of Ember's treasures, digging down into the earth so that on the surface it looked like any other hobbit hole. It had several windows to let in the light, but none of them opened, he was adamant about that. Once it was done Bilbo spent months helping him hang shinies, put his favorite pieces on display where he could see them best, and pile up the things he liked to lay on in a great big bed of treasures. Ember named the place Adroushan.

Once his fire started it had seemed to be the trigger of a growth spurt, horns growing out on top of his head and under his chin, itching him horribly, until Bilbo's hands were tired from scratching them for him, and Ember took the itch out on one particular tree whose branches were just right instead. That tree never did fully recover. Ember's tail grew longer, and longer, until it nearly tipped his balance. His skin was completely vivid crimson, the undersides of his wings a bright golden yellow, his horns a deep black at first and gradually turning red like the rest of him, his claws grew at a near alarming rate, and he scratched them down on boulders to keep them from getting bothersome, and his muscles grew stronger. Then something quite horrifying happened, His teeth began falling out one by one. Bilbo was worried until he saw that they were growing back in, larger, sharper and far more vicious looking. Ember let him keep the baby teeth, told him Dragon teeth were rare and special. Bilbo kept them in a beautifully carved wooden box, each tooth bigger than his hand.

Not long afterwards, Ember was finally old enough to fly. For years now Ember had been wanting
to fly, and Bilbo had been nothing but encouraging, but Ember simply hadn't been able to. But the flying started not too long afterwards, and once he was up, it was nearly impossible to keep him on the ground. Within a month he was strong enough to carry Bilbo, and they winged over the Shire in great sweeping arches for as long as Ember's strength held out. Bilbo had been very iffy about going too high at first, hobbits were creatures of the earth and liked it that way. But Ember's joy was infectious, and Bilbo was an adventuresome young hobbit, and soon couldn't go fast enough or high enough either.

One day, after they landed and Bilbo had tucked Ember in for the night, and was about to start hiking back up the hill, Ember's tail wrapped around him and pulled him back. The dragon had a very confused look on his face.

“You're- special, My Bilbo. My best treasure.”

Bilbo smiled. “You're my best treasure too Ember.”

But the dragon didn't seem satisfied with that, and shook his head. “Word's not right, I don't know it. Better than best treasure. My Bilbo. Trade all treasures to keep you. twenty silver is one gold, twenty gold is one platinum, five platinum for ten diamonds, these are treasures, but you- you are treasure but not a treasure. All diamonds, all gold, all jewels and shining metals in the world not equal one Bilbo, nothing's worth you.”

“I love you too Ember.” Bilbo said smiling and hugged Ember tight, planting a kiss on Ember's nose.

“Love? Explain.”

A twenty year old hobbit had a very hard time describing what the concept of love was to a thirteen year old dragon, but he did his best. At the end of it he didn't think he had done a very good job of it, but Ember was nodding. 'Yes, that's a better meaning, love. I love Bilbo.”

“I love you too Ember. Goodnight.”

“Stay? Sleep here with me. Treasures are guarded best here.”

“I'll stay tomorrow night, Mom's already gone to bed, she'd worry.”
Ember huffed but agreed and rumbled strong enough to feel it through the ground as he settled down curled around the firepit, lit these days with his own flame that burned much hotter, and Bilbo smiled and left. That winter was the first one that Ember hibernated, at least a bit. It was much colder than normal, and he didn't leave his home much, because the cold made him sluggish. Bilbo was a bit lonely some days, but he was also the only one who didn't have to fear rousing a sleeping dragon, he was perfectly welcome to come and go in Adroushan as he pleased, since Ember considered him one of his treasures. Several evenings he could be found curled up with Ember, fast asleep, and everyone knew better than to rouse a sleeping dragon or try to take anything from his hoard. When Ember emerged in the spring he was thirty hands high at the shoulder, his neck alone was seventeen hands long, and he was nine and a half meters long from snout to tail tip. The Shire agreed he must now be a full grown dragon, and celebrated his coming of age. There was a grand party and feast that lasted two days.

Bilbo was twenty-one during the Fell Winter, and though it was the coldest winter on record, what saved them was the fact there was very little snow, which meant Ember stayed awake. It had been a hot, dry summer, an equally dry autumn, and the winter wasn't much different. But the cold biting winds turned all the rivers and ponds to ice, and froze the ground solid. Even the Brandywine River froze solid, and wolves and goblins crossed over into the lands of the Shire in search of easy prey. It was a horrible mistake on their part.

Ember did not take kindly to invaders, and despite the cold, the fire he breathed and his anger kept him more than warm enough. He told all the hobbits to stay inside and bar their doors and shutter their windows, and they obeyed. For the first time, Ember spilled real blood. The roar of the dragon could be heard echoing all over the gentle hills, but the hobbits didn't fear it, they welcomed the sound, even though the sounds which followed it were anything but comforting, the sounds of battle, the screams of the dying, the vicious ripping, tearing, squelching shrieks as all manner of Fell things became victim to Ember's claws, fangs, and fire. The dragon feasted well that winter, even if he didn't care for the taste of warg or goblin much, and even though the land was scorched and stained red, it was hobbit land, and hobbits know very well how to recover fallow fields from a bit of fire.

Ember had also been very careful, no home was burned or ransacked, and the only hobbits who died that winter were from old age or illness, because when the snows did come heavier than ever, and the stores of food ran out, Ember gave Bilbo some of his treasures, ones he wasn't very fond of, and they sold them in the towns of men for enough food to feed the whole Shire. The dragon they had protected and cared for for so long, had done the same for them, and the Shire was very grateful. In the spring his smial was dug twice as deep into the earth, because it was obvious he was still growing. Rooms and doorways were connected and expanded, until everything was open, the fire pit made large and deep enough for him to sleep in, and the Thain told him that he was a blessing to these lands and would always be welcome here no matter how big he grew.

They also commissioned a breastplate made of brass, polished to a mirror shine for him, of dwarven make, the finest craftsmanship around, but in keeping with having Ember as the Shire's secret, no one who worked on the breastplate was allowed to know what or who it was for. They had it engraved, 'Our Protector' and presented it to him at midsummer. It was so well received Ember didn't
stop preening the whole night, and couldn't stop admiring the exquisite craftsmanship. Bilbo also made him brass horn tips, set with diamonds, so that the points of his horns gleamed and shone in the light.

Two months later, Bungo caught a late summer cold, that only grew worse and worse. When winter's chill came, it was too much for his lungs, it turned into pneumonia, and he died before Yule. Bilbo was heartbroken, and Bella walked around in a bit of a daze. Ember tore the frozen ground up with his claws so they could bury him properly instead of packing him in snow until spring. It was the first time Ember experienced real loss, and he became aware of the fact that His Bilbo, was not just fragile, but mortal, and that one day, no matter what he did, Bilbo would die.

This put Ember into a terrible temper. He flew for days, away from the Shire, away from everything, to the north, where he rained down fire and anger and raged against feeling helpless against the one thing he couldn't kill no matter how sharp his claws, or vicious his teeth, or strong his hide. No matter what he did, he couldn't kill Death.

When Ember flew off without him, Bilbo was worried, scared even. He had always known Ember might decide to leave some day, and he never wanted to try and keep the dragon somewhere he didn't want to be, not like he'd be able to overpower Ember anyway, but still, he had thought that Ember would at least have said good bye, or promise to visit. He worried the whole time Ember was gone. He busied himself taking care of his mother, and made sure to lock up Adroushan nice and tight, though he let the fire die, leaving it lit with no one home was just a waste of fuel.

Ember had been gone three days when a stranger in grey rode into town. Bilbo's mother managed a watery smile and received a very comforting hug from him. “My dear Bella, I'm so sorry for your loss.”

Gandalf stayed for a week, and Belladonna cheered up greatly with his company, but something about the wizard set Bilbo on high alert, perhaps it was because his father was dead and his best friend had flown off, maybe he was just feeling alone and vulnerable, but something about the man set his nerves on edge. He seemed to know too much, be hiding some secret, and just felt... off to him. He missed Ember, and he didn't sleep well with the wizard in the house.

Bilbo spent most of his time outside, returning long after dark, covered in mud, and twigs snagged in his hair after climbing trees searching the skies for red and golden wings. When Gandalf asked whatever was he searching for, he replied back 'Elves' and asked Gandalf to tell him stories of them, all the time though his thoughts were on warm fires and the smell of metal, and the deep contented rumble of a well fed and happy dragon, or the feeling of the wind whipping around them as they dove through the clouds, strong spikes and horns clenched tight in his hands.

Gandalf was still there when Ember returned, it was the middle of the night when a Bounder tapped
Bilbo's window to let him know Ember was spotted coming back. Bilbo leapt out of bed and barely managed to get his clothes on before he was ducking out his window with Ember's key in hand. He unlocked the door and got the fire going only minutes before the sound of wings landed out front. Bilbo rushed out to his friend and hugged him tight, then urged him inside before potentially suspicious wizards poked their overly large noses into his business.

Ember didn't understand why Bilbo was crying but tried his best to soothe him, and felt bad about worrying his Best Treasure. When the story of the wizard staying at Bag End finally came out, the strange presence he'd been feeling made sense, and he got an uneasy feeling. He told Bilbo not to mention him, he was going to sleep anyway, and he apologized for worrying him. Instead of returning home, Bilbo curled up with Ember that night. As much as it would look strange for him to not be in his bed the next morning, Bilbo's mother would surely understand. Besides, he didn't want the wizard to smell the dragon's smoke on him.

He bathed there the next morning before heading to the little shop he had set up and working most of the day. His mother showed up at lunch time, a knowing look in her eyes, and Gandalf trailing behind. Bilbo made it seem as if he'd simply gotten an idea in the middle of the night, needed the distraction, and had come here to work, and his mother, absolutely aware that his workshop was in Adroushan, and this was a place solely for repairs and assembling things that people could watch him make while they shopped, because it drew people in, just sighed and shook her head, but smiled fondly and made him eat.

A messenger came for Gandalf not an hour later, that a fire drake had been sighted in the north and was last seen flying south, a few leagues north of Bree. A hard set look came over Gandalf's face, and he left with barely another word, his eyes raking the sky, and his ears listening to the birds for any hint of trouble.

Once Gandalf was long gone, Bilbo returned to Adroushan, unwilling to be away from Ember any longer. Ember was feeling similarly, unwilling to let Bilbo out of his sight now that the wizard was gone, feeling quite protective of his fragile mortal hobbit, and kept him in Adroushan for three days. For once Bilbo didn't fight Ember wanting to hoard him, and let himself be shined up and examined and tucked where the light apparently struck him just right, and Ember curled around him, and lay his head in his lap, though by now Ember's head was nearly as big as Bilbo was.

“I wish to keep you safe forever, to never let you die, to make you as immortal as an elf so you can always be with me. No matter how long it takes, I'll find a way. You are too good for such a fate, you are my Best Treasure, I won't ever share you with Death.”

“That would be a very clever thing to pull off, I look forward to it.”

“Really?”
“Yes. To make something mortal into an immortal or quite close to it, that's quite the feat indeed. Because I don't want to leave you alone without a true friend. No one as wonderful and special as you should ever be left alone and lonely. I don't ever want that to happen, because you're precious to me Ember.” And he leaned over and planted a soft kiss on the tip of Ember's nose, the same as he had done a thousand times before, before curling up and falling asleep.

Neither of them knew it, but it was in that moment that Ember fell utterly in love with Bilbo Baggins. All Ember knew was that Bilbo was worthy of... something, but it was important, and he was intent on doing it. Bilbo was unaware that anything had changed.

Ember started small, taking certain pieces of his treasures and giving them to Bilbo, but unlike before, Ember insisted he wear them, directly against his skin. Bilbo didn't understand why Ember had suddenly become the fussiest dragon ever born when it came to him and making him shiny, but he did as he always did and adapted.

Nowadays Ember slid rings on his fingers and toes throughout the morning, bracelets at elevensies, necklaces at afternoon tea, a belt at dinner, and while the rest could be removed long before bed, he could only remove the lightweight head decoration of thin chains and jewels in the few moments before he went to sleep, passing it back out the window to Ember with the rest, even though Ember always put it right back on his head as soon as he woke up, and he once more started his project of making sure Bilbo Baggins shone and chimed everywhere he went and got prettier throughout the day. It took months, before Ember just told him to put everything on in the mornings, and wear it throughout the day, and Ember looked so pleased about how he looked it never even occurred to him to try and refuse.

Bilbo often caught himself daydreaming when he was at Adroushan these days, and would find himself playing with one of the pieces, usually a ring or necklace. He also began taking naps there in the afternoon, the warmth making him drowsy and inclined towards curling up with his dragon, and Ember didn't mind at all, it was why Bilbo had a bed there after all. Though Bilbo often found that the amount of treasures he was wearing had doubled while he was sleeping. Ember was always purr rumbling these days, happy and content.

Their routines had changed a bit after the passing of Bungo Baggins, but they weathered things together, and took time to make sure that Belladonna kept moving as well and didn't dwell on her grief. The three of them were still together, and even though they missed Bungo greatly, they still had each other. Bilbo grew and matured, and was now only a couple of months from being thirty-two years of age, and was currently napping after luncheon, determined not to do anything until afternoon tea.

Ember breathed fire on a ring that just wasn't shiny enough for his tastes, and then slid it back on
Bilbo's finger. Bilbo continued to nap on soft cushions, halfway buried in a nest of blankets. Ember may have preferred metals and bits of shine, but comfort for Bilbo was warmth, overstuffed armchairs, and soft fabrics, and Ember was determined to provide. Anything Bilbo ever needed, Ember was determined to give him.

It was a lazy summer day, Belladonna had gone to visit her sisters in Tookborough. And Bilbo was staying with Ember until she got back. They had crafted their best pieces yet in preparation for the faire that was coming to Bywater next month, and Bilbo and Ember would be going there to sell his wares. But with the last of the pieces done, Bilbo was taking a well earned nap, and Ember was meticulously taking off each of Bilbo's pieces and adding more magic to them before putting them back on his sleeping hobbit. Bilbo wore most of them constantly now, so Ember had to make sure they kept their shine, and the best way to do that was to tend them while Bilbo slept. His forked tongue licked at the tip of Bilbo's adorable little nose before he too, curled up to nap atop his pile of treasures, Bilbo Baggins the best one of them all.

When Bilbo woke up, he was well and truly pinned to his bed with a dragon's head atop him using him for a pillow. This was nothing new. He trailed his fingers over the patterns of scales across Ember's nose and up his head, then traced the chin spikes one by one, until his fingers wandered to Ember's jaw and he scratched lightly until Ember turned his head as he always did, wanting chin scratches, even while asleep. Bilbo was happy to oblige, and scooted free while he did, planting a kiss against Ember's nose like he always did before moving to add more wood to the hearth fire, which his dragon liked to keep at a certain height.

As the wood instantly caught and flared up strong, Bilbo stared at the fire, and out of the blue he finally realized, most others couldn't even bear to set foot in Ember's smial these days because it was too hot for them. It hadn't even occurred to Bilbo until now that even in the height of summer like now, he was always comfortable in Ember's smial no matter how long he stayed. It's not that he didn't feel the heat of the fire, he did, it just didn't make him uncomfortable, merely warm and happy. A strange thought occurred to him, a notion that couldn't possibly be true.

The edge of the fire pit was glowing white hot with Ember's impossible to quench flames that were as usual dancing nearly to Bilbo's height, and Bilbo was only a few feet away from it. The heat should be suffocating, stifling, unbearable, his clothes should be singed, his hair either plastered to his head with sweat or burned away and yet... How many times had he crouched on the very edge of that fire pit and added more wood, how often had he slept just here, only a few feet from the edge and never even broken a sweat? A loose piece of straw was near to hand in his pocket, and he took it out, and he let it drop. It curled and burned to white ash before it ever hit the ground. It was unbelievable that he had never noticed, and just out of sheer perverse curiosity, he set his foot forward, to touch that burning hot whiteness, to test what couldn't possibly be true... It was hot, but not too hot, and it did not burn him.

“Ember, your fire, it- it doesn't burn me, that metal is white hot, but I touched it and I'm fine. How is that- how is that even possible?”
A golden eye cracked open a bit and a rumble of confusion preceded the nudge he gave Bilbo.

“My fire? Burn you? Impossible. It would never dare, no flame would ever dare, not even the dark fire in the south-east would dare. You are the friend of fire, beloved by it, you have been forged of my fire, you are my Best Treasure. My fire protects my treasure, it could never destroy it. You have been tempered by my flames for almost ten years now, since you first accepted and started wearing my rings. You shine more brightly than any of my treasures. My fire can only enhance you now, there is nothing left in you to burn, so how could it possibly hurt you?”

Bilbo wanted to argue that that wasn’t how it worked, but he knew better. It was a wonderful thing Ember had unknowingly done, and he wouldn't make him feel like he had done something wrong. Though exactly how he had done it, he wasn't sure either.

“Clever, magical Dragon. I just didn't know you could do that with me as well as your shinies. You’re so incredible, and it's amazing what you can do. Thank you for protecting me, I'm very glad that I'm one of your treasures.”

“You're my Best Treasure. Nothing is better protected than you.”

“You're my best treasure too Ember, there's no one I care about more than you.”

And he curled into his dragon's warmth and let his dragon love him as best he knew how. In the morning as Ember curled into his fire pit and took a fire bath, Bilbo was actually persuaded to join him, allowing the flames to tickle and tease his flesh with soothing warmth, and he finally understood how Ember viewed the flames. It really was incredible.

It was late summer again, two years later, and Bilbo was days away from his coming of age, when his mother suddenly passed quietly in her sleep with no known reason or cause. With his father they at least had gotten some warning and had the time to say goodbye, but his mother seemed perfectly healthy, and that was what hurt the most. His only comfort was at least he had said 'Goodnight Mom, I love you, pleasant dreams.'

Ember, out of everyone, was the only one able to give him some kind of comfort. It was a week before he could even bear to stay in the Smial by himself. Instead he lived in Adroushan, and only ate when prompted.
Ember was very worried about him, he fussed and primped Bilbo up, brought Bilbo his favorite things, near buried him in shining quartz and semi precious stones, bumped Bilbo with his head, trying to comfort, but being unused to needing to do it. Bilbo eventually just clung to him, and cried, and curled up in the fire pit with him, until the heat had dried all of his tears, and the warmth had reached that cold, painful, empty place in his heart.

Ember just wanted him happy, he had never turned down a gift or rejected a bit of his magic, and the only way he could think of to make Bilbo happy was to give him a connection that couldn't be broken. He had been wanting to wait until Bilbo's coming of age, as was proper to do, though he had also hoped that Belladonna would be there too. But this would have to be enough, that is, if Bilbo said yes. Ember curled around him, looked him straight in the eye and said

“I'm still here to love you Bilbo, I won't ever leave you all alone, I promise. You are so precious to me, I want to keep you for always. Can I claim you for my own? Please?”

Bilbo, emotionally drained, heart full of sorrow, feeling lost and alone, but having this incredible dragon want to keep him for himself... he was okay with that, and Ember had asked properly like he was supposed to when he really wanted something.

“Yes, you can keep me. I'll be yours, I know how well you take care of your treasures.”

“Not just a treasure, my claim, my own, mine. Completely, utterly, totally MINE. You will never belong to another the way you belong to me.”

“There's no one who could ever take your place Ember, I'd be lost without you.”

“So, you will be mine? My claimed?”

“Yes, I'd be honored to be claimed by you.”

This clearly delighted Ember and he rushed around gathering things. A goblet, a knife, and he set the huge copper kettle up to start tea. “Do hobbits have secret names?” He asked conversationally, and Bilbo startled, how had he known that?

“Y-yes.”
“Oh good that makes this much easier, I'll need to know it to claim you properly, I'll give you mine in turn of course.”

“Dragons have secret names? I never knew that.”

“It's something I was born knowing. As you know, certain words can hold Power. For dragons, that is our true name. We are born knowing our true name and the name we would go by among our kin, but I have never used it, because you named me Ember. To let another hold my Name, to give someone that level of Power over me, it is a great showing of trust.”

“And one I would never betray. Do- do you not wish to be called Ember any longer?”

“Oh no, I like being called Ember, it's a name I cherish, because it is the name that you gave me, and I cherish you. I shall always be Ember, but I am also Smaug, as I would be known to the world and my kin, and I am also Orinda Cindrillion, Fire Serpent Of The Ashes, for it is all I will leave in the wake of my enemies.”

Bilbo felt the Power of Ember's True Name wash over him and it made him tremble. It was very strong, special beyond compare. “Oh Ember, that's a beautiful name.”

“Yes it is! You can say it if you like. You alone in all the world are allowed to use it, though only where no other may hear you.”

“Orinda Cindrillion” Bilbo said with awe and great affection. “My dearest and truest friend.” Ember closed his eyes and rumble purred loud enough that the entire Smial vibrated. Bilbo scratched him under the jaw just the way he liked. “My Hidden Name is The-Tree-That-Bends-But-Does-Not-Fall.”

“Truly a strong and fortuitous blessing. Your parents named you well. This will hurt a bit, but I will not cause you harm.” Ember bit hard into his own forearm, just enough that six drops of blood fell into the goblet. He then took Bilbo’s wrist and held his arm over the cup, allowing the blade to cut swiftly and shallowly, adding six more drops to the goblet before Ember gently licked the wound clean, soothing the hurt he’d caused Bilbo, no matter how slight. He added a handful of herbs to the steeping tea, and then poured it in to mix with their joined blood. Placing the goblet into the heart of his fire, Ember Spoke. “Blade, Flame, and Wind, Earth and Sea, heed me. My strength to him, and his to me. By strength and might, wings of flight, quenchless fires in the night, hone the magic, burn ever bright. By Ember's Spark and all of thee, I claim what has been given me.”
Ember took the goblet from the fire, drank half and then handed it to Bilbo, who did the same. The drink made him light headed, his vision blurred and his head was spinning, but warm arms were around him, laying him down gently in the fire. Ember was above him, but he didn't seem right, he almost looked like... like a person, with wings, horns, claws, and a tail, but there was pale skin, and dark curly hair, and those eyes, those eyes were right, and perfect, and Bilbo felt like he was falling so far down into them that he would never surface again. But that was fine, he didn't mind.

Ember was still speaking, chanting something, but he couldn't hear the words. He knew when Ember said his true name though, he could feel the tug of it, the dragon wielding that power like it was second nature, the feeling of that soul deep connection binding them together. His whole body felt like it was floating, or like he was floating above it, and he could actually see the fire Ember was breathing going straight down his own throat, but it didn't hurt. Nothing hurt, everything felt fine, better than fine, it felt wonderful. He felt warm and safe, cared for and claimed. There was a strange almost tickling sensation, right in the center of his chest. Ember's fingers deftly undid Bilbo's shirt, and what looked like a tongue of fire etched in the deepest black unfurled there. A mark, a claim, a bond. It was beautiful and warm. He could feel Ember's heart beating alongside his own. This was more than he had been expecting, but he didn't fear it. He adored it. He knew things now, things he hadn't known before, like that Ember would live for centuries, millennia, and Bilbo would never have to worry about being alone again, because Ember had claimed him as his own. He felt the singing of the treasures around them, each of them unique yet lovely to listen to. It was the most beautiful gift he could imagine. He fell asleep in that safety, with strong arms, golden eyes, warm fire, and what felt like a kiss upon his brow.

Ember tucked the unconscious hobbit onto his bed, and Ember curled around him, tucking Bilbo against him, resting Bilbo's head on his chest, so he could listen to his heart, a heart he now realized that Bilbo owned and cared for beyond measure. For the first time ever, He stole something from Bilbo Baggins, since Bilbo did it all the time to him, he didn't think he'd mind, since for a few moments he had lips as well. He stole a gentle, sweet kiss, enjoying the feeling of it as he brushed a curl off of Bilbo's forehead, and breathed magic straight into him, igniting the potion he had drank until the hobbit was positively glowing from the inside.

“My fire burns inside you now, and nothing will ever harm you as long as I live. There is nothing more to fear, you are MINE Bilbo Baggins.”

When Bilbo woke up he received a great shock, he could understand everything. The birds singing, the wind in the trees, the buzz of insects, there even seemed to be whispers in the wind and a delicate song just beyond his hearing. When he asked Ember about it, his dragon grinned and nudged him.

“It was something I wondered, if anyone else could hear things the way I did. There's a myth among men that whoever tastes the heart of a dragon and survives the poison of its blood would thereafter know all tongues of Gods, Men, birds, beasts, and even catch whispers of the Valar and Melkor. My flesh wouldn't do anything of the sort no matter which part you ate, but my blood, that's another
The blood of a dragon is extremely powerful, and holds our magic, which is why we can make pacts with it, and also why it will poison if stolen. But since it was given freely and accepted willingly, there was no risk to you. You have a part of me inside you now, it makes sense that you would gain some of my powers. The understanding of languages is just one of them. You drank about three drops, it wouldn't surprise me if you had gained three of my abilities, though it doesn't look like you have grown wings. I can give you more, to see if you might.”

“I'd much rather fly with you, than have wings of my own.”

“Well you can understand languages, can you breathe fire?”

It took most of the morning before they figured out that Bilbo could now understand all languages, and while he couldn't actually control fire, he could coax it closer to him from a very short distance away and make it burn brighter and hotter until it became dragon's fire, but he could not create actual dragon flame from nothing. And if he tried very hard he could use a mild form of Ember's magic, the strongest was the hypnotizing voice and gaze Ember was very good at using, but which Bilbo had been all but immune to for years now after Ember had tried using it to get absolutely everything shiny he wanted.

Ember was still insistent they try giving Bilbo more of his blood again to see what else developed, he was quite fond of the idea of making Bilbo more dragon like, and Bilbo kissed his nose and told him “Maybe later, let me get used to all of these changes first.”

But it wasn't to happen.

Their happiness together lasted a year, and Bilbo was thirty-four when things began going wrong. It was a gradual thing at first, Ember's mood would shift, he'd look pensive or be lost in thought with an uneasy look on his face. It wasn't hard to see that something was bothering him, but Ember couldn't determine what exactly was wrong.

'It feels like I hear someone calling my name, but when I turn there's no one there. It's like a tugging feeling, I don't like it, it feels sharp, and cold.”

For nearly a year it grew worse and worse, Ember would have to fight to pay attention to someone right in front of him, His head was constantly being pulled towards the East, then he'd shudder and grimace as he fought to regain control. He outright refused to fly, and it was with trepidation that he admitted that if he started flying and he felt that pull, he was unsure if he could fight it and not just fly off.
At first Bilbo questioned whether maybe Ember was feeling the call of a mate, but Ember shook his head. “That's simply not possible, and even if it was, such a thing would feel right. This does not, it feels very wrong, and unnatural.”

Bilbo was worried, but there was also a nauseating feeling building up inside him, a feeling of wrongness and desperation, it often made him shudder head to toe and feel ill. Ember apologized and said that he was feeling a slight bit of the pull that he himself was, because of their connection and the bit of his power and magic that he had sealed inside of Bilbo. If that was the barest hint of what Ember was feeling, he dreaded to think of what his friend was truly going through. As much as he didn't like feeling it though, he was glad that Ember had done it, because he said that Bilbo's strength was what allowed him to fight off the pull and voice that was calling to him.

It was early spring when the pain happened the first time, the pain in Bilbo's own head was almost unbearable, and Ember was in agony, roaring and rolling uncontrollably through his piles of treasures, trying to scrape his claws into his own head if it would just make it stop. For hours, Ember just screamed in pain, and there was nothing Bilbo could do to help. He couldn't even stay in Adroushnan, because of Ember's flailing about.

And still Ember fought what they had started calling 'The Pull' tooth and claw. The more it hurt the more he fought it, until he was snarling at that unknown, unseen force in the crudest language imaginable, hurling insults at the air, cursing and promising pain and destruction to whatever the source of this was. Bilbo was desperate to help, and asked why couldn't they go together to see what it was, maybe destroy it, get it to stop hurting them. Ember flat out refused.

“It's dangerous, too dangerous, and too strong. It seeks to control me, possess me, own me, like some pet on a leash.”

Bilbo didn't argue the point, because the last thing Bilbo could ever stand was for anyone or anything to treat Ember like a pet.

After six months of fighting the pain, the fear, the nightmares, and The Pull, Ember couldn't even leave Adroushnan, for fear of The Pull dragging him off against his will. Because The Pull had found a weakness. Treasure. Gold, and mithril and precious gems, things a dragon covets but that except for the few pieces that were already in Adroushnan, the Shire could never provide. He'd begin losing bits of time, muttering about gold and gems even in his sleep, and The Pull was somehow making sure that it was growing larger.

Ember burrowed deep down into his smial, until he reached stone, and he dug his claws in and wrapped his body and tail around the foundation, the supports, and anything that could help hold him
in place, buried himself in his beloved hoard, and refused to move, snarling at the east windows until Bilbo had them painted over and covered in an attempt to help. Bilbo brought him food and water, and Ember had countless visitors who missed him and were worried about him, and brought him food and more shiny things that now he was too distracted to even enjoy properly.

He would let his head rest at the front door and talk to people, but never emerge any further than that. Eventually he couldn't even do that, because he couldn't focus his attention on whoever was talking to him, and was constantly fighting just to keep from once again turning towards the East. Many could often find him with his head on his front porch staring at the green of the Shire, with silent tears running down his face. Even though it was self imposed, no one could stand Ember being caged, especially not Ember.

What was most worrying was the fact that Ember's fire pit had gone out and he dared not re-light it. “I don't trust my fire, The Pull wants me to use my fire, which is enough reason for me to never use it again.” Bilbo came in and tended to it instead, making it Dragon's Fire. It still wasn't as warm as Ember's flames, but it seemed to help ease and soothe some of the fear and the pain. No one mentioned that The Pull was obviously getting worse and more frequent.

It was early summer when it happened. Bilbo felt the shaking all the way in Bag End and could hear the roaring reverberating through the ground. He rushed to Adroushan, and Ember was snarling and writhing, everything was in disarray, and Ember was all but screaming “He's gone mad! He's gone mad! Kill, maim, burn, fly! Stain the stones with blood, burn everything to the ground, leave not a soul alive, and the gold, so much gold, enough to bury the whole of the shire in!”

Bilbo was terrified. Because Ember had let go of the stones and unwound from the supports, he had freed himself, and Bilbo didn't believe for one second that he had done it of his own free will, because Ember's eyes were dull grey and lifeless. Fire suddenly filled the smial, an arching stream of smoke and flames that clung to the walls as if it were liquid, the hottest flame Ember had. But the hobbits had known better than to build a Dragon's home with any wood, everything was made of stone and mortar, otherwise Ember would have undoubtedly burned down Adroushan with himself inside it and would have killed Bilbo had he not been immune to Ember's flames.

Faster than a viper striking, Ember made for the door. It was all Bilbo could do to grab on to him and cling to his neck, realizing as he and Ember took to the air that the dragon had tried to cover himself in the things Bilbo had made for him in an attempt to resist the pull of the gold, wherever it was. He was even wearing his breastplate, which had always been on the wall in a place of prominence where the setting sun could strike it through the window.

They rose fast into the air, until Bilbo's voice finally reached him and Ember halted, trying to fly back down, it was a battle fierce and violent, the pain for suddenly trying to go against the will of The Pull was enough to make both of them scream and all but fall to the earth like a stone. Even as they hit the ground and the wind was knocked out of Bilbo, Ember's eyes were locked on the East
with a madness that made Bilbo tremble head to toe.

Ember had lost the fight, there was no question of it, he was going to be dragged off to wherever The Pull wished him to be and Ember was scared to death.

“Take me with you! I'll go with you! You won't be alone, you'll have your Best Treasure with you! We can face anything together! Please Ember!”

“No, I can't, it's not safe. There is nothing but blood and death waiting for me there, I will not risk you.”

“I don't care! You shouldn't be alone Ember!” He grabbed hold of Ember's neck, trying to keep the dragon focused on him and not the East, but The Pull, whatever it was, had had enough of Bilbo's meddling. The pain of the double blow was fierce and swift and completely unexpected. His arm was wrenched harshly and he heard the sickening sound of bone snap in his right arm, and his vision went red and black and spotted from the blow across his face, and the claws that very well might have taken the sight from one of his eyes. Bilbo screamed, but it was from surprise, not pain, the pain would come later, right now he was too scared. He saw Ember's eyes and they were steely grey instead of brilliant gold. And he was snarling.

“I am not Ember, I am Smaug! I am Fire, I am Death, all who stand before me shall perish! The world shall burn, they shall pay, I will destroy them all, and nothing shall remain but ashes!”

Bilbo tried to grab onto anything as Ember once more took off towards the East, but his hands couldn't hold on tight enough to the shining metal, one hand all but useless, and the other now slick with blood, Ember slid right through his hands.

“EMBER!” He screamed towards where the dragon was quickly flying off, but it was useless, he didn't so much as acknowledge hearing the word. Bilbo collapsed to the ground in tears cradling his broken arm. Ember had fought so hard, but now that The Pull had won, and Ember was no longer fighting it, the pain that had been a near constant thing these last months had faded and Bilbo felt numb and boneless. The Pull had been too strong, enough to make Ember break the two promises he held above all others. He had hurt Bilbo, and Bilbo was all alone. Bilbo's sobs couldn't be stopped as the pain and the blood loss overwhelmed him.

Someone eventually found him, he was too weak from his wounds to even notice who they were, and his grief blocked out all sounds and colors, all he could hear was a sharp ringing in his ears, like the sound of a hammer on an anvil, except long and unending. His head felt stuffed with cotton, and his mouth couldn't seem to remember really what words even were and anything that was put in his
mouth, either medicine or food, he couldn't taste. He vaguely acknowledged somewhere in this haze, that his wounds were being tended, he knows he made some sort of sound as his arm was set, but he was still in his haze and nothing seemed capable of piercing the fog he was in.

Bilbo was like that for some time, unable to do anything on his own, and his dreams were filled with fire and death, blood and screaming, until one day, Bilbo knew that Ember must have reached The Pull, and done what it wished, because he was flooded with a mixture of bliss, relief, and a sorrow so great it was unimaginable. He knew Ember had buried himself in a vast collection of gold and gems, and that even though he'd now done what The Pull had wanted, and gotten the reward it had promised, it had no intention of letting him go. Ember was lost to him.

Bilbo's arm healed well enough, though it was never as strong as before, and miraculously his sight was spared against the odds. But his face bore the reminder of the event, three jagged scars from the left side of his hairline across his eye and nose and chin, all breaking off at his jawline. There was a fourth one, which had scored under his ear and along his throat that ended on his right collarbone. It was a miracle the claw hadn't torn his throat out completely, though he had very nearly bled to death despite the fact. He was on bed rest for a month, and he didn't remember anything of the first week or so of it he was taking so much poppy milk. The Shire didn't know what to do, several of them wanted to be angry at Ember for hurting Bilbo, but even more understood that Ember had not been himself for quite some time, and would have never intentionally harmed Bilbo in any way. Most of all people seemed to be waiting to see what Bilbo's reaction would be.

Once Bilbo was completely well again, he went to Adroushan, and he silently got to work. He cleared out the remaining filth from Ember refusing to leave the smial for so long, had the extra dirt removed that Ember had dug up in an attempt to hide from The Pull. Bilbo fortified the foundation, repaired the support beams, and spent six months polishing every piece of Ember's treasures from dawn til dusk and setting them exactly in the spots Ember had kept them. There were several things missing, the first bracelet Bilbo had given him, which these days the dragon had taken to wearing like a ring, the cascade necklace Ember was rarely ever seen without, The Breastplate, as he had fondly referred to it, a crowning piece of his collection, rings and bracelets and even a circlet Bilbo had crafted. Except for the breastplate, everything missing had been something Bilbo had made for him. And if he hadn't already known that Ember would never intentionally cause him harm, that would have convinced him of the fact his Dragon didn't mean what he had done, in fact Bilbo very much doubted it had been Ember who had done it at all. Ember's eyes were every fire and treasure analogy you could think of, but they were most certainly not the dull grey eyes that had stared at him that day, and even now haunted his nightmares.

When the people of Hobbiton saw Bilbo plant an arbor vitae beside Ember's smial, which every Hobbit knew meant Unchanging Friendship, and then in a ring around the entire smial he planted carnations of different colors, ones that meant pride and beauty, ones that signified health and energy, then, I will never forget you, and finally, endearment. Bilbo's true feelings were evident to all, and they finally relaxed and let the matter drop. Bilbo, out of all of them, had the most right to be angry at Ember or to feel betrayed, and he obviously didn't, so it was best to figure out what to do now.
Over the next few months new plants would appear nearly overnight. Azaleas for temperance, ivy for friendship and fidelity, alyssum for worth beyond beauty, bluebells for constancy, pansy and clover for think of me, heliotrope for devotion and faithfulness, amaranth for unchangeable feelings, chamomile, forget-me-nots, and rosemary for remembrance, daisies for innocence, honeysuckle for generous and devoted affection, and zinnias for thoughts of absent friends, until the entire hill of Ember's smial and all of the land around it was a riot of colors and scents, and could be seen halfway across Hobbiton. The flower garden atop Adroushan was one of the finest in the shire, and won 'garden with the most meaning' that year, and for several years after.
Searching, Scars, and Sanity

Chapter Summary

Bilbo sets out in hopes that he can find his friend, but the path he ends up taking does not lead him anywhere he would ever want to go.

Chapter Notes

The first chapter was almost absolute fluff, with a hint of angst, this chapter is utterly the reverse, it is mostly angst and pain, with just a few little bright spots hither and yon so that my readership might not put me in front of a firing squad or burn me in effigy (though I don't hold out much hope). At least I didn't leave it at a cliffhanger, I'm not THAT mean.

Fair warning now, the next chapter will also have a LOT of angst before it goes getting any better for our hero (though not the same kind as this one). I do a lot of damage in this chapter and it takes awhile to fix something after you break it as thoroughly as I tend to break the characters I play with.

I am an EVIL author, I like to make the character's lives miserable for my own sick amusement, but I also am a huge fan of happy endings, and the more they suffer, the happier the ending I tend to give them is, so trust me, by the end of this story, Bilbo is gonna be SUPER freaking happy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For six months while Bilbo recovered most of his strength, he kept the fire burning in Adroushan, burning herbs of protection and praying to anyone who might be listening to please protect his dearest friend and let him come home. The entire experience had changed him, he was no longer the hobbit that he once was. He was quiet, subdued, and not nearly as quick to laugh. The adventuresome streak that he had enjoyed with Ember, flying over the Shire, and looking towards the far off mountains in the north that they had wanted to explore together someday, those days were over. He stuck quite close to home now, rarely even venturing outside of Hobbiton to go visiting. And where he had once accepted every single party invitation and excuse to dance and sing and feast, he rarely attended anything anymore, or if he did, he didn't much participate.

Only the children could eventually coax him to smile and to tell them stories about Ember and the adventures they'd had together. But his ever bright laughter was gone, and the spark in his eyes was all but subdued and burned out as more and more time passed and his friend never returned.

He buried himself in his work, making fine jewelry for travelers and brides to be, and trinkets for young lads to give to their sweethearts. Even though he was now of age for it, Bilbo had no desire to court, in fact he had very little desire to do anything, and since he was one of the wealthiest hobbits in the Shire, he didn't have to do anything if he didn't wish to.

He also took up a couple of new hobbies; writing, reading, and cartography, he became quite the
dedicated scholar. That winter, he let the fire die, and he locked up Adroushan. He came back weekly to dust, and would polish anything that needed more shine to it. He strengthened himself as best he could and made preparations with his family, even wrote up a living will. Spring was barely beginning to show, the snow still thick on the ground, when Bilbo wrapped himself up, hitched up his newly purchased cart and pony, and set off, determined to find Ember and free him. He went to Bree, made a beeline for the bookshop, and purchased the best maps he could find. But he truly had no idea where to start looking. So he made a list of possible places. He would search the entire world if he had to, he was going to find his dragon. He bought books on history and legend, anything that might have mention of a dragon in it, and most of them had several tales that dragons came down from the north. So, north he would go.

With a Ranger named Longshanks that he hired to be his guide and not ask too many questions about what exactly he was doing, he chased rumors of dragons up to Fornost, then when he found nothing but ruins and a decent short sword, they traveled a bit East where Longshanks’ people were, and though Longshanks was called away on urgent business soon after, Bilbo planned on going even further North. But the Rangers pointed out to him that going on alone with no idea of how to protect himself was a recipe for disaster. They offered to teach him how to fight, and he accepted their offer. He ended up staying with them, learning his way around axe and sword and bow, just in case. They also taught him hand to hand combat, wilderness survival, then throwing knives once they realized how good he was with a slingshot, which he used with great accuracy when hunting small game. It was a classic Bounder weapon, and a very proper hobbitish skill to practice, so his mother's family had taught him well in its use long ago.

Also, just like his mother, he had became quite skilled at wielding a good cast iron frying pan. She'd liked wielding two, and did so with deadly accuracy. He was working on that, but for the moment a sturdy cast iron pan in one hand and a blade or sling or flail to hand in the other, and he was a rather formidable force, especially for someone the big folk tended to underestimate.

Bilbo often joined the patrol parties which ventured North, sometimes even breaking off from the main group and going off on his own for weeks once he had gotten used to it. They had truly taught him well, and he felt confident he could mostly handle himself. His true strength was stealth, he could sneak up on the best of them, hide in the smallest spaces, rabbit away as quick as mist. The only thing he couldn’t hide from, as he learned to his detriment, were Wargs. Their noses could sniff out anything, no matter where it was hidden, and while he had only met the two, and eventually taken them both down through sheer luck, it had been a terrifyingly close situation to begin with. The first one he had stabbed his short sword in at just the right angle to slice its throat. The second one had gotten their own bit of flesh off of him before he had been able to retaliate against it, and had left a nasty bite on his arm before he managed to stab it right through the eye.

He made it back to the main group and healed up just fine, though setting it in the fire for a bit helped it go much faster and kept it clean. He spent the next several months learning every trick on how to kill them, even adding a spear to his knowledge of weapons, because it was hard for almost anyone to duck low enough to take it away from him without getting run through for their troubles.

When he realized he had been gone for nearly two years he figured that if there were dragons in the north, they were further away than current civilization had mapped out, which meant a distinct lack of supply lines, which meant no people. You needed people if you were going to hoard a huge amount of treasure in one specific place. He decided to return to Bree, intending to perhaps do some business and trade, check his accounts, maybe even make sure all was well back home and visit with some relations. It was quite strange to go two years without seeing any relations.

But when he got to Bree he once more ran into Longshanks who was travelling East, going so far as the foothills of the Misties, to Rivendell, and asked if Bilbo was also travelling in the same direction
this time, and would he like some company if so. Bilbo ended up hurrying through his business and going along with the Ranger, since Rivendell was on his list of places which might contain information.

Lord Elrond was an extremely gracious host, and Bilbo got along famously with him. But it was the man’s children who all but adopted him into the family. Elladan and Elrohir were quite lighthearted and mischievous, and Arwen, well she was so very quick and fierce, clever, and yet still tender hearted. They called Longshanks ‘Estel’, and Bilbo discovered that he was all but an adopted son to Lord Elrond himself. Bilbo adored the family. The twins and Estel happily kept him sharp on his fighting skills, he and Arwen often went riding together, she tutored him on learning the elvish languages, and traded crochet, knitting, and weaving patterns with him, and shared his love of making jewelry. They spent many an evening chatting and spinning together, while he and Lord Elrond could continue lengthy discussions full of deep philosophy and wisdom for at least an age of the earth, as well as teaching him several of the elvish ways of crafting metals. Thanks to those lessons he even made himself some light scale mail and hard leather armor that was overlapped and hinged to be very flexible, which also wouldn’t weigh him down and still let him move easily with it on.

A good amount of his time was spent searching through their library, on a quest for anything to try and find out what The Pull was, how to defeat it, and where it could have taken Ember.

Unfortunately, any rumors that were being spoken tended to be in elvish and out of his hearing range. The first caused him no issue, but the second very much did. However Bilbo had also long ago become very good at learning how to feign ignorance of what was being said around him. Elves were far more observant than hobbits, and were sure to notice should he suddenly appear completely fluent in their language when he had never studied it. So he did. Just because he could understand what was written and being said didn't mean he could write it or speak it himself. While the speaking came rather easily to him, the writing style took quite a bit of practice, what with so many dialects, and his instant translation skills making everything appear to be in Westron to him if he wasn’t careful about concentrating. It went much faster with Lady Arwen's gentle and patient tutelage. She declared him quite gifted with language, she had never seen a non-elf pick up the elven tongues so quickly. He told her anything could be learned that one put one’s mind to doing, perhaps he was merely more stubborn than most. That had made her laugh quite pleasantly.

But no matter how long and hard he searched, or how much he learned, there was no mention of that type of magic ever being used before. There were barely even stories about dragons except in long ago times. Perhaps he could have found out more if he had asked directly, but he would then have no answer when asked what he wanted such knowledge for. Lord Elrond was the curious sort and liked to know that sort of thing, especially when researching something as potentially dangerous as dragons. Bilbo might also be a collector of stories, but Lord Elrond was also extremely good at knowing when people were lying to him, so it was best to avoid doing so.

Ember may have been the Shire's dragon, but Bilbo knew that the rest of the world did not view dragons, or at least one dragon, in the same way that the hobbits did. Many tales told of hunting dragons like it was seen as some noble prize to find and slay a dragon in its nest, crush its eggs, and claim its hoard for your own, those stories made him sick.

When he read about the ancient wars he felt nothing but pity for their race. To first be formed from evil and greed, then used in a war not your own, compelled to fight for someone who didn't value your life, while your children were stolen from you and forced to fight as well, all the while being loathed and despised by your given enemy. Then when the war was finally over, to become prey for greedy and fearful humans, to be hunted, feared, hated, murdered, without even being able to speak against it because dragons hadn't yet learned to speak yet on their own, to not have a friend in the
world... Bilbo's heart ached, and the very idea of it all horrified him to the bone. Who wouldn’t have become vicious and as violent and dangerous as possible?

But Ember had proven that vicious violence was not their default personality. They were kind, and loving beyond measure if they were given love and trust in the first place. They could be noble and selfless with those they trusted and cared for, and brave and protective defending their home and their family. Yes they were greedy, but no one was perfect, and it was something that could be directed and managed into positive directions. Dragons were not always the monsters the world and the Darkness wanted them to be. But Bilbo knew he would have a very hard time convincing anyone who had not known Ember all the dragon’s life, like the Shire had, that a dragon could be the best and most loyally true friend anyone could ever ask for if the dragon decided that you were worthy of his friendship.

All the research he did on how cruelly dragons tended to be treated, it reminded him very strongly of when he had found Ember's egg, the trail of drying blood, the somehow knowing that something had gone very wrong, that this wasn't right. Bilbo felt a pang of sorrow as he realized with sadness, that it wasn't just siblings Ember had been robbed of, it was his parents as well. He might not have even lived if Bilbo hadn’t found his egg, and that caused Bilbo’s stomach to churn in dread at even the thought. What would have become of the Shire during the Fell Winter, or himself after his parents died? Would he even have had a best friend at all? It certainly wouldn’t have been as special of a friendship or as tangible a bond as the one he had with Ember.

He didn't know who had done such a terrible thing to Ember’s mother, whether it was elf or man, perhaps orc or goblin, though it was unlikely, with how far into the Shire it had been. He still didn't know why no one had ever seen it, or why no one had ever found a dragon corpse. But with how recently he knew that hatred had been alive in the world, he couldn't risk telling anyone about it, he couldn't trust anyone outside the Shire to know about Ember, but there was only so much he could even ask or look up with his few clues being 'powerful magic' 'East from the Shire', and 'gold'. Nearly everything was East of the Shire, and it didn't have to be due East, it could be far to the Northeast or Southeast just as easily.

Lord Elrond had inquired how Bilbo had been injured, not the warg bite, that one was obvious to him, but he was unfamiliar with the claw marks on Bilbo’s face and neck. He also asked if he'd like to have the elvish healers tend him. Bilbo had accepted for his arms, but left his face alone. It was a reminder of what he was doing so far from home. He told the Elf lord it had been an injured beast, strong and fierce, and that he had mistakenly gotten too close to try and help it when it was out of its mind with pain and fear, and if it hadn't been for a dear friend, he likely wouldn't have made it through alive.

Lord Elrond had simply smiled and placed a hand gently on his shoulder and said “It's good to want to help others, even if they don't fully understand, or even appreciate your help. Just be careful my friend, and remember that cleverness can sometimes be more help than direct action, but can also be twice as dangerous, especially if you are trying to hide it. On the paths I see for you, nearly all of them will at some point, or many points, lead you to a great and dangerous treasure, one riddled and diseased with the strongest dragon sickness I have ever known, and I fear that as happened once before, you will be gravely injured by those you only ever meant to help.”

“Why would I be seeking a great treasure?” Bilbo had asked, barely keeping the fear from his voice, or the hope from his heart, because treasure was one of his only clues. Had he been searching the library for the wrong thing? Instead of trying to figure out what the magic was, where it could be sourced, and how to defeat it, should he be looking for the location of the vast treasure instead? After all, if he found the great treasure, chances were he'd find Ember, and then maybe, the rest might just fall into place?
"When seeking dwarven kingdoms, great treasures are unavoidable to find, for dwarves hoard and
covet wealth greatly, and often fall prey to the lure of gold. Gold can be very treacherous Bilbo,
especially to dwarves, so pray, take care and caution when dealing with both."

Bilbo was many things, but a fool was not one of them. He could take a hint when he heard one, and
threw himself into researching dwarves and their kingdoms, though truthfully there wasn't much to
find, so he would just have to look elsewhere.

The twins took him hunting a few weeks later, in the early winter, before the first snowfall, and that
was when he realized that quite by accident, he had stayed in Rivendell for nearly two years, even
though the time had nearly flown by for him. That spring, he decided to visit his home for a time,
having not seen it in over four years now, though he'd made sure to stay in constant contact with the
Shire, so his relations would have no cause to worry about him and his continued breathing. Many
were very relieved that his adventures had lead him into a library of all places, and not into the more
dangerous things which usually happened on adventures. He had prudently left out all mentions of
both being trained by rangers, as well as the incident with the wargs.

The twins were kind enough to ride all the way back with him, seeing as they had a friend they
wished to visit in the Grey Havens, and promised to visit on their way back through from there to
Rivendell. They were very tall to try and accommodate in a typical Hobbit hole, but his father's
instructions to raise Bag End to Man sized height back when they still tried getting Ember through
the front door for awhile, had a chance to pay off. The boys had no trouble at all staying overnight
with him, and leaving for the Grey Havens after first breakfast in the morning.

When Bilbo saw all of his neighbors, he realized that he was definitely not the same hobbit he once
was. They looked so carefree and unaware of the dangers which lurked just beyond the borders of
the Shire. He wasn't as soft as he had started out either, and had even more questions that he didn't
have answers to. He didn't even set foot in back in Bag End after his guests left, instead he spent a
week curled up in Adroushan, the fire pit burning brightly, warm and comforting as ever, and
wondering where to go next.

For the first time he felt the tug of the treasures inside, because he had been away from them for so
long. It brought tears to his eyes, that lingering feeling of Ember's care and love, his magic humming
through his body and heart. 'Heart of the Hoard' the magic whispered, glad to have him back, glad to
feel whole again, waiting and longing for their dragon to return, for they were so treasured, so
beloved by him. But it also made Bilbo’s loneliness greater since his dragon was not there, and until
he found him, he couldn't EVER be there.

Bilbo stayed in the Shire that summer, visiting relations and assuring people he hadn't been doing
anything dangerous, merely looking for information, and spending most of his time around books.
He decided to remain until spring before setting off again, after all it had been ages since he'd been
home. He made plans to have a birthday party come September.

Ember's birthday was before his, in mid August, when the Summer was still heavy with ripe fruits
and vegetables, and the grain was nearly ready for it's final harvest before winter. It was early July
now, and the whole of Hobbiton was alive with the business of the harvest, and like everyone else,
Bilbo spent days wandering into different fields, a pair of baskets at his side, a small sickle in his
hands as he picked all the produce he would need for winter. One's personal garden was for yourself
and family alone, to plant favorites or what you were best at. The large fields were for everyone who
contributed to them during the year, either financially, with provisions, or with work. Come harvest
time you could come and pick as much as you wanted to bolster your own stores with, to insure you
had extra. No one ever wanted a repeat of the fell winter when food had run dangerously low.
Bilbo had still paid his dues to the fields even though he wasn't there using them, and had also pledged to donate his cart and pony to the field harvesters as soon as they would need him. He loaded up his pantry with summer squash and tomatoes, beans, peppers, cucumbers, tomatoes, grapes, and berries so ripe and full of juice they all but burst in flavor the moment they touched his tongue. The orchards were swollen, branches near touching the ground they were so laden and burdened with fruit and nuts. In the summer it was peaches, apricots, plums, and cherries. In the early autumn it was oranges, nuts, and the promise of apples in another few weeks. The process of peeling, shelling, roasting, drying, salting, canning, preserving, pickling, making jams and jellies, it was all a wonderfully rote and familiar thing, his pantry steadily filling with the things which would get him through the winter, several types of seeds set aside carefully for next year, donated back to the fields, some could be used in his own garden by the Gamgees come spring.

The day before Ember's birthday, Bilbo noticed the commotion, and realized he had missed something new start in the slow to change Shire while he had been away.

He placed flowers at the door to Adroushan, same as he did every morning, but today was when he noticed that other hobbits had started to do the same. He had been surprised that the Gamgees had maintained the flower garden atop Adroushan while he'd been gone, and it had only grown more spectacular in his absence, planting gorgeous red peonies, and white or blue periwinkles that were planted in swirls like smoke rising from them. Together they represented devoted friendship and fond memories. On either side of Ember's door, were planters with daisies, for innocence.

Ember was well loved in the shire, and everyone missed him, and the bright and cheerful hobbit that had once accompanied him. Hobbiton hadn't even begun to forget Ember, in fact they celebrated him. Ember's birthday had become a new annual celebration in the Shire called 'Guardian Day' or 'Ember's Day', depending on who you asked.

Hobbits came from all over the Shire, and would place flowers at the door to Ember's smial, or make him a shiny that he would have treasured and added to his hoard. There were crafting competitions to see who could make the best one, and the winning item was given the title of 'Ember's Newest Favorite Shiny Thing.' which had been something that changed weekly if not daily when Ember was among them, and then placed inside his Smial. The rest they decorated the outside of his smial with.

For the past few years the winner had been decided by committee, but this year everyone had decided that Bilbo was to be the judge, since he was there, because everyone felt he was the best qualified to know.

There was a huge bonfire, surrounded by smaller bonfires on the hills, in remembrance of how Ember had protected the Shire with his flames. The farmers brought big bundles of chafe with them to toss in, so that sparks would fill the air. Floating red paper lanterns had apparently been tried the first year, but were quickly dismissed because of the mess they caused and the fact that one of them caught a bit of forest on fire, and another had burned one of Farmer Maggot's hay barns to the ground. But solid red lanterns were always set on the tables, and red and gold decorations were the standard for this particular celebration.

There were treasure hunts through farmer's field that had been fashioned after the way Ember had used to help the farmers, hay mazes, and dances that were to tunes they had written about Ember. There was 'The Friendly Guardian', 'Crimson and Gold', 'Safe Under Wing', 'The Fire In The Ice', 'The Hobbit's New Friend', 'The Unlikely Mousecatcher', 'The Cat That Really Wasn't', 'Magpies Of All Sizes', 'Bigger Than a Horse', 'The Farmers' Best Furnace' and finally, 'All Sorts Of Shinies'. There was even some songs mostly about Bilbo, like 'Tookish Flamerider' 'The Faunt and His Mount', 'The Richest In Friends', 'The Dragon's Tail-e-or', and 'A Dragon's Sort Of Lad'. Bilbo
realized he had a lot of new songs to learn and set about to writing them down and learning their tunes, they would doubtless keep him company on his travels.

But the best way the hobbits remembered their absent friend was through what all hobbits were good at, celebration, food, drink, and pipeweed. There were cakes in the shapes of dragons or flames, foods were mostly red, orange, or yellow in color, and anything smoked and/or spicy in nature had become a must.

Eventually special things had became a tradition, or were dubbed traditional even if they had only been done once before, because every tradition has to start somewhere, right? Corinthia Hornblower developed a spicy cheese bread filled with smoked meats that were baked over coals. She called them Ember Rolls, which became the first item to be dubbed a traditional holiday item and were a favorite every year. Other things were quick to follow suit. Smoked rabbit, and smoked pork, two of Ember’s favorite meats, Squash soup, sliced tomatoes topped with pepperjack cheese and diced yellow peppers, spaghetti squash ‘noodles’ with red peppers and chiles, stuffed tomatoes and yellow peppers, apricot tarts, peach pie, lemon curd, carrot cake, spice cake, watermelon, cornbread, golden honey, lemonade, corn on the cob, candy apples, red and gold apple salad, the list went on and on. Every hobbit still trying to outdo every other hobbit. Every year there were dozens of new dishes, and every year the festival grew, and the day had spread to the other villages and towns in The Shire until it became one of the biggest annual events. Especially once the brewers had gotten involved.

The Brimblebowers brewed a series of special beers in Ember’s honor. A dark stout that actually tasted smoky that they named ‘Ember's Brew’, a sweet golden lager called ‘The Golden Shiny’, and a strong spicy red ale called ‘Dragon’s Fire’. The Gamgees, not to be outdone, brewed up one heck of a sweet and potent drink that they called ‘The Dragon's Courage’ because it’s what you needed to attempt drinking more than one cupful of the stuff, no matter how good it tasted. Other brewers came up with their own drinks, everything from heavily spiced meads and wines, to ciders, but the most popular one that could be enjoyed by every age, was a vibrant red fruit punch called ‘Ember’s Spark’ that the Proudfoot clan had come up with, with a base of pureed watermelon, fresh mint, strawberry, raspberry, blackberry, and slices of lemon.

A few pipeweed blends were made as well, all of them smoky, strong, and rich, and in some way honoring their missing companion and his memory. The Shire had loved their dragon, they missed him greatly, and made sure that even if he never returned, he would never be forgotten.

Bilbo had a grand time, and the party really did lift his spirits significantly. His own birthday a month later wasn’t nearly as grand of an affair, but just as much fun, since the twins made their way back just in time for it and stayed a week visiting with him.

The winter was mild, and Bilbo spent most of it preparing for the spring, and once the mud was dry enough, he locked up the smials, turned the keys back over to Hamfast, and set out again, picking up two new Rangers in Bree, one named Holber and the other Filas. He wasn’t well acquainted with either of them, but he had met Holber before, who was of a pleasant if stoic disposition, and willing to travel just about anywhere as long as needed. Filas was a younger ranger, tailing Holber and learning what he needed to know. This time they started out heading south and east down the Green Way.

Bilbo had debated his course over the winter and planned on travelling the Green Way to the North-South Road, and taking it south to Isengard in hopes of learning more information about magic. Then resupplying, before starting his search in the southern Misties, and working his way along them, going north, to Moria, then over towards Lorien, before heading North again along the mountains in search of other dwarven settlements. When he reached the Old Ford Road near the middle parts of Mirkwood he would break away from the mountains and head through the forest, then up to the Iron
Hills, the most eastern dwarven settlement the Elves knew of, then up to the Withered Heath which supposedly was close to Erebor, he could check out Erebor from there, then go back along the ridge of the Grey Mountains, all the way to the far Northern point of Carn Dum, then south again along the mountains until he reached the Great East Road, which he could take straight home again after resting in Rivendell.

The whole trip would take him over three years if he had to complete the whole thing, but when he found his dragon and freed him, he just wanted to go home from there. Dwarves could be anywhere there were mountains, so that was where he would start looking. They journeyed south, Holber more than capable of keeping them out of trouble, and obviously well versed in what he was doing, and pleased that he didn’t have to watch over someone with no idea of how to survive in the wilds. Filas was young, but smart and very quick to pick things up. Bilbo was a tad rusty on his camping skills, but he had them down pat again by the fifth day on the road.

The adventure stories never talk about how dreary and slow any form of cross country travel is when there are horses along. Nearly the entire time is boring and monotonous, the many hours on horseback, followed by the many hours of walking to relieve the aches in your legs from the hours on horseback, only to undo it all when you get back on the horse the next time. There were multiple stops needed through the day, the constant need to have enough food and water for them, the days of doing no travel at all so the horses could rest properly and graze while you maintain tools or make repairs, not to mention losing at least a full day at any town in order to resupply and possibly see a farrier if needed. But having horses along also meant you could carry many more supplies, so you didn’t have to resupply for yourself as often, and also made camping far more comfortable, since you could pack tents and other bulky items that you wouldn’t be able to carry otherwise.

For Bilbo the easiest task for him was the making and breaking of camp, since he was very good at packing and organizing things, getting a fire going, setting up the tents, and starting a meal while the others fetched firewood, water, and fed and tended the horses. His least favorite chore were the watches at night, meaning that except for the rest days when they could nap whenever they liked, they never got the full night of sleep they needed.

They met another Ranger at Tharbad who accompanied them further, this one called Dungrim who had been selling his services here and in the lands of Rohan for several years now, as bodyguard, messenger, and courier alike, and from what Bilbo could gather, mostly alone. Bilbo kept his ears peeled for all news and gossip, since this Ranger was far less stoic and a lot more chatty than Holber, and quite willing to talk himself hoarse when plied with enough food, drink, and an obviously willing audience. And if there is one thing Hobbits can do well, it is provide good and welcoming company, and encourage conversations.

Filas loosened up a lot with Dungrim around, and Dungrim told them of a dwarvish battle that had just happened on the slopes of Moria a couple of months ago, and that some of the dwarves were still nearby, either moving south towards Rohan, or heading west, coming their way. Bilbo WANTED to talk to those dwarves, find out if they knew anything about dragons. So they altered course there at Tharbad, and headed East towards Moria.

For awhile now, ever since Lord Elrond's warning, he thought that perhaps Ember was in Moria. It was to the east of the Shire, there were tales of the vast riches the dwarves had produced there, was regarded as one of the wealthiest of the dwarven kingdoms, and he had heard a few mentions of some sort of beast of flame possessing magic there. It was a long shot, he knew, because Dwarf lands were always riddled with treasures, and there were and had always been several of them, and dragons were not the only beasts of flame. Ember could have gone to any of them, but there were no maps to be found. Dwarves were an extremely secretive and distant race, and there weren’t even rumors about the dwarves, at least not ones that had been around long enough to be written down in
even the most recent of elvish histories, which for elves had been about two hundred years earlier, and mostly regarding the lines of succession and significant battles.

So since they knew where Moria WAS, it was as good a place for Bilbo to start as any. The stories don’t mention the aftermath of battle. They made it there about six months after the battle had happened, and the stench of death still hung heavy in places, the blood long dry on the stones but still everywhere. Apparently orcs don’t bother burying their dead like the Dwarves obviously did, and with how many orc corpses were lying on the slopes of Moria, Bilbo could only wonder the count of how many dwarves may have died here as well. Scavengers and predators had picked most of the single bodies to bone, but where there were piles of bodies heaped atop each other, the air was still rank, putrid, and filled with flies.

Human scavengers had left this place well alone, there was orc and dwarven armor and weapons everywhere, and while the dwarven gift of metal and stone work was legendary, the orc gear was all obviously rough work built for quick slaughter and not any sort of form or style. But he couldn’t imagine that it was poor quality steel and iron, else it would have shattered in battle or fell to ruinous rust. What he saw was largely whole, even while left out to the elements for six months. Surely it could be collected and reforged, recast, made into something not ugly or for the slaughter of good people. A little work, some cleansing fire, Bilbo could make so many beautiful things from the aftermath of this carnage, he could make it shine... Bilbo closed his eyes and smiled lightly as he realized the direction of his thoughts. A very dragonish thought, the first he’d had in what felt like ages.

Bilbo sent a messenger bird off to one of his suppliers in Rohan later that day requesting twenty carts and forty men to detour over to Moria and collect all of the armor and weapons from the battlefield and deliver it to the Shire and place it in storage for him, and to offer the letter to his grandfather for a very generous stipend for doing so on his behalf. He also sent a letter to the Gamgees letting them know to expect a large and unusual delivery in a few months time, and to please rent him out a large barn to keep it in until his return.

Otherwise, there was nothing in Moria for him. If Ember was here, or anywhere even remotely nearby, Bilbo would have been able to feel it, and there was no trace of his dragon or Ember’s magic here upon these lands. Bilbo could however feel the mithril below his feet, the rich shining veins of it snaking off in every direction, deep into the heart of the earth and for miles in every direction. The mines were far from spent here, so the dwarves had not left this place willingly. With less orcs and death around, Bilbo could see Ember would love this place, so much open sky above, and so much shining wealth below, but his dragon was not here, so it was time to move on.

They stayed relatively nearby for three days, lazily wandering down to a good pathway while Bilbo pretended to explore and sketch and write down a new story, but was in fact plotting out possible courses now. Did he want to continue south towards Isengard, hoping to find the survivors of this battle somewhere near the Gap of Rohan maybe? Or should they go on towards Lothlorien? He had found one old dwarven settlement, and there had even been mention of a long abandoned dwarven Kingdom called Belegost rather near the Shire, if somewhere to the west instead of the east, so the chances of Ember going there were not at all promising. The Iron Hills still sounded promising, having apparently been attacked by dragons often in the past, meaning there might be great wealth there still, enough to tempt Ember. Or maybe Erebor would be easier to find, it had been said to be a solitary peak beyond the Misties, and very near a large lake, which must be distinctive. There could be several more dwarven strongholds hidden along the Misties themselves, the mountains were vast and rich in ores. There had been mentions of all the great dwarven kingdoms in the books he had read, but not where any of them were. Which was most frustrating.

He had decided to travel to Lothlorien next, to perhaps find a way to ask the beings who had walked
this world the longest where the dwarves had settled, but they never made it there. Moria was apparently still infested with orcs, even if they had abandoned the battlefield on the slopes. That night they swarmed up like locusts from the rocks and set upon their camp. Three Rangers and a Hobbit were no match for so many orcs. They hid as best they could but three of them were captured anyways. Filus was the only one they had managed to make sure got away, with a hissed order from Holbur to get help, before shoving him into the river before Bilbo, Holbur and Dungrim were taken and pulled into the deep dark pit of Moria.

Bilbo had thought they would be eaten or something straight away, but that would have been merciful, and as he quickly learned, orcs were not merciful creatures. In fact Bilbo doubted they were even capable of such a thing. They were shoved into a stinking, filthy, stone pit that was capped with a hinged, spiked grate to prevent escape, and an orc with a whip and an extremely long spear standing guard nearby. The large pit had crude stairs hewn into the rock on one side, and was mostly circular, but any other details were lost to darkness and the several other people crammed in there as well. There were about forty of them down there, around a dozen men, about two dozen dwarves, and then Bilbo, the only Hobbit, because Hobbits were a practical people, who don’t typically go leaving their comfortable homes so they could go off and get captured by orcs in the first place.

He stuck close to the Rangers who were huddled close together and discussing things in hushed voices and a different language. Just because Bilbo could understand the plans the two were making of the layout of the route they had taken down here, and possible escapes, it didn’t mean he felt comfortable joining the conversation.

It was hard to track time while underground, the lighting never changed, the activity of their guards rarely changed, seeing as the guard changed often, but never after a specific amount of time had passed. They had nothing to do, nothing to distract themselves. A pair of buckets was brought down to them once a day whenever their captors felt like it, filled with something that smelled absolutely revolting, and tasted worse, but when you were hungry enough, you’d eat just about anything, followed by two buckets of water. Just enough for everyone to have something to drink, nothing more. Their latrine was a hole in the floor that probably opened over a crevasse so their captors wouldn’t have to deal with it, though with how badly the orcs smelt, he couldn’t believe it would bother them.

At regular intervals someone would be dragged out of their prison by several heavily armed orcs and taken away. Either they didn’t go far, or the sound carried strongly, for the tortured screams and sobs were easy to hear. As time passed, several of those who were hauled away never returned. Bilbo learned what the sounds of murderous death sounded like, it haunted his nightmares, it stayed with him in his waking hours, until he could no longer tell if he was asleep or awake anymore. It didn’t matter, the scenery never changed, just the amount of people in the pit with him.

He did notice though that when the orcs would come for one of them, the dwarves had a tendency of removing most of their clothing, or at least their outermost layer before the orcs opened the grate. Bilbo figured it was so that it would be unspoiled if they returned, or could keep another warm if they did not.

Both of the Rangers ended up being hauled away once or twice and were returned later, beaten and bloody. Holber had even been viciously flogged and Bilbo fretted silently for days, worried that it would get infected in their horrible conditions. Somehow Bilbo kept being overlooked when they came. At first he thought perhaps the Rangers were hiding him out of sight just enough, or maybe they just had no interest in a Hobbit. That notion lasted until he realized that literally everyone down there with them had been beaten at least once in the time they had been there. He thought perhaps it was the infamous ability of Hobbits to blend in and hide when frightened, and Bilbo was nothing if not scared out of his mind. Or, and truthfully, this is what he hoped was the reason, that somehow,
even now, Ember’s magic was protecting him, hiding him from harm.

About three weeks after they had been put down there, Holber tried picking the lock, but only seconds after Holber touched it with a lock pick, the guard threw his spear keenly straight into the grate and it went straight into Holber’s gut while the orc let out a putrid cry. The man had barely fallen off the stairs and hit the ground, when a wave of orcs swarmed down into the space, beating and stabbing and kicking with all of their might. Bilbo was tucked behind Dungrim for safety, but he still saw the spear be jabbed down into Holber over and over and over again, a griny boot stomping down and crushing the ranger’s head, and then all of the orcs set to him, tearing him limb from limb with their bare hands. They began biting into the flesh right there, chomping great gory mouthfuls into their disgusting maws, and even gnawing the bones like wild animals as they ate. Most of them left with their snack of human flesh in hand, but their guard retrieved his spear, wiped it off with Holber’s ruined shirt, before tossing the stained cloth carelessly to the ground and asking in a gravel rough voice. “Anyone else want to join him?” While pointing his spear at where they had all cowered against the wall. The orc laughed cruelly and went back up the stairs, slamming the grate over their prison again.

Even in the dim light, the gore was slickly wet upon the stones, but worse of all, there were bits and pieces of Holber left scattered there as well. Entrails and lumps of skin, bits of his bashed in skull and brain, and even a lone, badly damaged finger, not to mention the blood. For some reason, Bilbo fixated on that finger. He honed in on it, could barely turn his eyes away. He didn’t even realize that he was sobbing, or notice the ringing in his ears which made everything seem to fade away. He barely even realized that Dungrim was shaking him by the shoulders and all but yelling his name in his face. He did notice when Dungrim began tearing off his shirt, belatedly realizing that Dungrim was shirtless too for some reason. Bilbo was down to his underwear and Dungrim hauled Bilbo’s back against his chest as he laid down on the stone floor. The Ranger kept his legs bent, which meant Bilbo’s were propped high above his head resting on the Ranger’s knees, and then there were clothes being piled on top of them, while the man’s warm arms were tight around his chest. Bilbo fixated on his toes instead, dirty and shaggy from so much travel, the hair uncombed, and the nails untrimmed. His mother wouldn’t have much cared, but his father would have thrown a fit if Bilbo had ever tried to come to the table with feet like that. When had he let them go so long? Downright unhobbitish it was.

Awareness came back to him slowly, the fact he was shaking head to toe, drenched in a cold sweat, that his head was pounding, and he was dizzy, his pulse was rabbiting in his veins and his breathing was quick and shallow. It seemed to take an age of the earth for him to regain any semblance of control over himself, to have his breathing even out, to calm down in any way. When he did, he realized that Dungrim was holding him tight, murmuring soothing little half truths and pleasant lies in his ear, because it was what he needed to hear, that they would get out of there, that it would be okay, that Dungrim would protect him.

When Bilbo finally came back to himself he broke down sobbing. Great, ugly, horrible, sobbing. He was terrified out of his mind, and he was going to die in this stinking pit. Even with everything he had learned, he was entirely useless. He wasn’t even able to save himself, let alone his dearest friend. No one would know what had become of them, his family would never know when or how he had died, and Ember would be all alone, would think that Bilbo gave up trying to find him, and somehow, that hurt and scared him more than the thought of dying did.

They weren’t able to scrub the blood off of the floor anymore than they were able to bathe themselves, but someone had obviously cleaned up what they could when Bilbo next woke up. He was grateful for it, as well as the clothes people could ill afford to lend him instead of protecting themselves from the cold rock. He returned them promptly, and thanked them sincerely. One of the coats was apparently an extra, left behind by someone who hadn’t returned, and the dwarf had him
keep it.

Over the next few weeks Bilbo started talking with the other prisoners, it’s not like he had anything else to do, and Bilbo was a social sort of person. Their numbers had dwindled to the point that what they were given was going much further these days, since the size of the rations had not changed, two buckets of gruel, two buckets of water. They divided it up so that they were eating and drinking twice a day instead of once. The dwarves were a bit quieter and more reserved than the men, who were quick to anger. He learned many of their names, though not all of them were willing to talk.

Then one day, they came for Dungrim again, and though the Ranger fought and fought hard, he was dragged away. The screaming continued for hours before it was cut off sharply and silence reigned. Dungrim didn’t return.

Bilbo thinks he cried for two days, it was hard to keep track down there, and most of the time he was in a numb daze. Finally the gnawing pit of his stomach made him vomit what bile was left in him, thankfully down the latrine hole, and then there was a dwarf crouched in front of him, handing him a bowl of water a few minutes later.

The dwarf was stoic and silent, but held him close. “You have to keep up your strength lad, your friend obviously cared about you, he wouldn’t want you to get ill on his account.” He had noticed the others looked to this dwarf as a leader, so he tried to not make himself look foolish.

“His name was Dungrim, the other was Holber. It’s my fault, if I hadn’t asked them to detour over to Moria-”

“Easy lad, easy, Rangers are a tough lot, but they are also clever. They knew how to care for themselves, but no one could have predicted how big this infestation of Orcs was. They never would have let you come if they had. Why did you want to come to Moria in the first place? It had been abandoned for centuries.”

The truth was wanting to spill out, he was feeling alone and vulnerable, but his self preservation won out in the end. “I’m a writer, a collector of stories and chronicles. I had heard that there had been a battle on the slopes of Moria a few months before, and that the dwarves who had claimed victory from it were still in the area. I-I had wanted to talk to them, hear the story, all of their stories, write them down, learn why they were there, and- well, we got more than we bargained for. We were set upon in the night, one of the Rangers made it to the river, the rest of us, well, you know.”

“Not many care to know the stories of dwarves, we tend to be overlooked by men and elves.”

“It’s hard to look over you when you’re a full head and shoulders taller than me. I have heard enough about men and elves to fill libraries with, but everyone knows those stories. No one knows of dwarves but the dwarves, and hobbits well, Hobbits aren’t exactly known for their great tales. I could fill you up a library of recipes, beer brewing, gardening tips, and animal husbandry for just about any creature to be found on a farm, but about the most exciting thing to happen in the Shire is the annual craft festival where we invite dwarvish and mannish tinkers and craftsmen to bring and sell their wares in Michael Delving and Tookborough. Not exactly the stuff of legend. I wanted to know the stories no one else knew, not men or elves or hobbits. I wanted to know the stories of the dwarves.”

Apparently that had been the right thing to say, because he was promptly introduced to the dwarf he was talking to as Thrain, son of Thror, and was told of his family, his three children, and his wife, whom he hoped had lived, but had no way of knowing. For the next week the dwarves told him their stories. Bilbo had no quill or paper to write them down with, but he listened and he memorized them all as best he could. Their names, their family, their stories. Even if they all died there, Bilbo at least
would remember for as long as he could.

Time blurred together into the haze of endless routine, and it’s not like they could very well mark the days. There were only five dwarves and himself in the pit when the orcs finally noticed Bilbo, and he was dragged out into whatever torture chamber awaited the prisoners. They strung him up with ropes sticky and stained with a thick layer of blood and grime. His shirt and the coat were ripped from his back, clinging to his wrists in tatters before they set to flay him open with a vicious flogger lined with knots and bits of embedded barbs to shred his flesh from bone, or at least, they attempted to. It hurt badly, and no doubt, but it didn’t hurt nearly as badly as he thought it would. What should have been bleeding slashes of flesh were merely raised welts, and for some reason he wasn’t as susceptible to whips as he had been to a warg bite. This was unfortunately to his detriment, since the orcs noticed their little piece of meat wasn’t bleeding and screaming the way they would like. That meant it lasted longer, hours longer, punches and kicks which should have shattered his ribs to dust merely left deep, aching bruises, so they upped their ante. They strapped his arms behind his back nearly all the way up to the elbow. They weighed down his feet then raised him by his arms and dropped him from a height until he was screaming. His arms felt like they were going to rip out of their sockets, his feet and knees felt like they should have broken, and little did he know that they all definitely should have. But the worst, the absolute worst was when one of them took a glowing poker from the fire, held it right at Bilbo’s eye level, hoping to see the fear in the Hobbit’s eye, and then pressing the red hot metal directly to Bilbo’s cheek. If Bilbo had been smart, he would have screamed, but the heat was blissful relief after so many weeks of being cold, the ache in his bones lessened, the pain melted away for a blissful second. When the metal was taken away, cold and dull as if it had never touched flame, of course there was no mark either.

The orc’s eyes lit up in sadistic glee, Bilbo could tell that he had figured it out, and worse, he told his buddies. The torture lasted hours, maybe even a full day, as they experimented, learned what would and wouldn’t hurt him, and just what his limits were. When they pried open his mouth and shoved a burning hot coal down his throat, Bilbo didn’t even have time to choke, he just swallowed the blissful, blessed heat, starving more for it than he had real food. But they were all witness to his wounds healing over a bit. He became their absolute favorite punching bag, one they didn’t have to be careful with so their toy could last a few days longer. If Bilbo wore out, all they had to do was heal him with flame.

Three days later they made the mistake of tossing him directly into a furnace, just to see what would happen, but when he changed the flames into dragon fire and used them not only to heal and warm himself, but begin to fight back against the monsters, they shut off every access point for air they could and waited him out. He learned then that he could sustain the flames with his magic alone if he had to, but it tired him, and with no extra air, no food, no water, trying to keep flames lit against their nature was exhausting. The fire quickly died and he was unconscious inside the sealed furnace within a day, after which they dragged him back out and to the pit again. They never let him too near a large fire again.

His new routine was being dragged out and beaten nearly every day, some days they just jabbed him harshly with hot pokers, his skin absorbing the heat, then weakening just long enough for them to stab him a bit before the next poker stabbed him somewhere else, or they just beat him with the cold iron. Others they tried to rip him limb from limb, beat him mercilessly, or just hung him upside down for hours by his feet, his arms weighted and dangling, leaving him struggling to breathe. His thoughts became further and further away as days became weeks, became months, he couldn’t tell. He got lost in his own head and couldn’t keep track of days, or tortures anymore, it was just a single unbroken and unending line of pain and fear followed by brief periods of blissful heat and healing. He wished that Ember had never protected him with his flames, because at least that way, his torment would have an end. Instead, now they could literally torture him right to the point of death, and then bring him back so that they could start all over again, and continue on in that way until he died of old age.
He now dreaded the heat and the healing fires, he dreaded the torture, he hated the looks of pity and confusion on the dwarves’ faces. They couldn’t understand how he could hold up, how he hadn’t died yet, or how he wasn’t even more injured with what had been done to him. Orcs weren’t known for their mercy or compassion.

It must have been a month or longer before Bilbo realized that he and Thrain were the only ones left down there in the pit now. He had two full sets of clothes now, gifted to him from one of the others who hadn’t made it back. They were a bit large on him, but he was so much warmer with them than without. Bilbo had never thought the day would come when he would hate the very idea of becoming warm, but being too warm was the last thing he wanted, because then he would heal, and then they would just start all over again.

Thrain was obviously being tortured too, though unlike Bilbo, he couldn’t heal from his injuries, at least, not at first. After awhile, Bilbo didn’t see the point in concealing the truth from his only friend, after all, who would he tell? So Bilbo healed him a bit with some of his magic, instead of using it on himself. Of course the dwarf king wanted to know how he had done it, but there were still some secrets Bilbo felt he needed to keep. He didn’t keep them long.

Three days later, Bilbo was talking after he had been put back in his cell for the night, he couldn’t have stopped himself if he had wanted to. He told Thrain the whole story, about Ember and the way he had raised him, and the secret behind why he healed so fast, and how he could heal others, and how Ember had been stolen from him. Thrain told him what had happened after that, where the dragon had gone, what Ember had done to Thrain’s people. He even told him where exactly the dragon was, and Bilbo broke down, sobbing and thanking him.

If Bilbo had not been suffering from a skull nearly half bashed in by a great metal mallet and going on only a few small coals of heat that day, leaving him pained, confused, talkative, and muddy headed, he might have been able to remember what had been said later on. As it stood, severe concussions were not good for recalling things. Several days later when the orcs healed him properly, he didn’t even remember that the two of them had even had the conversation, and by then, Thrain was in too sorry of shape to have thought he might need to repeat it.

Time became completely inconsequential, the routine never changed. Pain, torture, lack of sleep, fire only when it nearly went too far. Several times new prisoners were brought in and slowly tortured and killed off one by one, and now, Bilbo knew, added to the orcs’ stew pot. But Bilbo was still their favorite plaything. After the fifth time the prison had been emptied, leaving only himself and Thrain, and with no new meat for months, the orcs getting ever hungrier for flesh, they both thought Thrain was running out of time, being easier to kill, and not given adequate healing time, even if Bilbo occasionally healed his friend whenever he could spare a bit of healing, which wasn’t often. Whereas Bilbo, their captors could keep him alive for decades or more just for the entertainment value, not to mention that by this point, Bilbo was very much skin and bones.

One night, during this desperate time, while Bilbo was trying to come to terms with the fact that soon he would be on his own, with only the ghosts for company, Thrain handed him something, and told him to keep it hidden. It was a ring, one the dwarf had distinctly removed and put in his coat, the one he left behind each time before he was taken away. It stood as a promise between them, of comradery and friendship.

Bilbo had clung tightly to that ring, he held it the entire time Thrain was gone, and when the dwarf returned, he breathed a huge sigh of relief. But it wasn’t long after that that the orcs figured out a torture that made Bilbo literally yearn for death. They found his weakness, they found his fear. If fire was his strength, then his weakness was still the same as it was for most hobbits. Water. Once they discovered it, the orcs took great delight in nearly drowning him, holding him under in a tub, or
waterboarding him for what seemed an age of the earth. For three days they left him strapped to a table with a single drop of water striking his head at regular intervals. At the end of those three days he truly thought that he must have gone mad, he knows he had sobbed brokenly until he had fallen asleep with Thrain’s arms around him. The orcs never gave him fire these days unless he had been rendered unconscious, so his nights were spent wet and cold and shivering in the pit, trying to rid his lungs of the water they had taken in, leaving him coughing half the night, and robbing him of much needed sleep.

At one point, his magic reached its limit. He was so tired and weak that their whips actually worked on him these days, drawing blood, flaying flesh, and leaving deep and vicious scars. The beatings returned, leaving him a blackened and bloody mess. His eyes were all but swollen shut, his hands and fingers broken, The strappado dislocated one of his arms, the bone breaking severely as well, and once they left him up on tiptoe hanging by the neck, arms cruelly bound up tight behind him, the broken one screaming in agony. Swear to Ulmo he thought about ending it himself, he thought about tucking up his knees and just letting the rope around his throat strangle him. It would still be an escape, he’d die on his own terms, but in the end he just couldn’t do it, and part of him thought himself a stupid and cowardly fool for not doing it.

His healing still worked, just much slower these days, and tended to go towards the crucial things like making sure he stayed alive, not keeping him from harm, but with the same rations as always being brought, they at least had enough water most times to use one water bucket to clean out wounds and semi wash themselves these days, though it was mainly Thrain who bathed, Bilbo was developing a full on phobia of water, and considered how much water he was constantly being doused with to be bathing enough for him.

The orcs’ treatments were getting to Thrain too. His mind wandered further and further afield, murmuring nonsense, losing track of time and location, gibbering to himself, talking to people who weren’t there, or sitting in the corner rocking. Bilbo was the only one who could approach him without being lashed out at, and Bilbo warned any new prisoners that were dumped down there with them to stay well away, since the previous group, there had been a dwarf who had recognized Thrain, and when he had knelt and taken Thrain’s hand to bow his head over it to show fealty, Thrain had outright attacked him. Bilbo kept him well away from others after that, and distracted him by asking him the stories of the dwarves, and his family, for hope was an easy thing to lose track of in a place like this, and distractions were worth their weight in gold.

Bilbo knew he wasn’t doing much better than his friend, the days when it was a bad day for both of them were the hardest, neither of them able to care for the other and help drive the darkness away. He had once asked Thrain to kill him on one of those days, and he knows had Thrain known how to, or had the means, the dwarf would have done so, which was comforting for some reason.

On the clearer days, he tried to do something to keep their spirits up. Most of the songs he had picked up during his last visit to the Shire were barely half remembered at this point, but he still remembered the chorus and the last verse of his favorite one, one which he sometimes brokenly murmured the words he could remember as he and Thrain curled up next to each other at night to keep warm.

Where are you going, Tookish Flamerider?
Are you off to the mountains to gambol and play?
Are you off to fetch water or wood for your mother?
Are you off on adventures, or eating all day?

Where are you going, Tookish Flamerider?
Are you delivering letters, or gifts to your kin?
Are you hunting, or fishing, or finding new shinies?
Are you scaring off wargs, or just frightening men?

Where are you going, Tookish Flamerider?
Are you off seeing Elves and then meeting the King?
Are you digging for treasure, or finding new places?
Are you raising up dragons, or just selling rings?

Where are you going Tookish Flamerider?
To family or friends or new people to meet?
With those strong wings so willing to take you,
It’s really no wonder you don’t use your feet!

It reminded him, of happier times, of simpler days, of days when there was light and hope and warmth in his life. It helped him forget where he was and the fate which undoubtedly awaited him. He knew by this point that Filus hadn’t been able to make it to help. There wouldn’t be a rescue, there wouldn’t be an escape, he’d just exist in this tortured limbo until his body finally gave out, or the orcs got hungry enough, or maybe he’d die of some other thing.

Anything can become repetitive when done long enough, even torture. For Bilbo, everything was mostly a hazed out blur, followed by random spurts of clarity. During the clear spots Bilbo thought perhaps he was going just as mad as Thrain was and just didn’t know it. How was he to know? He didn’t really care if he had gone mad or not, not really, wouldn’t madness still be a form of escape?
All he wanted to do was escape. In his dreams he remembered that there were colors beside black and grey and brown, but he didn’t know if it was true anymore or not. He half remembered the blue of the sky, the green of the grass, and the bright, hot, yellow white and red of Ember’s flames, but at the same time, thought perhaps he had imagined them. He longed for bright colors again, and not being afraid. He barely even remembered what not being scared felt like, if he ever really had. He begged help from faceless images in his mind, some grander, higher form of being. He didn’t care who, just for help of some form, either let him escape, or let him die, and he didn’t kid himself or hold onto false hope on which one it would be, not anymore. If they were at all merciful, death would probably be the form it came in.

Awhile later, the orcs finally went too far. The orc torturing Bilbo was holding him under water until he nearly blacked out, his mind begging, screaming for help, desperate for air, and yet somehow still knowing, he could end it there, if he was brave enough, all he had to do was breathe in as deep as he could…

Right as he reached the point he was going to gasp in that breath whether he wanted to or not, Bilbo was hauled out of the water, what little healing ability he had left was pulled to his lungs, leaving him vulnerable, and the orc stabbed sharply at his throat, the blade met no resistance and struck deep.

It was one of the orcs who had liked that Bilbo was difficult to kill, and at the same time, liked that Bilbo was more vulnerable these days. When the knife slid back out, it was immediately obvious he had struck something major. Blood was gushing out of Bilbo’s throat rapidly, and he was left gaping and gasping as he bled out. The orc made a disgusted sound, and hauled him over to the brazier, and attempted to cauterize the wound with a hot coal, but as always, Bilbo could not be harmed in any way by fire, not even to save his life. The world was growing dim and silent, as it seemed like he was falling away, backwards down a tunnel, skewing his vision. The orc simply tossed him on the coals, either hoping it would heal him, or possibly thinking to cook his body when he was dead. But the fire did it’s job, the heat and the fire began to heal him, the bleeding must have slowed at least a bit, because he remained conscious, barely. He was still dying, slower than before, but it was happening. He closed his eyes, nearly grateful that it was finally over. Then, right when everything was going dim, he felt a great heat on his back, a moment later the sounds of shrieks and screams
registered to him. The orcs were running away in absolute terror, all of them. He couldn’t look, he
couldn’t even really move, but the tears nearly tickled as they fell. He pictured his friend, his beloved
Ember, come to save him at last.

“Please, help me.” He couldn’t bear to leave, not now that Ember was back. The words were barely
even spoken, but regardless, he felt the hot, endless fire against his back, and strong sure claws pick
him up, the heat rushing into him from every angle, his body soaking up every bit of fire he could
touch. He felt the wounds closing, healing, even managing to open his one eye enough to see Thrain
peering up from the pit as the huge thunderous footsteps walked him by their prison.

“Thrain, come with us, Ember will help us escape!” His words weren’t very loud or strong, not with
how weakened he was, and having his throat slashed, but Thrain still came to the bars all the same.

Thrain looked very skeptical and downright terrified, but knew there was no other hope of escape,
every orc was currently gone, and the grate was easy enough to get through when not under guard.
Bilbo saw Thrain come up from the pit and cautiously follow behind, and as utterly exhausted, hurt,
and relieved as he was, Bilbo closed his eyes and let the heat and fire just overtake him completely.

When Bilbo woke up, it was to pitch black darkness. He was in a deep groove of solid stone that felt
like it was melted down to glass in several spots. He was alone, as far as he could tell, no breaths to
be heard, no warmth, no glow of fire. He distinctly remembered that there should be fire. Ember had
come for him, had saved him, where was his friend? Ember would never leave him alone when he
had so much as stubbed a toe, let alone suffering torture and nearly dying at the hands of orcs.
Something wasn’t right. He moaned as he sat up. Bilbo touched his throat, the wound sealed over,
but still a bit tender. He wonders how much fire he had absorbed, to be this well off right now.

“Pssst! Bilbo!”

“Thrain?” Hhe croaked, knowing the dwarf had followed, and yet not able to see him anywhere in
this level of darkness, which was all but absolute, his eyes entirely unable to adjust, no matter how
acclimated he had been to the dimness of the orc’s pit.

“Down here Bilbo!” He heard somewhere down and off to his left, along with a slight shuffle of
loose stones.

“Where’s Ember?” he moaned, not liking the fact he was alone one bit, his body feeling heavy and
leaden, but thankfully still warm for the moment.

“That’s not Ember! We have to get out of here Bilbo! Now!”

Even in the total darkness Bilbo could tell that his vision was swimming and that his balance would
be all but non-existent. He felt his way out of the nook and onto the flattened stone beyond, then
around his surroundings gradually, only to find that wherever he was, there was a drop on every side
except the part behind him that went straight up. He was on some sort of ledge.

“I can’t get down, there’s a drop, and I won’t get far even if I could.”

“It’s a false drop, the stone curves under, but you are less than a foot away from other stones and
solid ground in every direction. You won’t fall.”

“I can’t see anything Thrain, the darkness is too deep, and my head is spinning.”

His friend climbed up to him and brought him a bowl of water that he had gotten from somewhere,
and Bilbo drank it down greedily. They were just maneuvering off of the rocks when the sound of
roaring flames seemed to ring in Bilbo’s ears, and his head swam anew with the sound of it. He
could feel the powerful magic and fire drawing closer, and a surge in his own stores, enough to make him gasp with its strength. “E-Ember?”

Thrain’s eyes went wide in terror. “No! No, Bilbo we have to run! NOW!” But Bilbo couldn’t run anywhere. He turned towards that warmth, that power, barely even realizing that Thrain ducked behind a thick outcropping of stones that hid him quite well. It was bright enough to see now, and Bilbo glanced to where he felt the welcoming heat of the flames, even from this distance. He froze. He could barely even comprehend the… the being he saw before him, enormous and terrifying and formed what seemed to be of glowing fire and molten rock itself, a living mountain of flame, far more powerful than Ember, and as old as the earth itself. Bilbo was frozen with shock, unable to move either forward or away.

It was not a force for good like Ember was, but how the orcs had fled from it in terror, it was not their ally either. Was it a force for evil? Or was it so tremendously powerful that it was beyond such petty definitions? And like Ember, had it merely been misunderstood due to its appearance? All of his other thoughts ended as it set down two large barrels right on the ledge next to Bilbo and then scooped him up in one huge hand as if he were nothing more than a kitten. Bilbo had flinched, but it was making no move to harm him, and the fire… there was so much blessedly warm fire, he couldn’t resist. It seeped into him, healing damage, soothing his aches and pains, bolstering his completely drained stores of magic. He saw the creature’s hand darken as if the stone was cooling from where he was taking the warmth. There were little wisps of fire licking at his hands and he let the flames grow, and envelop him, burn off the dirt and the grime, soothe the pain, ease his mind. It was the first fire bath he’d had since the orcs had tossed him into the furnace, and he reveled in it. The beast was making sounds, curious about him, but Bilbo’s magic was still too weak, so he was unable to translate it, and he didn’t trust his voice to speak. After he changed the flames crawling up his arms into the eternal heat of dragons fire, cupping them in his hands and opening his mouth to swallow them down until he was properly warm again, the creature actually sniffed him and stroked his head with one enormous claw. Bilbo pretended, probably very badly, that such a thing had no effect on him.

It stroked his head again, with what Bilbo could only describe as fondness, if a creature such as it could even feel fondness. But for some reason that seemed enough for Bilbo’s senses. This being did not seem out to hurt him, whatever it was, and was actually helping to heal him, so Bilbo was very grateful. He placed his hand on one of it’s claws and looked it in the eye, or well, what passed for eyes on it. “You saved my life. Thank You.” It sniffed him again then set Bilbo back on the ledge next to the barrels. Bilbo discovered that they held all sorts of foodstuffs, more than enough to last him for several weeks. Whatever it was, it was intelligent enough to know that Bilbo would need food. “This is perfect. Again, thank you.” The creature meandered away, and it glowed enough to light up a good portion of the cavern they were in. They were near a large underground lake, it must be where Thrain had gotten the water from. Thrain had also been right that there was no treacherous drop out to swallow him up, it was just the flattest area in the place save for the lake bed.

For the first time in longer than he could remember, Bilbo had something that wasn’t gruel, and while his appetite wanted him to eat everything, his stomach knew he wouldn’t be able to hold it down. But still he had a few bites of meat, bread, cheese, and it was nearly impossible to resist devouring the grapes completely. When he was full he gingerly made his way down to the lake, drinking his fill and deciding to wash out any remaining wounds he had, his leg, arm, and shoulder still giving him a lot of trouble, and his head more than worse for wear. It was the first time in longer than he could remember that he actually saw his hands, battered, broken, gnarled and scarred from improper and rapid healing, the nails torn, ragged, or missing entirely, and his feet were even worse, his skin thin and his arms and legs were nearly skeletal, he had gone so long without proper nutrition. There wasn’t much he could do about it though, so he just cleaned up as best he could, and slowly moved back to the ledge. Thrain was still huddled down behind it and Bilbo made sure to pass him
his own share of food.

He slept that night after the creature left and plunged them back into darkness. Bilbo was doing better, but he was still a long way from being hale enough to navigate the rocky tunnels and darkness at even a snail’s pace, let alone having to try and climb anywhere, especially without the aid of rope. And Thrain wasn’t any better himself, no matter how he tried to hide it and stubborn through, he had several wounds and at least one broken bone that had healed poorly. The orcs and their treatments had taken a heavy toll on both of them, making escape far more difficult. He and Thrain spoke for hours in the dark, trying to plan where to go, but not knowing either the layout of the tunnels, the way out, no proper supplies, light, tools, or the places the orcs were gathered, was very very dangerous. They knew they would not survive recapture, and they were not in any shape to try and fight their way out either. So they stayed put, hiding out in the creature’s lair for several weeks, maybe even months as they recovered, safely hidden from the orcs. The beast stayed there quite often, meaning Thrain stayed hidden, only eating and drinking when it had left on whatever business a creature such as itself could have, but all in all it was the most peace either of them had had since first being captured. Proper food, rest, and a lack of torture were a high step up from their previous situation at least.

Thrain called the beast “Durin’s Bane” and he never lost any of his fear of the creature, whereas Bilbo was often scooped up and sniffed or had his head stroked as it gave him more flames to help him heal. He even woke up a time or two curled up on the beast’s chest, it’s enormous hand cupped over him, keeping him pressed to flaming warmth and calling Ember to mind so clearly that it often made him forget where he was, expecting to find himself in Adroushan, a dragon atop him purring contentedly. It was very jarring to wake up and not find him.

The longer they stayed, the more of the beast’s magic Bilbo must have absorbed as well, not just its warmth and fire. Because he could see in the dark these days, and as time passed, he began starting to realize that the roaring, crackling sounds it made was actually a form of language, one he could gradually understand the more he heard of it. Over time he could even speak random, broken words of it the longer it went on.

One of the first things the beast asked him when it realized that Bilbo had started speaking its language rather fluently, was “What are you, little flame?” Bilbo didn’t really have an answer it would understand, but still thought he knew something which would please it. “Fire born, and fire made.”

It became a daily thing, twice, sometimes thrice daily, a deep soothing fire bath and swallowing all of the flames he could manage, followed by “What are you, little flame?” He tried to figure out what it was meaning by it, that perhaps he just wasn’t translating it right, but the words never changed or took on a new meaning no matter how much flame he took in, or how many times he was asked.

The heat from this fire didn’t linger inside of him the way Ember’s had, it warmed him while it was there, but it wasn’t something he could hold onto the way he could the dragon’s fire, meaning that when Durin’s Bane left, it took the heat with it, leaving Bilbo cold unless he used his own stores of magic to keep himself warm while it was gone, depleting him all over again until it returned, meaning Bilbo spent as much time with it while it was there as he could.

Time passed, they had no idea how long, but the creature kept him warm and well fed. Bilbo didn’t even notice when he had started replying only in the flame tongue that he was spoken to, and Thrain, he was growing wary and pensive, often leaving for days at a time trying to learn the paths and find an exit.

Most of Bilbo’s wounds had healed, but his scars and their effects remained, his shoulder and arm
was weakened significantly, and even though he had all of the fire he could want, what magic he had absorbed wasn’t easily wielded like the dragon magic was. It was unyielding, and temperamental, and nearly smothering, and it seemed he got colder faster these days, meaning the longer he was away, the faster he hurt again. One night was especially cold, and the chill left his shoulder in agony. When the creature returned, and saw Bilbo’s tears and pain, it picked him up and asked him what was wrong. When Bilbo replied that he wasn’t able to use its magic to heal the way he used his own, it huffed at him, said “fire can’t be stoked if it can’t reach the tinder. You are surrounded by stone, cradling your sputtering spark, trying to kindle it back to life, while an inferno waits outside, waiting to help you. I can only warm you so much from there with my magic. If you don’t let it in, it can’t heal you.”

Bilbo didn’t understand what stone he was apparently surrounded by, he had no idea, but then the creature placed its claw into one of the endless cracks along its surface, and when it came back out, it was coated in liquid stone.

“If you want my magic, Little Ember, you have to let it in.”

That nickname made Bilbo shiver head to toe, and his eyes fill with tears, but still when that molten heat was offered to his lips, Bilbo opened his mouth and drank it down. He shrieked in agony a moment later, flailed and thrashed and screamed, it scorched something inside of him, a new channel for magic, one that was flooded with power and heat.

Ember’s magic had been warm and soothing, a gentle current he could touch and move as needed, this, this was a flood, set to drown him. He saw it in his mind’s eye for just a moment, that precious little blue and white flame, that stuttering spark that had burned it’s way into him so gently he hadn’t even noticed. The flood would destroy it, snuff it out, possibly be able to control it and the one who had given it to him. He saw his mind’s self snatch it up in desperation, and having no other option to keep it whole or save it, ripped open his own chest, hid it inside of his still beating heart, and healed the wound as fast as he could before the flood of magic overwhelmed and smothered him. The flood tried to force its way down his throat, seeking the spark and to silence Bilbo for good, but the spark had found something to catch hold of and burn, it drove the flood back out and Bilbo felt the flood turn to rage as it couldn’t smother and kill him. The liquid fire magic buried him up to his neck, his limbs held immobile, his face barely able to breach the surface, and when it circled his throat but wasn’t allowed to choke him, finally it decided to make it so the magic couldn’t be used against it at least. It solidified as a collar made of stone, one which had a hood that blinded him, a gag which silenced him, and it also stoppered his ears, leaving him magically blind, deaf, dumb, and unable to use the spark at all. Mentally at least, he was imprisoned all over again, enslaved and brought to heel.

In the physical world, he screamed until he passed out, tears flowing, and he continued sobbing in his sleep. Thrain was there when he woke up, feeling like he was in a haze, his head and thoughts muddled, and a feeling of being warm but trapped, and he couldn’t even warn Thrain of the danger he might pose for him now. Thrain had been right to be afraid, Bilbo felt the magic even now, squeezing him. There was no more pain, but there was no more anything really, everything was a hazed out blur to him, nothing else mattered except the will of the power which now held him.

It was angry that Bilbo had kept the spark from it, so if it couldn’t control the spark, it would control Bilbo instead, and if he protested in the least, it would stop being kind. It would turn on him, make the orc’s treatments seem like tickles, and never let him die, it could make him immortal, it whispered, and then torture him for all eternity, until the spark died all on its own, and Bilbo would belong to it anyway. Even then he’d wish he were dead, and it would never be granted to him.

The magic was a whispering threat in his head, so when the creature came back and picked him up and the magic hissed at him to kneel, Bilbo knelt. The creature was very pleased at this and stroked
Bilbo’s head, never noticing the tear that flowed down the hobbit’s cheeks.

Bilbo lived in the haze again, even though there was no pain this time, and Thrain could tell that something was very wrong, but wasn’t able to do anything. Thrain had tried leaving with Bilbo once, but Bilbo’s legs stopped working when he reached the tunnel entrance, he couldn’t do anything but kneel once again, and was kept like that for hours until his legs were numb, burning, and throbbing with pain. Thrain had dragged him back to the lakeshore when Bilbo had begun babbling that he’d be cross at him if the creature found out he had tried to escape, and his legs didn’t unlock until Durin’s Bane returned, two days later. By that time, Bilbo had broken, and when it picked him up and stroked his hair and fed him fire and asked him what he was, Bilbo finally understood what he was being asked, and curled tightly around one of the claws that cradled him.

“Yours. I’m yours.” He’d said in a voice that was flat and hopeless, tears streaming down his face but unable to sob.

That had pleased his owner very well, and he rested in flaming warmth which eased every ache, pain, and even the memory of pain. Though somehow his dreams were still uneasy, filled with sorrow and a desperate denial, a screaming railing that he couldn’t recall when he woke up. He often studied the ring on his finger while Thrain was gone these days. He had offered it back to the dwarf long ago, but he had refused it, saying it was Bilbo’s and that it was a symbol of their friendship.

The haze grew ever thicker around him as more and more time passed. Now when Thrain’s mind wandered afield Bilbo would simply put his magic into the dwarf, trying to convince him to stop wandering off, to just stay there with him, where it was safe. Bilbo didn’t want him to be afraid anymore, couldn’t he see that his owner wouldn’t do them any harm? His owner took such care of Bilbo, and Bilbo was positive it would do the same for Thrain, if only he could drag him out of the shadows and his eternal hiding spot.

One day, Bilbo was resting with Thrain nearby for warmth, because he was always cold unless his owner was there these days. His owner was off getting more food for him from wherever he got it from, and then suddenly, he heard… fighting, the clang and clash of swords, the roar of battle, the shrieks of death. There were orcs nearby, and Bilbo cowered in fear, wishing his owner had left him a flame, any flame, so that he’d be able to kill them, he had so much magic now he could probably burn the entire world with it if he wanted, but they were alone in darkness. As a torch entered the chamber, Bilbo shrank as far back on his ledge as he could, trying to stay hidden. The torches cast very little light in the huge cavern, but they were nearly blinding to Bilbo regardless. Bilbo pulled Thrain close, he had to hide and protect him from this new threat, they carried torches, once they got close enough it would be their death.

It took several moments to realize they were speaking, and then to understand what was being said, he hadn’t heard the tongue in so long he had nearly forgotten it.

“Appears gone but his stench lingers, and the stone is scorched near to glass. This is undoubtedly his lair.” said one, melodic and strange.

“Find Bilbo, he should be nearby if he still lives.” this one nearly sounded familiar, though he couldn’t place where from. Bilbo didn’t like that they seemed to know his name.

“Leave the beast to me. Find your friend if he lives, but do not cling too tightly to your hope.” Spoke the first one again, and Bilbo very much did not like him.

Thrain’s arms were around him, trying to pull him out of his crevice, and he clung all the harder to the stone. He was safe from the orcs here, they would never trespass near his owner, he wouldn’t leave where he was supposed to stay!
A moment later Thrain was calling out to them, drawing their attention “Here! If you are seeking Bilbo, he’s over here!”

Bilbo couldn’t bear the betrayal, he lunged at his friend in fury, toppling them both off the small ledge. He took up a rock in each hand ready to fight to his last breath! He wouldn’t go back to that terrible pit ever again! He brought the stone down hard on Thrain’s head, but he wasn’t strong enough to smash it to the pulp he had wanted, and Thrain knocked him back, first with a solid swing from the side, and then by kicking him in the stomach, wounding him greatly as he landed hard on his back against the stones.

“Don’t let him near fire!” Thrain shouted as they drew close and Bilbo lunged towards them and their flames, only to be grabbed from behind by his one-time friend. “That beast has done something terrible to him! Addled his mind and enslaved him! He’ll burn you alive given even half a chance! Please, you must help him!”

Bilbo fought and snarled and screamed his outrage as he tried to attack his foes ineffectually. He had no spark, all he needed was just one single spark… He howled and screamed as their hands grabbed him tight, he resorted to biting, kicking, flailing as they tried to subdue him. He snarled at them in the fire speech, calling for his owner to save him once more.

He grinned in triumph when they trembled in fear at the words which came out of his mouth, and then he felt the flare of heat inside of him. His owner was returning, and he snarled at them as much. Let them quake in fear at that knowledge, their deaths would be terrible! He managed to kick the helmet off of one of the beings that held him captive, desperately trying to tie him up with a rope.

Somehow he knew the face, though it was half remembered, as if from a dream. He was so startled he stopped fighting for a moment and in that moment he was bound inescapably by two of the of the strangers and Thrain, the knots wouldn’t slip no matter what he tried.

“Bilbo! Bilbo stop! It’s us! Don’t you know us my friend?”

Some hazed out part inside of him insisted that he did, saw this half remembered stranger and for some reason he started crying, because it meant… something, he couldn’t remember what anymore.

“My owner is coming for me. He won’t like that you have taken me. Very soon you will all die.” He said in a low dark voice.

“Get them out of here, I’ll cover the rear and face it if I must. Whatever you do, do not turn back if I fall.” Said a tall elf who was quite imposing and rather other worldly, the first one who had spoken.

“Glorfindel-” said the one whose helmet Bilbo had kicked off.

“GO!” He snarled, and shoved them towards the way they had come from.

Bilbo snarled and struggled, growling at this Glorfindel stranger “Don’t even THINK of harming my owner! He saved my life! Leave him alone! He’s mine, and if you so much as try to lay a finger on him I’ll kill you myself!” He snarled and spat. He felt the fire building inside of him, desperate to destroy, the torch was close enough now, the fire tongue was about to roll off of his lips and make it explode and consume them all when Thrain turned to him with sorrow in his eyes.

“Forgive me, my friend.” He said before Thrain punched him hard enough to keep him from speaking, then gagged him soundly and bound his eyes, knowing that Bilbo couldn’t burn anything if he couldn’t see it or speak the words. Bilbo howled his muffled affront, but nothing happened, and he felt it as he was picked up and carried.
The other stranger tugged the others towards the entrance. “We’ll all go, it’s better to flee than to face it. Bilbo, we will leave him in peace if you swear to stay silent as we pass. You wouldn’t want to draw the orcs down on us now would you?”

Glorfindel didn’t sound pleased, but also seemed a bit relieved as Bilbo nodded his assent with tears in his eyes, tears that they couldn’t see, so it didn’t matter if they fell.

There was a great rending tug and pull at him as they fled the cavern, he could even feel that it gave his kidnappers pause as they fought to pull him away from where his owner’s magic wanted him to stay. He heard a sword being drawn, a whoosh of air, the sound of metal against stone, and suddenly they had no trouble at all moving him away from his owner’s home.

Moments later he felt the flare of rage as his owner returned only to find him gone.

Bilbo sobbed brokenly, he felt the great and overwhelming loss, and felt like he had betrayed his owner. ‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry. It wasn’t my choice.’ He cried in his mind over and over again towards his owner, not knowing if perhaps somehow, his owner could hear or sense him. He wondered what would become of his owner, lonely and without company here in the endless dark beneath the earth, hidden and feared by all but himself.

Since he was blindfolded and gagged he had no idea of what surrounded them as he was hauled around like luggage or an extremely ungainly sack of potatoes. One of their other kidnappers must have picked up Thrain and carried him as well because suddenly they were picking up speed, until judging by the wind Bilbo felt against his face all of a sudden, they were sprinting if not full out running in the hard to navigate tunnels.

His kidnappers were tireless, he was even strapped to one’s back like a rucksack before they obviously started climbing. He was only set down to eat, relieve himself, or get a few fretful hours of sleep, and it was only Thrain who fed him, bites of a strange bread and water, and three times a day a sweet and pungent potion that he was given a cupful of. He had stopped fighting, since gradually, as more and more distance was covered, his connection to the beast grew fainter, and the haze of his thoughts retreated enough at one point that he realized he had been fighting his own rescuers and felt rather hollow, empty, and a bit ashamed of himself.

It had been two days judging by the number of cups of medicine he had been given, and when Thrain removed the gag to feed him and give him his medicine, even though he was still blindfolded, he knew where his friend was. The haze wasn’t as strong right then, in fact for the moment it had retreated enough that he was able to speak.

“I’m sorry.” he murmured with a bowed head, and he felt the comforting weight of Thrain’s hand on his shoulder.

“I know. It’s alright, you weren’t yourself. Mahal knows I’ve done worse to you on my bad days.” Thrain removed the blindfold and ropes for the moment, and Bilbo blinked and squinted even against the dim light of their one torch. “Still have to keep those on while we move though, in case you suddenly decide to turn nasty. The path they are taking is treacherous, there’s paths I doubt even a dwarf could find a foothold, you trying to attack or burn us all wouldn’t help.”

Bilbo nodded in understanding. Just because today was a good day for both of them and they were relatively more aware than some days, it didn’t mean tomorrow or even an hour from now would be the same. He and Thrain were both a thousand leagues away from alright, they had accepted that long ago, and though they were well adapted to dealing with each other’s bad times, the others weren’t, and the coping methods they would usually use couldn’t really be done right now, so they had to find a different way to manage, especially with people who didn’t know what they were up
For the first time he looked and truly saw his rescuers, their faces were very familiar, but their names were slow to come back to his tongue. “Elladan? Elrohir? How on earth did you find us?”

Elladan came over with his brother, while the other elf stayed well back with a rather distrustful look on his face. “Father hadn’t gotten your letters in several years, and he was worried when he sent a letter to your home only for it to be replied to that no one had heard from you there in years either, so he sought you out with his Sight. He saw the orcs, and the balrog, and we immediately launched a rescue mission.”

Elrohir laid a hand on his shoulder. “We are glad to find you alive Bilbo. You are family to us.”

“H-how long, were we, how long did I-” his throat didn’t want to form the words, his voice didn’t want to work, part of him didn’t even really want to know, terrified of the answer, but Elrohir knew exactly what he was trying to say anyway.

“Near as we can tell, you were last heard of five years ago in the Shire. How much of that was spent in the Balrog’s clutches, we have no idea.”

“Almost a year, I think, I marked down the days whenever I could, the day you came was day two forty nine, though I am sure I missed several.” Said Thrain. To be honest this was the most lucid Bilbo had seen him in months. He recalled having given Thrain magic, trying to do… something. It was all a blur. He felt the Balrogs’ magic still inside of him, a cocoon of thick, viscous, heavy lava magic all but smothering him, and it just felt wrong and horrible, but he didn’t know how to get rid of it.

“We should be free of this place in another day, then we will head straight for home.” Elladan said.

It actually took another two days to reach the surface due to a rock slide blocking off the more direct route. They had emerged at night and with as long as Bilbo had been underground, the open and wide expanse of sky overhead was nearly incomprehensible to him, and the stars were downright dazzling. The dawn the next morning all but took his breath away, even though he couldn’t truly look to see the sunrise due to his eyes being too sensitive. The orange, pink, and gold splashed across the sky beforehand actually made him close his eyes and weep, and he sat there on that rock for an hour at least, with his eyes closed and the warmth of the newly risen sun on his skin before he put on the cloak he had been given, and raised the hood to protect him and his eyes.

It took them another day after that to reach where they had stashed the horses with two other elves, and after that they were galloping north, racing towards Imladris with all haste. They often switched horses in places you couldn’t even tell could hold them, and continued on near tirelessly, resting only when Bilbo and Thrain needed to. Even though he hadn’t gotten angry or violent again, they kept his hands and feet bound and his mouth gagged just to be safe, but let him wander freely at every break they took, though Thrain still wouldn’t let him too near the fire at night.

Having been held underground for so long, Bilbo’s and Thrain’s eyes were highly sensitive to the light, so they wore their hoods up everyday and a dark, thin veil over their eyes to protect themselves, but which still let them see. Bilbo kept trying to see the color of the sky, and watched as much of every sunrise as he could tolerate before the sky became too bright, making his eyes water and hurt to look anymore. He often rode with either Elladan or Elrohir, while Thrain rode with Glorfindel. Over a week after they were released they were resting the horses under a thick copse of trees, and Bilbo finally caught a glimpse of blue sky. It nearly looked foreign to him, but was as welcome to see as an old friend.
It took several more days before they reached Imladris, but when they did, Bilbo didn’t react how the elves had thought he would. The merry sound of the running water tumbling over the cliffs and flowing through the valleys did not soothe him, in fact it and the feel of the ropes over his hands and feet sent him into a full fledged panic that had him falling off the horse, landing hard on his back, and near scrambling over a cliff trying to get away from it, left him lashing out with feet and hands that were still bound towards anyone around him, and even biting whichever hand had dared get too close. In the end it was Thrain who managed to wrangle him into a corner of rock, untie his hands and feet, and make the cloak he was wearing go tight around him. “They wouldn’t give you a blanket, they didn’t want you warm. You’d be cold and wet all night. Are you cold or warm Bilbo? Are you wet or dry? Is it bright or dark? Can you feel the warmth of the sun on your skin? Can you smell the fresh air and the living earth, the flowers and the grass and the trees? We didn’t have any of that.”

It took awhile before Bilbo could come back to himself, and then he just broke down and sobbed and sobbed for ages, great, ugly, terrible sobs that hardly even let him breathe, and almost made him sick from coughing. He couldn’t stop shaking, or really catch his breath, just hard tiny pants, as if he had run a great distance, and couldn’t get enough air.

Thrain kept talking to him, and eventually he walked him down into the valley step by hesitant step, as Bilbo shook and trembled the entire time. Thrain kept reminding Bilbo that he had wanted to show him his all but second home, introduce him to his second family, have him taste a certain tart the kitchens had made, and take him on a tour of the library. As long as they kept Bilbo distracted they could slowly move forward one step at a time, the elves following behind at a distance. In the bottom of the valley, before they could cross the bridge, Thrain set him down next to a great tree, let him touch the soft earth and the rough bark, let him smell a handful of leaves, and run his fingers through a patch of grass. Thrain even told him there was a bridge ahead, and once past it Bilbo would be all but home.

It was well over an hour before they could cross a bridge over a large patch of running water, especially one without any guard rails. In the end the two of them crawled across it slowly, so that there was absolutely no chance of Bilbo falling or slipping off of it and into the water. As much as Bilbo had calmed down, this was nearly more than he could handle, and anything could set him off again right then. Their companions must have thought them strange, but while it was now the twins who were rather wary for the moment, Glorfindel seemed to have come around for some reason, and when Bilbo got stuck halfway across the bridge, unable to move, just clinging tightly to the bridge and tried to remember what breathing was, the gasped pants leaving him lightheaded, the older elf spoke to him gently, and wasn’t letting the twins move onto the bridge until Bilbo got safely across. “You’ve reached the halfway point, I know it seems longer, but you are nearly there. Just a bit further, and you have truly escaped from them, and are free again. They never wanted you to escape, they never thought you could be free again, or that you would ever get this far. Won’t it feel good to prove them wrong?”

A fierce determination seemed to settle in Bilbo’s bones and though it took several more minutes he ground his teeth together hard and kept going across that bridge, one tiny creeping inch at a time, and when he reached the other side he started crying again, but Glorfindel crossed swiftly and knelt in front of him, placing a consoling hand on his shoulder. “You made it, you survived, now you have to learn how to live again. It will take time, and patience, and practice, but your friends are all here to help you when you need it. I’ve been where you are, I know the hardest battle you will face now will be against your own mind, but you were strong enough to survive and escape, you are strong enough for this too, I promise you.”

The twins seemed confused when Glorfindel led them away, obviously wishing to comfort and ask
for answers, but the older elf simply stated “He knows where his room and the infirmary is, leave him alone, he’s a grown hobbit, not a child, he doesn’t need coddling. Warriors need to reflect on battles they have just won, let him enjoy the moment, he’s had precious little enough to enjoy lately as it is. Now, Elladan, let’s get that hand looked at, for all we know the Balrog made Bilbo venomous, and we don’t need you losing your pretty little fingers now do we?”

It was the first of many battles he had to fight with himself, and the first few months were the worst. He could find no rest in the soft mattresses, or the wide open rooms, and definitely not away from Thrain. Thrain’s awareness ebbed away again without Bilbo using the Balrog’s magic to force him into coherency, leaving him surly and disoriented, even among friends. He and Bilbo clung to each other, as survivors might. They could be found nearly every day under their shared bed instead of on top of it, wrapped in blankets and pillows, and woe to the being who disturbed either of them while they were asleep. Finally the ones who helped keep the rooms neat stopped trying to get them to sleep in the bed at all and just created a cozy nest for them in a closet, which the two of them thought was perfect.

The healing wasn’t much easier. Thrain responded well to the elf’s treatments, but Bilbo’s magic had forced his body to heal immediately in order to survive. This meant crooked bones, badly repaired nerves, tendons, ligaments, skin, and veins, scars that went into muscles and impaired movement, and worst of all, his magic still trying to protect him from further injury, which meant repairing the damage was nearly impossible. The only thing which helped even slightly was Bilbo building up a large fire and crawling into it.

Breathing and basking in normal flames it kept him warm, it soothed his pain, and somehow it kindled the small spark he had hidden in his heart even though he couldn’t currently use his magic. He was still trapped by the Balrog’s magic, it had gone fully cold, like lava which had hardened into stone. But it was still magic, magic Bilbo had to learn how to bend and use, or purge and get rid of, and he couldn’t do so until his own magic was strong again.

Needless to say Lord Elrond had nearly panicked when he caught Bilbo building a huge fire and then stepping into it, only to then be shocked that Bilbo wasn’t coming to any harm inside of it. He believed it had been the Balrog, and Bilbo was happy to let him continue thinking that. Bilbo explained about the Balrog’s magic, and what it had done, and how it felt like he was trapped inside of it. Lord Elrond was not a wielder of magic, but Lady Galadriel was, and Lord Elrond asked for her advice. Bilbo hadn’t been expecting her to show up, but she was welcome when she did. She had seemed to see into the very heart of him with one look, and then sent everyone out of the room and beyond hearing and sight range, and they had immediately obeyed. Bilbo had trembled in fear when he saw he was alone with her. He could feel how much power she held, and how directly at odds it was to what dwelled inside of him. She could obliterate the tiny spark in his heart with a single word, he was sure of it.

“Do not be frightened of me Bilbo Baggins, I will not harm you, or the treasure you so fiercely hoard inside of your heart. Why would I steal or destroy the thing you cherish most, or the magic which saved your life, and is even now keeping the dark magic from consuming you? I know the real reason that you are beloved by fire, I won’t take that reason away, I’m here to help you get rid of the other magic that you do not want, and also teach you how to better heal yourself.”

Over the next several weeks she would walk into his mind, where he was being held captive by the Balrog’s power, and used her own power to chip away at the magic holding him prisoner, carefully extracting him from it. Once he was free she pulled him to her side, cast what seemed to be a handful of starlight into the room, and they watched as the solid stone filling the room exploded and broke apart into bits of rubble, leaving a large pile of palm to pebble sized chunks. The pathway it had burned into him she cleansed with a blast of light, leaving the tunnel it had carved, but now it was
growing with stardust instead of thick with the dark lava magic.

“It is important to remember that you cannot wield this magic Bilbo, to wield it is to accept it, and this magic seeks to enslave and control you, tether you, and make you into a pet. However that doesn’t mean you can’t use it. This tunnel it burned into you, that is how you use this magic, the same as you use your dragon’s magic through this other tunnel, but while you wield your dragon’s magic, this one you must use differently. When you wield magic, you control it. You hold it in your hand and tell it what to do, and how to form, and what you want it to manifest as; like fire, or healing, or protection. You then release it through the channel that has been created for it, and it does its best to accommodate to your will. If your will is strong enough, it happens exactly how you wanted it to. If not it can have unexpected results, but they are generally along the same lines as what you had wanted. If your will isn’t strong, then nothing will happen at all.”

“So how do I use something I can’t wield?”

“It’s still magic, and magic has power, great and explosive power. Without direction or a will behind it, it is just a force of nature, like wind, or lightning, or fire, it exists even without being controlled, and as such…” She picked up an extremely tiny shard of the black stone from the floor and tossed the piece through the Balrog’s tunnel. The power surged through Bilbo’s hand in the waking world and he was startled as a great blast of fire came through his fingers, thankfully straight at the fireplace, or he might have burned down Lord Elrond’s house. The blast lasted for several moments before it ended and he stared at the now blackened fireplace in shock. If just that tiny sliver had caused all that... looking at some of the fist sized chunks made him shiver. She smiled at him. “You can aim it, but you cannot control it, and it is finite. Once the stones are gone, there is no more of it, so you can either go somewhere and purge it, or you can use it to your own advantage, whichever you like. Either way, it is your decision.”

She also taught him that the little room he was in in his mind, was the seat of his magic. Ember had apparently created it for him stone by stone long before granting any of his power to Bilbo, and it was where Ember’s magic that he had granted him lived and grew, but now that Bilbo had set the magic directly into his heart, there was no knowing what effect it could have on him. It had given him greater control, but it had also weakened a bit, and seemed directly tied to his physical strength now.

“I can teach you much, but you will have to learn how best to wield it now that you have changed it so fundamentally and it has become a part of you. Now that you know how to get rid of the Balrog’s magic, let us see if we can bolster the rest of the magic inside you that you can wield. Magic becomes easier to wield the more you use it.”

Bilbo spent much of his time in a large stone fire pit that he kept lit with dragon magic and good wood, he also bit by bit fed the smallest pieces and the dust of the Balrog’s magic out of his mind, and into the fireplace so he could be rid of it, the extra heat in the room was welcome.

When the spark inside of him seemed strong enough, Lady Galadriel showed him medical books, showed him how the body was put together, how each bone should look, how each muscle should move, each tendon and vein and ligament should function, then coaxed him to focus his magic on one single spot at a time, and have it reform things into the right order. She had him start small, one finger joint at a time, and also suggested that he could even stay in the flames while he did it so he didn’t tire so easily. Once he had that down, she had him focus on something he couldn’t see so well, his arm. It took him months upon months to make any sort of progress on it, but when he did, she told him that he would be just fine, and to heal well, then took her leave. He had learned a lot from her, but they both knew, he needed to be the one to pull himself together, literally and figuratively.
By the time a year had passed his arm was making significant progress, and most of his fingers were almost entirely straight and had the strength in them again. Lord Elrond treated him for his night terrors and perhaps his magic was healing his mind too, goodness knows he had been doing a fair bit better than Thrain, who spent many of his days wandering aimlessly and barely even speaking, and his nights curled up and shaking. Neither of them could bear to be in darkness these days and kept at least oil lamps burning throughout the night.

Bilbo had steadily dictated out letters to his family from the moment he was clear headed enough to do so, and he continued until his hands were strong enough to hold a pen again and could write them himself. He knew he had a lot more healing to do before he could go anywhere, but the real question remained, that when he had healed, would he go back home to the Shire, or was he actually brave enough to try and continue his quest to find his friend?

Chapter End Notes

So, WHY did this angst fest take me over a year to update? Well, I intentionally wandered into another fandom for awhile, because I have to take the occasional break from Hobbit or it gets obsessive for me, but also, work and life got crazy busy and hectic and also left me unable to write for a long time, because I didn't have any time to focus on it.

I am also not a linear writer. I write a ton of scenes that will let me write them when I first get an idea or when I have time to write, then I go back and fill in the gaps later and revise extensively. This isn't always easy for me to do, this 20k chapter only had about 3k when I started revising it, the rest was all gap filling, and the Balrog and Galadriel were entirely new ideas that showed up out of the blue and are why I didn't post this chapter back in January. The good news is that I already have another 41,900 words of this story written and waiting, the bad is that I have to gap fill before I can post them or they won't make sense to anyone but me. Luckily there isn't too much to fill in the third chapter, so an update shouldn't take as long as it did this time.

I do want to thank everyone for your patience with me, I know lots of updates are more fun, and a year is a mean amount of time to wait, but I do hope I have made it worth it. See you again soon. Luv, Cody.
Bilbo recovers, returns to his travels and of course manages to run into some more trouble along the way.

Chapter Notes

*Rises from the fandom ashes* I LIIIIIIIIIVE!!!!!! *Mad cackle*

Sorry for the longer than usual wait, it was the middle of this chapter that gave me Serious. Issues.

I would like to thank the Finish-A-Fic-February Challenge for somehow managing to kick this plot bunny in the pants so I could finish more of it. Including this chapter, there will be a total of 2 chapters posted over the next couple of weeks, seeing as I am just polishing up the last few loose ends with my beta and putting all of the scenes together.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilbo stayed in Rivendell to recover, even though all of his relatives were more than encouraging him to come home. It nearly qualified as hounding him, with the flood of letters he received from them. He found it hard to tell them what had really happened, beyond ‘I was captured by orcs, the elves helped me escape.’ He knew his relatives, most couldn’t take the truth of what he had been through, and the ones who could… well, he didn’t much care to be pitied and patronized, which he undoubtedly would be if he returned home in anything less than manageable condition. He loved his kin, he did, but right now, they would be overwhelming when he had such a tenuous hold on his sanity, and some days he still dropped the thread entirely. As much as he longed to see the green and rolling hills of the Shire again, Bilbo knew that if he went back there right now, his fears would get the better of him, he wouldn’t have the courage or the strength to leave it on his own again. So he decided to stay where he was, at least until he was fully healed, physically if not mentally, though both would be welcome.

He might have been healing far better than he had been, but there were still days and weeks that he lapsed into a fog, into complete despair, or a deep depression. A few times after a nightmare he had slipped back into the raging and near mindless slave of the balrog for a bit, and that had terrified him, because he didn’t feel like he was the slightest bit in control of himself. There were still bits of the balrog in his mind, not just in his magic, and he was so angry about it he was determined to purge the beast entirely no matter what it took. However, wanting something and making it happen were two different things entirely. Every time he conquered one demon, sometimes there seemed to be two bigger ones waiting right behind it, and sometimes the ones he thought he had already felled, still managed to take another stab at him, making him feel like he had made no progress whatsoever. It was very frustrating.
Magic might be easier to wield the more you practiced using it, but his dragon magic was still finite and rather weakened at the moment. Ember’s power had once filled the entire cottage sized room which was the seat of his magic, like the huge piles of dust and broken chunks of the Balrogs’ dark and foul magic now did, but that was no longer the case. After everything that the dragon’s magic had done to keep him alive over the past several years, the orcs hadn’t just weakened it, they had used it up. The little spark inside his heart was all he had left. He couldn’t kindle it, he wasn’t a Dragon. There were only two ways to replace it, get more from a dragon, preferably his dragon, or replenish it with magic from the hoard, and the fact he was nowhere near either one, meant that healing, and especially magical use, was still a very slow process.

He had debated going to some remote place and purging every mote of the dark magic that now dwelled inside of himself, it would certainly be cathartic, and oh how much of the world could he burn until it would all be gone? But loathe as Bilbo was to admit it, the tiny spark of Ember’s magic that he still possessed was not enough to help him survive anymore, and the wide world was a far more dangerous place than Bilbo had ever thought it was. If he was going to eventually continue his journey, he needed every advantage, every trick that could possibly help him to survive, and right now that meant the dark fire magic of the balrog, even though he hated it. His enemies would not be expecting him to be able to have anything of the sort, and the fact he could change it to dragon’s fire within moments of creating it was a great comfort to him. The only full advantage of it was that he no longer needed a pre-existing spark, he could create his own fire now, which would undoubtedly prove useful.

So he practiced with it, he learned how to use the balrog’s magic without actually wielding it. Though he couldn’t control it, he could transform it, until with a single thought, the balrog fire stopped being balrog fire and became dragon’s flame barely after leaving his hand if he wanted it to. There were differences between the two types of fire magic and how they responded as well. The balrog’s magic was just a pure blast of raw fire. It was powerful, and could be shot out for over twenty feet if Bilbo envisioned throwing the chunk of it through its channel hard enough, instead of just flicking it out. If he blew balrog dust through the channel, the fire could be slight enough that it only surrounded his hands. He then could use his hands to heat the tea kettle or cook a pot of soup, much to Glorfindel’s slight disapproval, who was all for Bilbo purging the lot of the dark power and being done with it for good.

Being able to change the raw fire to dragon’s fire made all the difference to Bilbo though, and why he eventually decided to keep it. Dragon’s fire he knew like breathing. Unlike Balrog magic, he could wield dragon’s fire. He could shape it to his will, he could dance with it, form it into shapes or give it direction. It had a will and an intent behind it and he could even make it change consistencies. He could make it into a shower of sparks, a steady stream pf flame, or a giant all engulfing blast. It could surround him like a shield, or a fiery whirlpool. He could make it pour like a liquid, or cling and creep like lava. Once it became dragon’s fire there was nothing he couldn’t do with it, and changing the flames to dragon’s fire, he eventually noticed, had absolutely no draw on the spark of his dragon magic, unlike any other time he used magic. It wasn’t too much of a surprise really, Ember had tempered him with fire and magic long before he had granted Bilbo the dragon’s blood which had given him the other abilities. He had the feeling that making any fire into dragon’s fire was what the very stones of the seat of his magic were made of. It might very well be the one power he couldn’t lose.

Once his hands and arm had healed as much as he could manage them, Bilbo began re-learning how to hold a weapon again. Five years of inactivity and torture, and another year and a half of healing, had severely atrophied his skills. He started by carrying thick wooden dowels everywhere, in order to walk himself through the basic movements again. When he got used to that, he began adding strips
of clay around the dowel and securing it with oil cloth, in order to get himself used to constantly holding the weight of a sword again, and began going through the basic movements and steps that had once been muscle memory. Once he felt secure in the weight of a sword, and felt confident that he could at least keep hold of a weapon for awhile, he began seeking out someone willing to spar with him and reteach him how to use the weapons.

While the twins were a bit hesitant to begin practicing with Bilbo again after their third time of trying, since they had learned that if they landed a blow they very well could set him off into a raging fire attack, as Elrohir’s singed eyebrows could now attest to, Glorfindel, surprisingly, had no such reservations. Day after day Bilbo sparred with the elf that was more than twice his size until he was exhausted and aching (which was far sooner than he was happy admitting to anyone). Even though Glorfindel was barely even toying with him, it was letting Bilbo remember the movements and the footwork, the holds and the steps, things he had once known how to do even half asleep and injured. Glorfindel was gentle with his corrections, his strikes hardly even taps, but even those could set Bilbo off on a bad day. And on the bad days, was when Glorfindel was the most insistent that they practice, and where he didn’t hold back as much, determined to make Bilbo work through the dark places his mind had wandered in order to help him regain control.

When Bilbo got angry or lashed out is when Glorfindel got serious, landing harder blows, jeering at him, telling him to use his anger and hatred, not let it bottle up inside or it would eventually control him. Many is the time the elf narrowly dodged a stream of balrog flames loosed in his general direction, only to attack immediately afterwards until Bilbo had worked through the place his mind had gone and was able to focus again even if it was just out of sheer stubbornness. It was a strange way to go about it, but through Glorfindel, he was able to learn some form of control.

Instead of sparring with him, the twins worked with him on remembering his metal craft, the detail work aiding him in recovering some dexterity in his stiff and scarred hands. He often became frustrated with how slow his fingers moved with how quickly his mind remembered, and despised everything he produced. Elladan called it anger work, and told him it didn’t matter how it looked. The elf had him look at it in a different way, encouraged him to create something infused with every ounce of his anger and bad feelings, make it as ugly and twisted and detailed as possible, something that at the end of the day he could happily enjoy destroying by throwing it into a smelting pot. Surprisingly it worked for him. Bilbo’s fingers relearned wire and metal work through anger and stubbornness, and the horrific looking results at the end of the day was tossed into the smelting pot with glee so he could remake the metal into wire, which also aided him in re-honing his skills.

Once he got some semi-steady dexterity back, Bilbo and Arwen worked on building up his strength and endurance. She took him to the archery range and had him practice with the bow in both hands, not just his dominant one. He was nearly ashamed of himself for how low of a draw weight he had to start out with, his arms shaking by the time he had fired three shots. He practiced drawing and holding on practice arrows with blunted tips, and took up his slingshot again. Bilbo was determined to get back up to where he had been before. His determination was based upon the singular goal of reclaiming back every last thing the orcs and balrog had robbed him of.

He was nearly overjoyed when he found his fingers nimble enough to resume their old pastimes of spinning, knitting, and crocheting together at night. Arwen even taught him the new craft she had taken up of loom knitting, which Bilbo took to like a duck to water. He sat near the fire most nights, letting the warmth soothe his aches and pains. Thrain was always near to hand, carding the wool for them, or holding his skeins while Bilbo spun, or even made yarn balls for the two of them since he had no interest or skill in fiber crafts. On good days Thrain might read aloud for awhile if the conversation lagged, and on particularly good days Thrain would take up a bit of wood and start
carving near the fireplace, brushing the shavings into the flames, occasionally even singing if he felt up for it.

Bilbo had long since requested copies from his relatives of all of the hobbit songs he had long since forgotten now, and took to singing a few of them whenever the mood struck. Arwen would often sing and tell stories while she worked on a knitting or sewing project, or on rare occasions, would knot lace. Estel would often come in and spend his time on one of the couches and ‘read’ a book as an excuse to spend time with them, though Bilbo suspected the young ranger was mostly interested in spending time with Arwen. He was welcome all the same, and after a while, instead of pretending to read a book, he would tend to his gear, repair tools, kit, and patch up his clothes. If he was done with that he would work on decorative leather tooling. It felt like family and home to Bilbo, and that was a very precious thing to him these days.

From Estel and the twins, Bilbo learned there were multiple ways to make things like your shirt, waistcoat, jacket, and cloak discreetly hide and carry just about everything one would need on a journey, so that if you ever became the target of robbers, it was highly unlikely they would get even a fraction of what you had on you, and if you lost your pack you still had all of your essentials with you, so it wouldn’t matter as much. Estel even helped Bilbo modify his own clothes to do the same and even taught him how to sew a cloak that could not only be turned reversed to become an oilkissn, but was also able to be turned into a tent thanks to a few ingenious tucks, folds, and ties that hid all the extra fabric. They also made a thick, braided decorative trim around the whole thing which was actually made of elvish rope if you looked closely, and could be cut away and used quite quickly if needed. He did the same with the hood’s drawstring and even made a good woven belt of it, since one never knew when good elvish rope would come in handy. When Estel told him that he really should get boots, because leaving your feet vulnerable was a warrior’s folly, Bilbo actually listened and had two pairs of boots commissioned with thick rugged soles, one of them lined with fur for cold weather, and both proofed against water. He also commissioned a pair of shoes, so he could start getting used to wearing things on his feet. His relations would have been horrified, but he wasn’t willing to leave himself vulnerable in any way. He might have looked absolutely ridiculous for awhile as he learned to walk, run, jump, and then climb in shoes, and tripped over his own feet quite often, but he got the hang of it eventually.

Over time Bilbo painstakingly relearned every weapon he had once known like breathing, and his fingers gradually regained their former dexterity and nimbleness, and when they did, he started addressing a problem that only he could fix. He was a fire wielder, and while he himself was fireproof, his friends and allies were not, and his outbursts when he lost control were both deadly and unpredictable. The people closest to him needed to be protected from him. He could have probably made them into treasures if he took long enough, tempered each person slowly in dragon’s fire and hope that it would stick like it had with him. However he didn’t have that sort of time or that amount of magic readily available to him unless he returned to the Shire, which he still wasn’t prepared for, or he had to try and find another dragon willing to share its magic, which was unlikely.

He would also have to explain how he could do such things, it couldn’t all be explained away as an after effect of the balrog. So he decided to do what he could, and try to make a charm which would make the wearer alone fireproof. If he remembered all of the things Ember had told him about making things into treasures and the process for it, it should work. He had been so curious after Ember had made him immune to fire, that he had asked about a thousand questions, and his dragon had happily answered each one. Bilbo was quite glad now that he had. With how little dragon’s magic he had left, making such a charm would undoubtedly tire him, but he wouldn’t have to worry about accidentally killing his friends either, which was the far more important thing, and would make it worth the exhaustion.
Luckily any magic he did use didn’t actually leave him, it was more like extending what was already there to recognize something else as him or itself, and therefore, do not destroy or consume it, simply ignore it and move on. It was rather like letting a new puppy sniff and taste and feel something new, then train it to leave it alone. Eventually it just gets used to it. He had a lot of failures. Trial and error was a constant companion for many months as he worked out exactly what could retain the imprint of the magic, (metal and certain types of stone worked best) and then try to work out how it would recognize and only work on specific individuals. The latter proved much MUCH harder to manage, he needed either a piece of the person to meld with the charm, or a blood promise, neither of which would be easy to manage. So for now Bilbo settled on creating something that would protect just the wearer from fire, he could find a way to make it so the charms couldn’t be stolen or used against the ones he intended them for later on. He tested the charms on a dead tree that he found in the woods first, just in case. A good thing too, he would have felt pity if the tree had still been alive with how often the thing was scorched while he was experimenting.

Once he got the general concept down he began working on making sure it wasn’t just keyed to his fire, but all fire, which took a bit more working. His efforts evolved slowly, until he finally had it perfected in the form of a small disk that could be worn on a necklace, bracelet, or even as an earring, which was made out of either brass, bronze, copper, or iron, and engraved onto it was the shape of the mark Ember had left on his chest when he had been claimed, as a holding sigil for the magic. He made the item a treasure first so that it couldn’t be destroyed without his express permission, and then keyed it so that whatever the charm was on, made the wearer entirely fireproof from dragon’s flame, balrog fire, and even a regular fire.

Once he had it working well on the poor scorched tree, he moved up to animal carcasses that were due to be cooked for dinner anyway, and then finally, once he was absolutely certain, he tried it on one of the horses in the stables, whose eyes were covered so that it wouldn’t startle or panic at the flames. It worked perfectly. Then and only then did he ask Glorfindel to put one on, and then place his hand in the fire. The elf looked at him like he was mad, but by then they had enough trust between them that the elf did as bid, and as he was marveling at the fact the flames weren’t harming him, Bilbo grabbed a chunk of Balrog flame and threw it at his back before he had a chance to react. Glorfindel was too anticipatory of his movements these days to let the flames hit him if he saw it coming, so it had to be by surprise. Sure enough, the blast caught Glorfindel smack between the shoulder blades, and as soon as it had dispersed there wasn’t as much as a hair singed on his gloriously golden head. Glorfindel put him through his paces for it, but afterwards he helped Bilbo distribute the charms to Thrain, Elrond, Elladan, Elrohir, Arwen, Estel, Lindir, and a few of the other elves of Lord Elrond’s household that he had become quite fond of, or that he saw often. Bilbo put a few around the library as well, and even sent two off to Lady Galadriel for her and her husband to wear, with a letter explaining what it was for.

Now that he knew that his friends were safe, he relaxed greatly and threw himself wholeheartedly into training. Now it didn’t matter if he lost control for a moment, though he also had to relearn how to pull it back and extinguish it with his will as well. That took some practice.

Bilbo’s water phobia did not lessen, he avoided anything deep or running, avoided anything that had a bridge attached to it at all costs, and bathed only with a single bucket twice a month while locked up alone in his room, so that no one could come behind him and force his head into it. Not that he thought that someone would, it just was one of the ways the phobia manifested itself, and he couldn’t get away from the thought. Otherwise he took daily purifying fire baths to get rid of anything else and to keep from smelling. It wasn’t ideal, and even though he kept promising himself
it was something he was going to work on, there always seemed to be something else to work on first.

Thrain, aside from a rather prominent limp he had developed from a badly set and healed bone about halfway through their capture, physically, he healed just fine, dwarves are resilient like that. But mentally, once Bilbo’s magical interference wore off, he had his days worse than Bilbo ever did. It wasn’t just the orcs, their tortures, the methodical slaughtering of his kin, and the balrog that haunted him. Though those things were a good portion of it, it was the battle that had happened before Bilbo had been captured that did the most lasting damage to the dwarf’s mind. It was the watching of his father being beheaded and so many of his people lost. Dwarves he had known his whole life, friends, kin, his own youngest son, he had watched them all die horrible deaths. It was the possibility of his entire family now dead and he the lone survivor, and therefore in charge of his people, and at the same time knowing he was not up to the task. This was only compounded by not knowing what had happened to his other son and his daughter, her two sons, his wife, or his multitude of cousins. Grief and the unknown was a far more vicious foe than pain would ever prove to be.

Lord Elrond offered to send out messengers, but Thrain said he wasn’t ready to know the truth yet. Not until he was a bit more recovered, a bit less scared, in case someone was alive. To allow his heart to hope, only to give it nothing but more grief, he didn’t think he could bear it. Lord Elrond, who was ever the gracious host, agreed to Thrain’s request.

Bilbo and Thrain were still inseparable. On the good days Thrain taught him the dwarven way of fighting, and gave him a far greater challenge, being nearest to Bilbo’s own height, but far outpacing him in skill. The bad days still easily outnumbered the good for Thrain, and Bilbo refused to use more magic on Thrain’s mind when he really didn’t know how to fix it, no more than he could fix his own. Their demons were their own to work through, and in many ways, they had to do so on their own.

As long as the five years in the hands of orcs had dragged on, the three years since their rescue seemed to all but fly by, prolonged healing and all. Bilbo and Thrain still shared one room, one bed, on bad days one closet, though they were using the bed far more often these days. At mealtimes they even tended to share a plate just so Thrain could press closer to him. It was comfortable and familiar to have a friend so close to hand, one who truly understood him, and Bilbo was loathe to give it up. But with every skill he regained, every day and week and month he had gotten better, the urge to leave grew stronger. Part of him thought the wanderlust had gotten into his blood now, the rest of himself knew that he couldn't really rest until he had his Dragon back, and he couldn't do that in Rivendell.

Bilbo had once loved Rivendell, and still did, but not as much as he once had. It didn’t afford him the kind of peace it used to thanks to his new phobia, and his need to seek out his dragon kept growing ever stronger.

He hadn’t even realized that he was making preparations to leave, until he noticed that his bags were packed, his new clothes were set with tools, food, and even a couple of weapons, all tucked away and hidden inside. His travelling armor of padded cloth, leather, and scale mail meticulously tended and oiled.

Another clue was that he was writing a letter to each of his kin telling them that he was hale and sound and was leaving Rivendell to continue his journey, and would be in touch when he could. He even made sure Thrain was having a good day when he explained several times that he would be
heading out to find his dragon. He felt safe about telling him, since when the balrog had taken him, he had mentioned Ember to the dwarf, and Thrain had seemed to have no problem of knowing who that was. He must have told him about his dragon at some point, and obviously his friend had taken it better than he had thought he would.

Thrain nodded in understanding and for some reason reached into his inner coat pocket for a moment, then handed over a large folded map and a key Bilbo had seen Thrain fiddle with before when they were in Moria. The left upper corner of the map was a detail of Erebor and the paths one could take to it, as well as townships, landmarks, and rivers. The rest was of the interior, showing all the important paths, and where the treasury would be. The paper was of Lord Elrond’s stock, and must have taken the dwarf ages to make if he only worked on it on his steady days.

“It’s a map, of Erebor, as good as I can remember it anyway. You said you had been having trouble finding the dwarven cities, well there it is. Easiest one to find in all of Middle Earth. There had been another one, but my father gave it to Gandalf, and who knows when he might show up again. There’s a hidden door, to the upper halls, up the stairs on the side of one of the statues and in this little nook on a bit of flat space. It will be invisible, but it is there, shows up during one of the moons, can’t remember which one, but if anyone is clever enough to find it, it’s you, that’s why I marked it. The front gates had been all but destroyed, even though the dwarves swore that they sealed them, I’m not sure how they could have, they were nearly ripped in twain. So maybe you could find a way in that way.”

“Thank you Thrain.”

“You are my friend, and I want to help you. When you get your dragon back, I hope you will let me meet him, properly this time.”

“Of course. Thank you Thrain, truly.”

Thrain merely nodded and Bilbo kissed his brow and embraced his friend before they settled in for the night. He was ready to leave two days later. He woke up extremely early, tidied his room and left a note for Lord Elrond informing him that he had decided to continue his journey, thanking them for their extended hospitality and patience, that he was extremely grateful for everything, but was actually rather terrible at goodbyes and couldn’t face doing so. With that set on Lord Elrond’s chair where he was certain to find it, and a satchel stuffed with travelling food, Bilbo made his way to the stables.

Bilbo startled when he opened the door only to find Glorfindel, Elladan, Elrohir, and Estel already inside, tacking up their horses. Bilbo was about to turn around and bolt, when Glorfindel spoke.

“You might as well come in Bilbo, Marigold is already groomed and saddled, and I checked her hooves myself. Lord Elrond has known for a week that you were going to try and sneak away. And you’re a fool if you think we’re going to let you go on alone after what happened the last time.”

“You don’t ALL need to come! I don’t even really know where I’m going!” Bilbo protested. He was not about to lead four of the greatest hunters in middle earth anywhere near his dragon when he hadn’t even explained about Ember to them in the first place!

“I’ve been on two journeys with you now where that was the case, and I don’t mind going on another in the slightest.” Estel said with a pointed look. “You’re our family Bilbo, and we care about you. Our hearts would break if something happened to you.”
Bilbo looked down at the ground. “Don’t you think it’s the same for me, for all of you? After what I watched happen to Dungrim and Holber, and never knowing what happened to Filus, who we thought had gotten away, when I had been the one to ask to go to Moria in the first place… I-I just could never bear to see the same thing happen to any of you. I couldn’t live with myself if anything happened to you because of me. Please don’t ask me to. I’d rather stay than to ever put any of you in danger like that.”

Elladan and Elrohir led their horses out, tacked and bridled. “We’ll be in danger anyways Bilbo. It’s either going with you, or we go off into the wilds hunting orcs, goblins, trolls, and any other fell things we can find.” Elladan said.

Elrohir nodded. “Wouldn’t you rather the company and the protection, instead of wondering and worrying about us as you tend to do?”

“You aren’t being fair.” Bilbo grumbled. And the boys didn’t deny it, the imps, merely smiled at him.

“As if you were being fair trying to dissuade us. You would rather have our company than not, and you know it.” Glorfindel said. “Besides, how else are you going to improve your sparring? And your archery is still weak, do you want to engage every enemy in close combat without aide or backup, or were you really planning to rely on a power that you know you cannot trust?”

Bilbo knew he was outmaneuvered and finally agreed to his self appointed guards “I’m telling your father how you bullied me.” He tried in desperation.

The twins laughed. “Good! Then he can’t be cross at us, since it was his idea!” Elladan laughed, and led the other two horses who were carrying their gear out.

Estel chuckled and held Marigold steady as Bilbo mounted. “So Bilbo, where to this time? Dwarves, or Dragons?”

“Dragons. Now that I’m immune to fire, I’ve decided that I’m going to raise one from infancy and train it to burn holes in the seat of all of your pants and trousers, steal all of your shiny things, and chew on your boots. It’s going to be my best friend, since the lot of you are ganging up on me.”

Estel just laughed and announced that they had best stick to dwarves then, just to be safe. Bilbo smirked, and then they were heading North out of the valley and through the Misties on paths that only an elf or one particular Ranger would know existed. Over the next few months they found several small dwarven settlements, nothing very large or grand, most hadn’t ever left these places, and had no information of the outside world whatsoever. There was the occasional small group of mountain men making their way through the mountains or on trade routes. Thrice they were besieged by bandits, but the bandits had no idea the kind of fight they were in for and fell quickly and easily to their united front, moving together seamlessly and as a single well trained unit that covered each other’s weaknesses.

Only once was there a very close call of one of the bandits getting a lucky hit on Estel, but before the thief could land the fatal stroke Bilbo sent a stream of flames arching into the bandit, not needing to be careful with Estel, who was protected. Unlike regular fire which either lit or blew past immediately, dragon’s fire could also be thick and nearly sticky, like a liquid if Bilbo was feeling particularly vicious and lethal. Those flames clung to whatever they touched, were hard to extinguish, and slow to die. Estel turned away from the gruesome and painful death. The one remaining bandit made to flee, but Bilbo struck him too, not giving a chance for anyone to escape
their fate who intended them harm and might be able to return with more help.

Estel was quiet that night and sat at a distance from Bilbo, as if wary of him, and Bilbo left him to his thoughts. He was able to speak when he was ready. It was several days before Estel managed to figure out the root of what was bothering him.

“Those were not honorable kills.” The Ranger mentioned quietly while the two of them tended the horses and the elves set up camp.

“Neither was what they were wanting to do to us.” Bilbo stated clearly without a hint of remorse.

“He was running away.” The Ranger defended stubbornly, but with very little will behind it.

“And if they had others they could have contacted, greater numbers to return with in the night to ambush us with, would you really be willing to risk our kinsman’s lives on that chance? I’m not. I’ve seen too much of the dark places in monster’s hearts to show them any mercy or pity. I think what really disturbs you Estel is that it was me who landed the blow, and that I used an unpredictable dark power to do it.”

“Bilbo-”

“No, let me finish. You still remember what I was like before, you know how much I’ve changed, and how far that is from the way I had originally started out. How hard I have grown concerns you. You’re worried that I will fall to darkness, for you know well the weakness of men’s hearts to stand against it. I won’t say it will never happen, because I don’t know the future, but I don’t think it will as long as the light in my heart stays kindled. As long as I remember how good and bright life can be when surrounded by love, darkness has no room to grow. There’s still Hope in me Estel, you don’t need to worry that I am lost to it just yet. Yes, I am changed greatly. I may change even more yet, but I am still Bilbo Baggins, and as long as that remains truth, that is no bad thing to be.”

Estel took a minute but then nodded afterwards and let the matter drop.

The group made the way ever more northward along the western ridge of the Misties, through the Ettenmoors and then towards Carn Dum. They met up with plenty of orcs, and cut a large swath through their numbers with both sword and flame. But no matter how many orcs they killed, it was not doing anything to help ease that nervous energy insisting he needed to go off and find his Ember. They crossed the ridge and began heading south along the eastern slopes this time, and while they found more dwarves, and Bilbo collected more stories, he found out nothing more about dragons, and he knew he wouldn’t as long as they were all together, for an elf’s hearing was far too keen, and he was with three elves. Three of the greatest elven hunters known, and a Dunedain Ranger who was a rather deft hand at it as well.

But Bilbo’s restlessness wouldn’t ease up. He found himself wandering off on his own after they would set up camp, not trying to escape or anything, he just needed some time to himself. He was debating trying to leave on his own, but he couldn’t sneak away from the group, and he wouldn’t go so far as to try and do something devious like drug their food so he could slip away, they were his friends, and he wouldn’t leave them unprotected just so he could go off on his own. He even debated with himself for long hours about just telling them the truth about Ember and letting the dice fall as they may, but he was terrified about doing so for nameless reasons he couldn’t even understand. Not even Lord Elrond knew, or maybe he suspected something and had just never said anything, Bilbo had no way of knowing. But historically Elves and Dragons did NOT have any good relations between them. Either way the urge to leave just kept growing, and it was true, that he was far safer
with them than not. He just wished that he wasn’t so torn. If he could tell them honestly and have them accept it and continue with him, that would be ideal, however it was the most unlikely reaction as well.

Bilbo had thought that he was being rather subtle about his little bouts of personal solitude, but no one should ever doubt the watchfulness of an elf. One night he had gotten lost in thought and stayed out a little longer than he had meant to as he once more tried to figure out how to truly continue his search without feeling like he would be betraying or disappointing those he was closest with. As he stared at the moon and kept hoping that it would provide him with some kind of an answer, he all but missed Glorfindel’s approach until the elf sat beside him with a bowl of rich and delicious smelling rabbit stew, a large mug of water, and a whole triangle of lembas bread. Glorfindel knew well the appetites of hobbits. Unfortunately Bilbo wasn’t very hungry. He managed a few bites of the stew while it was still hot, and sipped on the water, but handed the lembas back, knowing he didn’t have the stomach for it at the moment. He slowly picked at the remainder of his bowl, in hopes that he could convince his belly that he really did want it, but the heavy, melancholy feeling in his heart stole away his appetite.

“It must be a dark thought indeed that would keep a hobbit from his food. We cannot ease your troubles if you do not tell them to us Bilbo.”

Bilbo was quite tired of making excuses. He was tired of hiding and deflecting, honestly he was utterly sick of the whole business. “I have a secret, Glorfindel, a great, wonderful, and terrifying secret. I have never told it to anyone outside of the Shire, and while the people of the Shire may know parts of it, or most of it, only one or two others know the full truth, but it is something I fear that no one in the outside world would understand. I may have told Thrain, I don’t remember, but the Lady Galadriel I think has come the closest to knowing and understanding my secret. I didn’t tell her, but she knew the inner truth anyway when she looked into my soul and helped me after the Balrog. And yet, I still fear that no one would ever believe me, or if they did, they would come to hate or fear me, or seek to destroy my secret, thinking that I am mad or deceived, or because they simply want it for themselves. So I can’t tell anyone, even those I love most in this world. It was once such a happy secret, but now it has become weighted and filled with sorrow the longer my search goes on without finding what I am looking for, and it leaves me grasping at fading memories which were once as bright as the dawn not so long ago. I knew what pure and perfect happiness was at one point, I felt it every single day, I was filled with it to the very brim of my being. Moria took so much from me Glorfindel, so much, but killing orcs and goblins isn’t going to help me get any of it back.”

“I may not have known you before your ordeal, but I have gotten glimpses of the person you used to be, Bilbo Baggins, and that person wouldn’t want to worry his friends. They miss you Bilbo, they miss your warm and easy laughter, and your companionship, and your trust in them. I know why you are guarded, but if you cannot trust even your friends and kin, it is a lonely path to try and walk alone, and you will never know if they can understand and accept your secret if you don’t even try.”

“Very well. I will tell you part of it, and if you can’t accept it, or if it causes fear to grow in your heart for me or towards me, then you have to let me go. You must let me continue on my journey alone and unaccompanied, without protest, and you will stop the others from pursuing or following after me. Do we have a deal?”

“That is a strange request. This has something to do with why you are always seeking out stories about dwarves and dragons doesn’t it?”

“Your word Glorfindel, or I’ll not speak another.”
“You have my word, Bilbo. If I cannot handle your secret I will let you go off on your own without letting the others stop or follow you. And what if I can accept your secret?”

“Then… then I will tell you the whole of it, you and the others, and perhaps, I will have better luck with my quest than I have been having so far.”

“Very well.”

Bilbo sat there a moment, not really knowing how exactly to word it without just blurting everything out. He knew Glorfindel’s legend, the fall of Gondolin, had read about it in Lord Elrond’s library. He could think of no living elf who would have more cause to hate any beast of flame, let alone a dragon.

“My fire-, well yes, I suppose that is as good a place to start as any. You’ve distrusted it ever since you found out about it. You think it is a terrible evil that should be destroyed and disposed of as fast as possible, right?”

“Power that dark can only destroy, Bilbo, I’ve seen it.” Glorfindel said severely, his brows knitted tight. It was an old disagreement between them by now.

“I know, and that would be true, if I was wielding it as the Balrog probably intended. You see it as me picking up the weapon of the enemy and trying to use it for my own gains, when I am not. I either pick up the Balrog’s weapon and throw it whole and sundry at the bad guy, or I reforge it into something I can use, something that would never consider harming me. My fire is not new Glorfindel, the balrog didn’t give me the immunity to being burned, or the ability to control flames. I have had those since I was a lad. All it gave me was the raw fire so that I didn’t need an existing spark or source to use it. The balrog carved a new channel into the seat of my magic and dumped his power into me, trying to control me with it, but my first magic fought it back. I have two fires, not one. The first I can wield without any issue or harm to me, whereas the second, Lady Galadriel taught me how to use it without wielding it. My first flame is what is protecting you from being burned by me or any flame, because I convinced it that any amulet was actually a part of myself. It was why the balrog saved me in the first place, because I was begging the fire for help. I was dying, Glorfindel, truly dying, and it was the only option nearby that had enough fire that could heal me.”

“And where did this ‘first fire’ of yours come from Bilbo?”

“It’s dragon’s fire, and there is only one way to obtain and wield a dragons’ fire, it has to be willingly given to you as a gift. You can’t steal it, or force it to be handed over. It can only ever be offered, and then accepted if it is to survive. ‘No flame will ever dare burn you, not even the dark fire in the south-east would dare. You are the friend of fire, beloved by it. You are forged of my flames, so there is nothing left inside of you to burn.’ That was the promise I was given out of purest love and care to me before I understood even a fraction of what it meant.”

“How did a Hobbit of the Shire come to know a dragon, especially well enough to survive the experience and be granted a gift?”

Glorfindel was curious, if wary, and Bilbo decided to go ahead and just tell Glorfindel the whole story. They were there well past first watch and halfway through the second when Bilbo finally got it all out. The elf had never interrupted or raised a single question. When Bilbo finally stopped speaking, Glorfindel just sat there quietly. He felt worlds lighter and yet had a tight knot in his belly at the same time.
“That is an unimaginable burden for you to carry Bilbo. And while your story doesn’t make me wish to pull away from you in any way, it has given me a lot to think on. However, I wouldn’t tell the others if I were you. Elladan and Elrohir particularly would not grant any clemency where a ‘dark creature’ is concerned. I am surprised that you confided in me, knowing my own history as you do.”

Bilbo breathed out in relief. “I figured if there was one person able to believe me, it would be someone who has been granted wisdom, life, and power from the Valar and literally remade. If that is possible, why not finding a dragon that is able to share friendship and love? But now you know why we kept it to ourselves. I don’t know if it is every dragon that can be made to love and live in harmony with others. I don’t know, that’s beyond my ken. But one dragon, MY dragon, he is filled with love and compassion, and he protects the ones he cares for. He’s worth everything in the world to me, and I won’t stop searching until I get him back.”

Glorfindel chuckled. “I know you well enough to know that is very true of you Bilbo. If there is one thing you are, it is persistent and stubborn. As much as I would like to go with you and help you to save your friend, I am afraid I must allow you to go on alone and prevent the others from following you instead. If we came along, it would not end well. I will begin to sway their minds if I can, or at least lead them away from tracking you. If I were you I would start in the Erid Mithrim and the Withered Heath, and then head south and search the Erid Nimrais which serve as the border between Rohan and Gondor. Most of the fire drakes I have known nested in the north, while the cold drakes nested more in the south. Please take great care Bilbo, the visions I have had of you were fraught with dangers and perils, and you have suffered enough already. I do not want your death on my hands by allowing you to go off on your own, so please, watch yourself. Be extra sneaky and clever, and if any fell thing gets within your striking range, promise me that you will burn it with merciless fury.”

“I promise Glorfindel, and thank you.”

Glorfindel placed a huge, warm, and comforting hand on Bilbo’s shoulder for a moment after he gracefully stood, then walked back to camp without reply. It was as close to a farewell as Bilbo was going to get from the elf. The elf was obviously uncomfortable with Bilbo’s decision, but at least he wouldn’t try and hold Bilbo back. When Bilbo finally got the gumption to walk back towards the fire himself, Bilbo found his travel pack not only packed with his bedroll securely on top, but it looked fuller and felt suspiciously heavier than earlier. Marigold was tacked and saddled, with curiously full saddle bags as well, and even a bundle of firewood they had gathered. She was also tied up several yards away from the others who were all soundly asleep, and it didn’t seem as though Glorfindel had any intention of waking one of them up to take watch any time soon. The meaning was clear; ‘Escaping now is your best bet. If you are here by morning I cannot stop them.”

Today had been a rest day, so Bilbo didn’t feel too badly about making Marigold walk gently away under the light of the brilliant full moon that nearly made the smooth mountain peaks shine as if in muted daylight. They weren’t on a well worn path, it was all flat sheets of stone, gravel, scrub brush, scattered conifers, and large rocks for the most part, very hard to track anything over. Keeping his pace to the pony’s steps meant that it didn’t sound like an escape attempt, or like riding was occurring at all.

He was several miles away by daybreak, following the southern star, and not a trail in sight. It was more than mid afternoon when he found the sheltered nook of rock and its overhang, big enough for him and Marigold to rest in for the day. The others might be pursuing, but they would not stop him, he was determined.
What Bilbo was not aware of, was that Glorfindel was not the only one who had heard his tale that night. Estel had also heard it, having woken up wondering why he had not been roused for second watch. He had arrived just as Bilbo was telling how Ember had lived in the garden shed until the whole town had built him a huge smial of his own, and how many of Bilbo’s happiest memories had been curling up in it with his dragon. He listened to the entire rest of the tale, finally knowing and understanding the thing which drove Bilbo to seek out dragons without a true destination in mind. And the fact they didn’t know, meant they were unintentionally hindering him from his goal.

Glorfindel was right about the twins, but before Glorfindel stood, Estel turned around and went back to the camp. He hurriedly packed Bilbo’s saddle bags with food and supplies. Hobbits ate far more frequently than elves needed to, and he wanted to make sure that his friend wouldn’t go hungry. Estel then hurriedly went back to his bedroll and feigned sleep. Glorfindel of course wasn’t fooled for a minute, if the amused snort he heard when he went to pick up Bilbo’s saddlebags was any indication. He heard Glorfindel put things in Bilbo’s pack and roll up his bedroll before leaving the fire and heading to the ponies. Glorfindel either didn’t come back, or ignored Bilbo’s presence when he returned, and then left moments later. In the morning, he’d follow Glorfindel’s lead, and do his best to make sure that the other two did not hunt down their friend.

For weeks Bilbo traveled south along unfamiliar paths, until he was forced to descend the mountains towards a settlement in order to resupply. The path was rocky and the going was slow, especially with a pony along. What he hadn’t been expecting was to be walking beside Marigold one day, and suddenly have the rock which had seemed steady beneath his foot, give out and just drop out from under him. He had tumbled down right after the rock, and fell into a steep canyon without even the chance to catch himself or halt the fall.

The fall should have killed him, Bilbo was honestly shocked that it hadn’t. It was over a hundred foot drop. But he had slid and tumbled down the steep slope of the canyon wall for most of the way. He would count his blessings that he was no more than achingly bruised with a sprained wrist that thankfully was not severe enough to trigger his dragon magic to try and heal him. However he was now also trapped down there in the ravine, the sides were either too steep or too loose to climb them, so he had to wander through the narrow canyon in hopes of finding a way out. By the fifth day of being trapped down there, he had run out of water and hadn’t come across another fresh source. His food was holding steady, but without water it was very hard to make himself eat, since it only made him thirsty, and half of his food needed water to be cooked anyway. Come the third day without water he was extremely weak, and barely making any progress through the sharp and stony ground. By the fourth day he was hallucinating and might have spent what little energy he had wandering around in a circle. When the sky lightened on the fifth day Bilbo couldn’t even really move, he lay there in the morning shade of the canyon wall, having gone as high as the loose gravel would let him climb, his tongue parched, his lips cracked, his muscles screaming, and his head pounding. At some point or another, he passed out.

Bilbo dreamed of The Shire, of his comfortable armchair by the huge fire pit in Adroushan. He dreamed there was a familiar and beloved dragon curled up inside of it, except for his head, which was resting squarely on Bilbo’s lap as usual, pinning him to his chair. Bilbo had thought it only fair to use some of Ember’s spikes to help prop open his book since he was currently playing pillow, while he idly used his free hand to trace over the patterns of scales, and every so often lean forward to place a gentle kiss above his dragon’s eye, causing his dragon to rumble purr in that great deep voice he had. Outside, the spring rains had come and were pouring over The Shire, turning the fallow fields to mud, readying them for planting, and Ember would soon be hunting the fields for
rodents, clawing up the fallow fields, and burning the chafe. It was warm and peaceful, and he had his dragon with him, he was at peace.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door and Bilbo scratched Ember’s head so his dragon would roll off of him and he could go and answer it. It was definitely not a hobbit who was waiting behind the door, and it wasn’t raining at all, the sun was shining bright.

“Lady Galadriel!”

“Hello Bilbo.” She peeked over his head, to where Ember was now pretending he was napping, one eye slit open just a touch, watching them. She smiled. “A fine dream to be sure. A time you were happiest, a dream to put yourself at ease so you do not fight the final breath, so that your last thoughts are of the one you love most. Many have dreamed the same so near to passing, seeing lost loved ones. But the Bilbo I know doesn’t stop fighting, the Bilbo I know cannot be swayed from the course of his heart’s true desire by pain, or fear, or the threat of death, and does not accept failure. The Bilbo I know resisted possession by a Balrog all for love of his friend’s gift, and would never be satisfied with a mere memory of him, especially when that friend is still lost to him. You have to go now Bilbo, you must climb, then go due south, the way the water is flowing. You will reach a valley, and there you will find aide.”

He didn’t want to go, it was so peaceful here, and his friend, his beloved Ember… already the dragon was fading away like mist, along with the armchair and the fire, now that he knew the truth. No, the Lady was right, Bilbo could never be content with a dream, no matter how beautiful and fond it was. His eyes began to sting with tears though, because he knew that meant willingly going back to so much pain, which was all the harder now when he had been so happy for just a brief moment.

“How long have I slept?”

“Only a few hours. You were near to death Bilbo. You must reach the water, it is very close to you now. Drink Bilbo. Drink and recover, and climb!”

Bilbo’s eyes opened and he promptly shut them as the deluge of rain cascaded straight into his face, leaving him coughing and sputtering since it had also been falling straight into his opened mouth for who knows how long, letting him swallow enough to finally revive him. He was drenched to the bone, cold and shivering, and the rushing sounds of water were all around him.

As he cracked a bleary eye open again, this time with a hand raised to shield his face, Bilbo saw that the rain was bucketing down so hard he could barely even see, and nearly every crack and crevice of the ravine walls seemed to be shooting out a torrential waterfall. The bottom of the canyon was filling quickly with the runoff, and had become a deep, swiftly rushing river, white capped with rapids and muddy, hiding the perilous stones beneath them. The water was only a couple of yards away from his toes. The old and deep dread of water gripped him, but now, it didn’t have the same effect on him. Bilbo was too weak, too injured to also experience fear at the same time, his body just didn’t have the strength to feel more than one thing at a time, and right now what he was mostly feeling, was thirst.

Weak and sore, every muscle screaming from lack of water, Bilbo managed to roll over and crawl to the nearest gushing waterfall and drink and drink and drink. He didn’t care about the grit it contained, he was grateful it wasn’t mostly mud. He was so thirsty he didn’t care about anything but drinking his fill. He got sick, and didn’t care, just rinsed out his mouth and drank his fill again, moments later he lost control of his bladder and didn’t care, because it didn’t matter with the waterfall
washing it away immediately anyway. He filled his waterskins, and once the desperate thirst was
gone and his head was slightly clearer, the next item of immediate self preservation allowed him to
realize just how dangerous of a spot he was in.

The ravine was a flood channel, or a seasonal river, and the water had already risen so high that it
had covered the juts of stone that had been much taller than himself, and the gravel he was on was
obviously still part of the riverbed… but that was not nearly as high as it could go. Bilbo spotted the
water marks on the stones a good thirty feet above his head, and felt himself go pale, seeing just how
much water was pouring into the ravine, the water was going to rise fast. The Lady’s words were
still ringing in his ears. ‘Climb! Climb!’ He had to get to higher ground, NOW.

His muscles were still screaming at him, and his head was throbbing and lightheaded, but Bilbo
ignored all of it, picked up his bag, and started climbing. It took far longer than it would have had he
not been so close to dying half an hour earlier, but as long as he climbed faster than the water could
rise, and didn’t fall off of the wet and slippery rocks as he made his way up, it didn’t matter. He
finally climbed high enough that he passed the waterline and found a narrow jut of rock that was
enclosed in the front and back so he couldn’t fall in. He immediately felt his strength leave him and
he all but collapsed to the ground. It was about ten feet above the watermark, which should be well
out of the way of the flood waters, and he could still climb higher if he had to, but knew he couldn’t
safely go any further at the moment with what little strength he had right then, just that forty foot
climb alone had taken nearly an hour, and had exhausted him down to the bone.

There was no shelter beyond a slight overhang, which offered a little protection against the constant
downpour of rain, and did nothing to stop the rain coming at him sideways when the wind picked
up, but there was no waterfall crashing into the spot, which was a plus. There was a large flat rock at
the front part, which would keep him away from the river itself. It had a deep groove worn into it on
the top, which was filled with fresh clean rain water. After he had rested for awhile he emptied out
one of the smaller skins which he had filled with the gritty runoff, and carefully collected the water
from the rock instead. It was raining so much that the groove was filled again twenty minutes later,
and he emptied another skin and filled it too.

He couldn’t tell how long it had been, but a very short while later he heard a cracking, rumbling
sound. At first he thought it had been more thunder, but then Bilbo saw the swelling wall of muddy
water moving down the ravine, carrying a ton of debris, including several fully grown trees. It was
terrifying to watch the thick trunks snapped like twigs as they got stuck on the rocks and were forced
to move anyway as the flood water drove itself along the ravine, entirely burying the side where
Bilbo had been laying before and moving up the walls of the ravine, seeming to be reaching for the
water line.

Bilbo was cold, and shivering, and he had more water than he could use, which after nearly dying
from dehydration was an odd sensation. He drank more when the groove filled up again, then used
balrog dust to heat the stone the groove was in and bathed in the warmed water, the pouring rain
rinsing him clean. When he got some of his strength back, he washed out his other set of clothes
since he’d probably be there awhile, then washed out the groove. He used balrog dust to warm the
stones under the overhang so that the clothes that he’d laid out on them would actually dry. He also
heated the ground underneath him so he would be comfortable, and warm up a bit. A good hot fire
would be worth a lot to him right now. Being cold, wet, and sore, only brought back bad memories.
It took some trial and error to find the right amount since he hadn’t done it in awhile, but when he blew a tiny pinch of dust in a steady stream while holding onto his cooking pot, he could get the water inside the pot to heat and boil so he could cook, since he had no wood or charcoal to burn instead. The hot vegetable pottage was quite satisfying on his empty and unhappy stomach.

As night fell with no sign of the rain letting up, Bilbo peeked over the edge of the ravine and saw that the water was now about halfway to the waterline. His clothes were finally dry enough to wear, and with his cloak and his oilskins on top of that, he was about as dry as he was going to get. He kept the stones warm, and fell asleep tucked as far back under the overhang as he could get, knowing he wouldn’t be able to sleep sitting up for very long, which meant he could check the water level often. Sure enough he woke up four times that night, each time checking the level of the flood waters, drinking more water, relieving himself, and reheating his rocks. When dawn rose it was still raining steadily but it wasn’t bucketing down like it had previously been and it still hadn’t reached the waterline. He could see a pretty steady looking way towards the top from here, but he was still very tired, sore, and the rocks were beyond slippery. He decided to stay put until it let up, no point in risking his neck when he didn’t need to, especially with no shelter promised at the top.

The storm held on for three days total from when Bilbo woke up. The flood waters seemed to mostly be holding steady right at the waterline, which was good, he didn’t want to try and climb a cliff under duress again. Bilbo waited an extra day after the rain stopped in order to let the sun dry the rocks enough that he felt safe climbing them. In the meantime he made sure he was quite recovered from his bout of nearly dying from thirst, and even took some time to reorganize his pack since he had nothing else to do except to rest, which was exactly what he did. He wished that he could dream of Ember again, he missed those dreams.

With three days of being surrounded on all sides by water and the sound of it, the feel of it, and drinking more of it than he really wanted, but needed to after the dehydration, he was quite proud of himself. Aside from that first startled moment of fear, he somehow hadn’t had a single nightmare, reaction, or panic attack over it. He didn’t know why it had happened, what the trigger had been to finally make him let go of that trauma and have the hydrophobia recede, but he was quite proud of himself, all things considered.

Once the rocks were dry enough, Bilbo made his way back to the top of the ravine, and was surprised to find nearby what looked like a rather solid path. He didn’t see any boot prints on it, no wonder with all the rain, but it still was a very steady path that meandered its way south, as he had been told to go. Several days later Bilbo found a small open valley, where a Dwarf man lived with his human wife and their four children. The family welcomed him in and let him resupply when he offered work in trade. The Dwarf’s name was Olor and his wife was Cirra and they were a very kindly and good spirited sort.

Bilbo then got the surprise of his life when he opened their barn door the next day to feed the animals and was enthusiastically greeted by Marigold, who had apparently sought shelter with the family when the rains came, and had even managed to keep all of her tack and the rest of Bilbo’s gear with her after he had fell.

Bilbo stayed a month with them, since it was near the spring harvest and the summer planting, so his help would be more than welcome. While he worked, Olor told him about the paths that would be safest to take with a pony along, and the places he should avoid. It was a restful time for his mind, which had been sorely needed, and he was almost sad to have to leave so soon. But he needed to
press on, and did, with a hug, a handshake, and a promise to stay in touch if possible.

Bilbo wandered further southeast, carefully passing Mount Gundabad and then beginning to head east into the Erid Mithrim. He would search the mountains and he also had the map to Erebor that Thrain had given him. If Ember wasn’t there then he would work his way over to the Iron Hills, and then could head south from there to Rohan and Gondor.

It was a solid plan, and for the first time in a long time, Bilbo felt quite hopeful about something. He whistled a merry little tune as he set up camp that night, lighting the fire with a tiny few sparks of Balrog flame, and before long he had a nice stew of dried mushrooms, beef, and barley going with a bit of portable soup and an herb cube for flavor. Of course, that is just when everything decided to go wrong again.

He didn’t know that he was being watched, that the bandits he had killed HAD had friends, but they hadn’t been bandits, they were slavers, and they had been following him for weeks. Now they had finally caught up to him without being noticed and were waiting in the shadows for him to fall asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Trying to figure out a plausible way for Bilbo to get away from and overprotective Elladan, Elrohir, Estel, and freaking GLORFINDEL tied me up for months. Because that is like Final Boss, ultimate level stealth mode requirements if he was trying to sneak away, especially since they set up a watch. I had written myself into a corner, until one day I was venting at a show screaming 'Why can't they just TALK about their problems and work them out like actual mature grownups?!' and then the lightbulb went off, I palmfaced, and finally started writing the end of that scene. So yeah. Sorry for the delay!

End Notes

This one will be on a slower update schedule, but I am making up for it with longer chapters.

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