A Very Respectable Hobbit

by thethirdstar

Summary

Bilbo Baggins is going on an adventure and along the way he might just learn that being respectable isn't all it's cracked up to be. A look into how Bilbo got to know and befriend the dwarves and maybe, just maybe, come to care for one in particular. Slow burn Bagginshield, rating may change.
"Fili!"

A shout came from over the boundary of the camp. There was a brief silence, before the haggard and very much annoyed face of Kili burst through the bushes.

"Fili! You better get out here right now, before I am forced—" Kili spat out a stray leaf from his mouth, "—to take drastic action!"

The young dwarf stomped into the centre of the clearing, twigs and other unsavoury bits of the forest still clinging to him.

He raised his fist, gesturing wildly. "That's right, you little prat, I said drastic action. If you don't give me back my damn—" Kili's spluttered words were suddenly interrupted by his brother suddenly swinging down from a low branch of a nearby tree.

"But my dear, dear brother, surely the point of me liberating this fine dagger from your person was not to return it to you," Fili's grin grew large with wicked mirth, "but rather to, in fact, keep it." The blond dwarf's smile split impossibly wider as he saw Kili's face turn a rather delightful shade of furious red.

Fili began to strut away from his brother, pretending to use the dagger to clean under his nails. "The thing is, brother, you spend so much time playing with those bits of twig you call arrows, that I find it just a bit hard to believe that you would even know how to properly use a dagger," he flipped the hilt between his hands. "Let alone appreciate the fine craftsmanship of this little beauty."

Kili ripped the remaining twig out of his hair, before lunging after his brother with a frustrated yell. "Blast it, you boil-infested, clean-shaven, elf lover! Give. It. Back!"

Fili continued to dodge his brother's increasingly clumsy grabs at his person, laughing raucously each time Kili missed. Bofur and Bilbo had looked up from they were sitting next to the campfire, as they prepared what the hobbit hoped to be a passable meal.

Bilbo fought the smile creeping onto his face, not sure if he should be laughing or trying to break up the scuffle before someone – Thorin – came back and inevitably blamed him for the lack of proper work being done.

"Should we, uh... should we be doing something?" Bilbo glanced nervously at Bofur, who appeared to nothing short of immensely amused.

Bofur stopped slicing the pair of rabbits Kili had brought back earlier and let out a bark of a laugh. "Nay, Master Baggins, they do this sort of nonsense more often than not – no sense tryin' to get in the middle of that pair while they be makin' mischief."

Bofur threw the freshly cleaned rabbit chunks into the pot of stew before continuing. "The only thing that could stop those lads is one thing they actually respect."

Bilbo stopped chopping the carrots and narrowed his eyes as he glanced at the dwarf. He couldn't imagine anything being able to rein in Fili and Kili once they got each other going.

"And, uh, where would we go about finding this thing?" Bilbo glanced at the dwarf skeptically.
Bofur just cast an amused glance back Bilbo's way, like the answer shouldn't even need to be said. "And here I thought you were supposed to be the brains of this operation, Master Baggins. The only thing those two lads respect is the fearsome glare of their uncle." A smirk crept across Bofur's face, "I know you've gotten one or two of them yourself. I think even stone would collapse if Master Thorin glared at it long enough."

Bilbo felt his face flush hot with an involuntary embarrassment. It wasn't like he was trying gain Thorin's ire; it was just really, **really** hard not to. At this point it almost seemed as if even if Bilbo was sitting perfectly still making absolutely no noise, Thorin would have cursed the fact that hobbits needed to breathe like any other folk.

"Well then," Bilbo grumbled, "we should probably just let Thorin glare at the dragon for a bit. Who knows? We might not even need to draw our swords."

Bofur laughed once more, clapping Bilbo on the shoulder and forcing all his finely-chopped carrots to the dirty ground. "Yer alright, laddie, yer alright."

They both turned to see that Kili had finally managed to tackle his brother to the ground but Fili had immediately wrapped an arm around his brother's neck in what Bilbo thought to be a rather impressive chokehold.

Fili tightened his grip as the younger dwarf continued to struggle.

"You'll have to do better than that, brother dear! I think even Master Baggins could put up a better fight!" The blond dwarf looked up to wink at Bilbo, "No offense meant, of course."

Bilbo just shot him a rather unimpressed look and continued to try and salvage what he could of his vegetables.

Kili took Fili's momentary lapse in concentration to place an elbow in his brother's stomach and a boot to his shin. Fili clutched his leg in pain as Kili lunged forward, grabbing his brother's braided hair.

"Not the beard!" Fili shouted, only to be met with a cackle of decidedly unapologetic mirth.

"Then maybe you shouldn't take my things!"

"And what exactly do you two idiots think you're doing?" An unmistakably gruff voice came into the clearing. Thorin and Dwalin made their way to the centre of the camp, both covered in what Bilbo considered to be an obscene amount of blood.

Thorin's nephews immediately stopped their wrestling and attempted to disentangle themselves, scrambling away from each other. Despite their efforts, Thorin made it to them first, grabbing the young dwarves by the collars of their coats and hoisting them up before shoving them onto their feet none too gently.

"He took my—" Kili began quickly, thrusting a finger into his brother's face.

"I was only—" Fili shouted back, before they both recognized the thunderous look on their uncle's face.

"Enough," Thorin ground out. "I don't want to know what happened and I am finding it extremely hard to care. You two are supposed to be adults – why don't you start acting your age, instead of running about like ridiculous dwarflings? Go make yourselves useful."
The expression on their leader's face indicated that he was nowhere near optimistic that any work would be getting done despite his instructions.

Thorin turned away brusquely just as Fili and Kili shared a look before scrambling away from camp, yelling something about the obvious poor quality of the firewood and their sworn duty to find more.

The hobbit looked nervously at Bofur, trying to understand how he should be reacting, but was met with an extremely unhelpfully ambiguous twitch of the dwarf's mouth. Bilbo then tried to steal a quick glance at Thorin, only to find himself meeting an impressive stormy-eyed stare and noticing the frown fixed on their leader's face.

"Would you like to say something, hobbit?"

Bilbo laughed nervously. "Nope, no, not me – wouldn't dream of it. No hobbit says less things about some things than yours truly." Bilbo continued to ramble, as Thorin's frown started to deepen.

"Enough."

Thorin glared at the hobbit as he and Dwalin made their way over to the supplies. Bilbo's eyes widened in shock as he fully took in their appearances. The dwarves were both sporting several rather jagged-looking wounds and Dwalin was favouring his right leg.

Bilbo shot up in concern, dropping his knife. "You're hurt! What happened?"

He ran over quickly to Thorin and immediately began inspecting the dwarf's face, assessing the damage. Their leader's eyes widened, clearly not expecting the swift approach of the hobbit, nor the concern etched across his face.

"We ran into a pack of wargs during the patrol." The dwarf leaned back slightly, looking uncomfortable.

Bilbo pushed himself into Thorin's space even further, hands waving fretfully as he examined every cut. Thorin stood still for a brief moment, before he shook his head and shoved Bilbo out of the way.

"I am fine." Thorin spat out, trying to resume his course to the supplies.

Bilbo frowned, crossing his arms as he moved into their leader's path. "Clearly you are not. Would you just let me help you?"

Thorin paused for a moment, apparently not sure whether to shout or just ignore what he doubtlessly saw as an excessive show of impudence.

"I do not need, nor do I want any help from you," Thorin scowled, pushing by Bilbo again. "I'm going to clean up. Bofur make sure the halfling finishes his task. I would hate for us to go hungry tonight because he couldn't keep his concerns away from where they are unwanted."

And with that, Thorin made his was out of the clearing and into the forest towards the stream that lay nearby. Bilbo eyes flicked to Dwalin momentarily, but the dwarf merely shrugged and followed their leader out of the camp.

Bilbo stood there with his mouth slightly open, as he narrowed his eyes at Thorin's retreating form.

'How can anyone be so rude?' He thought to himself with irritable frustration. After all he was only trying to help, not get in anyone's way. The hobbit felt a hand on his shoulder and glanced up to see Bofur with a kind smile on his face.
Later that evening after what was, in Bilbo's rather humble opinion, a very good batch of stew, the dwarves had just about finished cleaning and setting out their sleeping rolls. They had only set out from Bag End a week ago, but Bilbo was… well, he still wasn't sure as to the general opinion of his presence. Thorin excluded, of course. He knew exactly what feeling that dwarf felt when intreating with him and he would hazard a guess that it wasn't unbridled joy. Even though several members of the company had been nothing but friendly towards him, the hobbit didn't want to impose.

The sleeping place he had taken was far from the fire. It seemed to him that the more senior members of their company, or at least the ones Bilbo guessed were some sort of nobility, were given the closer spots even though no one actually discussed it aloud. Not to mention he also was hesitant to breach the tight circle of sleeping dwarves when most of them had barely even spoken to him.

With a sigh and a shiver, he rolled out the small mat and the blanket that his mother, Belladonna Took, had passed down to him. Falling asleep in the wild wasn't easy for Bilbo Baggins. He grumbled a bit as he looked around at the rest of the dwarves and Gandalf had all fallen asleep almost immediately despite the unforgiving ground and incessant presence of rocks underneath wherever he laid down.

Shifting back and forth, trying to find some semblance of comfort, Bilbo felt a pair of eyes on him. Looking up, the hobbit was met with the dark glare of Thorin, who had taken up his customary stiff-backed first watch of the evening. Still miffed about their encounter earlier, Bilbo purposely made even more noise getting comfortable than he would have usually, all while grumbling about Thorin's apparent indifference towards proper sleep being nothing short of unnatural.

Bilbo refused to look over at the dwarf again and rolled over so that his back would face Thorin. He knew he was being petty. Not that the dwarf would care one way or the other which direction Bilbo decided to sleep, but even that knowledge didn't stop the slight swell of satisfaction he felt. It was just when he was beginning to enjoy the feeling when Bilbo felt his stomach clench uncomfortably with guilt. When the hobbit had glanced at Thorin, he had realized that the cuts on the dwarf's face and arm were still exposed and untreated.

Bilbo waged a furious debate with his conscience as he lay on the cold ground. Thorin clearly didn't want his help, but Bilbo was familiar with stubbornness, if only because he was half a Took. He knew that just because Thorin was too proud to ask didn't mean he didn't need it.

Sighing loudly, the hobbit found that he could ignore the wriggling sensation in his gut no longer and threw off his blanket, rummaging in his pack for his the basic healing supplies that he had brought from the Shire. Ignoring what he knew to be a distasteful look on Thorin's face, Bilbo continued rustling until he found the small leather satchel.

Standing up with a bit of a stretch to loosen his aching back, Bilbo stepped carefully over the clutter of sleeping dwarves until he reached the log Thorin was sitting on. He sat down, still not making eye
contact with the dwarf, and opened the bag, gathering the balm and bandages he would need for his task.

"What do you think you're—" Thorin began, before Bilbo shot him a practiced Baggins' glare of his own, raising a hand to silence the dwarf.

Slightly shocked that Thorin had actually stopped speaking and didn't, oh, punch him in face, Bilbo threw caution to the wind.

"I understand you don't like me. I get it, I really do. I know I've had little in my life to speak of sorrow or hardship." Bilbo let out a short sigh. "I can't possibly understand the weight that rests on your shoulders, Thorin, nor can I ever fully appreciate what it is to be forced out of my home and watch my people move from place to place."

Bilbo looked up and met Thorin's gaze he opened the jar. The dwarf's face had fallen into that odd little place of a not entirely disgusted grimace and yet still looking like he might pull a knife. It was an expression Bilbo was quickly realizing had a monopoly on Thorin's features.

"But what I do know is that I am here. I am a part of this company now and whatever your personal opinion of me, if nothing else, you should allow me to do what I can to help. I am perfectly aware how hopeless I am with a sword – you said it yourself that I look more like a grocer than a burglar. I won't debate that."

Bilbo felt his hand clench the pot tightly. "But I think I do have value in this group or else Gandalf would have never come to my home in the first place. So... I am asking you to use your judgment as a leader to allow me to assist this company as best I can. And if that means helping our no doubt invincible leader clean his wounds, then so help me, I will see it done."

Bilbo finished his speech with a large breath, not remembering when he'd gotten worked up enough to stick an accusatory finger near Thorin's chest. Quickly pulling the offending hand back, Bilbo kept his arms crossed and a scowl on his face to show the dwarf that he would not be intimidated into conceding this point.

If he had not been trying to cow a frightening and very intimidating dwarf prince into submitting to his wisdom, Bilbo might have laughed at the expression on Thorin's face. The dwarf clearly had not being expecting Bilbo to grow a spine and actually confront him.

The slightly agape mouth and mildly shocked expression lasted for a good few seconds until Thorin seemed to realize that his regal and stoic mask had slipped. He slammed his mouth shut and narrowed his eyes in what Bilbo thought to be a challenge for him to say anything further. The hobbit just continued to wait, not willing to move unless the prince physically removed him from the log. Which... well, it wouldn't be totally uncharacteristic if he did.

To Bilbo's immense surprise, Thorin seemed to deflate a little. His usually rigid posture gave way to a slight slumping of his shoulders, and the dwarf's eyes shifted away from Bilbo towards the crackling fire.

Thorin was silent for a few moments more, before he let out a breath and grumbled. "Carry on, if you must. Clearly you feel very strongly about finally being useful for a change. Who am I to discourage you from pulling your weight?"

Despite the harshness of Thorin's words, Bilbo let out what could only be described as a beaming smile. He had done it. Bilbo Baggins of the Shire, useless Bilbo Couldn't-Even-Hold-a-Sword-Without-Tragically-Impaling-Himself Baggins had convinced Thorin Oakenshield that he was right.
He could get used to this feeling.

Thorin took one look at the hobbit's bright grin and shifted uncomfortably, as if preparing to bolt as soon as he regained his sense again.

"Get on with it before I change my mind," the dwarf muttered, refusing to look away from the fire.

The hobbit let out a chuckle, savouring the feeling of light elation that spread through his chest and began to spread the balm on the gash that had torn several inches through Thorin's shirt. The work was methodical and, much to his surprise, actually quite relaxing.

He had experience with scrapes and small wounds, both from helping the little hobbits that played around in the Shire and from random gardening mishaps. None of the dwarf's wounds appeared to need stitching, for which Bilbo was eternally grateful. Regardless, he wasted no amount of balm in making sure that they remained unimflamed.

Bilbo wrapped up Thorin's arm tightly with a bandage over the prince's cut shirt. Standing up to get a better angle to treat the dwarf's face, Bilbo carefully stepped between Thorin and the fire. He stood there for a second, waiting for the other to tilt his face up so that the balm could be applied more easily, but Thorin appeared to still be clinging to any chance to make this process more difficult than it had to be.

Bilbo let out an irritated sigh. He seemed to be doing that in much greater frequency the more he was exposed to the stubbornness of dwarves.

"Can you please look up?" The hobbit asked as he rolled his eyes, "I'll get this sorted and then you can pretend this never happened and that you healed magically through sheer willpower and pigheadedness."

Thorin's head snapped up, a frown firmly set on his face. He looked one moment away from hissing a scathing remark at the hobbit, but seemed to think better of it when Bilbo started to slather the soothing mixture on his face.

Thorin made one last attempt at a small glare, before he gave a small shrug and closed his eyes. Bilbo worked without comment, his back warmed by the fire. He found that the methodical process combined with silence interrupted only by the small crackle of the flames proved to be the most pleasant interaction he'd had with the dwarf since they'd met. Bilbo covered each of the small cuts carefully until he found that he had gotten them all.

"All done now," Bilbo said with a small smile. "See, now that wasn't so bad – pride still intact, I'm sure."

Thorin kept his eyes shut, a mostly passive expression on his face.

Bilbo moved his hand from Thorin's face, wiping the remaining balm on his trousers. The hobbit made to move away, until he felt a hand grasp his wrist. Starting slightly at the unexpected contact, Bilbo's eyes widened as he looked back at the dwarf prince. Thorin's eyes were still closed and no expression reached his face. The dwarf's voice was so quiet that Bilbo almost didn't catch the small and muttered "My thanks."

Thorin quickly released his wrist and Bilbo moved back to his pallet with a small smile on his face. Thorin had the social grace of a goat and the conversational skills of a moss covered rock, but, he supposed, the dwarf couldn't be that bad deep, deep down. He pulled the blanket over his body and shifted into a passably comfortable position.
He took one more small peek at Thorin through almost-shut eyes. The dwarf was brooding again and Bilbo could only feel bad for the fire given the intensity of the glare it was receiving. Bilbo couldn’t help but roll his eyes; Thorin was nothing if not predictable in his moods. Or mood rather, so far as he’d known the prince, Bilbo had witnessed just the one: grumpy.
Chapter 2

The journey continued much as it had for the first few weeks. The company of Thorin Oakenshield travelled to the boundaries of the Shire, quickly leaving behind the rolling fields and laughing brooks for the denser trees of the forests that lay beyond Hobbiton.

Bilbo Baggins found that while he was not quite regretting his decision to leave the quiet comfort of the familiar curves and nooks of Bag End, the journey so far had not quite endeared him to what Gandalf had enthusiastically referred to as 'The World Beyond the Shire.'

Most days Bilbo felt as if he were in a perpetual state of discomfort. He was not familiar with pony riding – hobbits were a folk fond of walking and, in cases of extreme necessity, would perhaps consider a light jog. Bilbo could not for the life of him figure out why these blasted dwarf saddles did not have cushions.

It was no mystery to him that many of the dwarves doubted him and his presence amongst the group. His interactions with Thorin alone seemed all the evidence required to see they must think him useless and a burden.

While several of the dwarves, mainly Bofur and the young Durin brothers, were pleasant towards him, Bilbo thought that had more to do with their natural congenial dispositions rather than anything he had done personally to gain their affections.

Bofur had taken to subtly showing Bilbo some tricks about camping and living on the road. This was all, to Bilbo's immense relief, done while Thorin's judging eye was otherwise occupied. Bofur, he very quickly discovered, was just the type of dwarf to lend a hand when he could. Bilbo found himself on cooking duty with the miner and his brother often, probably because this was one of the few tasks Bilbo could do competently and consistently.

They often found themselves cleaning the meats that Fili and Kili brought back with them from their frequent scouting trips and making the meals together. There was not much he enjoyed about this adventuring business, but cooking with Bofur was one of the few things he was decidedly opposed to complain about in his hourly internal rants.

"You see laddie, if you strike the flint at a certain angle, you won't be needin' to hit it a buncha' times wastin' the thing. If you can't get it on the first or second try," Bofur explained as he expertly hit the two pieces of stone together, small bits of fire leaping out like eager friends embracing. "You'll get a right merry fire in no time at all!"

The dwarf looked up at the hobbit, handing the flint to Bilbo who glanced down at it skeptically. Shaking his head with a sigh, Bilbo took the two pieces of stone in his hands. "I know Bofur, I know, it's just... wouldn't we be better served with some, oh I don't know, matches?" Bilbo looked at the flint distastefully, "It seems to me like you dwarves are making life harder for yourselves than you need to."

Bofur chuckled lightheartedly, "Oh Master Baggins, you know so little of the road! It's just a wee bit amusing." He tapped his nose twice with finger and winked at Bilbo. "So what'll be happenin' when your pack gets wet and your nice Shire matches get ruined, hm? And what about when our illustrious leader be askin' you to make us a nice fire with those soggy bits o' twig, what then?"

Bilbo looked from Bofur to the flints and back again, "I, uh, see your point."
The hobbit shuddered as he imagined the glare and verbal lashing he would receive if he were responsible for a lack of heat and food.

"And that, Master Baggins, is why we always carry a flint!" Bofur smiled and tapped Bilbo's knee, "Now show us how it's done, there's a good lad, and I will rest easy knowin' you'll not be shouted at for not bein' able to start a fire again."

Giving the stones a few good hits, Bilbo finally was able to coax the sparks onto the tinder, feeding the flames to a reasonable size. Feeling absurdly pleased for having accomplished what he thought that any dwarf would come out of the womb knowing, Bilbo went about his task of preparing dinner with Bofur for the rest of the evening.

They sat next to the fire, Bofur skinning the small deer they had managed to get for the evening and Bilbo peeling the potatoes, falling into easy conversation.

"Say, Bofur," Bilbo fiddled with the potato the he held. "What did you do before joining the company? I feel like I know so little about everyone here..."

Bofur, tongue stuck between his teeth in concentration, looked up at Bilbo from underneath the brim of his fur trimmed hat.

"Well, it's nothin' interestin' to be sure. Not like some o' the other dwarves here at least."

Bilbo stopped his peeling to raise an eyebrow. "Would you really like to have a conversation comparing uninteresting with a hobbit? I will have you know, if I am confident in one area, it is that I have resident mastery over all topics considered uninteresting."

Bofur gave a laugh as he vested a particularly difficult part of skin from the meat of the deer, "I see your point master hobbit." He continued his task in silence for a few moments, contemplating his words.

"As you heard from Master Thorin, the dwarves of Erebor were forced from our home by Smaug the dragon. Bombur and I lost our family in the attack, not to mention that particular incident of unpleasantness was just before our dear Bifur got that lovely bit o' goblin steel to the forehead."

Bofur stopped his skinning to gaze forward into the fire in a spell of contemplation. "My family was once a great line of miners, some o' the best if I do say so myself. Though.. you might not think it lookin' at the likes of Bombur and me. I always followed my father down into the great mines of Erebor."

Bofur looked over to smile at the hobbit, "You woulda' liked it laddie, knowin' you hobbits got propensities for earth and the like. There isn't a sight more beautiful in all the lands than that first glimpse of precious stones beneath all that dark rock."

Bofur sighed as he sat back still with a gentle smile on his face. "It's hard work to be sure, but there's a pride in it, you know? We dwarves are the best miners of all the different folks on this earth, to be one o' the best o' the best, well there's not a feelin' better that the camaraderie that grows between folk chippin' away at the deepest and darkest places of the world."

Bofur reached into his shirts underneath the scarf he always wore and pulled out what Bilbo thought to be the most exquisite stone he had ever seen. It was a deep shade of green, but in the light of the fire, it seemed that it had golden veins curling out from the middle, almost like it was alive with the life-blood of the earth flowing through it.

"This, laddie, is the most treasured stone in all my family. Well, what's left of it at least. Found by my
pa when I wasn't even but a thought in the back of my mother's mind. He gave it to her in a flourish of romantics when they began their courtin'."

Bofur stuck the jewel back safely into its previous resting spot against his chest, "Loved 'er more than any of the gems he found in all his years minin' even in the great wealth of the Lonely Mountain. You woulda liked 'er." Bofur's face was a distant sort of smile.

"Bombur takes after Ma more than I, she had the color of flames and a temper to match. She wasn't much for minin' but she could cook up dishes you would be ready to give half your fortune just to have a good sniff at."

Bilbo glanced up from his potatoes to give the dwarf a small smile, "She sounds lovely Mister Bofur. Hobbits have only the utmost respect for a talented cook."

Bofur gave him another wink. "Aye, laddie, and she appreciated those with a more refined pallet an' taste than just for the treasure of the mountain. Wonders why she agreed to marry my ol' pa, but there's love for you, never makes even the least bit o' sense."

They both looked up to see Bombur waddle into the camp, a stray biscuit nestled in his mouth and several more overflowing from his pockets.

"Bombur took the dragon's wrath harder than me, but I was always thinkin' that was because he and Ma were so close." A sad smile crept onto Bofur's face as he watched his brother move slowly across the camp, "hardly talks anymore when he hasn't had a good few ales, just goes about stuffin' his face… But I shouldn't be too hard on him, I think he does it mostly cause it reminds him o' her."

Bilbo looked at their companion with new light. He hadn't spoken with Bombur much, but based on what Bofur had just said, it made sense he wouldn't talk to Bilbo if he didn't even really talk to the other dwarves. It seemed to Bilbo that all of the company had their own sad story to tell, unique in all but their share of sorrow.

Bofur began to speak again as Bombur left the edge of the camp. "So, after Smaug ravaged our home, me an' Bombur left followin' Master Thorin as he led our people to west. Birfur met up with us a few days after the whole mess but the lot of us were attacked by goblin raiders not long after the disaster."

Bofur continued his methodical cleaning of the deer, now staring into the fire. "The buggers came in the night and tried to attack our lot. Bifur took an axe to the forehead tryin' to protect Bombur an' me…"

"We weren't neither of us fighters then. I was makin' toys, for Mahal's sake, just tryin' to scrape a livin' in the town's of men we passed through. There's not a whole lot o' minin' to be done above the ground… Anyhow, needless to say me an' Bombur learned to fight real quick after that, what with Bifur bein' out o' commission for a while."

Finished with the cleaning the deer, Bofur started to chop it into small bits for the stew. "We stuck together since then, us three. Followed Master Thorin everywhere, we did. He's done all right by us. Best he, or any dwarf, could have done considerin' the circumstances." He and Bilbo both glanced up at the leader of their company who stood against the setting sun gazing over the edge of the small cliff that their camp was nestled in.

"So when Master Thorin made mention that he was goin' back to Erebor we had to join 'im. Never any choice really, we owe him our lives for gettin' us all the way to the Blue Mountains, though it never quite felt like home. Not like Erebor had anyway. But," Bofur dropped the remaining chunks
of meat into the stew. "I'm thinkin' that's cause all our memories, our truly happy memories, still lie beneath the stone of the Lonely Mountain. And that, Master Baggins, is why we got to go back. Not just to get those memories, but to be movin' on and makin' ourselves new ones."

Bilbo felt his heart clench. He knew nothing, he thought, nothing of the hardship and loneliness that these dwarves had tasted. Here he was complaining about doilies and sleeping on rocks when dwarves like Bofur, kind Bofur who showed him how to light fires and properly wash clothes in a stream, had suffered more than he could imagine and bore it with a smile on his face every day.

Bofur made to get up and clean off his skinning knife when Bilbo gently grabbed the edge of his coat. "Thank you," the hobbit said quietly, "thank you for sharing that with me, I know it couldn't have been easy."

The dwarf just let out a kind laugh. "Make no mention of it laddie, it was good to speak of the happiness of Erebor again, even if it feels like a distant memory."

Bofur walked a few more paces away before turning to face Bilbo again.

"Don't judge him too harshly, laddie." Bofur looked at Thorin still brooding at the distant setting sun, "I know better than most he can be few and severe in words but Master Thorin has a bigger and truer heart than any dwarf I ever met. He bears the weight of every dwarf's fate under his charge and makes all their troubles his own. Thorin Oakenshield has known so much tragedy in his life and won't let no one care for him the way he cares for all of us."

And with that Bofur walked away to the nearby mountain creek to clean off his tools.

Bilbo continued to stare at Thorin who, of course, took that moment to turn around and noticed the hobbit looking at him. The dwarf offered Bilbo one of his most distasteful looks, clearly honed in years of arduous training, apparently hoping to avert the hobbit's gaze.

Bilbo, still feeling the sorrow of the tale that Bofur had just accounted, simply gave Thorin a somber smile, hoping to at least communicate some of the comfort he knew Thorin must be sorely be in need of. The dwarf's eyes narrowed briefly before his face fell into a frown and he muttered something about strange halflings before turning away again.

Later that evening after most of the dwarves had gone to sleep, Bilbo Baggins found himself tossing and turning once again. The rocks, he thought, had gotten progressively more and more uncomfortable along their journey. The discomfort coupled with Bombur's cacophonous snoring made Bilbo throw off his blanket in a huff of frustration.

Ignoring the curious glances of Fili and Kili who sat near the fire keeping watch, Bilbo stomped over to his pony Myrtle. He would reluctantly admit the pony was quickly earning his affections despite his natural disposition in preferring his own feet.

Bilbo stuck a hand in his pocket, grabbing one of the apples he had found earlier that day and snuck it towards Myrtle's eager mouth.

"Here you are, there's a good girl," the hobbit gave Myrtle a few quick pats on the nose as she chomped away at the sweet fruit, "it'll be our little secret."
Bilbo gave his pony a fond smile before he heard several shrill cries from coming from the valley below their camp. Glancing from the basin to the brothers sitting near the fire and back again, Bilbo gestured between the two mouthing but no words came out of his mouth.

The hobbit sputtered for a moment in fear. "What - what was that? What were those noises?" Bilbo tried to whisper but ended of making more of a muffled shout.

Fili and Kili glanced at each other before the younger of the two looked him straight in the eyes, deadly serious. "Orcs. The low lands will be crawling with them tonight. They come into the camps swift and silent."

Bilbo stared at Kili, eyes wide in barely contained fear, "They'll creep in while you're sleeping. Often don't even have time to scream. The only trace they leave is the blood. So much blood."

Bilbo was caught between shaking in fear and trying to figure out the best position to be in the camp should orcs come in for a midnight raid before he heard sniggers coming from the fire. Narrowing his eyes, the hobbit stopped shifting his eyes frantically around the camp and leveled his gaze at the two dwarves, who apparently were very pleased with their little joke and had to stifle their laughter at Bilbo's expression with their leather-clad fists. The hobbit crossed his arms in anger and was just about ready to give them a good telling off before he heard a gruff voice stir from just behind him.

"And you think that is funny, do you? You think orc attacks are amusing?" Thorin emerged from the darkness and pushed past Bilbo, shooting his nephews a truly fearsome glare.

Kili and Fili had the grace at least to look ashamed with themselves before Kili almost silently muttered an apology. "We meant nothing by it."

Thorin merely scoffed at them as he walked by them. "You know nothing of battle. Until you get a taste of the fear and the blood, hold your tongues. I doubt the halfling could handle much more of your teasing anyway."

Thorin made his way through a few of the trees towards the edge of the camp he had been standing earlier that evening when Bilbo and Bofur had been making dinner.

As was becoming a common occurrence with the dwarves, Bilbo wasn't quite sure how to react. His natural instinct was to go after Thorin and offer some words of... comfort, maybe? He wasn't even sure what he would say and couldn't conceive of a less welcome action towards the dwarf.

His thoughts were interrupted by the soft presence of Balin. "Don't take it too seriously, laddie," the elder dwarf offered Kili a kind smile, "Thorin has better cause than most to hate orcs."

Balin launched into the tale of Thorin and his family. Bilbo was torn between going back to sleep, not sure if he would be welcome to listen, and desperately wanting to hear the story of their enigmatic leader.

Balin spoke of Erebor's prosperity, the grandeur of the dwarven city burrowed deep within the mountain. He spoke of the Thrór's ring, one of the seven given to the dwarves, gifted with the ability to foster great riches from the stone that surrounded them.

He spoke of the Arkenstone, treasure of Thrór and emblem of the splendor and magnificence of his prosperous kingdom. Bilbo listened in awe of Balin's tales. Where Bofur had told him of the pride of the miners, Balin spoke of the legacy of kings.

Then the elder dwarf spoke of Smaug and his legendary wrath that swept over the unsuspecting kingdom. The fire that burned, the claws the tore, the teeth that crushed. He spoke of the betrayal of
Thranduil, Elvenking of the Great Green Forests, who refused to help his dwarven neighbors in their time of need.

Balin spoke of Thorin, taking lead of their people, as his grandfather and father became obsessed with revenge. Consumed with tales past and unconcerned with troubles present. He told them of the kings reduced to schemes and the prince reduced to work for men, all to make sure his people didn't starve on their way to their new home.

Bilbo's gaze rested on Balin as he continued onto the battle for Moria; of the death of Thrór at the hands of Azog the Defiler, the madness of Thrain, and the ascension of Thorin, who took up an oaken branch and withstood blow after relentless blow until he bested his foe and took the field of victory at great cost.

Bilbo couldn't help but let his jaw hang a bit as Balin continued his tale. These were just like the stories of old, tucked away in the many books that lined the halls of Bag End, full of darkness and courage.

It was hard for Bilbo, hobbit of the Shire, connoisseur of all things respectable and boring, to reconcile that the dwarves he journeyed with - that the dwarf that led them each day from one camp to the next - had lived through so much. That the Thorin he knew, the Thorin that glared at him for dropping bags and needing help up on his pony, was the same Thorin Oakenshield of a great but fallen dwarven people.

He couldn't help but ask as Balin finished his story. "But what of Azog the Defiler, what happened to him?"

Thorin walked back through the camp hitherto unnoticed and spat as he passed. "He died of his wounds long ago, the filth."

The hobbit still couldn't quite wrap his head around that he, Bilbo Baggins, was in the company of heroes. Not just Thorin, though Bilbo would admit to being most in awe of that particular dwarf. But heroes like Bofur who had mined in the great halls of Erebor with the rest of his family. Like Bombur who had a mother he loved more than anyone and lost in the fiery ruin of his home. Like Bifur who had come to help his only remaining kin and protected them, almost dying in the process. Like Dwalin and Balin who had fought in great and mighty battles. Like Fili and Kili who were raised with tales of their birthright, kings without a kingdom.

Bilbo Baggins suddenly felt smaller than he ever had in his life.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

I'm on tumblr at tevinter-trash.tumblr.com if anyone wants to hop on a veritable roller coaster of shitty post after shitty post!

Aside from the stray animal attack, the company was met with few challenges not inherent to travelling on the road. Of course it was just when the hobbit had begun to gain some semblance of confidence in his ability to keep himself not only alive on the road, but also useful to the others, that he found himself cursing any thought of leaving the Shire.

That particular day had started out as most had for the past few weeks. Thorin roused them at dawn, Bombur fixed them a hearty breakfast, and company had packed up their bags onto their ponies. Off they went with the usual amount of grumbles and sleepy sighs. This day, like the few before it, bore wind and rain without a glimpse of sunlight to be found.

The company had rather miserably bundled themselves up in their cloaks against the horrid weather but otherwise carried on as they normally would. Bilbo found himself at the front of the group, which was a very rare occurrence in itself as he often favored the back to chat with Gandalf or Bofur. Or even to share the notes he had been keeping in his journal with Balin. Fili and Kili had taken the front of the group as well, their keen eyesight used to guide the rest of the dwarves on the path through the lower mountains.

The narrow strand of flat dirt wound through trees against the small mountain. To their left was a thick brush of trees that rose up steeply with the side of the mountain. To their right was a sparse area of trees followed by about a twenty-foot steep incline that led into the next steppe of the mountain.

The path, Thorin had told their group as they set out, was notorious for robbers and raids given that once on it, a traveler would have only two options: to go forward or to turn back until they reached the lower ground of the forest that lay on the edge of the mountain pass. Bilbo should have known, should have known, that just when Thorin opened his big stupid mouth about attacks, fate would consider herself sorely tempted.

They had gotten about a few hours into their day's ride along the trail when Thorin shouted for a halt, having heard the shrill and blood-curdling cry of an orc. However, given the rain and the wind was so strong and their position as the official un-official scouts, Fili and Kili, trailed closely behind by Bilbo who had chosen that day of all the blasted days to ride a bit ahead of the group with them, heard absolutely nothing.

Unaware of the ambush that had taken place behind them, the young brothers and Bilbo continued to ride for another few minutes before chance decided that one Bilbo Baggins needed just a bit more excitement in his life.

An orc jumped out of from what seemed like the mist itself and knocked Kili off of his pony in a flurry of teeth and claws. Shouting in surprise, Kili reached for his sword but it was swiftly knocked from his grasp as the orc launched itself on top of the struggling dwarf. Hearing his brother's shout, Fili forced his pony around and yelled with fury as he saw Kili fighting tooth and nail with the larger orc.
Fili didn't have much time to react, however, as another orc jumped out from the trees. A bit quicker than his brother, Fili leapt off his own pony to the ground in order to gain better footing.

Myrtle, it seemed, had just about enough of this frightening business and chose that moment to rear up as Bilbo scrambled fruitlessly to maintain his grip and ended up falling back over the saddle onto the muddy ground.

Dazed for a few moments, Bilbo missed the next minute of action but from what he could tell through the confusion and rain, Fili had taken out his two swords and was making quick work of his assailant.

Bilbo sat up just in time to see the orc that had Kili underneath him was raising his own curved, wicked blade to bury it deep into the dwarf's chest before Fili gave a wild yell, beheading his orc and barreling into the one on top of his brother. The main problem with this, Bilbo's mind supplied rather unhelpfully as time seemed to slow down, was that there was quite a decent drop a scant few feet from where the brothers were fighting.

Bilbo let out a loud gasp, still dazed but attempting to scramble up just as he saw Fili connect with the orc as its armor-clad hand tightened on the neck of Kili's coat and all three tumbled out of view. Bilbo sat there in the rain and mud, shocked for a good few moments before he shook himself. He had -- he had to do something. The hobbit barely had time to think as yet another orc screeched and launched itself down the steep drop after its fellow.

Bilbo felt cold, clawing panic flood his stomach. As far as he could tell, the two dwarves had dropped down with an orc, a bloodthirsty, cruel orc and another one had followed it down to which Fili and Kili were currently unawares. A flash of silver caught Bilbo's eye, it was Kili's sword!

'Oh no,' thought Bilbo 'oh no!' He had to get Kili his sword or else they would be in even more trouble.

Making a split second decision that Bilbo knew he would regret almost immediately, the hobbit ran as quick as he could, grabbing the sword by the hilt as he passed, and slid feet first down the almost vertical mud-slicked drop after the brothers.

As he slid, Bilbo felt the rocks and other nasty forest things ripping his favorite trousers and into his skin. The slide was controlled for the first few seconds but, as he picked up speed, one of Bilbo's rather large feet hit a protruding root, causing him to turn sideways and then start rolling.

Bilbo was sure if he was not the hobbit being bruised and cut as he unceremoniously fell down the very steep hill, he might have found the sight humorous. However, as he finally slammed into the bottom of what appeared to be another path, Bilbo found exactly nothing funny about the pain shooting through every part of his body before he blacked out.

Head throbbing and vision swimming, Bilbo awoke to someone shaking him quite vigorously.

"What're you… what—" Bilbo slurred as he felt a hand grip him in what was probably the fiercest and closest hug anyone had given him.

"You saved him Master Baggins, you saved him!" Fili laughed into Bilbo's shoulder as the hobbit patted the dwarf gingerly, feeling increasingly confused.

"Thank Mahal you were here!" Fili continued to clutch the hobbit for another few moments before scrambling to his brother's unmoving side.

Bilbo blinked several times before noticing a sharp pain in his back. Looking down, the hobbit saw
that what he had landed on was not, in fact, the ground, but rather the orc that had followed Fili and Kili down the drop. While he tumbled down, clutching Kili's sword, Bilbo had apparently fallen right on the orc inadvertently stabbing it as he had been knocked out by the impact.

The hobbit shook his head in disbelief, not quite able to grasp what his life had become in the last few weeks. Sleeping outside and falling on orcs, what his father would have said, Bilbo did not even want to begin contemplating.

Bilbo reluctantly removed the sword from the motionless orc before he made his way over the two brothers. Fili was holding Kili's head, examining the other dwarf for wounds.

"Is he… is he alive?" Bilbo asked nervously, dreading the opposite. He felt sweet relief flood through him as Fili turned, giving him strained smile.

"Yes, he'll be fine the great lump, the fall must have knocked him out cold." Fili patted his brother's cheek, "The fool lost his sword in the first few seconds. Uncle is going to be absolutely livid."

Fili shuddered, most likely at the thought of Thorin seeing Kili unconscious with a giant, red bump on his head.

"Still," the dwarf muttered, "better than him being dead." Fili swatted his brother's head affectionately before laying him back on the ground and joining Bilbo.

Fili narrowed his eyes against the rain as he gazed up at the ledge.

"Well this is just perfect," the dwarf sighed before glancing sideways at Bilbo, "I think we're going to have to wait for Thorin and the others to get a rope and help us back up, this ledge is too long and too steep for us to manage. Especially with this unconscious oaf." He nudged Kili's limp form with his foot.

Bilbo frowned with worry, "I hope the rest of them are alright… I think there were more orcs than just these three…"

Fili patted Bilbo on the shoulder squeezing it gently. "They'll be fine Master Baggins, no orc would get the better of my uncle. Plus!" He added with somewhat forced bravado, "Gandalf is with them! Always good to have a wizard at one's back."

Bilbo still felt the worry gnaw at his chest most uncomfortably.

"Come on," he heard Fili mutter, turning to his brother. "Let's get Kili out of the mud at least. He'd end me if I let his precious bow got too dirty."

Bilbo and Fili waited at the base of the ledge with an unconscious Kili for any shout from the rest of their company. They only had to wait about twenty minutes before they heard the frantic shouting of Thorin Oakenshield.

"Kili! Fili! Where are you two damned ingrates? I swear if you don't answer me, by Durin's beard I'll wring your necks myself!"

The shouting stopped for a second before they heard crashing up above them, "Blast it! Hobbit! Where are you? Someone answer!"

Fili cupped his hands around his mouth before yelling back, "Down here!"

Silence fell again before they heard Bofur's muffled voice, "I think I heard somethin', everyone
quiet!"

Fili shouted once again before they saw Thorin's face, a mixture of worry, anger, and the blackest orc blood peek over the side.

"What in the name of Thrór are you fools doing all the way down there?"

Fili let out an irritated sigh. "Will you please get some rope and help us up, Uncle? Kili's been knocked out and we could do with some rest."

They saw Thorin slam his mouth shut and Bilbo swore he could hear their leader's teeth grinding from all the way down where he stood.

"Fine! But don't think I'm letting this go! Dís would have me skinned if she saw you two…" Thorin growled as he went out of sight again.

Bilbo glanced nervously at the blond dwarf, but he was met with the sight of Fili's almost constant smirk.

"Don't worry Master Baggins, Thorin gets like that when he's worried, best to just let it wash over you," Fili made a motion with his hands as if there were waves going over his head. They stood there for another minute before the end of a rope swung down.

"Send Kili up," came Thorin's shout from above.

Fili let out a little sigh as he turned to Bilbo. "If you'd be so kind Master Baggins, could you hold him up while I tie the rope?"

Bilbo shuffled over and helped Fili lift his brother to where the rope was still swaying. Together they held Kili up as Fili tied a snug knot around the younger dwarf's middle.

"Okay! Drag him up!" Fili shouted as he gave two quick tugs to the rope.

They watched as Kili was swiftly brought up the steep drop until the rope came down once again. "Alright Master Baggins, your turn." Fili said with a grin as he fitted the rope under the hobbit's arms and tied a tight knot.

Bilbo gasped as Fili finished it with a yank.

"Was that really necessary?" The hobbit grumbled as he was pulled up rather ungraciously.

"Sorry, didn't quite catch that!" He heard Fili call out with a laugh.

'Dwarves…' Bilbo thought indignantly as he shook his head before feeling a pair of large hands grip him around the waist and lift him up.

The hobbit was plopped down in front of a very angry looking Thorin Oakenshield who grabbed him by arms, quickly examining him for wounds.

"Are you injured?" Thorin asked gruffly still holding him tightly.

"Uh… No?" Bilbo looked around at the rest of the group, no one appearing especially injured which relieved him immensely.

"Then move out of the way," Thorin didn't wait for him to move and lifted Bilbo to stand beside where Kili was lying on the ground being examined by Gandalf.
Fili came up a few minutes later, a bit dirty but otherwise fine. The young dwarf was swiftly grabbed by his uncle and the two shared tight embrace before Thorin pulled his nephew away at arm's length to examine him.

"I'm fine, Uncle. It's Kili we should be looking at," Fili muttered with a small smile before glancing at his brother.

"He will be quite alright," said Gandalf calmly. "He'll be up when he's up, nothing to do for him now but make sure he's comfortable. Thorin, I suggest we make camp for the evening."

The company found a sheltered area after where the path curved downward and opened up into dense forest. There was a flurry of activity for another few hours as camp was set up, dinner made, and Kili tended to. The dwarf had yet to rise, but Gandalf said it was nothing to worry about, these things having a tendency to sort themselves with a bit of rest.

After dinner, when most of the dwarves had retired to their respective mats, Bilbo found himself watching over the still unconscious Kili with his ever-attentive brother. Fili had not left his brother's side and had made sure Kili was wrapped in blankets, weapons and clothes cleaned as best he could, and that food and water were ready for when his brother awoke.

"He will be alright, won't he?" Bilbo was not completely convinced, but after Fili had allowed him to clean and wrap Kili's head, the hobbit was put at least a little at ease.

"He'll be just fine, Master Baggins, he's just milking this for all it's worth. Just loves the attention, this one." Fili shot Bilbo a warm grin.

They sat in comfortable silence for a good few minutes before they heard the heavy footfalls of Thorin making his way over to them. Bilbo watched their leader warily as the dwarf prince knelt down next to his nephew with a look of deep concern on his face.

"Any changes?" Thorin questioned Fili with a frown.

"No, Uncle. Though I think he should wake soon."

Thorin continued to look at his nephew as if he could force the dwarf into consciousness through sheer willpower. Fili gently grasped his uncle's forearm. "I'll let you know as soon as he wakes. Go rest," he added quietly. Thorin gave a stiff nod before walking away towards his bedroll.

Bilbo glanced a little wide-eyed between Kili and Thorin, not having seen the stoic prince express any emotion so intensely before. At least not, uh, positive ones.

"He loves him," Bilbo shot his gaze toward Fili who was watching him with a small smile. "More than anything else, Thorin cares for my brother."

Bilbo thought he saw a hint of sadness in Fili's eyes but whatever it was, the flicker disappeared as the dwarf looked at Kili's peaceful face and it was instantly replaced by affection.

Bilbo felt a frown creep across his face. "Surely he cares for you equally… I mean, he is an uncle to you both."

Fili raised his eyebrows with a smile. "I do not mean that he does so consciously or with great disparity, but I am not blind nor am I naïve, Master Baggins. I know what I see."

For the first time since they had met, Bilbo saw in Fili something other than the easy grin that usually rested on the dwarf's face. Bilbo reached out and clasped Fili's arm, "I'm sure that's not true, I've seen..."
Fili let out a short laugh and put a gentle hand above Bilbo's.

"I did not mean to imply that I feel somehow cheated by it. I also love my brother above all things, how could I fault someone for doing the same?" Fili's mouth quirked up into a grin.

Bilbo gave him a sad smile. "Well, for what it's worth, I think you are mistaken."

They sat in silence for a few moments before Fili continued quietly. "Kili looks much more like our mother, Dís… Much more like a Durin for that matter, what with the dark hair and all."

Fili sat back against a large rock just behind him, "I've been told I look like my father."

Fili absentmindedly tugged at a blond braid that sat just by his ear. "Thorin didn't like him much I'm told, said he was never good enough for my mother."

Fili gazed at Fili, unused to the dwarf doing much more than laughing or pulling pranks. "Is… is light hair uncommon amongst your people? I haven't seen any other dwarf who look like you…"

There was a moment of silence before Bilbo added quickly. "Not that there's anything wrong with looking different! You'd, uh, you'd fit right in the Shire, with no doubt! Hobbits have all variety of coloring!" Bilbo felt his words spilling out, increasingly afraid he'd offended the dwarf.

Fili laughed at his obvious discomfort just as he laughed at most things that crossed his path. "Not at all, your words of inclusion are most kind and appreciated." Fili gave a mock half bow with an exaggerated flourish.

"As to your question… No, I suppose there are not many dwarves with light hair. My father was from a unique sect of dwarves that does not… comply, I suppose, with the traditional desire for great halls and a golden hoard."

Fili started absentmindedly tracing unknown runes into dirt beside him as he spoke. "They are a nomadic bunch, mostly hunters and leather workers. They ride great mountain rams and are nearly as skilled with a bow as the fair folk. While most dwarves are… confused by their lifestyle, they do bring resources to the mountain dwellers that they would not be able to get as easily otherwise, for all their reluctance to leave their halls."

Bilbo was absently gazing at the growing number of runes but listened attentively. "So they… They are traders?"

Fili nodded. "Of a sort, they work their leather and their cloth and travel from kingdom to kingdom, exchanging their wares for metal work and weapons that they cannot as easily make. Which is, in fact, how my mother met my father."

Bilbo looked up at Fili once again.

"But…" The hobbit was hesitant to go on, not wishing to offend the dwarf but his Took curiosity was as irresistible as ever. "You're royalty are you not? Shouldn't she have married a prince of some sort…?" Bilbo trailed off quietly.

"Quite right, Master Baggins," Fili chuckled ruefully. "My mother had all of Erebor in a right tizzy when she announced her betrothal to some wandering dwarf. See, you may not know this about us dwarves, but when we take a partner, we usually do so for the entirety of our lives. Dwarves take courting all very seriously because to express interest is not for a fleeting fancy, but an announcement
that you are willing to dedicate your life to another."

Bilbo sat wide-eyed, gazing at Fili but also eager to absorb any new information he could about his mysterious companions. "So… your mother, she was not supposed to marry your father?"

Fili grinned yet again, his teeth flashing. "Not even for a moment! She told me they met at one of the markets. He was selling the finest leatherwork she had seen in her entire life: beautiful and intricate bracers, clothes, and even jewelry. Dwarves don't often take to wearing the leather except for its uses in the smithy and coats, but I think my mother has a taste for the exotic, hence the attraction to the uh, well…” He made a vague gesture at his hair.

"Anyway, they met and she says they continued to talk," Fili gave Bilbo a salacious wink, "and eventually fell in love."

"She announced her betrothal and naturally just about every family member threatened to disown her, but she just turned up her nose and told them to stuff it. Even Thorin wouldn't speak to her for a long time."

Fili glanced at his uncle with an unreadable look. "But in the end, I think when he saw that they were truly in love, Thorin stood beside her. My great-grandfather decided to, well, not condone it per say, but at least he didn't glare at her every time she walked into a room."

Bilbo smiled at this, the thought of the Durin glare being a family trait amused him for some reason. "Did Thorin and your father ever end up getting along?"

Fili let out an amused grunt. "No… I don't suppose they did. Just too different I suppose. My uncle is all about the ruling and the responsibility and getting upset at the very mention of the word 'fun' whereas my father was more of a… free spirit, I think."

Bilbo tried to imagine Thorin with a large smile on his face but thought made his brain feel like it might fracture at the strain if he continued. "What happened to him? If you don't mind me asking…"

Fili's smile grew somber though it never left his face. "Not at all. It was a few years after the attack on Erebor. I was very young at the time and my mother was pregnant with Kili when it happened. We were traveling to the Blue Mountains with my uncle and the rest of the dwarves when we were attacked by a group of bandits."

Bilbo looked at Fili closely, wondering how someone so cheerful could know such hardship.

"It was no ones fault really, but I think Thorin blames himself. You've seen him, Master Baggins, he needs to protect everyone and bear every burden. My mother is a uniquely hardy dwarf so she never lets it show, but I know she misses my father every day. Even so, Thorin has in many ways become the father Kili and I never really had."

Fili looked at his uncle, who was still sitting across the camp participating in a marathon brooding session the likes of which Bilbo had yet to witness.

"I'm supposed to be king. When Thorin is gone, and if we take back Erebor, I'm supposed to rule our people. But in some ways, I think… I think Thorin always wanted Kili to be his heir."

The dwarf prodded his brother with his foot. "My father died before Kili knew him, so Thorin has always been the one he's admired. Have you seen Kili look at him?"

Fili let out a bright laugh. "It's like the sun shines out his arse, you couldn't tell him one thing against Thorin without incurring his righteous retribution."
Bilbo let out a small chuckle, it was true that the younger of the brothers did seem to try and emulate his uncle in every way he could.

"Kili is... Kili is quick to smile, quick to love, quick to anger but he just as soon forgives. It's impossible not to love someone so bright and full of life... Thorin is no exception."

Fili turned to Bilbo once more, "I think I remind him too much of what he's failed to do. Failed to protect. He couldn't save Erebor and in the end he couldn't save the thing his sister loved most."

Bilbo opened his mouth to object but Fili quickly cut in again. "Forgive me, Master Baggins, I phrased that poorly... I don't mean he does not love me, of course I don't think that, how could I given all he has done for me? But it is in Kili that his hope for the future of our people rests, and nothing, not even me, could be more important to him than that."

There was a brief silence before Fili continued quietly. "I want to thank you Master Baggins. For saving my brother today."

Bilbo flushed at the sudden turn in the conversation. "It was nothing, really. I just sort of, uh... fell at the right moment."

Fili scooted closer to him, looking at the hobbit deadly serious.

"You saved Kili's life. You saved mine. I don't know what... I couldn't live without him. I owe you a debt, Bilbo Baggins, one that will not go unpaid. Should you ever need me, at any time for any reason, I will come. You have earned a friend for life. I will not forget the courage and trueness of heart you have displayed."

Fili pulled Bilbo into a tight hug for the second time that day. Having heard the dwarf's story and knowing how deeply Fili felt for his family, Bilbo gripped back just as hard, hoping to convey some of the swelling affection he felt in his chest.

They heard a gurgling come from somewhere next to them and then a loud groan. Fili immediately dropped his arms and scrambled back to his brother's side. "Kili! Wake up, brother, you've rested long enough."

The younger dwarf made another pained noise before swatting at his brother's face. "Why do I feel as if I've had a tankard of ale and gone a few rounds with Dwalin?"

Fili and Bilbo both laughed as Kili sat up slowly, eyes focusing on the two smiling faces. "Well? Is anyone going to tell me what happened? It was noon a moment ago..."

"Kili!" Thorin came running over seeing his nephew getting up, gathering him into a fierce hug. "Do you feel alright?"

Kili winced and gasped for air. "Easy, Uncle! Easy! I can hardly get a breath with you squeezing like that! I'm fine!"

Thorin sat back immediately, glancing at Bilbo as if challenging him to say something. Bilbo simply sighed and raised his hands in placation, too relieved that Kili was finally awake to be worried about Thorin and his moods.

"Fili, I would like to know what happened this morning," Thorin addressed his nephew.

"Me as well, brother! I'm all fuzzy after breakfast," Kili added with a whine.
"Nothing too exciting," Fili grinned, "an orc came out of the tree and jumped you on your pony, Kili. You lost your sword and were struggling with it when another one of those beasts appeared and attacked me. I believe then Master Baggins here fell off his horse," Fili winked at him as Thorin muttered something that sounded suspiciously like 'of course' and Bilbo just treated them with a rather rude hand gesture.

"I finished off my orc and tackled the other one and we all fell off the ledge."

Thorin crossed his arms looking far from pleased. "You should have known better than to do something so reckless near a drop like that, Fili."

Fili nodded with a small shrug. "Then another orc came down the ledge after us but I was occupied with the second one and didn't have time to get between it and my unconscious prat of a brother. Which is when –" Fili made a mock bow towards him again, "Master Baggins was so gracious as to come to our rescue and stabbed the orc before it could touch Kili."

That wasn't… quite how Bilbo remembered it, what little he did remember.

"I mean, that's not really what—" Bilbo began but was interrupted by his third dwarf hug of the day. This was clearly becoming an issue.

Kili clutched him tightly and then held him at arms length. "I knew bringing you along was a wise choice, Master Boggins!"

Grinning in the way that only Kili could, Bilbo couldn't help but smile back at the dwarf's infectious enthusiasm. "You have my thanks, truly! My fine hobbit friend," Kili slung his arm around Bilbo's shoulder, "you have earned a friend for life! We Durins take these sorts of things seriously, don't we Uncle?"

Thorin looked on in what Bilbo could only describe as disapproving in manner, but conceded a small nod.

"See! Even the great Thorin Oakenshield acknowledges this debt! You will forever be a friend of Durin, Bilbo Boggins!"

The hobbit flushed a deep shade of red at Kili's words, but smiled at the two brothers, feeling that he was finally earning his place in the company.
Thorin Oakenshield's company continued much as they had the past few weeks. After the ordeal at the mountain, the group had moved off of the more mountainous terrain to travel through forests and hills.

Bilbo Baggin's was having mixed feelings, which was unusual for him. In the Shire, if Bilbo didn't want to do something, he wouldn't. If something annoyed him, the hobbit would grumble for a few minutes and then either fix it or move on, none of this continuous torture that the adventuring seemed to contain.

Despite the lack of a comfortable bed, familiar neighbors, and the delightful normalcy of routine, Bilbo found that if he didn't think about the soreness of his legs from pony riding, the constant rumbling of his stomach without his regular seven meals a day, and the appalling state of his wardrobe; he could at least try pretend everything was as it should be.

If Bilbo prided himself on anything so far on this journey, it would be his ability to push all the uncomfortable experiences into tiny, little boxes that he shoved deep into the back of his mind, never to be reexamined except for very late at night when he needed a good pity session.

Bilbo found himself more often than not flanked on either side by the brothers during their travels. Dwarves, it appeared, took this whole live saving business very seriously. Which confused Bilbo, who still thought he hadn't done anything especially heroic. Still, their friendship was a welcome one to the hobbit who had been feeling increasingly lonely.

They often tried to include Bilbo in their pranks and even when the hobbit tried to refuse, the dwarves merely laughed and each hooked an arm around one of his own and dragged their reluctant companion along anyway.

The more time he spent with the two youngest of Durin's Folk, Bilbo felt his affection for them grow. He hadn't begun the journey with the dwarves expecting to make any lifelong friends, especially given their initial reception of him, but in their two wide, grinning faces, Bilbo saw a strength of spirit that he couldn't help but admire.

They were setting up camp one night when Bilbo first truly felt the chill of autumn start to nip at his skin. The blanket that his mother had made him, though warm, was not enough to keep the cold out.

The company had finished dinner and most of the dwarves had either gone to sleep or sat quietly in their own thoughts. None of the dwarves, nor Gandalf, had expressed any discomfort at the ending of the summer nights, so Bilbo knew any of his complaints would be met with a rolling of eyes and advice to 'buck up, Master Hobbit.'

'It must be the beards and all that hair,' mused Bilbo as he wrapped himself tightly and gazed longingly at the fire, hoping to will some of its heat over to his stiffening limbs.

Thorin, as usual, sat near the fire keeping the first watch while his nephews were away scouting the area for the best route to take the following morning. Bilbo discreetly watched the dwarf prince from
across the camp trying to figure out just how exactly to become, if not friends, then at least cordial.

Bilbo thought of himself as a goal oriented hobbit. It was the stubborn Took in him, he supposed. Once he set his mind to something, very little could persuade him otherwise, thus bringing Bilbo to what he referred to in his mind as his 'little project.'

The hobbit had hoped since their leader’s nephews were now clearly fond of Bilbo, that Thorin would at least attempt to not frown at him all the time. Oh how wrong he was, Bilbo thought disappointedly, how very, very wrong…

It shouldn’t have surprised him that Thorin's friendship was hard won, but Bilbo couldn’t squash out that little spark of hope he felt that his smiles would now be returned instead of sneered at.

If anything, the hobbit's newly forged companionship with Thorin’s nephews made the dwarf dislike him even more. There seemed to now be a constant look of disapproval when he caught the three laughing amongst each other. Fili and Kili assured him that was due to their uncle being ‘jealous because he secretly wanted to have fun with the rest of them but had an image to uphold.’

Bilbo had laughed with the brothers at the thought, but also felt his stomach turn uncomfortably. He hoped that he wasn't breaking some dwarf taboo about a commoner associating with princes… The two brothers were about as fun loving and mischievous as any hobbit he had met, but Bilbo had read enough of the stories that resided in Bag End to know that kings and princes lived by a different sort of rules.

Rolling onto his back, Bilbo accepted that with the cold being like it was that evening, he would not be falling asleep anytime soon.

The hobbit had hoped to make at least some progress on his 'little project' since the night where he had taken care of Thorin's wounds. Bilbo thought he had maybe impressed the dwarf a small bit and perhaps even earned a little respect, but Thorin was a dwarf of few words and those he did choose were rarely directed at the hobbit except to offer what Bilbo thought was wholly unnecessary criticism.

Thorin seemed to think that even the smallest action would somehow end in Bilbo fatally wounding himself or that his distasteful hobbit ways might rub off on his nephews leaving them as soft and helpless as Bilbo knew the prince saw him.

It was hard for Bilbo not give Thorin a piece of his mind, despite knowing that not all of his precious limbs were likely to escape that encounter intact. One of the few things that stayed Bilbo's tongue were Bofur and the brothers' kind words and friendly comforts after Thorin's scathing remarks.

The hobbit knew based on his conversations with those particular dwarves that Thorin, despite all the harsh words, did care deeply and intensely for all the dwarves in his company.

With that bit of knowledge kept close to his heart, Bilbo decided that no matter how long it took, he would prove to Thorin that he was worthy member of this company and that with every glare the dwarf gave him, Bilbo would give a smile in return, no matter how forced it looked.

This tactic seemed to amuse Fili and Kili greatly, both of whom caught on quickly and would try to intentionally goad the hobbit into one of his now infamous rants. But! Bilbo was determined while in Thorin's presence to not let his frustration show and would settle for discreetly kicking their shins in retaliation.

Bilbo's musing was interrupted by the return of Fili and Kili to the camp. They looked tired in the
firelight but were laughing with each other as usual as Bilbo watched them walk up to their uncle. "We checked out the path and along the sides," began Fili who adjusted the various knives on his person.

"And it looks like it should be all clear for tomorrow!" Finished Kili with a bright smile on his face, pleased that the scouting had gone without so much as a hiccup.

Thorin looked at his nephews, a rare and small smile on his face. "Very well, go get some sleep the both of you."

Fili and Kili grinned at each other. "Good night, Uncle," they said simultaneously.

Bilbo thought he would never get used to their uncanny ability to say the same thing at the same time with frightening accuracy and frequency.

The hobbit closed his eyes hoping sleep would come to him soon, if only so that he wasn't conscious of the cold any longer. That was until he heard two pairs of footsteps grow louder until they stopped right by where he was trying to rest.

"Do you think he's asleep?" He heard Kili not quite whisper.

"Hm… I think I saw his eyes open a second ago but now I'm not so sure," Fili answered his brother quietly.

"Look at the poor little fellow, he's shaking like a leaf in the winter wind!" Bilbo heard Kili say with mock pity and with that he frowned.

Finally opening his eyes to look at their grinning faces. "You are aware that I can hear both of you…"

They laughed in unison. "Of course Master Boggins, we just wanted to see how long it would take you to respond!"

Fili glanced at his brother then down at the hobbit again. "But you do look rather cold, my friend."

Bilbo was touched by his concern but he was equally determined to not let his discomfort show, especially while Thorin was still in earshot.

"All is well," Bilbo smiled, though somewhat unconvincingly due to the shake in his shoulders. "I'm just not quite used to this weather yet. Autumn has taken me a bit unawares, but I'm sure I'll be used to it soon enough."

Fili and Kili looked at Bilbo with matching frowns, then at each other, then back to the hobbit again. Bilbo felt his confusion grow as the silence stretched and the two brothers appeared to be doing their unique brand of silent communication.

"Alright it's settled then!" Kili's smile broke widely as he settled his pack to the spot directly on Bilbo's left.

The hobbit's forehead creased, unsure what, exactly, had been settled between them without having used any words. "What are you –"

Fili interrupted him as he dropped his pack on Bilbo's right. "Well, Master Baggins, we can't have
our burglar freezing during the night! Especially not when you've been so useful recently." The blond dwarf gave him a conspiratorial wink.

It finally dawned on Bilbo that two brothers were planning on sleeping next to him. Right next to him. On either side. Bilbo's eyes widened in horror as he imagined Thorin's face and inevitable disembowelment that would follow. He glanced from Thorin, whose gaze was currently set on the forest opposite of where they were to shifting between the two brothers.

"Uh, well, not that… not that I don't appreciate the offer or anything but, uh, but wouldn't… wouldn't Thorin be, I don't know, absolutely furious?" Bilbo ground out trying to sound sarcastic but as he felt the words pass his mouth, the hobbit realized with disappointment he sounded just as nervous as he felt.

"Nonsense, Master Boggins!" Kili rolled over to face him on his mat, a blanket pulled over his body. "Our uncle is a practical dwarf and will surely understand just how practical not letting you turn into a hobbit icicle overnight is."

Bilbo frowned, not even in the slightest seeing the logic to that argument, but as usual, found it hard to disagree with Kili when he got all enthusiastic. Bilbo turned his neck to look at Fili who merely shrugged and grinned as if to say, 'can't argue with that.'

Bilbo frowned, facing the night sky again and for the umpteenth time marveled at how strange his life had become.

"That is unless…" The hobbit heard Kili begin and turned his face to look at the younger dwarf, "we are making you nervous Master Boggins…" Kili gave him a comically large wink before the two brothers burst into laughter.

"Oh come now brother, I'm sure Master Baggins has parade of lovely hobbit lasses wishing to come share covers with him to stave off the cold." Fili added, his voice light and teasing.

"Tell us, have you a pretty hobbit to pass the winter nights with back in the shire?" Bilbo felt his face redden as he gave Kili one of his most fearsome Baggins glares.

"That is – that is completely irrelevant." The hobbit spluttered trying to sound impressive but utterly failing. "And keep your dwarf noses out of my business, though I know that might be a bit hard considering how ridiculously large they are!"

Fili and Kili laughed loudly as Bilbo reddened even more, crossing him arms in a huff.

"Oh my, Kili, I think we may have offended him!" Fili gave Bilbo a playful shove with his shoulder.

"Well then Fili, we of course must make amends!"

"Our deepest and most since apologies," Kili began trying to keep a straight face.

"And our everlasting promise to keep our, what did you say? Oh yes, our 'large dwarf noses' strictly in our own business," Fili finished not even attempting to pretend there wasn't a large grin on his face.

Bilbo still refused to look at them, trying to will the red from his face. "Apology accepted. Though I retain the right to inform your uncle how un-princely his nephews have behaved."

Fili chuckled as he gave Bilbo a knowing look. "A most fearsome threat indeed, but I think in order to follow through you might have to actually talk to him to report us."
"You make a… you make a convincing argument," Bilbo muttered conceding the gaping flaw in his threat.

"Glad to see you can be shown reason," Fili grinned as he scooted close to the hobbit. Bilbo shivered again as a gust of wind blew across their camp.

The hobbit felt the blanket being pulled up and the edges of two more thrown over him as Fili and Kili situated themselves closely to the hobbit on either side. Soon, with their combined heat under the blankets, the two dwarves and Bilbo were huddled together and feeling comfortably warm.

The hobbit smiled, thinking of the Fili and Kili and what their friendship had begun to mean to him.

"Good night," he said quietly before adding an almost silent, "and thank you."

"Good night, Master Baggins." They said together before silence fell over the camp once again.

Bilbo thought he felt eyes upon him and looked towards the fire to see Thorin gazing where his nephews lay on either side of the hobbit, an unreadable expression on his face.

They held eye contact for a few long moments. Bilbo was unsure if he was about to be reprimanded, but then saw Thorin let out a sigh and shake his head minutely, breaking their eye contact, and turning to watch the forest once more.

Bilbo smiled again to himself, perhaps Thorin was as his nephew said: a practical man. And so began a trend that continued from that night on. Whenever it was cold, Bilbo, Fili, and Kili would huddle together sharing blankets and stories until sleep took them under the watchful eye of Thorin Oakenshield.
This was not happening. There was no way Bilbo Baggins was listening to this – this complete and utter nonsense.

"No, no, this will work!" Kili reassured the hobbit in hushed tones. "You're so small they won't even see you coming!"

Bilbo closed his eyes, fighting simultaneous urges to throttle the two dwarves pushing him to reclaim their lost ponies and to shake in fear at the thought of getting anywhere near the three trolls sitting in the clearing that lay far, far too close for Bilbo's liking.

"Really now," Bilbo ground out turning between the brothers, "I know going to Thorin would be undoubtedly unpleasant in every possible meaning of the word, but I really do not think that we should be doing this alone!" The hobbit glared at them for good measure. "That I should be doing this alone!"

Fili and Kili glanced at each other clearly still considering sending their burglar after the lost ponies to be a more favorable solution than going to their uncle.

"Oh come on!" Bilbo cried in exasperation, "You two cannot possibly think this is a good idea!"

"Well…" Fili and Kili said in unison trailing off and looking not at all convinced in turning this conversation in a direction Bilbo was more comfortable with.

"We'll be right behind you, Master Baggins," began Fili putting a hand on Bilbo's shoulder.

"That's right, Master Boggins, no need to take drastic measures! Just sneak on over there all… sneaky-like! You can tell us what the lay of the camp is and then I promise we'll go get Thorin," Kili finished with a smile the hobbit thought was far too confident given their current situation.

Bilbo's mouth hung open in disbelief that this was happening. That this was going to happen. With soup in his hands.

"I… I…Oh alright! I will take a look, and only a look, but then I am coming right back and you two better be waiting!"

With that Bilbo shoved the two bowls into their stomachs and turned with a huff. The hobbit knew he had to start moving before his brain had time to catch up with his feet.

Bilbo felt Fili's hand on his shoulder as he stalked away from them. "If you get in trouble, hoot once like a brown owl, then twice like a barn owl! We'll come find you."

Bilbo just nodded trying to keep him mind blank and took a large gulp. The hobbit knew he had to start moving before his brain had time to catch up with his feet.

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Feeling hopelessly out of options and hearing the frightened sounds of Myrtle and the other ponies being unceremoniously shoved into a pen, Bilbo pushed on as quietly as he could.

The hobbit was relieved to find that perhaps Gandalf was right in saying he had some hitherto undiscovered talents and that one of them just might be sneaking. Bilbo reached the edge of the camp and eyed the pen the ponies were restlessly trotting around in.

There appeared to be several thick ropes wound tightly around wooden posts stuck deep into the ground. From what Bilbo could tell, there was no way he was going to get through that rope without the help of a knife or something distinctly sharper than his hobbit teeth.

The trolls were thankfully busy arguing with each other. Bilbo thought he heard something about snot and squirrel droppings but deciding his stomach couldn't take anything more upsetting or stressful, the hobbit blocked out what the trolls were saying as best he could.

Bilbo crept along the ground now on all fours. The great shadows of the trolls provided him with some much-needed cover to hide in as he slowly put one hand in front of the other. Scanning the camp for something sharp, Bilbo felt his hand grip something that felt suspiciously like a bone.

Bilbo took several deep breaths to steady himself and squeezed his eyes shut. 'Calm down you foolish Baggins, of course this isn't a bone!' The hobbit almost let out a hysterical laugh, 'nope, no, not here, these are trolls not orcs! Much more civilized! No unsavory people bits in these parts!'

Bilbo opened his eyes a fraction and raised his hand. 'And that is… Yes, that is a bone. A very large, human sized bone.'

The hobbit fought the urge to gag as he tossed the bone away as if it had burned him. It was in that moment that Bilbo Baggins realized that he was very much alone. Alone in a camp with three massive trolls and not even so much as a toothpick to defend himself.

Now shaking slightly with fear, Bilbo resumed his search for something sharp with an even greater urgency. That was when he spotted it: a large, curved, and crudely made knife sticking out of one of the trolls' belt.

Scrambling to position himself behind the smallest of the three trolls, Bilbo made several grabs trying to reach part of the knife he could grasp without cutting himself. The troll sat up suddenly forcing Bilbo to fall back, his heart just about stopped in fear as for a brief second he thought he was surely caught.

The troll simply proceeded to scratch himself before settling back down on its rock. Bilbo clutched his heart in relief, blood rushing in his ears and blocking all noise. He took in a few short, shuddering breaths to try and calm himself once again.

'That is it Bilbo Baggins! Pull yourself together and get this done!' Bilbo thought as he scrunched his face determination. This was no place to let his faithful pony Myrtle meet her end and he would be damned if he let that happen while he could have done something to stop it!

Creeping back up behind the troll with renewed courage, the hobbit slowly stood to get a good grip on the knife in order to pull it loose. What he most certainly wasn't expecting was a loud sneeze and an even larger troll hand wrapped around his middle.
If the sudden yank and rather undignified yelp Bilbo let out wasn't horrible enough, the next few seconds being pressed against one of the most disgusting faces the hobbit had ever seen and subsequently used as a – as a *handkerchief*, of all things, were possibly the most unpleasant he had ever experienced.

The sensation of wet, sticky troll snot being wiped all over his face and clothes would haunt Bilbo's dreams for many, many years to come.

What happened next, Bilbo wasn't quite sure. One second he was being used in one of the most unsavory and nauseating ways he could conceive, the next he was being thrown to the ground.

The hobbit blinked a few times as he tried to sit up quickly. "Wha—Wha do yer think it is?" The smaller troll asked the others, its expression looking both shocked and frightened at the prospect that this thing had come out of its nose.

"I'm a— I'm a burglar—" Bilbo began before he quickly stopped realizing that announcing your intention to *steal* to three trolls was probably a tad bit unwise, "—hobbit." He finished rather lamely, cursing his inability to think quickly.

The three trolls looked at him rather stupidly. "A wha?" The middle one asked, looking to his fellows, "wha'sa burglahobbit? Neva heard of one of thems before…"

The troll that appeared to be in charge ignored his clearly less intellectually inclined partners. "I wonder if we can cook it, maybe there be more-a them 'round these parts for us to get a nice crunch."

The smaller troll looked between the leader and Bilbo hopefully. "Ohh, yes! Yes! Maybe if we gots enoughs of thems, we coulds be gettin' a good pie!"

The middle troll moved forward and stuck his face frighteningly close to the hobbit. "So, are there any more of ya's hiding in the trees, hm?"

Bilbo quickly scrambled backwards, trying to put some much desired distance between the rank stench emanating from the troll's mouth and his suffering nose. "Nope, no more, none of me! I'm the only – the only one around here—" Bilbo began nervously raising his hands in placation before he felt a troll hand grasp his middle again.

"He's lyin'," growled the middle troll.

"Oh, oh put his toes over the fire!" cried the smallest one excitedly, "Make 'im squeal!"

Bilbo was thrust over the incredibly large pot of… well, whatever mysterious *substance* they thought was stew. The hobbit struggled for all he was worth, feeling the stifling heat of the fire more and more as the trolls argued amongst themselves.

Bilbo tried to kick and bite his way out of the large fist that held him, but it seemed to the hobbit that for all his efforts, he was little more than a tiny mouse already half swallowed by a cat.

Squeezing his eyes shut, desperately trying to think of something, *anything* that could help him, Bilbo thought he almost imagined the familiar voice shouting.

"Put. Him. Down!"

The hobbit's eyes flew open and he was greeted with the sight of Kili, wonderful, brave, *amazing* Kili coming to his rescue and facing down three massive trolls all by himself.
'Wait,' Bilbo thought, 'by himself? Oh well this was just perfect. Why didn't the dwarf bring his fool brother along? And maybe one or two of the fighters at least. He's going to be killed!' Bilbo felt his panic grow exponentially.

The hobbit was about to yell at the dwarf to run before he was turned into a fine paste by one of the troll's monstrous feet, when the most welcome sight he had ever seen in his life came bursting through the brush.

Thorin ran in the camp with a fearsome yell and in that moment, the fire reflecting off of his eyes, Bilbo saw the warrior of legend that brought hundreds of orcs to their knees. Allowing hope to fill in his chest, Bilbo almost didn't even mind being thrown to the ground for the second time in ten minutes.

Except this time, instead of hitting hard soil, Bilbo collided with a very surprised Kili. With a large 'oof' and a tangle of limbs, Bilbo and Kili collapsed to the floor as the rest of their company swarmed around them, making for the trolls with their weapons raised.

Feeling slightly dazed, Bilbo looked up to see Kili giving him a lopsided grin. The idiot had the nerve to smile at him at a time like this. "Are you alright Master Boggins? I told you we'd come for —"

Bilbo interrupted the dwarf with a swift and, to his immense pleasure, hard punch to Kili's shoulder. "You are the most foolhardy, thick-headed, clod I have ever had the terrible misfortune of meeting!" They looked at each other for a brief second before Bilbo continued to give Kili a fierce hug, "Thank you for saving me!" The hobbit let out a strangled laugh filled with a mixture of relief and agitation.

Kili just continued to grin. "What're friends for, eh? We get each other into messes and we get each other out! Now hurry up and get to safety, we'll take care of the trolls." The dwarf pulled them both up and winked as he ran in to join his brother and uncle taking on the leader of the trolls.

Bilbo was caught between not wanting to leave his friends to face this mess by themselves and knowing he really couldn't do much to help. The hobbit was about to scramble back to cover when he heard the familiar whinnying of Myrtle.

The ponies!

Bilbo made up his mind in a split second. He came here to make sure their ponies were freed and so free ponies they would have! The hobbit made his way around the edge of the fray hoping to stay out of the way of any combat.

That was until he saw something that made his heart sink. Dori, Nori, and Ori were battling the smallest troll on the edge of camp closest to the horses. Dori and Nori had been engaging the troll at its trunk-like legs, slashing and beating the limbs while dodging between their frantic movements. Ori, with his tiny slingshot, was pelting the creature's face from afar, pushing it into furious rage.

The troll took one giant sweep of its club and caught Dori and Nori as they attempted to dodge blow, but not quite making it out of the way in time. The two dwarves were thrown to the ground by the force, momentarily incapacitated. The troll took the opportunity to let out a fearsome shriek as it lurched towards a very frightened Ori.

The troll advanced, raising its club as Ori tried to back away but caught his foot on a protruding branch causing him to fall backwards. Bilbo's eyes widened in horror as he heard Dori and Nori yell as the club started to fall towards their brother.
Bilbo, who had been standing frozen in shock but unnoticed by the troll, took one look at Ori’s face full of fear. The hobbit shot out as quick as he could, not taking a second to consider how poorly this could end for him, and launched himself towards the young dwarf. As soon as he connected, the impact of his tackle forced them both just barely out of the way. The club shattered the ground where Ori had been laying mere moments ago.

The troll let out a furious shriek having been denied its prey, but was immediately distracted again by Dori and Nori having rejoined the battle.

Bilbo quickly looked down at Ori who seemed more than a little in shock.

"Are you all right, Ori?" The hobbit gave his companion a shake to the shoulders.

"I… uh, I think so." The dwarf replied in a quiet voice.

The hobbit let out a sigh of relief, releasing Ori as he stood up.

"I need to go get the ponies. I think – I think you should go find somewhere safe for a bit. No sense heading back in quite yet," Bilbo looked down at Ori who simply nodded, still not having had processed what just happened.

Bilbo gave Ori’s shoulder a comforting squeeze before spotting the troll knife on the ground mere feet from the makeshift pen the ponies were in. 'Finally some luck!' Bilbo made a quick dash to pick up the crude tool.

Handling the knife with two arms, Bilbo sawed through the rope in a short minute and the ponies, sensing their freedom, took off around him into the woods as soon as he was done cutting.

Finally ready to find somewhere safe and never leave that sport ever, Bilbo felt a troll hand grip him again. 'Really now,' he thought bitterly as the hand squeezed him, 'can't they just leave me on the ground for a moment?'

The action seemed to go from blindingly fast to a sickening halt as the hobbit felt each of his limbs being gruffly pulled away from his body.

"Drop yer weapons!" Shouted the lead troll. "Or we'll snap 'im in two!"

Bilbo glanced down to see the dwarves halt in their wild swinging. Fili and Kili's faces were twin in horror as they saw their friend dangling at the mercy of the trolls.

"I said. Drop. Yer. Weapons," growled the troll once again but this time giving Bilbo a threatening yank to show he meant business. The hobbit couldn't help but wince and give a small yelp at the pain.

He looked down at the dwarves again and saw Thorin's eyes flicker as he clenched his teeth, but remain otherwise stoic. Bilbo was about to tell them to keep fighting when the dwarf prince stuck his blade into the ground with his eyes flashing, seething anger laying just beneath their cold, blue surface.

Seeing their leader's example, the other dwarves dropped their weapons.

What happened next was like something from Bilbo's childhood storybooks. The ones that were almost too fantastic to be even remotely considered real. And yet, here he was, watching half the company being turned slowly on a spit over a raging fire, waiting to be cooked and eaten.
The other half, which included Bilbo, lay just nearby all stuffed rather ungracefully into burlap sacks and tossed upon one another. 'Well this,' Bilbo thought to himself, 'could not possibly get any worse.'

'Think, Bilbo, think! What would mother do in this situation?' Belladonna Took was known for her quick wit and always being able to think on her toes, but at the moment the hobbit hadn't ever felt more slow and sluggish in his life.

Bilbo knew he couldn't just sit around and wait for something to dawn on him. 'Wait,' he thought slowly, 'what had Gandalf told him about trolls and sunlight?' Then it hit him like the fist of an angry orc.

'The dawn!' It was almost morning, Bilbo just had to buy time. He just had to distract the trolls long enough for the sun to rise.

Jumping up as quickly as he could and ignoring the look of incredulity on Thorin's face, Bilbo hopped his way over to the fire before calling out to the trolls.

"I wouldn't—I wouldn't do that if I were you!"

The trolls stopped their bickering to look at him, shocked that their meal had the audacity to talk to them.

"You can't reason with them, lad, they're halfwits!" Bilbo heard Dori's muffled cry over the crackling fire.

"Well, what's that make us then?" Replied Bofur irritably, the dwarves all visibly starting to sweat.

The trolls continued to look at him expectantly. "You have to… uh, you have to season them properly," Bilbo laughed nervously. "Have you smelt this lot? I wouldn't plate them with naught but their clothes and stench!"

The two smaller trolls seemed to be buying his farce, though the leader still looked unimpressed. Bilbo scrambled to continue, "That's, uh, well you see, there's a special technique to cooking dwarf!"

The largest troll crossed its massive arms and made a face Bilbo could only liken to a frown. "Well, wuh is it then? How does the burglahobbit think we should be cookin' dwarves?"

Bilbo looked around the camp for something to give him a hint as his mind went unhelpfully blank. "Well you see… the key to cooking any good dwarf is to… is to…" The hobbit floundered until his gaze rested on the knife he had used earlier. "The key is to skin them!"

The dwarves seemed to all raise a simultaneous shout of indignation, clearly not catching onto what Bilbo was trying to do. He heard Dwalin yell something about not forgetting this betrayal but Bilbo didn't have much time to acknowledge it as poor Bombur was hoisted up by the smallest troll.

"Well I've never 'ad any skinned dwarf before," sneered the troll as it dangled Bombur in front of its grotesque face. "Grab me my skinnin' knife!"

Bilbo felt the now familiar sensation of panic squeeze at his gut and shouted without thinking. "I wouldn't eat that one if I were you!"

The troll paused his swinging of Bombur for a brief spell to look at the hobbit with agitation. "An' why not?"

"Because… Because he's got…" Bilbo could feel how ludicrous this was going to sound as soon as
he thought it but plunged on hoping dawn was fast approaching. "Because he's got worms in his… tubes..."

"Wha – got worms in 'is where?"

The troll looked at Bilbo stupidly before Bilbo continue hurriedly. "In fact, they all have them! They're infested with parasites!" Bilbo leaned forward, hushing his voice in mock conspiracy. "It's a terrible business. I wouldn't risk it, I really wouldn't."

"Did he say parasites?"

Bilbo heard the gruff voice of Oin from somewhere in the dwarf pile behind him. "Yeah! We don't have parasites!" Kili's voice joined with Oin's in outrage. "You have parasites!"

Bilbo closed his eyes praying for patience, 'of all of the thick-skulled dwarves…' Then Bilbo heard a grunt and briefly looked back in time to see Thorin giving Kili a swift kick to shut him up. At least one Durin had some scrap of sense.

There was a brief silence in which Bilbo pleaded with the night that the dwarves would catch on soon.

"I've… I've got parasites as big as my arm!" He heard Oin shout before Kili joined in quickly. "Mine are the biggest parasites! I've got huge parasites!"

'Well,' Bilbo thought with exasperation, 'you couldn't fault Kili for his enthusiasm…'

His ruse appeared to work briefly as Bombur was tossed from the troll's grasp back onto the pile of dwarves, who all groaned in pain at the impact. The three trolls broke into another argument, when Bilbo thought he saw a flash of grey whip by on the hill next to them. Oh how he hoped that was Gandalf returning, they could use him now more than ever.

The trolls continued their bickering for another minute before the leader shouted in frustration.

"Enough! Don' think I don' know what yer Doin'." He growled at Bilbo. Turning to his fellows he spoke with command, "Let's keep cookin' I don' fancy meetin' daylight today."

Apparently his jig was up and the trolls weren't going to let him be a distraction anymore. Bilbo scrunched his eyes, wracking his brain for something useful he could use.

That was when a booming voice came out from behind them. "Let the dawn take you!"

Gandalf! The wizard had returned to them! Bilbo let out a relieved sigh, hoping this business would be over sooner rather than later with a conjuror in their midst.

"Wha' is that?" Grumbled one of the trolls as it strained its gaze to make out the wizard. "Can we eat it?"

Gandalf raised his staff and brought it down upon the boulder, a resounding crack echoed through the clearing as the rock split into two, flooding everyone who stood in the camp with the early light of day.

The trolls let out horrible shrieks as their flesh turned to stone, faces contorted in pain, frozen in silent screams for the rest of time.

Bilbo felt a rush of relief flood through him and struggled to get out of his sack. After a minute of
wriggling, the hobbit finally freed himself and made his way over to the pile of dwarves, assisting Kili in turning his brother around onto his back.

"Are you all unharmed?" Bilbo quickly checked over the dwarves who were still struggling with their bags and not assisting the number of their company who were being helped off the spit.

"We are fine." The rumble of Thorin's voice came from a few feet away as Bilbo looked away from examining a cut of Fili's face to meet their leader's eyes. "No thanks to you, burglar."

Bilbo frowned about to protest Thorin's caustic words before the dwarf continued. "Next time we lose our ponies, don't listen to these two fools," Thorin gestured towards his nephews, "you come and find me, is that clear?"

The hobbit continued to frown in indignation, but was cut off from making a remark. "Is that clear?"

Thorin was clearly not leaving this issue up for debate, so Bilbo shot him a stiff nod before turning back to Fili's cut. Thorin stood there for a moment longer, not moving a muscle, before letting out a great huff and stalking away to help his comrades.

Fili let out a laugh before exchanging a knowing look with his brother. "Don't worry Master Baggins, he's just showing he cares is all." Kili grinned at the hobbit, "I think you did rather finely today! Excluding you getting caught by those trolls about half a dozen times, of course."

Bilbo shot Kili a scathing look. "That is a gross exaggeration. It was only three times, thank you very much."

Fili and Kili laughed as they clapped him on a shoulder each. "Lets get cleaned up. You smell rather a lot like troll, Master Baggins, no offense meant of course" Fili smiled as he and his brother pushed Bilbo out of the clearing to a nearby stream.

As Bilbo scrubbed the troll snot out of his jacket, he let the rush and excitement of the battle finally wash over him. While nothing could replace quiet evenings after a good meal tucked up with an even better book, Bilbo could maybe, just maybe, see a small, tiny, infinitesimal appeal to this whole adventuring business.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Just very quick note, I saw there a review re: Kili's use of Boggins vs. Baggins. I've been spelling it like that intentionally cause in the movie when Bilbo opens the door to Bag End, it sounds like Kili says Boggins and not Baggins. My head cannon is that Bilbo would be all like "Kili stfu its Baggins not Boggins you little twat" to which Kili, being the little shit he is, would go out of his way to mispronounce his name until the end of time. So it is intentional and not me butchering the name of the main character thankfully ;) Enjoy!

Bilbo couldn't quite believe it. He and the rest of the company were standing on a ledge overlooking what could possibly be the most wonderful and fantastic sight the hobbit never thought he would witness outside the confines of his own imagination: Rivendell.

They had only just made it out of the rock-studded hills that lay beyond the forest of the trolls. Barely two days had passed since the 'snot-incident that shall remain unvisited in his memories' and Bilbo Baggins hadn't taken any time to rest.

Following that night, the group had gotten scant few hours of sleep before they carried on their journey. It was a very rushed and hurried affair, but after some investigation, Gandalf had uncovered the cave in which the trolls had lived.

Bilbo decided to stay outside. And not because he was too weak in the stomach to stand the stench as Fili and Kili had accused him, grinning with their stupid dwarf faces. Though considering he had been wiped with troll snot the previous night, he could hardly see how anyone would've blamed him even if that were true.

Bilbo had waited outside flanked by Fili and Kili as they kept watch until Thorin had emerged from the dank hole with a new and beautiful sword in his grasp.

Bilbo had been about to ask of its origins when Thorin had pushed passed him only to be swarmed by Fili and Kili, both eagerly asking where their new swords were.

The hobbit had stood several feet back, not really understanding all the fuss apart from its fine craftsmanship, when Gandalf had approached him with a sword of his own. It was surprisingly light and just the right size for Bilbo, who had tried to reject it based on his inexperience and lack of desire to be near a situation in which the business end of any sword was likely to be aimed at his person.

Gandalf had proceeded to say something profound about courage and Bilbo felt any further discussion would not have been taken kindly by the wizard. Even so, Bilbo felt that this small elven sword would likely never leave its ancient scabbard.

Not twelve hours after a run in with the three particularly unfriendly and ravenous trolls, in which Bilbo thought he had seen quite enough danger to last several lifetimes, they were attacked by orcs.

'No, wait sorry, an orc pack, because of course orcs come in packs,' Bilbo had thought angrily as he found himself once again running for his life. Thorin's company had sprinted for what felt like hours
and, to be perfectly honest, he was altogether quite chuffed that his small hobbit legs hadn't fallen off.

Bilbo had just about given up on ever escaping their foe when Gandalf had led them down a cave nestled into the ground. But it hadn't been a cave. The back opened up into a narrow path that led them winding through the earth until they came out and were met with the serene, peaceful, and, to Bilbo's immense relief, utterly orc free sight of Imladris.

Thorin's face had been absolutely livid as he conversed with Gandalf in hushed tones, but from what Bilbo gathered, the dwarf was expressing his distinct dislike of elves. The hobbit couldn't fathom why as he gazed open mouthed at the cascading waterfalls and the delicate white architecture of Rivendell.

After several minutes of heated discussion Gandalf, Thorin broke their huddle and the company was met with a very gruff "we move on" from their leader.

Bilbo found himself near the back of the parade of dwarves close to Fili and Kili as they made there way down the path to the Last Homely House.

"So…" Bilbo began slowly, not sure how his line of inquiry was going to be met by the brothers. "Does, uh... does Thorin really hate all elves that much? I mean, I remember Mister Balin said something about an elf king, but surely they aren't all bad?"

Fili chuckled from in front of him. "Well, don't let him hear you say that, Master Baggins, Thorin might just stick you right through for implying the lot of them aren't traitors."

"You know what they did, Fili! You've heard Uncle and Balin, they left us to die! Uncle is completely within his right." Kili shot in from behind the hobbit, his voice low and angry.

Bilbo felt himself frowning as he listened to the two dwarves. Of course he had heard Balin's tale, but there were also his countless books that resided in Bag End, well-used and dog-eared, that spoke of the goodness of elves.

He had long since admired the beauty and quiet strength he imagined all elves to posses and, after seeing the outskirts of Rivendell, Bilbo was having a hard time reconciling that view with what Kili was saying.

Fili sighed, turning to look at his brother, clearly not wanting to rehash what must have been an extremely well worn topic. "I know that, Kili. I'm not saying what they did was right, but these are not the elves that left our people to the dragon."

Kili looked as though he was about to argue back when Fili cut in quickly. "Anyways, whatever we think of them, we are now in their home. I think we would do well to at least pretend to have some respect."

"I - Well, I..." Kili spluttered trying to find something to further defend his uncle with. "I will be saying nothing to them. Even if they apologize," the younger dwarf crossed his arms in a huff before sticking his nose into the air.

Fili rolled his eyes and shared an exasperated smile with Bilbo. "And I'm sure, dear brother, they will be most repentant once faced with your fearsome glare."

Kili realized he was being teased and stuck out a playful tongue at his two companions.

"You just wait Fili, you just wait. When you're booted off the throne for being too soft, I will come swooping in majestically to be king," Kili waved his arms like a great bird, "and there will be no
elves allowed within fifty leagues of Erebor!"

Bilbo and Fili laughed as Kili continued to flap his arms. "I'm sure you will, brother. You don't know
how relieving it is for me to be assured the kingdom is in such capable hands should I ever be
dethroned."

Kili stuck his hand out to Bilbo with his fingers waving as he schooled his face into an imperious
sneer. "Clearly our hobbit subject would prefer me as his king. You may kiss my ring, peasant!"

Bilbo swatted Kili's hand away as the dwarf's face broke into a grin. "There are no kings in the
Shire, Mister Dwarf, and if there were, I can assure you they would not be so pompous as one of you
Durin folk!"

Fili and Kili laughed as they each shoved one of Bilbo's shoulders. "Perhaps Master Baggins would
make a good king, what do you think brother?" Began Fili as he looked Bilbo up and down with a
grin.

"Why I think you might be onto something…" Kili pretended to ponder. "He is as haughty as a king
should be."

Bilbo gave a mock gasp of surprise. "I am shocked! Us hobbits are not known for our pride! Perhaps
you are merely mistaking my lack of patience for your incessant dwarvish posturing as arrogance?"

The dwarf brothers let out a cackle. "Indeed! I believe we have found our replacement, Kili! Our
dear hobbit has certainly shown he feels no hesitation in reprimanding royalty!"

Fili and Kili proceeded to give Bilbo matching bows as they walked backwards to face him. "All hail
to the hobbit king!"

Bilbo was about to tell them which orifice exactly they could stuff their hails when the group finally
reached the gate.

The company followed Gandalf into the courtyard when a tall, brown-haired elf came down the
steps to greet them before embracing the wizard warmly. Bilbo felt his mouth hang open
embarrassingly as he looked at the elf, but couldn't bring himself to stop.

This was the first of the fair-folk he had seen! They had chased and danced in his thoughts
throughout his entire youth, weaving fanciful tales of nature and beauty, and now there was one
merely feet away!

Bilbo took in the fine auburn clothing that seemed not to crease around the elf's body, but flow like
water until it cascaded gently to the floor. Even the elf's hair seemed to be its own living entity
somehow, the ends fluttering gently in the breeze.

The hobbit could scarcely believe that a person so beautiful could exist in the same world as him.
Bilbo continued to gaze unrepentant until he felt another's eyes upon him. Glancing around hurriedly
to see which dwarf had caught him, he saw Thorin glaring at him out of the corner of his eye.

Of all the dwarves, Thorin was probably the most… unfortunate to have caught his awed gaze.
Bilbo flushed in embarrassment, quickly shifting his eyes to the floor. The hobbit felt quite
irrationally like he had been caught – caught making eyes at the elf.

Bilbo shook his head to clear his thoughts. He didn't hate elves! It wasn't Bilbo's fault the elves had
been a fascination of his since his younger days and now he was finally seeing one.
'Thorin's opinion of them has nothing to do with mine!' Bilbo thought angrily, now embarrassed that gaining the dwarf's approval had become so important to him.

Bilbo looked back up from the ground at Thorin, determined to convey that he would not be daunted by the prince into embarrassment. Thorin merely narrowed eyes for a few moments before glancing back to where Gandalf and the elf were still conversing.

The hobbit continued fuming, still too agitated to really notice what was going on around him until he heard a shrill horn come from behind him followed closely by the thunderous stamping of horses hooves.

Bilbo turned around to see a group of about a dozen elves coming straight for them. The hobbit was still too stunned to move when Bofur gripped his arm tightly, pulling him into the center of their quickly formed circle.

The dwarves continued to close ranks tightly as the warriors proceeded to circle them for several nerve racking seconds in which Bilbo was not sure if he was supposed to just stand there or pull out his new sword.

The hobbit stole a quick glance at Gandalf, only to see the wizard had an amused smile on his face as he watched the scene unfold. Bilbo's face scrunched in confusion; if Gandalf was smiling they couldn't be in any real danger, could they?

One of the taller elves on horseback came to a halt before taking off his helmet. 'This one was clearly important,' Bilbo thought to himself as the wizard and this new elf conversed in elvish before embracing. It wasn't the armor that signified this particular elf as important, for they all had finer armor than Bilbo had ever seen; it was the strong demeanor and easy authority that he seemed to exude in waves.

The striking elf turned to face their group before addressing their leader. "Thorin Oakenshield," he acknowledged with a nod. "You are welcome here in the houses of Imladris."

Thorin's face grew dark as he looked at the elf with nothing short of contempt. "And how do you know who I am?"

The elf merely raised an eyebrow. "I knew your grandfather, Thrór, when he ruled under the mountain. You and he share a similar bearing."

Thorin all but growled as he stepped forward out of the ring of dwarves followed closely by Dwalin, who kept his hammer raised in warning. "Well," Thorin ground out, "he made no mention of you."

Bilbo was torn between wanting to rip at his hair in frustration with the dwarf's stubborn rudeness and wanting to run up to the front and cover Thorin's mouth before he could offend their host any further.

The elf kept his eyebrow raised before taking a step forward and started to speak in his fluid tongue. The dwarves all seemed to be torn between confusion and anger.

"What does he say?" Bilbo heard Gloin shout out from the middle of the group, "does he offer us insult?"

At that, the dwarves raised their weapons in unison, apparently ready to fight all of Rivendell and its master. Gandalf let out a deep sigh before stepping between the elf and dwarves with a glare that clearly meant even children would have behaved better.
"Master Elrond is offering you food."

The dwarves grew silent, all looking at each other, quietly trying to figure out what action to take before Gloin stepped forward. "Uh… In that case, lead on."

Bilbo almost gave an exasperated laugh; he supposed he shouldn't have been surprised that food, of all things, would facilitate friendship between the dwarves and elves.

The hobbit's shoulders slumped in relief, pleased that they had resolved any tension without resorting to violence. Bilbo felt a hand grip his shoulder and looked him to see Bofur give him a smile. Clearly the dwarf had been following the same line of thought Bilbo had. The hobbit just rolled his eyes and smiled, and together they walked with the rest of the dwarves into the halls of Rivendell.

After their fine dinner had concluded, the dwarves and Bilbo had found themselves an alcove of Elrond's home and made a makeshift camp. The hobbit had tried to protest that while they were in a home they could at least use beds, but the rest of the dwarves seemed reluctant to take any more aid from the elves than necessary.

The hobbit merely threw up his arms in defeat, muttering about the stubbornness of dwarves, and excused himself to go further explore Rivendell. Just because some uncultured dwarves were opposed to appreciating the fine elvish settlement and their undoubtedly extensive library, didn't mean he had to miss out.

Bilbo made his way through the winding halls, moonlight bathing the intricate flooring that twisted and bloomed into many elaborate patterns. The hobbit thought he could have spent a lifetime simply looking at the gentle curves carved lovingly into the wood or the lifelike figures that decorated the thin pillars.

He traced his fingers across a wooden elvish face wondering how many lifetimes of hobbits this still woman had seen and if the hands that carved her ever thought a halfling of the Shire would come from many miles away to stop and stand in awe of their labor.

Bilbo continued down the hallways for what seemed like just a few short and happy minutes, but noticed that the moon had indeed risen well past the center of the sky.

'I should probably start heading back,' Bilbo thought feeling just a tad disappointed. 'Wouldn't want them to think I defected.'

The hobbit made his way back towards where the dwarves were sleeping. He was almost to where the rest of the company lay in sleep before he saw a solitary figure sitting on a bench that faced the open sky and valley that Imladris rested above.

Ori was making gentle marks on the small notebook he carried on his person wherever they went and did not seem aware that Bilbo had come back.

"What're you doing? If you don't mind…"

Bilbo smiled as he sat down gently next to the youngest dwarf on the bench. They had not talked much on the journey so far, but he felt that the dwarf who always had his face in a notebook and wrapped in wool was more similar to himself than any of the others.

Ori jumped a bit as he glanced up quickly at Bilbo, "Oh, Master Baggins! I'm terribly sorry I didn't see you!"
The dwarf took a deep breath collecting himself before he opened his notebook again, tilting it over so Bilbo could see.

"It's just a sketch..." Ori began quietly, "I've been trying to take notes on the journey. You know, the happenings and where we've been going. Just so... people will know when we're done what really happened."

Bilbo gaped at the sketch; it was almost like he was looking at the real thing! Ori's delicate hand had finely rendered the serene landscape with a practiced skill of many years. "Why that is amazing, Ori! Really, you've done an incredible job!"

Ori turned beet red from his face all the way to his fingers, but gave Bilbo a small, pleased smile. "Thank you very much, Master Baggins. It is nice to have someone really appreciate my work. The rest just think I'm here to chronicle the journey, but it means so much more than that to me."

The dwarf grew less shy as he continued to talk passionately about his duty. "Not only do I get to see these amazing places, I also get to depict them, in both word and drawing, for others to see! So that in a way they may also visit distant lands and hear our tale!"

Bilbo smiled kindly at Ori who liked to gesture with his arms quite a bit when he got to talking. "It seems to me like not many dwarves have a, uh, taste for literature or art."

Ori gave Bilbo a rueful smile. "Oh I wouldn't say that. It's true that the fellows we travel with would probably rather pick up a sword than a book, but our culture is rich in both tale and great works of art."

Bilbo looked out to the night sky thoughtfully. "It's just, well, I haven't really read anything by a dwarf before I suppose. It's hard for me not to imagine you all as miners or fighters."

The dwarf looked at the ground a little sad, his short legs swinging and not quite reaching the floor. "Yes... We dwarves are far too secretive for our own good, I think. We have so much to offer, but often find staying in our great halls to be far more appealing than dealing with the other folks of this world. I must admit even I was reluctant to leave..."

Bilbo looked over at Ori raising his eyebrows. "Really? But you all seem to take to this whole adventure business so well."

The dwarf gave a small chuckle covering his grin with a knit covered hand. "I'm glad you think so. My brothers would probably not agree with you saying I had taken to adventuring with any skill though..."

"Why did you three come along?" Bilbo asked quietly as he leaned back against the wall the bench rested in front of.

"You might not know this," Ori began softly, closing his notebook and looking at Bilbo. "But my brothers and I are related to Thorin."

Biblo gave a loud cough as he spluttered. "But - but you're so... you're so nice!"

Ori gave another small laugh. "Ah yes, but Fili and Kili are also amiable, are they not?"

Bilbo gave Ori a sideways glance. "I suppose you're right... Must not be a family trait."

The dwarf grinned, "I should say that we are rather distantly related, but I think you are right in thinking Thorin is certainly a unique individual. Though I must confess, even our family relation to
Ori looked back out to the moon that was casting twisting shadows on them. "We had some… some family difficulties, shall I say, right when Thorin announced his intention to return to Erebor. It was both a matter of desire and convenience that we set out with him."

Bilbo waited silently for Ori to continue his tale, growing more and more intrigued as the dwarf carried on. "Dori, Nori, and I come from a rather well-to-do family, you see. We've been merchants as far back as I can tell, buying and trading the rare gems found in the deep of the mountains."

"You'd probably not be surprised, but Dori took after the family business with the utmost dedication and fervor. Our parents were nothing but pleased with Dori and found him to be a rather ideal son."

Ori began to fiddle with the pages of his notebook as he spoke. "Our childhood passed with many happy memories and it was in its way quintessential, I suppose. However, as we got older, Dori continued to grow in our parents favor, their future plans for the family empire resting solely on him."

"I think it was then that Nori began to… well, not resent Dori, but the way my parents would often not spare a glance to anyone else. I believe it is for this reason that Nori began to slip away from the family. I was too young to understand at the time, but I know now that he started to become involved in some… less than savory activities."

Bilbo felt his eyes widened at the implication. "Are you saying that Nori is a – the hobbit leaned in closer with a hushed voice, "— that Nori is a criminal?"

Ori let out a small laugh. "Don't sound so scandalized Master Baggins, surely you couldn't think all the members of our company were royalty?"

The hobbit leaned back with a scoff. "Well of course not, but I didn't expect to have any lawbreakers amongst us. The Shire has very little by way of crime, it just… isn't done."

The dwarf looked at Bilbo curiously. "You live in a strange place, Master Baggins, sometimes I forget I have been there. The meeting almost seems like a dream now…"Ori trailed off before he shook his head.

"Anyway, my parents were so caught up in Dori's success that they didn't notice Nori had gotten involved in some of the syndicates. I'm still not sure to this day what he has done in, uh, specifics. But it never mattered to me because Nori always made sure to pay attention and take an interest in my life.""Especially when I felt quite alone… I suppose I'm lucky in a way that my parents were so concerned with Dori because I was allowed to pursue whatever interests I wanted. The writing of tales and poetry is not frowned upon, per say, but it certainly isn't a path that is looked upon without much more than dismissal these days."

Bilbo suddenly felt very sad for his companion. It sounded to him that Ori had spent much of his life up to this point mostly alone. "The tales of old are already written, they say, the great works have already been done. I suppose most look down on paths that do not somehow involve the monetary enrichment of the kingdom."

"Nori practically raised me until he got in too deep with the crime rings. Our parents nearly died of shame and sunk into reclusiveness. I think that's when Dori first started to take the helm of the family. He took over the business and me when Nori's visits grew less and less frequent. Though he
has a, uh, unique way of showing it sometimes, I know Dori loves Nori and I above all the riches to be made in the mountains."

Bilbo put a hand on Ori's shoulder and smiled at him gently. "They both sound like commendable dwarves."

A fond expression crept onto Ori's face. "Yes. Yes they are, Master Baggins. We hadn't seen Nori for many years until news of Thorin's intention to return to the Lonely Mountain reached us. That night Nori showed up at our home and said that he would be killed if he didn't leave the city at once."

Bilbo looked at his companion shocked. "Why? What did he do that was so bad?"

Ori shrugged. "I don't know. I never asked. All that mattered was that my brother was back and he needed me. So I packed our things and we were about to set off when Dori caught us."

The dwarf let out a chuckle. "He tried to stop us going, said he was going to tell on us. But Nori and I stood fast and eventually Dori caved. He said he'd let us go but he was coming with us. I believe his words were something along the lines of us being totally and utterly lost without him."

"Nori and I tried to make him stay, tried to remind him that all the family business was resting on his shoulders, but Dori just said without us there was no family and so off we went to meet our distant cousin Thorin Oakenshield about going on an impossible quest to regain Erebor."

Bilbo looked at Ori for a few moments in awe. "So Dori dropped everything? You dropped everything? Just like that?"

The dwarf absently flipped through a few pages of his journal. "I suppose it does sound a bit ridiculous when you say it like that... But in short, yes. It all seems a bit surreal at times. It feels like only a moment ago I was in the great libraries, taking countless notes on forgotten legends..." Ori glanced at him sideways with a smile. "But now I'm in the Last Homely House that only a few dwarves alive can say they've seen with their own eyes, so I don't think it's all bad really."

Bilbo chuckled. "I knew I liked you for a reason, a dwarf after my own heart. It's good to see at least one of you can appreciate fine things even if it was made by the elves."

Ori laughed with him for a few moments before he grew quiet. "I want... I want to thank you Bilbo Baggins."

The hobbit looked up startled. "Um, you're welcome I suppose... but, uh, for what exactly?"

Ori merely shook his head with an exasperated grin. "For saving me the other night of course! From the trolls."

Bilbo gave the dwarf a small smile. "Make no mention of it, I just sort of... lunged... I suppose. I'm really quite pleased I made it through that whole ordeal without fainting to be honest."

Ori looked at him with wide, sincere eyes. "No, Master Baggins! I owe you my life! You were very brave, I think even Thorin was impressed!"

The hobbit had to laugh at that. The thought of Thorin Oakenshield being pleased with anything he did was almost as ludicrous as the thought of Thorin Oakenshield being pleased at all.

"Really though, Master Baggins," Ori continued earnestly, "you should have seen Dori and Nori once the battle was over! They just about skinned me themselves for almost getting killed. I know
they've been meaning to thank you as well, but... I just thought I would take the opportunity while you were here."

There was a moment of silence before Ori moved forward swiftly and embraced Bilbo in a tight hug. The hobbit was shocked for a moment before he returned it with a few pats.

The dwarf let go and pulled back with a smile. "Good night, Master Baggins, I hope you sleep well."

Bilbo just looked at Ori as he turned to walk away before he added a quiet "Good night, Ori."

The hobbit sat there for several minutes, alone except for the now low hanging moon. He felt a strong surge of affection for Ori as he pondered their conversation. The dwarf would have done very well as a hobbit, Bilbo thought to himself, and he could only hope that when this whole ordeal was over, Ori had his new legend to tell that would earn him the recognition he deserved.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

So there's some lore in this chapter that I mostly bullshitted from memory, so don't be afraid to just gloss on over any gross discrepancies ;) Thanks everyone who has taken the time to review, you are all very kind! Enjoy!

Bilbo woke up the next morning feeling utterly refreshed and in a very good mood. Even if the dwarves were too stubborn to concede to the offering of beds by the elves, the fine cushions Bilbo had 'liberated' from one of the close by rooms were infinitely preferable to the ground.

That, and the lack of needing to be ready at a moments notice in case of an orc raid, made for the best sleep Bilbo had had since he left the Shire. The hobbit sat up with a stretch, noticing that most of the dwarves had already left the alcove they were staying in.

Fili and Kili were likely off being a nuisance to whomever they met and Bilbo had no doubt Thorin had stuffed himself into some random closet so he could avoid everything elvish and possibly have a good pout.

Bilbo got up from his makeshift bed and was determined that he would go exploring before their dinner with Lord Elrond later. The hobbit had heard marvelous tales describing Elrond's extensive library and could feel himself almost start salivating at the thought of touching some of those rare tomes.

Bilbo started down the hallway he had used last night passing Ori, who was already back to sketching, with a smile and a nod and was met with one equally warm.

The hobbit continued with a slight spring in his step, feeling that he had finally made another friend within their company.

The hallways looked just as beautiful in the morning sun as they did at night bathed in moonlight. Though it was a different kind of beauty, Bilbo pondered. In the night, the designs appeared to him as ethereal and mysterious, in the sun they looked full of life, almost sentient as the shadows of leaves danced across the floor.

Not quite sure where exactly he was heading, Bilbo made his way towards what he thought to be the main courtyard. 'The dwarves have certainly done a good job finding a secluded area,' Bilbo thought with exasperation, 'I haven't seen anyone and I have no blasted idea where I'm going...'

After hitting more than a few dead ends, the hobbit began to realize that he was, in short, completely lost. "It shouldn't be that hard, it's not like this place is that large!" Bilbo muttered to himself, pushing a hand through his hair as he stared at another set of locked doors.

"Why, the little one looks quite lost, doesn't he brother?"

Bilbo spun around as he heard a light, almost musical laugh from behind him. Clutching his heart in surprise, the hobbit took a few deep breaths to calm himself as he gazed at two eerily identical elves.

The two were brothers apparently. Just by looking at them, Bilbo could have come up with that
conclusion by himself. They had the same brown hair, woven in intricate braids at their temples and identical circlets rested on their brows. But it was their faces that gave Bilbo pause, for they had almost the same features as Lord Elrond apart from their stunningly blue eyes that looked more akin to shards of ice compared to Elrond's deep cobalt.

The hobbit wouldn't have been able to tell them apart at all if it wasn't for their clothes that differed color, the one on the left sporting a deep auburn as the one on the right favored a blue as dark as midnight.

"I was just..." Bilbo began nervously, not sure if was trespassing in an area he was not supposed to be. "I was just looking for the library?"

The elf in the blue spoke with a small laugh. "That is a relief, small one, for I was just about to ask you why you were trying to break into our rooms."

Bilbo looked from the two elves to the door behind him and back. "Oh, oh no, no I wasn't trying to get in there!"

The hobbit flailed his arms trying to convince them he was no burglar. Well, not a real burglar anyway.

The two elves simply raised an eyebrow each in unison.

"Well I was, but I didn't know it was anyone's quarters!" Bilbo couldn't help the sinking feeling that this was going not at all well. "I mean... well..." The hobbit felt horribly flustered at this point and the elves impassive faces were doing nothing to assuage his fears.

"I am lost. Very, very lost. But seeing as how no one has seen fit to give me a tour, I hardly see how that is my fault." Bilbo crossed his arms with a huff, narrowing his eyes, but his ruffled feelings were quickly giving way to nerves as he desperately hoping he hadn't offended the two in his small outburst.

There was a moment of silence before the two elves broke into smiles, letting out soft laughter. "You have some spirit, little one, I admire you for it," the one in the auburn tunic spoke.

"Allow us to introduce ourselves, I am Elladan," the elf bowed before gesturing to his brother who added, "And I am Elrohir, sons of Lord Elrond and very pleased to make your acquaintance..."

Bilbo spluttered for a moment, he had just been cross at the sons of their host. The sons of Lord Elrond. "I'm, uh, Bilbo... Bilbo Baggins. Son of, uh, Bungo Baggins. Not that you've heard of him..."

Elladan and Elrohir exchanged a quick glace.

"Ah," Elrohir began, "so you are the halfling that travels with the dwarves and Master Gandalf."

Bilbo gave them a small nod, hoping that maybe the two were good natured enough to let his impudent behavior go. "Uh, yes, I suppose I am."

"Well then, it is a pleasure to have one of the Shire folk in our halls again. It has been far too many years since we had the presence of your kin amongst us." Elladan gave Bilbo an easy smile, "I apologize for no one showing you the halls of Imladris."

Bilbo flushed. "Oh no, I must apologize for intruding! I had no idea I'd gotten so lost..."
Elrohir stepped forward and placed a long, pale hand on the hobbit's shoulder. "Nonsense!" He said, "It is our duty to show guests of our father the hospitality of the elves, Bilbo Baggins, allow us to guide you to the library."

"There's no need!" Bilbo cut in quickly, the last thing he wanted to do was impose on the sons of his host. "I'm sure if you just, well, point me in the general direction I'll get there eventually…"

Elrohir frowned at him. "Surely you must know, small one, that the elves take great pride in their hospitality. I insist we guide you even if I must carry you there myself."

Bilbo felt his mouth fall open as he gaped, wide-eyed at the elf, 'did he just say he would carry me?'

"Elrohir is joking, Bilbo Baggins. You must forgive him. My brother is adept at many things but I fear humor often escapes him." Elladan smiled at the hobbit teasingly but was swiftly reprimanded by his brother.

"At least I attempt it. You are about as amusing as a poisonous spider." Elrohir pouted at his brother who merely laughed again.

"Come, come, little one," Elladan ushered Bilbo forward as they made there way back down the hallway towards the correct direction. Bilbo felt very strange at that moment. He was used to being flanked by Fili and Kili, so it was not as if having royalty on either side of him was abnormal, but at least Fili and Kili were closer to him in height.

Bilbo felt immensely short, as the elf twins were almost twice his size. And if he thought the dwarf brothers were too similar to be healthy, these elves even had the same gait in their walk. Bilbo wasn't sure he could have even began to try and tell them apart if they hadn't helpfully worn different colors.

"So, Bilbo Baggins, tell us, how do you find journeying with dwarves?" Elrohir glanced down at the hobbit with a small grin as they walked down another hallway. "I must confess, while they have done nothing to refute the common opinion of their nature thus far, I was rather hoping to be wrong about this group."

Bilbo pondered the question for a moment. This was his chance to try and facilitate some friendship between the two groups!

"I did start off rather skeptical," Bilbo began slowly. "They had made a right mess of my kitchen and ate all of my pantry the night they stayed in my home. But I have found since that the dwarves have some of the kindest of hearts I have ever had the privilege of knowing."

A small sigh escaped his lips. "It's true that dwarves often are very reluctant to let outsiders know themselves and their secrets. But! If you work hard enough and earn their loyalty, I think it would be difficult indeed to find a truer friend!"

Elladan gave him an appraising stare. "You speak very highly of them, little one, perhaps it is wrong of us to judge them so quickly."

Bilbo gave the elf a large smile. "It is good to hear the elves are not so stuck in their prejudices as some of the dwarves I know! I sometimes think all it would make all the difference in the world if Thorin would just sit down and talk with an elf…"

Elrohir let out a short laugh. "I think in that case, Master Hobbit, you might be mistaken. Thorin Oakenshield's dislike of our kind is all but legendary. I believe he finds all our woodland kin to be traitors of the worst sort."
The trio wound their way through many paths and hallways, a warm, autumn breeze playfully rustling the trees as they passed.

Bilbo could only shrug. "I can't say I know the whole story really, but from what I heard, the elf-king was trying to spare his people the wrath of the dragon. I know Thorin sees it as betrayal, and it just might be. But I think in his position, Thorin might have done the same, for he loves his kin above all else..."

Elladan and Elrohir placed a hand each on one of Bilbo's shoulders.

"You speak with much wisdom, little one," Elladan spoke kindly. "Perhaps you should consider diplomacy if you find adventuring not to your liking."

"Oh, yes!" Elrohir joined in with a merry laugh. "We could certainly use your skills in our dealings with the dwarves!" The elf leaned to whisper conspiratorially to Bilbo, "You don't know how often our councils end with a dwarf raising his axe to our father, shouting about some insult or another!"

Bilbo smiled at the twins, if he could only get Thorin to see that the elves were perfectly nice! The three of them eventually came to a large archway that was carved intricately with depictions of ancient tales. Bilbo let out a small gasp as they entered into the great library.

Rows and rows of books lined the walls in shelves that seemed to be less carved, than trees that had simply opened up to make space for the countless, leather-bound tomes.

"Oh my..." Bilbo whispered as he gaped at the sight, sunlight pouring through the openings in the ceiling, a soft, ethereal light pouring down.

"It is worth having a library this grand if only to see the faces upon new visitors," Elrohir laughed as he made his way past Bilbo into the great space. "Feel free to browse at your leisure."

Elladan also moved forward before turning to face Bilbo. "Please let me know if I can assist you in finding a particular subject, I've spent many long hours in here myself."

Bilbo just nodded, not sure he could make words at that moment, and made his way to the nearest shelf. There seemed magic in the air, Bilbo thought, the knowledge of thousands of minds pooled together in one place.

The hobbit ran his hands across the spines as he made his way down a row of books, each one had a distinct feel and seemed to almost thrum with life as touched them.

Bilbo stopped as he saw a large, thick book bound in ancient black leather with what seemed to be golden runes decorated its spine. Bilbo stood on his toes as he strained to lift it off the shelf, until a pale hand reached out from behind him to grasp it, "Allow me, Bilbo Baggins."

The hobbit tilted his head back to see Elladan smiling down at him. "Oh, uh, well thank you."

Bilbo took the book as Elladan handed it to him. The cover had more of the runes that resided on the spine, but accompanying the script was a golden embossed design of a regal figure pounding at an anvil, the sparks that flew from the impact making intricate designs as they intertwined.

Bilbo felt his breath leave him as he gently traced the design with his fingers. "What... what is it?"

"It is the tale of Aulë and Yavanna, two of the Valar. Yavanna is the guardian of all the green things that grow on this earth," Elladan spoke softly. "She works constantly to keep evil away from her wild children and is mother to the great Tree-Walkers."
"Then this is Aulë?" Bilbo asked as he continued to trace the gold figure.

"Indeed. It is interesting that you should pick this book of all that reside here. Aulë is the great smith of the Valar and creator of the Seven Fathers of the Dwarves."

Bilbo looked at Elladan with wide eyes, hoping to hear more of the tale. The elf seemed to catch on as he grinned at Bilbo, "It is said that Aulë defied Eru to create the dwarves. Eru learned of Aulë's actions and almost forced him to destroy his children, before recognizing their worth and granting them life. And thus the dwarves came to be."

The hobbit turned back to the book and opened its pages delicately; bold runes stared back at him as if trying to convey the great nobility of dwarven people. "It also contains some of the history of the early dwarves and lineages, I'm sure your friends of the Durin line would find their ancestors among its pages," Elladan added as he started to peruse some of the other books.

"Do you think?" Bilbo asked excitedly, "How did Lord Elrond come across this treasure?"

Elladan continued to move slowly down the row, "I cannot be entirely sure, but he has lived countless lives of men and the dwarves did not always view us so coolly. Perhaps he received it from a friend or found it forgotten in an ancient kingdom, I suppose you would have to ask him."

Bilbo continued to turn the pages, wishing he could understand some of what the runes said, "Do you think…" The hobbit began, hoping not to sound overly forward. "Do you think I could show this to one of my companions? He loves tales and legends, I can already imagine his face if I showed this to him!"

Glancing up at the elf with a hopeful smile, Bilbo clutched the book tightly to his chest. Elladan seemed to find the sight endearingly amusing. "Of course, little one, I doubt it has seen appreciative eyes for many years. It would be a shame to let this friend of yours be unable to learn its treasures."

Bilbo almost jumped up and down in excitement but just barely restrained himself. "Oh, thank you, thank you! I will tell them of this kindness, I'm sure then they will not think so poorly of elves!"

Elladan smiled down at the hobbit. "I admire your optimism, Bilbo Baggins, perhaps this time you are correct."

Bilbo spent many hours looking through the wealth of the library, occasionally picking up books, but always clutching the story of Aulë closely. He would have liked to continue on but the appearance of Lindir, apparently searching for the twins, announced that dinner would be approaching soon.

"Come along, small one," Elrohir ushered Bilbo out of the library, "best not be late, we will show you back to your dwarves." The hobbit chatted amiably with Elladan and Elrohir as they guided him back to the alcove where the company was staying.

Bilbo thought if he had more than an afternoon, he could become great friends with the elf twins. While they were a bit more reserved and polite than their dwarven counterparts, he saw their good nature and subtle humor as very likeable. It didn't hurt, of course, that their father had the most fantastic library Bilbo had ever been in.

As they reached the area where the dwarves had slept, Bilbo was surprised to see all of the company was resting there, talking amongst themselves. Bilbo looked from where Elrohir was telling a story about a hunting mishap in which he and his brother had thought their father was a deer and accidentally started firing arrows at him, when Bilbo made eye contact with Thorin.

The dwarf's face went from passively pleasant as he conversed with Dwalin to a dark frown as his
gaze went from Bilbo to the two elves with him. The hobbit raised his chin in defiance and turned to say good-bye to the twins.

"Thank you for showing me the library, I don't know what I would've done if you two hadn't shown up." Bilbo tried to say with a smile but it came out a little stiff knowing that Thorin was probably glaring daggers into his back.

"You probably would have broken into our room, small one." Elrohir laughed as he gave Bilbo's shoulder a friendly squeeze, "but the pleasure was ours. Should you return and ever need any assistance navigating our halls, just let one of us know."

"Indeed, it was our fortune to have meet you Bilbo Baggins, we wish you luck on the rest of your journey." Elladan added with a soft smile, his ice blue eyes creasing slightly at the corner.

"Will you both not be at the feast tonight?" Bilbo asked a bit disappointed, hoping to have another opportunity to spend time with Elrond's sons.

"I'm afraid not," spoke Elrohir. "We have business to attend to on our father's behalf in the Golden Wood. Our grandmother has requested a meeting and so we must go."

"Then I wish you both a safe journey as well, and good luck with your business." Bilbo gave them both a wide smile before they bowed and walked away from the hobbit.

Bilbo turned around again and felt his smile crumble as he met Thorin who was, predictably, still glaring at Bilbo. The hobbit refused to apologize for making new friends and walked past where Thorin and Dwalin stood, going around the corner to where Fili and Kili sat, both pulling long draws from their pipes.

"And where have you been all day Master Baggins?" Fili's mouth curved up into a grin.

"We almost sent out a search party for you! I bet Uncle thought the elves had captured you." Kili laughed as he let out a cloud of smoke.

"Not that it's any of yours or Thorin's business, but I went to the library." Bilbo said with a sniff, trying to identify the weed the brothers were using in their pipes.

"Ah, we should have known, brother," Fili said with a wink. "Let the hobbit out of our sight for a single moment and he makes for the nearest pile of books."

Thorin chose that moment to stalk past them, looking as displeased as ever.

Fili peered at his uncle through a puff of smoke. "He seems grumpier than usual, what did you do this time Master Baggins?"

"What?" Bilbo started indignantly. "Me? How are his moods my fault?"

Kili let out a laugh but accidentally choked on his own smoke. Fili slapped his brother a few times on the back before Kili collected himself. "Because," the younger dwarf began like it was obvious, "he only gets that particular brand of grimace on his face after he talks to you."

"That is – that is utterly preposterous!" Bilbo ground out irritably, "Your uncle has a grimace on his face all the time, regardless if he talks to me or not! …Though I wouldn't call it talking, more him glaring silently as I try to figure out in which of the multitude of possible ways I could have offended him."
Fili and Kili both cackled. "Oh, our dear hobbit, you must have done something, no need to hide from us!" Fili leaned forward with a mischievous smile on his face.

Bilbo frowned as he tightened his hold on the book in his grasp. "Well if you must know, I met Lord Elrond's sons and they were kind enough to show me around today. Thorin saw me saying goodbye to them, that's all."


"Oh, he is not going to be pleasant tonight!" Kili grinned back at his brother. "Knowing our impressionable hobbit was in the company of dirty elves." The younger dwarf pretended to gag as he said the word elf.

"I am not—I am not impressionable," Bilbo shot in offended. "And they are not dirty, which is pretty rich coming from you lot," the hobbit sniffed with perhaps an undue amount of exaggeration.

The two brothers laughed. "Fair enough, Master Baggins, I would just avoid mentioning that you found them anything less than repulsive to Thorin, lest we all suffer his mighty scowl for the entire evening!"

Bilbo walked the small distance to his bag and set the precious book into it, careful to treat it with great care, before turning back to the brothers. "I will do no such thing! Scowl or no, they were very kind to me today and I will say nothing otherwise!"

The two dwarves stood up stretching as the rest of the dwarves started to make their way to dinner. "Your funeral!" Kili stuck out his tongue with a wink as he clapped Bilbo on the shoulder. "Now let's get moving, I'm absolutely starving!"

Dinner had gone smoothly. Well, as smoothly as Bilbo could have hoped. While the hobbit had been seated at a separate table with most of the dwarves, he had been anxiously watching where Thorin, Gandalf, and Elrond all sat.

It looked to Bilbo that Gandalf and Elrond did most of the talking, the two were clearly old friends who had years of shared experiences to reminisce about, but Thorin had surprisingly held his tongue for most of the dinner, settling for pushing his leafy greens around his plate.

Bilbo had sat next to Balin and Bofur who proved to be reliably good company. The longer dwarf table was considerably louder, as no amount of fine company could keep the rowdiness of dwarves at bay.

Following dinner, Bilbo, Balin, and Thorin had followed Elrond and Gandalf out of the hall to a private chamber where they discussed Thorin's map. Bilbo wasn't sure exactly what he was doing with the group as he thought these matters were not directly his concern, but Gandalf had ushered him along muttering something about keeping the dwarves in check.

After Elrond had read the moon runes, a magnificent sight to be sure, the elf and Gandalf had retreated to meet with what Bilbo heard them call 'The White Council,' and the two dwarves had quickly made their way back to the alcove where the rest of the company was waiting.

Bilbo dallied behind the dwarves, eventually separating himself entirely, hoping to take in what he
was feeling was going to be his final night in the fine elf settlement. The hobbit sighed as he slowly
made his way through the now somewhat familiar halls.

'If only I had more time…' Bilbo thought to himself morosely, 'think of all the books I could have
read!'

The hobbit closed his eyes as he ran his hand along smooth railings and carved pillars, hoping to
memorize their feel and the smell of Imladris so he could recall the memory during the undoubtedly
unpleasant days ahead.

Sooner than later, Bilbo found himself near where the dwarves were getting ready to sleep. He was
about to make his way around the corner when he heard lowered voices from one of the rooms on
his left. The door was slightly ajar and Bilbo felt the Took in him growing impossibly curious.

The hobbit silently padded over to the door to listen for a second. And only a second.

Bilbo heard a long sigh, "I know that Dwalin, believe me when I say I know we need more rest, but
we have to move at first light." The hobbit immediately recognized Thorin's gruff voice as it drifted
out the door.

"Listen to me Thorin. And I mean really listen. We have little supplies, no ponies, and rest of the
company has only had one, one good nights rest. We're goin' to need a hell of a lot of luck from here
on out if these are the conditions you want us to travel in."

Bilbo was shocked to hear someone speak so frankly to the prince, but he supposed years of battle
together forged a unique and powerful bond.

Thorin growled back, "No Dwalin, you need to listen. I spoke with the wizard and he hinted very
strongly that the White Council was going to try and stop us! Whatever our conditions are, they
mean nothing if we cannot go anywhere!"

There was a brief pause before he heard a sigh, Bilbo could just imagine Thorin taking a few deep
breaths to calm himself, "By Durin's beard, I cannot, will not, be stopped when we are so close to
finally returning home! Not when I have finally unlocked the secrets of this blasted map."

"Aye," Bilbo heard Dwalin respond, surprisingly gentle for such an intense dwarf, "and I will follow
you wherever you lead, Thorin. But we will need to find somewhere to resupply and get some
proper rest."

The hobbit heard the clap of a hand meeting a shoulder. "You know I value your counsel, Dwalin.
Normally I would heed your words above all others, but in this case I know I am right."

"Aye, Thorin. But you must remember that we are not immortal. I know what this quest means to
you. We all know what this quest means. But even you cannot take back Erebor alone."

Silence fell again for a few seconds before Bilbo heard footsteps coming towards the door. The
hobbit swiftly jumped away and practically ran around the corner, the last thing he wanted was to be
cought eavesdropping by Thorin.

Bilbo dodged around several dwarves lying on their mats before he reached is small pile of cushions.
He went about setting up his area, before Bilbo saw his bag and the book visible from the opening.

How could he have forgotten! Bilbo had meant to show Ori before they went to sleep so he could
return the book in the morning. The hobbit quickly retrieved the leather tome from his pack and
made his was over to where Ori was sitting, a bit away from the group as he wrote in his notebook.
"Hello Ori," Bilbo sat down next to the dwarf with a warm smile.

"Oh, hello Master Baggins! How was your day? I didn't see you until dinner."

Bilbo uncovered the book from his arms with a flourish. "One could say that I was very productive. I went to Lord Elrond's library and found something I thought you would like."

"Is that—" the young dwarf looked back and forth from the book to Bilbo several times, "is that a first edition?"

Bilbo shrugged with a laugh. "I was hoping you'd know! Elladan said it was very old so it just might be."

Ori let out a pleased groan. "Oh, Master Baggins, I've seen copies! I've taken notes on copies, but I've never seen something so old and so well-kept as this!"

The hobbit handed over the book to Ori's slightly quivering hands, which proceeded to stroke the cover lovingly. "So you can, uh, read it right?" Bilbo asked the dwarf curiously, "It looks ancient and I'm not much familiar with dwarf script."

"Oh yes," began Ori. "It is quite old, but I," the dwarf looked at Bilbo with a pleased smile, "just happen to be an expert. Would you mind if I looked at it a bit?"

Bilbo chuckled. "Of course not! Just be careful, I'm not sure what elf lords do to those that desecrate their books and I don't much care to find out."

Ori looked scandalized at the idea that he, of all dwarves, could possibly harm a book. "I will be most careful!"

Bilbo gave the dwarf a pat on his knit covered shoulder as he sat up, not wanting to be a distraction while Ori frantically took notes on the ancient script. The hobbit stretched a bit, no longer feeling tired, but not quite sure what to do with himself until he caught the wafting of familiar smoke coming from around the corner that was blocked from his view.

'Maybe Fili and Kili are having a smoke,' Bilbo thought pleased as he started to make his way over, 'perhaps they'd share…'

However as the hobbit turned the corner away from where most of the dwarves were sleeping, he was met with sight of Thorin Oakenshield framed against the trees and moonlight that fell on Imladris, an intricate pipe at his lips.

Bilbo was caught in quite the awkward situation. On the one hand, he was sure, well more positive, that Thorin would not want his company. On the other he was clearly making his way in Thorin's direction, and seeing as how there was nothing but hallway where the hobbit was facing, it would be difficult to play it off casually.

Thorin, noticing his presence, gave him an almost imperceptible nod.

"Oh, uh, sorry…" Bilbo began trying frantically to think of an excuse to turn around without offending the dwarf, "I didn't know… you… were here, I'll just –" he made a motion indicating his intention to back away.

Thorin simply snorted at him. "Do all hobbits ramble so much? Or do we just have the distinct pleasure of hosting one so… unique?"
Bilbo frowned at Thorin indignantly, crossing his arms over his chest. He didn't ramble. Well, he
didn't ramble that much. And only when he got nervous. "I will have you know that while you lot
apparently find it distasteful, we hobbits are quite skilled and well practiced in small talk."

Thorin raised an imperious eyebrow at him. "You certainly are small, though I'm not sure I would
label your talking as anything less than lengthy."

'Alright,' Bilbo made up his mind in a huff, 'if Thorin Oakenshield wants to talk, then so help me, I
will talk.' The hobbit uncrossed his arms and purposely made his way to stand next to Thorin, who
was still resting against the railing, facing the valley down below.

"Just because you do not appreciate the pleasantries of conversations, Master Oakenshield, does not
make them irrelevant or unnecessary." Bilbo still did not look at the dwarf, but pulled out his trusty
pipe, stuffing the end with a spare bit of Longbottom Leaf that he always kept on his person.

"Light?" Bilbo glanced sideways, not sure if Thorin would punch him, scoff, or humor him. The
dwarf continued to gaze at the hobbit as he tilted his pipe sideways until one of the embers fell into
Bilbo's. "Thank you."

Bilbo took a few quick draws, added breath to sparks until he got a nice, steady glow.

"I suppose you found that the elves appreciated your pleasantries?" Thorin had turned back to gaze at
the moon, taking a long pull from his pipe before exhaling a rather impressive ring of smoke.

Bilbo could see that Thorin was baiting him, and rather poorly, but the hobbit had just about enough
of dwarvish stubbornness and couldn't quite restrain himself. "Why yes, Elladan and Elrohir were
quite receptive to my pleasantries, I believe they found my conversation quite amiable and we got on
rather well."

Thorin sneered at him. "That's because all elves value is talk. Oh, they will say all the pretty, hollow
words they need to gain your trust but they are just like a breeze, weak and empty."

Bilbo rested his arms against the railing before blowing a smoke ring of his own. "I won't pretend to
understand what happened to your people, but surely you cannot think that all elves are the same,
Master Oakenshield."

"That is because you cannot understand what happened to my people, halfling." Thorin's grip on his
pipe tightened, his face darkening. "You cannot understand the smell of burnt flesh and the
deafening screams of your kin as they are slain without warning by a beast that knows nothing of
mercy."

"You cannot understand what it means to see an elf that had pledged friendship," Thorin let out a
bitter laugh, "turn away an entire army's worth of ready swords as you begged and pleaded for aid."

Bilbo had not been expecting such emotion or frankness from the dwarf and so was vastly
unprepared with anything meaningful to say. Normally the hobbit would have placed a comforting
hand on the dwarf's forearm, but if Bilbo was certain of one thing, it was that Thorin would be most
discomforted by contact from him.

"It would be foolish of me to expect you to understand, halfling," Thorin said bitterly soft. "But I
believe I am well within my right to expect that you respect my dislike is founded on much more
than mere prejudice."

Bilbo let out a small sigh; he knew there was nothing he could say, nothing he could do to offer the
dwarf any modicum of comfort. There was nothing anyone could do for Thorin Oakenshield that
could repair the damage done. That could begin to heal the wounds that had festered over many long years of exile and burden.

Thorin's rage was as white-hot and burning as his desire to return home. But in his pursuit of revenge, to right the many wrongs dealt to him in life, Bilbo believed Thorin had held too tightly onto that blazing fury. He had become so burned and scarred that little could reach him through that hardened shell.

There was nothing Bilbo Baggins of the Shire, Bilbo Baggins the hobbit, or Bilbo Baggins the individual could offer such a man that would not be met with condescension.

'And he's right,' Bilbo thought to himself, smiling sadly, 'I understand nothing.' But, as he looked at Thorin, as he looked at the dwarf who burned brighter than any fire Bilbo had seen, perhaps that was a good thing.

"For what it's worth, Master Oakenshield," Bilbo began slowly, not sure if he was making a mistake even speaking at all, "I am sorry. Truly sorry. No one should have to suffer as you and your people have."

"I know you think you do not have a home. That to become whole again you must go back to what you had. But I think you are mistaken." Thorin looked sharply at Bilbo, his eyes narrowing, "I see the way you treat Fili and Kili. I see the camaraderie you share in Dwalin and Balin. I see the way the others would follow you to their death. Not because of where you lead them, but because you are the one that leads."

"I do not believe that home is necessarily always a place, Master Oakenshield, but rather being in the company of those whom you love and respect. I think in some ways you've always been home," Bilbo continued quietly, "but tragedy can cloud the things right in front of us."

They sat in stiff silence for a moment and Bilbo thought he actually had a good chance of being impaled and meeting his death in a rather undignified way.

Thorin sat up quickly, tapping his pipe out with much more force than necessary.

"You know nothing of me, hobbit." Thorin spat out as he passed Bilbo. "Nothing."

'Well,' Bilbo thought, 'I suppose that could have gone worse. Not much, but still, I'm not dead.'

The hobbit tried to be offended at Thorin's words, tried to dislike the dwarf who had never spared so much as a small smile at him, but all Bilbo felt when he thought of Thorin Oakenshield was sadness. There was a kind man, a loving and gentle spirit somewhere deep under the rage and pain. Bilbo knew because he had seen the dwarf interact with his nephews and been told by Fili himself of the strength and care he had shown the young dwarf and his brother.

What Bilbo hoped was that in the future, when Thorin was ready and hopefully after their quest was successfully completed, there would be someone to coax out the man Bilbo had seen from brief, distant flashes. What Bilbo knew was that it would never be him.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I’m traveling out of the country for a study abroad deal tonight so things will be a bit hectic for the next couple days! Mostly I just wanted to get down to the hug scene to end all hug scenes, but I also wanted to get a bit of a longer update before I left. This chapter takes us to the end of film one, so from here on out there will be book spoilers aplenty. Also, looking back on the summary, I think it sort of implies that this would be a series of one-shots, which I had originally intended, but I seem to be incapable of that so sorry if that was misleading! As always, thanks to everyone who reviewed, fav’d, and followed, you are exemplary and commendable human beings :) Enjoy!

Thorin roused his company before dawn. They hastily packed up their things and made their way quietly down the curved halls of Imladris. Bilbo tried to take in everything one last time, knowing in his heart this could be his final walk down these corridors.

They made their way hurriedly to the courtyard that they had entered in two days previously before heading up a narrow mountain path.

Bilbo Baggins was tired, emotionally and physically. After his talk with Thorin, Bilbo had stayed up long past his pipe had gone out, thinking of what had been discussed between them.

For the first time since setting out on this journey, the hobbit felt that he had damaged his almost non-existent relationship with the dwarf prince beyond repair. Bilbo had said what he meant, without restrictions, and now he was beginning to think some tact might have been in order.

Bilbo stood by what he said; he was just becoming less and less sure that was the opportune time to say it. Thorin hadn't so much as looked at him the entire morning, which in itself wasn't so unusual, but now there was an underlying tension Bilbo was sure he wasn't imagining.

The hobbit sighed as the group reached an opening in the rock that would lead them up and over the Misty Mountains. "Say, Master Thorin," Bofur spoke up from the front of the group, "weren't we suppose' to be waitin' for the wizard?"

Thorin stopped at the front of the group. "Gandalf will be joining us at the High Pass. He had other business to attend to. We must keep moving, the White Council may yet notice our absence."

Bofur nodded as he passed Thorin who was waiting for all the company to catch up. Bilbo was at the very back, right behind Fili and Kili, who both seemed unbothered by the rough terrain and lack of sleep.

The hobbit stepped on a particularly loose bit of rock and stumbled as the stone gave way beneath his foot. Bilbo felt himself lurch forward, but a helpful hand grasped his arm before his face became intimately acquainted with the ground.

"Woah there, Master Baggins," Fili said with a surprised laugh as he hauled the hobbit back up. "Don't want you falling this early in the day, do we? Better watch your footing, it'll only get worse the higher up we go."
Bilbo sent Fili a grateful smile as he readjusted his pack. "Thank you, Fili. I'll try and watch my step."

"Make sure you keep up, halfling," Thorin sneered, his tone acidic as Bilbo, Fili, and Kili finally made it to where he was standing. "We won't be slowing down, even for gentler folk."

The dwarf pushed his way back up the narrow path towards the front of the group and Bilbo felt the smile slip off his face. 'Well' the hobbit thought dejectedly, 'he is most certainly not pleased with me.'

Fili glanced curiously between Bilbo and his uncle. "Do you want to talk about it, Master Baggins?"

Bilbo forced his gaze away from Thorin's back. "I, uh, what? What do you mean?"

The hobbit didn't think he sounded at all convincing but at least he gave it a good go, no matter how pathetic his words came out. The blond dwarf raised an eyebrow and gave Bilbo a rather unimpressed look.

"You don't need to tell me," Fili began slowly as they walked behind the group. "I certainly won't pry, but I know my uncle better than most... Perhaps I could help."

"I..." Bilbo wasn't sure he wanted to involve Fili, let alone talk about what happened but decided with a sigh that if there was one person he couldn't fool, it was the young dwarf. "Thorin told me last night... well he mentioned certain things after I might have... defended some of the elves."

Bilbo didn't even need to look at Fili to see his wince. "And I'm sure you'll find it very hard to believe, but I also might've have run my mouth a bit and said that I thought perhaps that he..." Biblo struggled with how to phrase exactly what he had told the dwarf prince. "That he already had a home?"

The hobbit heard Fili's groan followed by a slightly disbelieving chuckle. "Oh you did not, please tell me you didn't tell him we needn't go back to Erebor at the very least!"

Bilbo ran a frustrated hand through his hair, "I said no such thing!"

Fili just raised his eyebrows again, an exasperated smile on his face. "Well I didn't mean to! I don't think I said anything in that specific wording, but he, uh, might have mistakenly taken that as my implication..."

Fili clapped a leather-clad hand onto Bilbo. "Oh my dear Master Baggins, you certainly have a distinct talent for saying exactly the wrong thing to my uncle."

Bilbo let out a miserable groan. "I was only trying to... I don't know, show him that he has people that care for him! That he doesn't need a mountain when he has friends and family that love him!"

The hobbit glanced desperately a Fili who gave him a sympathetic smile. "I know I can't help him, but I still can't help but try. Next time I'll just keep my big mouth shut... Not that I'll get a next time."

Fili wound an arm around Bilbo's shoulders as they walked. "Have heart, Master Baggins, I know if you give him time, Uncle Thorin will come to see you as Kili and I do."

"And how exactly do you see me?" Bilbo grumbled, "An incompetent, hopeless, nuisance? Because I think that description would be generous given Thorin's opinion of me..."

"Of course not, Master Baggins. I have seen first hand your courage. I have known your friendship and seen a loyal and selfless hobbit make sacrifices for dwarves he has no tie to." Fili looked down at
Bilbo with a smile, "Thorin has a… difficult time reassessing his judgments of people."

Bilbo glanced up, already feeling slightly better as Fili's words reminded him that he did still have friends among the company. "My uncle has spent many years leading our people through danger and unfamiliar places. After the betrayal of the elves, I think he has a great difficulty trusting outside our race."

"Thorin was forced to make many quick and hard decisions since Erebor was taken. He makes swift judgments of people and rarely changes his opinion once decided. I think it was easier for him to inspire confidence if he appeared decisive and absolute in his dealings."

Fili looked up to the front of the group where his uncle was leading now with Kili trailing closely behind him. "I will not deny this has served him well over the years, but in your case, Master Baggins, his strategy has been woefully inadequate."

Bilbo looked at Fili curiously. "I had a similar opinion of you myself when we first arrived at your home, but you have proven me wrong on all accounts, for which I am grateful. You saved Kili's life after all."

Fili paused for a brief moment, considering his words carefully. "I believe Thorin is still… well that he is still stuck in his initial perception of you. After you saved Kili, I know he wanted to thank you… But I think it is perhaps even harder for him than he realizes to reconcile the hobbit he thinks he knows with one who is brave and selfless."

"He is so unpracticed that when it comes to you, Master Baggins, the change will have to be slow." Bilbo frowned, wishing Thorin could for once not be an infuriatingly complex dwarf. "But!" Fili added with a smile, "I truly believe that with time, Thorin will realize that he is wrong about you, my friend."

"Thank you, Fili," Bilbo said with a small smile. "But I think you may be mistaken. I'm afraid I managed to offend him rather severely… Though I do very much hope that you are right."

"See!" Fili gave the hobbit a squeeze before returning his arm back to his side. "There's the Baggins spirit I know! Just be patient and I'm sure it'll work itself out."

Bilbo let out a laugh. He wanted to believe Fili, but all things considered if Thorin didn't knife him in his sleep, he'd consider that a success.

The company continued up the pass for what seemed like hours. Bilbo was hoping that Thorin would call for a rest, or more ideally camp, but the shout never came.

The dwarf prince was set on putting as much distance between themselves and Rivendell as he could, and so pushed the quickly tiring group father and father.

It must have been evening when Bilbo saw the beginning of dark storm clouds quickly roll towards them as they made their way on the increasingly narrow and, in his opinion, completely unsafe path.

It took only a short while after Bilbo saw the storm clouds for them to become a torrential downpour with wind and rain whipping at their bodies.

He was walking only about a foot in front of Fili and Kili and just slightly behind Bombur. Bilbo had taken to nervously making sure his hand kept in contact with the steep and jagged mountain face to his left, and not, under any circumstance, to let his gaze venture down to the gorge that lay a scant few feet to his right.
Clutching his cloak to his now shivering body, Bilbo felt the cold and wet continue to seep through his clothes. The hobbit tried not to show his discomfort too much, as the rest of the company was dealing with the same horrible conditions he was. But at that moment, Bilbo would have liked nothing better than have a good sulk and reminisce to someone about how warm and dry Bag End would have been.

Bilbo glanced back at the brothers behind him and met Kili's eyes, who gave him an encouraging, albeit slightly forced, smile. The hobbit was just about to ask them how they fared when he heard a sickening crunch from above. Bilbo could have sworn he felt the mountain move.

Bilbo looked at Fili whose face said that he had felt and heard the same shift in the rock the hobbit had. The wind had built up into a frenzied gale and Bilbo couldn't help but curse his luck when he saw lightning begin to flash in the sky all around them.

Everything seemed to go still for a few moments until Bilbo heard a deafening crash above him. The hobbit looked up terrified and saw a massive boulder colliding with the side of the rock face before it shattered and began to rain down upon the company.

"Everyone stand back from the ledge!" Thorin yelled, "Keep close to the mountain!"

Bilbo felt paralyzed as the rocks poured down around them, smashing into the path and the face of the mountain. A firm hand gripped his upper arm tightly and yanked the hobbit back just as a rather large, and most definitely lethal piece of boulder smashed into where he had been standing a second ago.

Bilbo was pulled back roughly until his back collided hard stone. The hobbit couldn't help but gaze open-mouthed at the place on the path he had just been, except now there was significantly less rock and disturbingly more room for him to plummet to his death.

His brain catching up with his body, Bilbo began sucking in air to calm himself. 'No, nope, this is not happening. I am most certainly not mere inches away from emptiness. I am in the Shire, in my chair, and simply having a terrible dream,' Bilbo chanted to himself as he closed his eyes, trying to shut out the sound of more boulders crashing above them.

"—ilbo!" The hobbit sluggishly tried to focus in on the familiar voice, "Bilbo Baggins! Snap out of it right now! We have to keep moving!"

Still pressed against the side of the mountain, Bilbo glanced sideways to see the hand that saved him belonged to Fili who was shaking him slightly while yelling over the wind.

Bilbo looked from the dwarf, down into the gorge and back, not even trying to stop the flood of fear now coursing through his body. Fili gave him a reassuring smile, or what the dwarf probably had hoped was reassuring, though against the wind and rain Bilbo thought it looked more like a grimace.

"We'll stick together Master Baggins, I promise I will not let you go." Fili gave Bilbo's arm another tight squeeze, "Just trust me." Bilbo was trying; he wanted to believe the dwarf but everything around him made his body scream out in danger. "Please, Bilbo, trust me."

The hobbit forced himself to look at Fili once more and gave a small nod despite the sickening panic that seemed to have housed itself permanently in his stomach. But his friend, the dwarf that had saved his life countless times so far, was asking him for trust, and so Bilbo Baggins would trust.

Bilbo turned to start walking forward, keeping a death grip on the hand the still remained on his arm. The hobbit stuck his shaking fingers between Fili's hand and his own body and, to his surprise, felt a
slight reassurance emanate from the sturdy dwarf behind him.

The two of them, with Kili right behind his brother, made their way cautiously along the path. Bilbo just was starting to believe maybe they could all make it through alive, but his short lived confidence was almost immediately shattered when he saw a gigantic figure through the sheets of rain.

This thing, this massive monster had the vague shape of a man but from what Bilbo could tell, was made entirely out of stone. The giant ripped away a piece of the mountainside like it was little more than a twig from a branch, and hurled it towards where the company was making their treacherous journey.

Bilbo was once again shoved towards the wall, but this time he felt Fili shielding him tightly with his own body. Bilbo clung fast to the dwarf's arms that circled around his chest for stability as he felt the ground shift beneath them.

'Oh no…' Bilbo thought with terror, 'Oh no, no, no!'

There was a large screeching noise from just behind him as the mountain tore itself in two. Bilbo turned his head in horror as he saw what they were standing on was not just a groove in the mountain, but the knee of one of the giant stone monsters.

The hobbit's knuckles grew white as he gripped Fili's hand, holding on for dear life. Bilbo felt one of the arms around him get thrown back as he heard a yell from Fili.

"Take my hand Kili!" Except there was no time, no chance for Fili to help his brother. "Kili!" Came out Fili's strangled yell, sounding as if he had just had a limb wrenched from his body.

There was a horrible lurch as the monster disconnected itself from the mountain and took a great step forward. Bilbo held tighter to Fili than he had to anyone in his life. The dwarf had returned the arm to clutch the hobbit to his chest, but moved the other to hold onto a groove in the rock so when the giant finally finished its jerking step forward and half the company was jostled sideways, Fili was able to still cling to the rock.

The next few minutes were a blur to Bilbo as he concentrated on just staying with Fili. If he just trusted in the dwarf, everything would be fine, Bilbo thought to himself with no small measure of panic. They were slammed back again and again as the monster they clung to fought its violent kin.

There was a cacophony of sound around Bilbo as rocks eagerly smashed against each other, the wind howled fiercely, and the company was pelted with sheet after sheet of cold rain.

The only thing the hobbit knew was that Fili was here, and while Fili was here, Bilbo tried to focus less on the very unpleasant and painful death that could meet them any second, and more on the strong heartbeat of the dwarf behind him.

The giant they were clinging to received a great blow to the face. The impact forcing the stone monster to twist violently and the leg Bilbo was on jerked forward towards the mountain.

The hobbit couldn't help but let out a frightened yelp as they hurtled towards a wall of very hard and very solid rock. Bilbo felt the grip around him tighten as Fili yelled out, "Hold on, Bilbo! Whatever you do, don't let go!"

Bilbo closed his eyes. He knew it probably wasn't the wisest decision he had ever made, but the hobbit couldn't help but try and shut out the terrible scene in front of him for what were probably going to be the last few gruesome seconds of his all too short life.
There was a resounding crash and Bilbo felt himself being launched forward. Then all of a sudden the motion stopped as Bilbo and Fili flew into the rock wall. The dwarf had twisted them so Fili took the brunt of the impact with his back. The young dwarf let out a grunt of pain and in the force of his body slamming into a solid surface, Fili let go of Bilbo who tumbled out of his grasp.

The hobbit experienced some of the most confusing and adrenaline filled seconds of his life as he rolled away from Fili, still dazed from the crash, until suddenly there was no ground beneath him. Bilbo felt his legs go over first and his eyes widened in horror as he began to drop.

Flinging his arms out, the hobbit was just barely able to find a miraculous grip on a rock jutting out the side of the mountain. With his legs dangling above a dark abyss and the wind doing its best to dislodge him, Bilbo found that he was distinctly displeased.

Bilbo didn't know how many moments passed, but it felt like countless hours as his arms grew rapidly more and more tired. They shook with the effort to cling to the rock, but the hobbit was suddenly filled with the furious desire to live.

Bilbo Baggins was not going to die by falling into some dank, infernal pit. He was going to pass on in his bed, at a very old age, feeling nothing but comfort and peace.

The hobbit knew someone would see him soon, because he trusted his friends to find him and save him. Bilbo clenched his teeth with effort as he dug his fingers into the rock, feeling the skin break and blood begin to run down his hands.

All of a sudden Bofur's face appeared above him. "Bilbo! I found 'im!" Bofur lay down on his stomach, his hand reaching down desperately to help the hobbit back up. "I can't —" Bofur reached down, straining to help the hobbit, his teeth clenching, "I can't reach 'im—"

Bilbo briefly considered letting one hand go to try and meet the dwarf halfway, but he knew almost immediately that given his arms were already shaking with effort, he would probably just drop before Bofur had time to reach him.

There were a few moments of flurried activity above Bilbo, before the hobbit saw Thorin swing down from the path and place a firm arm around his waist.

Bilbo met Thorin's eyes for a brief second as they connected. The dwarf looked equal parts harrowed and fiercely determined. Bilbo couldn't help but feel hope well up within his chest, Thorin would save him! As Thorin hauled the hobbit up, Bilbo felt his shaking arms give way limply, letting the dwarf bear his weight.

Bilbo was brought up to Bofur, who took the burglar under his arms and pulled him up. The feeling of ground, solid and tangible beneath his feet was one of the most welcome sensations Bilbo had ever experienced.

Dwalin leaned down to help Thorin back up as Bilbo looked around at the company, they were all here! The hobbit felt a surge of relief pour through him until a pair of dwarf arms swiftly and tightly came around him.

There was a brief moment in which Bilbo was very confused at the feel and smell of wet fur against his face. That was until he was pulled back and met with the sight of Fili letting out a strained but relieved laugh, his brother right behind him sporting an almost identical look.

Bilbo laughed himself, feeling relieved to just be alive at this point. "You had me worried there, Master Baggins! One second I had you, the next you fall off a cliff! I swear I can't let you out of my
sight for a single moment."

Bofur came up next to Fili, followed closely by Bombur and Bifur. "You certainly gave us a scare, laddie, I thought we might've lost our burglar!"

Bilbo gave Bofur a grateful smile, before he looked past the two brothers. Thorin was looking at them with an unreadable expression on his face, his hand clenching and unclenching itself.

"The burglar has been lost since the moment he left the Shire," Thorin began, his tone dark and angry. "He has been nothing but a burden and a nuisance. The halfling has no place amongst us. He should go back to his precious home before he gets killed."

The dwarf prince turned away from them before stalking off. "Dwalin, we make camp in the cave. Make sure everyone is settled."

Bilbo felt the smile slip from his face. 'So,' he thought almost blankly, 'that's what he thinks of me.' Bilbo had thought Thorin assumed these things about him, he was just as sure that those ideas had crossed every one's mind at one point, even his own.

But there was something in the way Thorin's eyes flashed, the way his hands made tight fists in what Bilbo thought to be barely contained fury, and the way he had spat out the words, as if the saying them caused the dwarf to feel a physical repulsion. That was what dug deeply and painfully into Bilbo.

The hobbit felt a gnawing ache begin in his chest. Bilbo had never had someone look at him as though he was disgusting before, as if he wasn't even worth the dirt on Thorin's boot.

Bilbo stared blankly where Thorin had stood a second ago, until he felt Fili's hand go to his shoulder. "Do not fret, Master Baggins," the blond dwarf spoke in a low, comforting voice. "He was just worried is all, don't take him too seriously."

"Yes, Master Boggins," Kili added quickly. "He says the same thing to us all the time. I think we've all been called a nuisance and a burden at some point in our lives! Its like a… Like a right of passage! Like a –" Kili was silenced by a swift elbow to his stomach.

"What he's trying to say," Fili continued patiently, shooting a glare his brother's way, "Is that's just how Thorin speaks, it's not really anything to do with you personally…"

Bilbo gave them a false smile. "Of course. I'm sure he was just tense."

Kili nodded vigorously. "Indeed yes, Master Boggins! Just worried is all, see!"

Fili gave Bilbo a questioning glance, clearly not completely buying Bilbo's charade, but couldn't pursue the topic further as Dwalin gruffly told them to get in the cave now or freeze outside.

The three of them made their way in through the narrow gap in the wall that opened up into a surprisingly spacious cavern. It was longer than it was wide, but there was still more than enough room for all the company to fit inside.

"I'll just get a fire goin."

"No. No fires, this pass is known to be crawling with goblins." Thorin spoke from further inside the cave. Bofur looked down at his clothes and plucked at his soaking scarf somewhat dejectedly. "Bofur take first watch, everyone else, get some sleep. We'll be heading out at first light."
Bofur just sighed and nodded, placing his pack near the entrance and sitting down on a rock, clearly resigned to a night of being uncomfortable. Bilbo set his own bag down somewhat close to Bofur, but away from the rest of the group.

Fili and Kili set their packs down a few feet from Bilbo, not on either side of him as they would usually. After a hushed discussion between them, Fili seemed to have convinced his brother that the hobbit would probably prefer some space at that moment, for which Bilbo was grateful.

The hobbit opened his pack to pull out his blanket only to notice that the black, leather-bound book he had taken from Elrond’s library was inside and thankfully dry and undamaged. Bilbo traced the cover for a second before glancing over at Ori, who was talking quietly with Dori and Nori, and realized that the young dwarf must have put it back in there last night before the hobbit had gone to sleep.

Despite feeling a momentary anxiety that he had inadvertently stolen what was no doubt a precious artifact from one of the oldest and most powerful elf lords on this earth, Bilbo couldn't fight the small spark of happiness he felt when he looked at the cover.

Placing the book tenderly back into his bag, the hobbit took off his sword and sopping cloak, before wrapping himself in his blanket and laying down. There was about half an hour more of bustling commotion as the rest of the company organized themselves before one by one they trailed off to sleep.

Bilbo heard the usually comforting soft snores coming from Kili to his right, but could not calm himself enough to fall asleep.

Thorin's words kept running through his mind, over and over. Despite Fili and Kili's reassurances, there was something different about the way Thorin had spoken to him this time unlike all the times before when he offered the hobbit criticism.

The dwarf prince had told him he was incompetent, had scoffed at him when he fell off his pony and couldn't start a proper fire, had sent him an uncountable amount of glares and harsh looks, but he had never once told Bilbo to leave.

The hobbit had thought he was finally earning his place amongst the company. He had foolishly begun to think he was becoming useful, but as he looked back on the journey so far, Bilbo realized he had probably slowed them down far more often than done anything helpful.

Sure, he had saved Kili and Ori, but those had been accidents and blind luck, not based on his exceptional skill with a sword or insurmountable bravery. 'What am I even doing here?' Bilbo thought to himself as he spiraled further and further into dark thoughts, 'what right do I have to journey with these brave dwarves? What right do I have to burden their quest to take back their home?'

Bilbo clutched the blanket to himself tightly, gritting his teeth as he tried to fight the one idea he didn't want to consider, but felt closing in as his only option. He had to go home. He had to go back to the home he already had, the one he had always known. He wasn't safe here, he wasn't happy here, Bilbo told himself over and over again.

Thorin's dark and angry face, grimacing in disgust as he told Bilbo to leave, plagued his vision every time he closed his eyes. How could he even face Thorin after the dwarf had all but dismissed him? Thorin clearly didn't want him here; he had made his opinion very apparent.

Bilbo felt a twinge of guilt as he thought of Fili and Kili and of Bofur and Ori, all of whom he
considered to be his friends. He thought of their faces, that he might never watch the two brothers
poke fun at each other. That he might never hear another tale from Bofur, who had shown him so
much. That he might never see Ori's beautiful drawings or hear him talk animatedly about ancient
tales.

But he would be doing them a favor, wouldn't he? They might be upset now, but surely by leaving
Bilbo was saving them countless troubles and sparing them of always having to look out for the
poor, helpless hobbit who had no real ties to their goal.

Bilbo made a snap decision, not allowing himself to consider it any further. Rolling up his blanket,
Bilbo stuffed it back into his pack. Quietly as he could, the hobbit strapped his sword back around
his waist and fixed his still damp cloak to his back. He'd go to Rivendell. He'd go back to Lord
Elrond's, return the book, and plead his case with the elf, who he hoped would show him some
mercy and allow Bilbo to borrow a pony and perhaps some supplies.

Then he would go back to the Shire. He would go back to Hobbiton and Bag End, where he would
not be a burden or a nuisance and was altogether a very respectable hobbit.

Though he was determined now, Bilbo felt nothing but a hollow ache in his chest as he glanced at
the sleeping dwarf brothers. Turing away from them quickly, Bilbo's eyes flicked towards Bofur
who was supposed to be keeping watch. The dwarf's head was tilted down and his hat obscured
what little Bilbo could see of his face.

Bofur's breathing appeared to be calm and steady, which Bilbo prayed meant that the exhaustion
from the day's ordeal had taken its toll and Bofur was asleep.

Bilbo padded quietly towards the opening in the cave that they had come through earlier, not at all
relishing the thought of going back on that narrow path, but reminding himself that he had no choice.

He crept passed Bofur and was almost outside again, when Bilbo heard a quiet voice behind him.
"And just where do you think you're goin'?"

Bilbo cursed silently as he turned around slowly to Bofur who was looking at him with narrowed
eyes. "I'm – I'm…" Bilbo began quickly trying to think of how best to explain this to his friend, "I'm
going back to Rivendell."

The dwarf sat up off his rock in a sudden motion looking shocked. "You can't be goin' now, laddie!
Not when we're gettin' so close!"

Bilbo let out an angry sigh, he didn't want to hurt anyone! He didn't want to be responsible for
anyone getting harmed because of him! Why couldn't Bofur see that?

"You heard Thorin!" Bilbo said desperately, trying to make Bofur understand why he had to leave.
"I don't belong here! I never have. I'm not like you, I can't do this adventuring business, I'm just not –
I'm just not made for it!"

Bofur frowned at him. "You can't be honestly believin' that, laddie… Not after all the things we done
so far. I've seen you, myself. I know you were startin' up not knowin' a twig from a rock, but I've
seen ya change." The dwarf crossed his arms with an indignant challenge on his face. "I saw you
save the lads," Bofur nodded down to Fili and Kili, "And I saw how you helped Ori too."

Bofur nodded to himself as if this settled the matter. "You are part o' this company, Bilbo Baggins,
whether you thinking' you're suited or not. No matter what Master Thorin says, I know your worth,
Master Baggins, I know it's the very highest."
Bilbo looked at his friend, shocked that the dwarf thought so much of him but one glance back at Thorin's still form reminded him why he was leaving.

Bilbo remained silent for a few moments before speaking quietly. "I'm not though, am I? Thorin has never been more right. I am," the hobbit continued with a sigh, "a creature of comfort, Bofur, I'm used to doilies and fire, to warm beds and seven meals a day. I can't even swing a sword without taking out my own eye."

Bofur stepped forward and placed a hand on Bilbo's shoulder. "You're homesick, laddie. And that's okay, I understand," the dwarf had a kind smile on his face.

Bilbo couldn't help but lash out. He couldn't stop himself when he saw Bofur, kind Bofur, tell him it was fine when he was obviously being a right coward and trying to run away.

"No you don't!" Bilbo almost shouted, "You're dwarves. You're used to living this kind of life! To – To living on the road, to not belonging anywhere!"

Bilbo immediately regretted what he said. Bofur's face fell but, to his credit, he maintained a small, sad smile as if despite the hobbit's pretense, he finally understood what Bilbo meant.

"No, no I –" Bilbo spluttered trying to find some way to make this alright, but felt more out of his depth than ever. "I… I didn't mean it like that…"

"No, you're right, Master Baggins. We don't belong anywhere." Bofur looked around at all the sleeping dwarves with a sad smile. There was a moment of silence in which Bilbo felt almost sick, this was not going at all as he pictured it.

Bofur closed the space between them and grasped Bilbo in a warm hug. "I understand, Master Baggins. You gotta do what you must." Bofur pulled back, now smiling with a genuine kindness Bilbo felt he had never deserved less, "I wish you all the luck in the world, Bilbo Baggins, I really do."

At that moment Bilbo was embarrassingly close to letting frustrated tears fall from his eyes. He knew in that moment he didn't want to go. He didn't want to leave his friends... But at the same time he had never felt more selfish, as if he was hoarding their smiles and their friendships even though he didn't deserve them.

The hobbit was feeling utterly torn in two when he saw Bofur glance to his waist, the dwarf's eyebrows pulling together in puzzlement. "Is your sword glowin', laddie?"

Bilbo quickly pulled the hilt of the elvish sword up and, sure enough, a blue light poured out from its steel. Bilbo glanced from the sword to Bofur, realization suddenly dawning on him as he gasped.

"Goblins!"

There was a strange metallic groan that came from beneath them before the ground started to give way.

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me," Bilbo spat out before he fell into the darkness below.
Bilbo Baggins was, for the first time, deliberately going to take a life. Sure, he had killed accidentally killed an orc before, but the hobbit had never *purposely* done more than step on a spider or two.

After the ground had opened up, Bilbo had fallen through with a yell down a narrow passage along with the rest of the company. All thoughts of deserting and going home were thrown from his mind as he crashed down a series of chutes.

He had landed in a heap with the rest of the dwarves only to be swarmed by more goblins than Bilbo had ever seen in his entire life. Not that that was saying much, but for the hobbit, the sight of about a hundred foul, screeching creatures coming right at him seemed like it could have been an entire army.

The company had been hoisted up rather unceremoniously and started being hauled down a narrow path towards a rickety bridge. Bilbo realized rather quickly that the goblins were mainly concerned with his dwarven counterparts.

In a fit of either wits or cowardice, Bilbo was still not sure, the hobbit had crouched down and to his amazement the goblins had swarmed around him, oblivious to his presence.

Bilbo had almost, *almost* thought he had gotten away until a straggler jumped him, teeth and sword flashing as it pummeled him with blow after furious blow. Bilbo had swiftly drawn his sword and, although acting purely on instinct, the hobbit met each of the strikes with his own parry.

The goblin had lunged out blindingly fast. Bilbo met it's sword but was forced to throw his weight over to his right side, leaving him horribly off balance. The goblin had launched itself at the hobbit, wrapping its strong legs around Bilbo's waist as it tried to choke him from behind.

Bilbo, still off balance and now with a goblin strangling him, did his best to throw the creature off but as he stepped back, he felt his foot slip off the edge of the ledge. He and the goblin went plummeting to the ground.

Thankfully some ridiculously large cave mushrooms broke Bilbo's fall but the hobbit ceased feeling anything other than a cold dread as a new strangely grotesque creature appeared and started to drag off the goblin off.

The creature got a few feet with its cargo in tow when the goblin shot up in a fit of strength. They struggled for a few moments before the creature grabbed a rather jagged looking rock and bashed the goblin's head a few times until it stopped doing anything more dramatic than twitch.

Bilbo had gotten up from his hiding place and quietly followed the creature. He had been about to walk further before he saw a glint of gold at his feet. There was a second in which Bilbo could have sworn he heard the thing whisper in a darkly seductive and unknown tongue. That was silly, of course, because rings *couldn't* whisper, but that didn't stop Bilbo from reaching down in a trance to pick it up.

As his fingers had gently touched the cool surface, a wash of possessive pleasure washed over the hobbit, the word precious a hint in the back of his mind.

Bilbo had been snapped from his reverie by the sound of singing floating over to where he stood. The hobbit had shaken his head, quickly putting the ring into the pocket of his vest.

What happened next, Bilbo found extremely odd and almost unbelievable as he looked back in later years. The creature had threatened to eathim and then had the gall to ask him to play a game of riddles.
Bilbo couldn't really see another viable way out of these blasted caves, so he played along. The two traded riddles until Bilbo Baggins, no doubt a regular word-puzzle savant, had trounced his foe. Well… perhaps not trounce but he certainly had won, and in no way cheated. Nope, no cheating whatsoever, not Bilbo Baggins.

The hobbit had run away as fast as he could as the creature howled behind him, yelling something about Bilbo having stole his 'precious,' whatever that was…

Having seen an opening in the rocks, Bilbo forced his way through, though sacrificing his fine brass buttons, and fell into another cavern on the other side.

As he fell, something truly extraordinary happened. As Bilbo made contact with the hard ground, the ring had flown out of his pocket and in its descent, landed right on his finger.

Bilbo had let out a shocked gasp as the world seemed to bleed gray around him. A loud rushing filled his ears and Bilbo could swear time slowed down. As he moved his hand, the appendage seemed to leave a brief blur, an imprint of its presence where it had been a second ago before fading.

The creature had leapt through after him and Bilbo had scrambled up, raising his sword and gathering himself for a fight. But much to his amazement, the creature looked around, but remained unseeing of the hobbit that stood not more than two feet from him. Bilbo Baggins was invisible! It seemed this ring was magic and, the hobbit had thought feeling relieved and pleased, was going to be very useful.

Bilbo had run after the creature until they both stopped at the sound of crashing footsteps. At that moment, a most welcome sight came hurtling past them, Gandalf! The wizard had returned and was soon followed by the rest of the company.

Bilbo had been about to call out to them, but suddenly remembered he was not only invisible, but there was still something between him and the dwarves that had not ten minutes prior expressed its delight in ripping the meat off his bones.

Bilbo raised his sword, letting it sit a few inches from the creature's neck and steadied himself. There was nothing stopping him, nothing stopping him from cleaving that wretched head from the creature's body.

Nothing except Bilbo was no longer sure he could kill something he pitied. Just as he had been about to deliver the deathblow, it had turned around and shed a tear. A few moments before, Bilbo had been telling himself that death would be a mercy for a being so miserable. Now, as it looked as if someone had ripped it's very heart from it, Bilbo couldn't bring himself to complete the strike.

'Surely to feel such sadness, one must also feel love?' Bilbo thought to himself as he continued to gaze at the creature. It must have lost something truly cherished to look so desolate. The hobbit could kill an orc, he could kill a goblin and feel no hint of remorse, but that was because those creatures were born of hate and malice and knew nothing else.

This creature had known love, had loved. No matter how violent or how miserable its life seemed, Bilbo knew now he could not be the one to end it. The hobbit took a step back, then launched himself over the creature and ran for the beautiful sunlight that poured through the exit of the cave, ignoring the cries of anger that followed him.

The hobbit made his way down the side of the mountain that was blessedly covered with mostly grass and trees. He dodged rocks here and there, hoping he wouldn't have long to go before he caught up with the company.
Bilbo was panting now, no sleep or food had left him feeling slightly dizzy, but the thought of returning to his friends, of seeing Fili and Kili's grins and Bofur's warm smile pushed him further. He knew there was no going back now. There was no return trip to Rivendell until the quest was done unless Thorin forcibly carried the hobbit himself.

Out of the cave and in the light of the setting sun, feeling deliciously alive as the air burned his lungs, Bilbo felt the dark thoughts of the cavern leave him. Maybe Thorin did want him to leave; maybe he did think that Bilbo was nothing more than a waste of time and energy. But as Bilbo thought of his friends’ words, he knew in that moment, for the first time since the beginning of the journey, where he belonged right now was in the company of Thorin Oakenshield and the thirteen brave dwarves that deserved more than anything to retake their home.

Bilbo felt a surge of relief as he heard the gruff voice of Gandalf float through the trees. "But where is Bilbo, where is the hobbit?"

Thorin's voice shot back in reply. "The hobbit has left us. He saw an opportunity to go home and he took it."

Bilbo thought Thorin sounded, well… angry, but there was also some stiffness in the dwarf's voice that he couldn't place.

There was some talking Bilbo couldn't make out, but he soon heard the frantic voices of Fili and Kili shouting his name. Rather being unused to invisibility, Bilbo almost ran into the group still wearing his ring. However, at that moment he felt a strangely strong desire to keep them unaware of his new treasure, at least for the time being.

Slipping the ring back into his pocket, Bilbo came out from around a tree. "Nope, still here!"

Covered in dirt, his vest open, and scrapes covering his face, Bilbo was sure he didn't look as good as he felt, but nothing seemed to matter as he was quickly swept up into a hug by the two dwarf brothers.

"Where have you been? And how did you get past the goblins?" Fili asked the hobbit, relief apparent in his voice.

"You had us worried sick!" Added Kili indignantly but a smile broke out on his face nonetheless.

Bilbo gave them a small shrug. "I, uh, got separated after we fell. And I suppose they don't take much notice to folks as small as hobbits. Plus, Master Dwarf, I am remarkably light on my feet."

Bilbo gave them a teasing smile.

"Why did you come back?"

Bilbo looked away from Fili and Kili, turning to face Thorin who was looking at him rather strangely. Bilbo took a moment thinking about how to say what he wanted. "I came back because…” Bilbo began slowly, feeling a sense of liberating peace now that he had firmly decided to stay.

"I came back because I miss home."

Thorin looked at him confused. Clearly this was not the answer the dwarf had been expecting and his brows moved closer together in his uncertainty.

"I know you doubt me. And you are right to do so. When this journey began, I admit the thought of home was on my mind more often than not. I miss my books. I miss my fires and my chair." Bilbo let
out a small laugh, "I even miss my doilies of all things. But I know I miss them because they are home. They are where I belong."

Thorin's gaze on him was still unreadable as Bilbo continued. "And when this is all over, I will return home."

"That's why I came back. Because you don't have one… A home. It was taken from you," Bilbo gave Thorin a smile both bright and somber. "But I will help you take it back if I can."

Bilbo held Thorin's gaze for a few silent moments, waiting for the dwarf to react, for better or worse, but if Thorin was going to say anything, it was drowned out by a fearsome and terrible howl.

Thorin's face quickly tightened as he yelled, "Wargs!"

Followed quickly by Gandalf's booming "Run!"

Bilbo felt a hand push him forward, and began to run along with Fili and Kili. The company sprinted down steep terrain as they heard the thunderous pounding of clawed feet closing in on them from behind.

Bilbo had hoped his good mood would have lasted him more than a grand total of five minutes, but seeing how the rest of the journey had gone thus far; he wasn't really sure why this still surprised him.

The wargs were now very, very close. Much too close for Bilbo to feel even remotely safe. The hobbit heard the gnashing of razor sharp teeth from somewhere behind him. Right behind him. Bilbo dove behind a tree, hoping to at least put something a little more solid than air between himself and the ravenous beast.

Panting with fear and exhaustion, Bilbo couldn't help his eyes snapping shut as he waited for jaws to close around his soft and exposed bits. That was until he heard a growl and a yelp.

Bilbo snapped his face to the side to see what happened and was met with the sight of Thorin thrusting his curved blade into the neck of the warg before twisting it then pulling Orcrist out with a loud and very disgusting squelch.

"Are you alright?" Thorin asked him hurriedly, scanning the hobbit for bites. Bilbo couldn't force his voice into making anything more complex than a rasp, so he just gave a quick nod.

Thorin looked back up the hill where more wargs were running down towards them. "Draw your sword, you may need it yet."

Bilbo placed a shaking hand on the hilt, pulling out the glowing blue steel.

A firm hand grasped his upper arm and pulled him forward into motion. "Keep going and find somewhere safe to hide, we'll take care of the beasts."

Bilbo suddenly realized that Thorin was planning on staying to hold them off. "No, Thorin, you can't! There's too many of them!"

Thorin growled at him as he continued to try and force Bilbo into motion away from the action. "I meant only that we'll thin the herd. I'll be right behind you, now move!"

Bilbo glanced back at the incoming wargs, and prayed that they'd all make it through this alive as he ran after the others. He made it about another minute before he heard panicked shouts. "}
This is a ledge, Master Gandalf!” Dori cried out from somewhere in front of him.

Bilbo quickly looked around and sure enough, they had run themselves straight into a trap, there was nowhere for them to go!

"Up the trees!" Gandalf shouted near the ledge, "Climb you fools!"

Bilbo felt a moment of incredulity as he stared at the trees. 'There's no way I can climb that!' Bilbo thought angrily, feeling nothing but resentful that the wizard was severely over-estimating his height at the worst possible time.

Bilbo stood there a moment, not knowing what he should do before he heard Kili call down to him from a nearby tree, "Over here, Master Boggins! Come quick, I'll help you up!"

The hobbit ran over to the tree where Kili and his brother were hiding. The younger dwarf, in a display of rather impressive acrobatics, swung down so that he has hanging upside down by his knees from the lowest branch, his arms swinging down so that Bilbo could grab hold.

Bilbo quickly sheathed his sword as he reached up and Kili grasped his forearms, pulling the hobbit up with himself. There was a moment in which Bilbo was not sure exactly which way was up or where he was supposed to be gripping, when he felt another set of hands pull him up further.

Fili had grasped Bilbo's pack and hauled him up to the branch he was currently standing on. Swiftly joined by Kili, the three of them made their way further up the tree.

The hobbit saw Dwalin and Thorin, the last two of their party to reach the ledge, start climbing another tree nearby. They were not a moment too soon as the wargs started to swarm the ground underneath them.

There were a few moments in which the air seemed to be permeated only by the harsh snapping and furious howls of the beasts, but out of the darkness, another voice spoke up.

Bilbo's eyes shot over to where the strangest orc he had ever seen sat atop a warg the color of cold snow. The orc had scars covering its face and chest, but its most distinctive feature was the twisted metal claw it sported instead of a right hand.

It began to speak in a voice that sent chills down the hobbits spine; it's words all but dripping with malice and a thirst for bloody violence. Bilbo couldn't understand what the orc said but he was almost positive he picked up the names 'Thorin' and 'Thrain' as it began to sniff the air before giving them a sharp-toothed smile.

Bilbo heard a strangled and disbelieving "Azog!" from somewhere to his left in Thorin's unmistakable voice. The hobbit saw Fili's had grip a branch white knuckled and heard Kili let out a low, "it's not possible..."

Turning back to the orc, Bilbo felt his fear twist his stomach. This orc was Azog the Defiler. The same orc that had beheaded Thorin's father right in front him, the same orc that had killed scores of skilled dwarf warriors. And now he was here, smiling at them like he was going to rip their limbs off one by one and be all the more delighted for it. Which, in all fairness, he probably would.

Bilbo didn't have much time to consider all the possible gruesome and thoroughly unpleasant ways Azog could kill them because the wargs had begun to attack the trees.

The hobbit and two dwarves were suddenly jerked backwards, Bilbo only just hanging on to the branch in front of him, as three of the wargs started to tear apart the base of the tree.
Bilbo heard Fili mutter something in dwarvish angrily before he turned to the hobbit. "This tree isn’t going to last long, we’re going to have to jump."

"Jump?" Bilbo let out a strangled laugh, "Jump where exactly?"

There was another jerk as the tree started to fall back towards the edge of the cliff. "As soon as we get close enough, jump to the next tree!" Kili’s said, his voice sounding remarkably steady for a dwarf who was barely hanging onto a tree.

Bilbo was just about to tell the brothers just how idiotic and ridiculous this idea was, when their tree crashed into the one behind to it. The hobbit didn’t so much as jump as find himself being flung. Thankfully Bilbo was able to grab a branch and found a relatively thick piece of tree to place his feet. The hobbit looked down to see the two dwarves were slightly below him and both seemed to be unharmed.

He didn't have much time to appreciate this new stability, however, as the wargs had immediately begun to take this tree down as well. Though Bilbo was now aware of what was going to happen, it didn't make the next jump any less terrifying.

This process happened two more times before the entire company found itself on Gandalf’s tree that rested, in Bilbo’s opinion, much too close to the edge of the cliff.

Bilbo found himself on a branch just below Fili and just above Kili. The wargs seemed to halt their attack at the command of Azog, who raised a deathly white hand to point a clawed finger at Thorin before he slowly drew it across his neck, indicating that they would very soon be missing a rather crucial part of their anatomy.

The wargs howled with malicious delight and resumed their attack on the tree. This one was rather studier than the rest, but it didn't take long before Bilbo felt it begin to tilt backwards towards emptiness.

Bilbo suddenly felt something hot fall into his lap. Confused, the hobbit looked up just in time to see Fili throwing a flaming pinecone at the beasts, a sudden and impossible inferno bursting from its depth.

Feeling hope for the first time since they had started running, Bilbo quickly grasped the pinecone in his lap and launched it with all his strength. The flaming cone sailed through the air until it hit one of the wargs square in the face. It let out a surprised yelp as the flames raced out.

The rest of the company threw the pinecones until the hill before them was ablaze with the light of Gandalf’s inferno. A few of the company let out whoops of glee as a fearsome roar tore from Azog’s throat.

Bilbo was just about shoot Fili a grin when he felt the tree begin to fall backwards again. Clinging on for dear life, Bilbo squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the sensation of a plummeting death to take him, but just when the tree was laying flat against the earth, the roots held fast. They were alive!

Bilbo’s legs were dangling as he tried to haul himself onto the branch. He was so concerned with getting his leg onto the tree, Bilbo almost missed the sight of Thorin, eyes blazing with as much fury as the fire raging in front of them, pull out his sword and start to run towards Azog.

Bilbo watched in horror as Thorin let out a fierce cry, picking up speed as he hurtled towards the orc. The hobbit wanted to shout out to Thorin, to tell him to turn back, that he was outnumbered and outmatched but any words he had died in his throat as he saw the great, white warg leap out and
plow into the dwarf.

Thorin was able to dodge the worst of the impact by tucking into a roll, but the claws of the beast raked his back. Azog forced his mount around for another attack as Thorin pulled himself back up, taking up his oaken-shield.

The beast lunged forward, Azog preparing to bring his mace down on the dwarf who swung Orcrist in a great arc. There was a flurry of movement that Bilbo couldn't quite make out as the attacks met but the hobbit felt his face slacken in terror as he saw the mace connect with Thorin's back in a fearsome blow.

The dwarf crumpled in a heap as Azog turned around once more. The warg growled as Azog whispered something into its ear and Bilbo could feel the fear wrack through him as the beast closed its jaws around Thorin's body and begun to shake viciously.

It was Dwalin's desperate cry to his leader that jolted Bilbo into action. He had to help. He had to do something. If Bilbo had taken the time to consider the repercussions of running into a battle, woefully unprepared, against a foe that had slain hundreds of warriors, the hobbit just might have thrown up.

Hauling himself up onto the branch in a burst of strength, Bilbo scrambled onto the trunk just in time to see Thorin plant his fist into the warg's snout before it flung him across the clearing. The dwarf didn't appear to be moving as Bilbo heard Azog growl out a command to one of the other orcs.

Bilbo drew out his sword and ran. 'He must live, he must live!' Bilbo chanted to himself over and over again as he sprinted towards the dwarf, ignoring the shouts behind him and the blaze around him.

It didn't matter what happened to him, what mattered was that Thorin be able to reclaim his kingdom, that Thorin be able to grow old and watch his nephews and people enjoy the prosperity and peace they so rightly deserved.

What did Bilbo have? A house? A hole in the ground? What did any of those things even matter. Thorin had people who needed him, people who were depending on him, people who loved him. Thorin had to live!

Bilbo threw himself with all the force he could muster into the orc that had raised its sword to end the dwarf's life. They collided in a heap of limbs and armor. Bilbo let out fierce yell as he stabbed the orc again and again before it could attack.

The hobbit stumbled off the now still orc, practically falling over himself as he placed his body between Thorin and Azog. Every part of Bilbo's body ached but he raised his sword in both hands towards the incredulous face of the orc. He said no words, but there hobbit made it clear that we would die before they laid another dirty finger on Thorin.

There was a quiet moment in which Bilbo met Azog's light blue eyes and the hobbit saw death. He pictured the orc coming towards him and swinging that spiked mace into his body. Bilbo could feel in his mind the impact as it connected with his body, the feeling of spikes splitting his skin and blood pouring out of him as the world crashed down in a swell of noise and pain.

And yet, as the he raised his chin towards the orc in defiance, despite all his fear, Bilbo had never felt more at peace. If he was going to die, then he would die in service of a friend. He would die because when faced with the choice of watching someone be slain or doing what he could to stop it, Bilbo Baggins would always choose to help.
Bilbo took a deep breath, readying himself for whatever was to come. Azog and his mount started to move forward slowly, when Bilbo heard shouts come from his right as the dwarves began to run out in defense of their leader.

The hobbit barely had time to relish the swell of hope in his chest when one of the orcs rushed over to him. The dwarves and Bilbo engaged their enemy, fighting fiercely for several mintues before the shrill cries of what sounded like birds came from above.

Bilbo had just managed to stick his sword rather unceremoniously into the orc as it came to a stuttering halt, looking at the steel imbedded in its flesh as if not quite believing a hobbit had actually managed to land a hit.

The hobbit pulled his sword free with some difficulty before he turned and saw several massive eagles swooping down, picking off the wargs with ease. Bilbo couldn't help but gape at the sight, never having seen a bird larger than a horse before.

The next several minutes were filled with the flapping of great wings and the howls of the wargs as they were tossed over the side of the cliff. Bilbo saw the eagles begin to pick up the dwarves now, and it dawned on him that the eagles were actually going to rescue them.

While he most certainly appreciated the help, Bilbo in no way saw the appeal of being picked up in a giant set of claws and hurtling through the air. No thank you, he was a hobbit that lived in the ground, and ground is where he would most certainly like to stay.

Bilbo saw one of the eagles begin to descend straight towards him. 'Oh no,' he thought panicking, 'Oh no, no, no!' The hobbit started to walk backwards but the eagle was apparently having none that and proceeded to wrap its large foot around his body. Bilbo was jerked up forcefully as the eagle gained altitude again before soaring over the edge of the cliff.

The hobbit had just accepted the fact that this was actually happening when the eagle suddenly let go. Bilbo let out a frightened yell as he plummeted through the air until he landed on the back of another eagle. Clutching more tightly to the feathers than was probably considered polite, Bilbo breathed rapidly until he calmed down.

The group of eagles flew with the company of Thorin Oakenshield through the night. Dawn was breaking over the mountains and Bilbo couldn't help but gape in awe at the sight. The rosy pink light glittered across the white snow of the mountains and bathed the forests below them in a quiet and beautiful light.

It was hard for Bilbo to believe that such horrors as orcs and goblins could exist simultaneously in a world that was so breathtakingly stunning.

They continued to fly for a while longer until Bilbo felt his eagle start to descend towards a plateau of rock jutting out from the ground. The eagles landed one by one, dropping off their passengers, before taking off once again, heading for the distant horizon.

The company swarmed around Thorin's motionless body all clamoring to see if their leader was alive. Gandalf pushed through the tightly packed group of dwarves and knelt at Thorin's side.

Bilbo stood at the outside of the group, wringing his hands, but not wanting to get any closer for fear of getting in the way. Gandalf ran his hand slowly above the dwarf's face, muttering ancient and unknown words, until Thorin's eyes started to flutter open.

There was a collective sigh of relief amongst the company as Thorin slowly began to sit up.
"Where…" Thorin began, his voice quiet and raspy, "Where is the hobbit?"

Gandalf smiled down at the dwarf before moving to the side, unblocking Bilbo from Thorin's view. "He is quite alright."

Bilbo met Thorin's unreadable gaze as the dwarf started to stand up, albeit with much strain. Dwalin quickly hurried to his friend's side, attempting to help Thorin up who just batted the larger dwarf's hands away.

Thorin began to limp forward towards Bilbo, who hadn't even the faintest idea what he was supposed to be doing. "Did I not say that you would be a burden?" Thorin began to speak but the hobbit couldn't make out the tone in his voice.

Bilbo felt the relieved smile slip off his face as Thorin continued to slowly make his way closer. "Did I not say you would not survive in the wild? That you had no place amongst us?"

Bilbo's heart clenched painfully at the dwarf's words and couldn't find any to defend himself. Thorin stopped when they were barely a foot apart.

The dwarf held Bilbo's gaze fiercely for a few moments before he placed both hands on the hobbit's arms, gripping them tightly, then pulled Bilbo forward into his chest.

Bilbo felt Thorin's arms move around him and grip the hobbit tightly to his body before he spoke in the gentlest voice Bilbo had ever heard the dwarf use, "I have never been so wrong in all my life."

Bilbo was… well… shocked was understatement. Pleased, yes, but undeniably shocked. The hobbit slowly raised his arms, half waiting for Thorin to suddenly push him away, but once he realized that the dwarf was not letting go any time soon, he returned the embrace just as fiercely.

Bilbo felt an impossibly wide smile break over his face, feeling for that moment the world could have come down around them and he wouldn't have cared. Thorin was alive and that's all that mattered.

Thorin pulled away and, for the first time since Bilbo had met him, had a warm smile on his face. The hobbit felt his breath catch as the early sunlight washed over Thorin's face and Bilbo saw the king, he knew lay beneath the years of pain. And it was truly mesmerizing.

"I owe you my life, Bilbo Baggins, a debt I will not forget."

Bilbo flushed in embarrassment, 'These dwarves really need to stop getting so caught up in this life-debt business,' Bilbo thought both flustered and exasperated.

"No need, really, Master Oakenshield. Any of your company would have done the same. I just, uh, got there the fastest I suppose. Which is really quite surprising, if you think about it, given how short my legs are—" Bilbo stopped rambling suddenly seeing the frown on Thorin's face. It was a different sort of frown though, not full of disparagement as they had been before.

"Thorin," the dwarf said shortly.

Bilbo stared at their leader blankly, starting to wonder if maybe he had received a blow to the head. "Uh, yes… that's your name…"

Thorin gave the hobbit a rather unimpressed look. "You may call me Thorin, if it pleases you."

The hobbit felt slightly confused, but didn't want to seem rude, not when they were just beginning their friendship. "It… does?"
Thorin nodded satisfied with Bilbo's answer before his expression turned serious again, "You stood between myself and death, Bilbo Baggins. You have allowed me keep the only thing that has ever remained truly mine and for that I am more grateful than you know. I have... I have little left in my possession other than life."

Bilbo looked back at Thorin before glancing over his shoulder at the company of dwarves that chatted happily amongst themselves, clearly overjoyed that their leader was alive.

Glancing back to where Thorin was still gazing at him intensely, Bilbo smiled. "You have a great many things in your possession, Thorin. You have the love of your family and the unyielding devotion of your friends, that is a treasure only a lucky few can claim."

Thorin turned to look around at his company, their gazes instantly drawn to their leader, affection and relief clearly written on every face.

"Yes... I... I believe you are right, Bilbo Baggins." Thorin spoke softly as he looked from the company to the hobbit that stood beside him.

"I believe you are right."
The company had moved out only a few hours after the eagles had dropped them off on the tall plateau of rock that faced a large valley and then seemingly endless forest. After Thorin's wounds had been tended to, Gandalf had surprised them all by telling them that he had other business to attend to and would be leaving them soon.

While the group had protested most vehemently, seeing as how having a wizard at one's back was turning out to be incredibly, *life-savingly* useful, Thorin had simply narrowed his eyes, shaking his head and muttering something about the predictability of the wizard's unpredictability.

Gandalf had assured them he would stay long enough to make sure that they made it somewhere safe to resupply and, if they were lucky, find some new ponies.

They descended down the precariously high rock to the valley below trailing after the wizard. While most of the company was tired and in someway injured, Thorin was by far the worst of the lot. He was limping and favoring his left shoulder after his encounter with Azog and was trailing in the back with Bilbo instead of leading from the front as he was accustomed.

Their leader had gritted his teeth after refusing to halt and continued on with his usual stubbornness, no matter how many perfectly logical and highly practical arguments Bilbo made.

"Thorin…" Bilbo began again for what felt like the fifth time that day, the dwarf's name still feeling unfamiliar on his tongue. He had hoped Thorin would have seen by now that pushing himself while injured was both unnecessary and idiotic, but the dwarf merely grunted and hobbled forward.

"You know it's not, uh, *weak* or anything to take a bit of a rest. No one would judge you for it." Bilbo tried yet another tactic as he walked beside Thorin, still facing Dwalin's back but looking out the corner of his eye at the dwarf.

"Yes I am well aware, but that does not change the fact that those goblins could be after us again as soon as night falls." Thorin winced as he tried to straighten out to his full height. 'Probably trying to intimidate me,' Bilbo thought with a sigh, 'old habits and all that…'

"What if Fili and Kili were as injured as you, hm?" Bilbo crossed his arms with a huff, "Would you stop then or would you keep pushing them as you push yourself?"

"I would –" Thorin began, his eyes shifting and Bilbo could tell their leader was desperately trying to think of something plausible. "I would… carry them."

"Carry them…" Bilbo said incredulously as the dwarf quickly looked away, refusing to make eye
contact with him.

"Yes."

Bilbo was caught between wanting to shake Thorin until he saw how ridiculous he was being and sighing at how predictably and infuriatingly stubborn the dwarf was.

"So what you're telling me is that you would carry both of your fully grown nephews for an entire days journey if they were injured?"

Thorin still refused to meet the hobbit's gaze, as if not looking at Bilbo meant he would not have to admit he was wrong.

"...Yes."

Bilbo let out an exasperated groan. "Now you are just being purposely obtuse!" The hobbit stuck an accusing finger into Thorin's shoulder. "There is no way even you could carry two dwarves laden with armor for an entire day!"

Bilbo had been ready to pounce on this opening until he realized that Thorin had let out a small hiss of pain at the hobbit's contact with his body.

"Alright, that is it!" Bilbo threw up his hands in annoyance, "We are stopping even if I have to knock you unconscious to do it!"

Thorin turned to full on glare at Bilbo who just narrowed his eyes right back. "I have told you I am fine. We are not stopping just because –"

The dwarf wasn't able to finish his protest as Bilbo called out a halt to the company who all seemed to heed the hobbit's command with some relief. Bilbo was slightly surprised to see that the dwarves were actually listening to him, especially Dwalin – who usually never did anything against Thorin's direct orders – but after the hobbit had saved their leader, even the elder dwarves and those he had barely spoken seemed to gladly acknowledge his request.

"We are not stopping!" Thorin tried to resume his refusals but had his coat grabbed rather swiftly by Dwalin's hard fist and was pulled over to a rock sitting near a babbling creek that ran next to the path they were on.

"The lad's right, Thorin." Dwalin crossed his scar covered arms after plopping Thorin down. "You need to stop moving for awhile or you'll just be making it worse. We'll set off again in a few hours, just try and get some rest."

Thorin looked around to the rest of the company for support but found the rest were either shifting their eyes in the anticipation of the dwarf's fury, or had expressions similar to Fili and Kili who both looked relieved and nodded their staunch approval of Dwalin's words.

The brothers walked over to their uncle who was sitting.

"I think we all need some rest at this point," Kili groaned as he stretched his aching back before Fili clapped his shoulder with a laugh.

"Not for us, brother dear, we need to go hunt for some food. I swear if I hear your stomach make another noise I'll remove it myself."

Kili stuck his tongue out at his brother as he placed a hand over the offending organ. "If you didn't
Fili jabbed his brother with the pommel of one of his many daggers. "See now that is funny, because I'm fairly sure I remember giving the last piece of bread to you."

Kili jumped away with a glare, but it was quickly replaced by a wicked grin. "Oh my, I must have forgotten! Though I don't know how I managed that seeing as how it tasted so delicious."

The blond dwarf flipped his dagger so the pointy end was facing Kili as he narrowed his eyes with devious grin of his own. "You had best start running, brother. I'm rather afraid I've had so little time to practice lately, I might accidentally hit something vital."

Kili let out a nervous laugh as his glanced quickly between his brother and the dagger. "I, um…"
The younger dwarf looked pleadingly at Bilbo who just gave him an amused shrug before Kili pointed frantically at something behind Fili with wide eyes, "Oh no! Watch out Fili! It's a giant boar!"

As Fili spun quickly on his foot to see what was behind him, Kili took advantage of his brother's momentary lapse in concentration by sprinting in the opposite directing, cackling with mirth.

"Oh, you little prat!" Fili shouted at his brother's retreating form before chasing after him, "I'm going to turn you into a pincushion! A dwarf pincushion!"

Bilbo chuckled as the two dwarves ran around the camp in a flurry of shouts and laughter. He almost didn't catch the muttered "idiots" from Thorin who was gingerly removing the sword from his back.

The dwarf made to remove the oak shield that usually hung from his belt but his hand stuttered to a halt as he realized it was no longer there. Bilbo watched Thorin's face grow tight as his fingers clenched at empty air.

The hobbit took a seat on one of the nearby rocks, not really sure what to say. His friendship with Thorin was new and tentative and he didn't want to ruin it by running his mouth again, lest he ruin his second chance.

Thorin closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath before opening them again. "I must have… it must have fallen."

Bilbo didn't really understand why the shield was so important to Thorin, but seeing as how his title was 'Oakenshield' it must have been something significant. "I'm sorry, Thorin… I know it must have meant a lot to you."

Thorin let out a short, sad laugh. "Yes… I suppose it did." There was a moment of silence before the dwarf continued quietly, "though I did not realize how much until it was gone."

Bilbo glanced at Thorin curiously, wondering why a dwarf of all things would keep a piece of wood to defend himself. He debated with himself for all of a few moments before giving in to his curiosity.

"How did you come by it? If you don't mind me asking…"

The dwarf continued removing his gear, albeit very slowly, as he sunk into some unknown memory. "It was during the battle for the east gate of Moria. Better known to my people as the Battle of Azanulbizar."

Bilbo wracked his brain, he knewhe had heard this somewhere before he just couldn't place it.
"It was during the battle my grandfather Thrór was slain by Azog the Defiler." Thorin spat the orc's name as it fell from his lips.

Bilbo felt himself recoil slightly at the name, 'stupid, stupid hobbit!' He thought to himself angrily, of course he had heard it before! Balin had told him of the battle, 'the last thing Thorin needs is to be reminded of that right now!'

Bilbo floundered for a second, unsure if he should change the subject or not, before the dwarf continued. "We had fought long that day. Our forces were beginning to retreat. I… watched many of my kin slain by our foes."

The hobbit winced, imagining how hard it was for Thorin to talk about even more losses to his people that the dragon was not responsible for. "That was the first time I saw the pale monster. He swung his mace with a blood lust and malice I have witnessed in no other of his kind. It was… horrible to see many of the bravest dwarves I have ever known shake with terror."

"My grandfather foolishly faced the orc by himself," Thorin's face was now unreadable as he unbuckled his bracers. "He had already been injured protecting my father and I couldn't reach him in time…"

Bilbo almost reached out a hesitant hand to comfort the dwarf, but thought perhaps he should wait, oh, maybe more than a few hours into their friendship before he made a habit of breaching the dwarf's personal space.

"I'm sure… I'm sure you tried as best you could."

"Unfortunately, Master Baggins, in the field of battle trying counts for very little. The fool shouldn't have attempted to take on the beast himself. I believe he had… I believe reclaiming Moria was his last hope after the destruction of Erebor. As the battle turned, reason left him and recklessness took its place."

Thorin shrugged off his great coat as he spoke quietly. "He was slain within minutes, his head cut off and raised up over the battle."

Bilbo couldn't help but let out a small gasp at the image, that Thorin had seen his own grandfather not only killed but then to witness the mutilation of his body… It was almost too much for the hobbit to even comprehend.

"I admit I was… filled with a rage I had not experienced again until last night. I lost myself and I was almost killed because of it. The orc had torn my sword from me and was about to deliver a blow that would have crushed me, but I was fortunate. I reached out and grabbed a stray piece of wood and used it as a shield."

The dwarf was down to his woven blue shirt now and Bilbo thought for the first time he looked… real. The Thorin he had known before was almost an untouchable idea, cold and distant, but now that the hobbit looked at prince before him in not a single piece of mail, Bilbo thought he looked almost fragile. Not that the hobbit would ever say that to Thorin, no, he liked his limbs exactly where they were, thank you very much.

"That branch saved my life. I was able to buy enough time to grab another sword to cut off Azog's hand and rally my troops. We lost many that day. It cost me… cost us far too much."

Bilbo gaped at Thorin for a moment. "You were the one that cut off his hand?"

The dwarf gave Bilbo an almost imperceptible smile. "It was the one good thing to come of that day."
Though I had thought him dead from his wounds until last night…"

Thorin gave a pained sigh as he stretched his back a bit before hunching again quickly. "It seems I have been mistaken about many things as of late, Master Baggins."

The hobbit shot up, finally realizing that no one had changed the wrappings on Thorin's back since very early that morning. "Well, no reason to let that fester on top of it all. Take off your shirt, I'll change the bandages."

Thorin grunted as he shot an annoyed glare to the hobbit, thought it lacked the venom it had held earlier in their journey. "It can wait a little longer."

Bilbo threw up his hands for the second time that day, "oh for the love of—can you please not be difficult at a time like this! Your back is probably oozing puss and blood and all manner of infectious things!"

The dwarf frowned as he crossed his arms. "It is not oozing puss. Has anyone ever mentioned you hobbits talk far too much?"

Bilbo pretended to ponder for a second before giving the dwarf an unimpressed smile. "Why yes… I believe it was you actually. Now take off your shirt or I will get Dwalin to help me, I know he at least cares for your health."

"I — oh alright. Just make it quick, we've lingered here far too long already."

Bilbo quickly fetched the salve and some fresh bandages from his pack and returned to where Thorin was sitting.

It didn't take long for the hobbit's deft fingers to remove the bandages from Thorin's back. Ori had done some very adept stitching on the larger cuts from the warg's claws, but the mace had left some very impressive bruising that covered nearly all of the dwarf's skin.

As Bilbo applied the salve, it hit him again just how poorly the previous night could have ended, not only for himself, but for Thorin as well. He'd have to thank Gandalf for getting the eagles to come to their rescue before the wizard left on his business. The hobbit wrapped the wounds back up and smiled softly at the dwarf's back.

'He really isn't so bad,' Bilbo thought to himself. 'Once you get past all the glares.'

The hobbit hoped in that moment that he and Thorin would become good friends. The dwarf needed someone to talk to as much as he needed someone to tell him when he was being irritatingly stubborn.

'He's felt alone for far too long,' Bilbo pondered feeling a twinge of sadness, 'I just hope he's willing to open up enough to let me help.'
Chapter Notes

I've been putting notes and whatnot on the Fanfic version of this story but not here cause I'm a lazy bitch and typing is hard. However, I think I should point out that this will not be following the canon religiously. Obviously it would be no fun if I didn't change anything cause then everyone would know what was happening, so I will be taking a few liberties as I go. I don't think I'd classify it as an AU so to speak, but there will be some inevitable AU-ish elements.

RE: Thorin's age, as people have pointed out Thorin is a fossil in the book, but since I'm going kinda movie!verse here, and enjoy nothing more than picturing Mr. Armitage brooding in my head, I'm making him younger than a few of the other dwarves in this story. It makes my brain hurt trying to reconcile some of them being younger than Thorin in the movie, so I'm using it as an opportunity to fuel my angst ridden head!canon for Dwalin ;)
He wasn't tall enough to reach the silky looking petals but the hobbit placed a tentative hand on the closest leaf. Bilbo had been about to give it a small pinch just to see how thick it was, when he was greeted by the sound of a strange buzzing coming towards him.

Out of the thick clustering of flowers came the biggest bee Bilbo had ever seen in his entire life. About the size of his head, the hobbit couldn't help but let out a surprised yelp as he scrambled backwards.

Bilbo only got a few steps back before he had tripped on a stray root in his haste. One second he was facing that thing, the next he was facing the sky feeling slightly dazed.

There were several confused moments as he felt the ground shift beneath him while he was hauled up. There was a pair of hands under each of his shoulders as the two young dwarf brothers pulled him up until he could see a pair of matching grins.

Bilbo swiftly got his feet steady and looked up to where the bee was still buzzing except now between himself and the floating insect was an angry Thorin Oakenshield; his sword drawn with his good arm and aimed at the distinctly disinterested and rather unimpressed bee.

"You alright, Master Baggins?" Fili grinned at him, straightening out the hobbit's coat.

"You really should be more careful, Master Boggins, never know when any fearsome beasts might come out and attack you." Kili added with a laugh as he cast an amused glance at his uncle who was clearly finding nothing humorous about this situation.

"Very funny, really." Bilbo shot them scathing looks, "Look at the thing! It's giant! You can't exactly fault me for being taken by surprise!"

Thorin sheathed his sword gingerly, apparently satisfied no one was currently being maimed and grumbled as he walked past them back to Gandalf who didn't seem to even consider restraining his gruff laughter.

The bee was joined by more of its kind and soon enough there was a whole group of them lingering at the edge of the garden, but not crossing its boundary to where the company stood.

Bilbo eyed them nervously as Gandalf moved to the front of the group and stood where a small, pebbled path started between to stalks of the towering plants.

"We have arrived at the House of Beorn. He does not often have company and even less frequently wants it."

The hobbit felt his stomach twist nervously; surely this man must be a giant to care for such a large garden. Being on the wrong side of someone who could probably crush him with a single angry fist did nothing for his confidence in the situation.

"I suggest," Gandalf began while leaning on his staff, "that we go through in pairs. I will use my not inconsiderable charm and persuasive wit to placate the man, but I feel it unwise to alert him that there are fifteen of us right away."

Bilbo nodded fervently in agreement, feeling that angering the man could end very poorly for all of them.

"If all goes well," the wizard continued, "he will let us rest and resupply before I must leave you…"

Gandalf turned to face the path for a moment before turning back again, "Thorin?"
"What is it, wizard?" The dwarf replied, not happy with the idea of going into an unknown place at the mercy of a person he had never met nor trusted.

"I think it would be best if you did not speak. At all." Gandalf turned back around too quickly to catch Thorin's glare, but Bilbo couldn't help but give a small chuckle at the dwarf's face.

The company made their way onto the path in pairs after the wizard. Bilbo, who was at the back of the group, started to nervously fidget with the strap on his pack while waiting for the wizard’s signal.

Turing the piece of leather over and over in his hands, Bilbo's glance shifted between the ever-growing group of bees to his left and the path that quickly curved out of eyesight on his right.

"Stop that."

Bilbo couldn't bring himself to stop nervously watching the number of bees steadily grow. "What?" The hobbit muttered absently still twisting the strap.

"I said stop fidgeting with that. It is distracting." Thorin frowned as he turned his face fully towards Bilbo who had finally torn his gaze away from the insects.

Bilbo narrowed his eyes in response. "Oh, I apologize, is this bothering you?" The hobbit made an exaggerated motion as he pulled the leather up and down as far as it could go.

"Yes. It is."

Bilbo let out a strained and slightly panicked laugh. "Well, that is unfortunate now isn't it, because I am rather fond of occupying my hands when nervous. And I am very nervous."

Thorin raised an eyebrow as he put one hand on Bilbo's wrist and the other on the strap before drawing them apart. "There is no need to be nervous, Master Baggins."

Thorin pulled his hands away before facing the path again. "Whatever sort of man this Beorn is, he will not lay a hand on you or the rest of the company. So if you would kindly stop twitching, I would be most obliged."

Despite Thorin's uh, unique, method of comfort, Bilbo couldn't help but relax. He would be fine. The dwarf had fought in countless battles and faced many foes; surely a man with a garden and bees couldn't be that bad anyway.

"I was not twitching—" Bilbo was about to mutter more subtle and undoubtedly clever insults at Thorin when they saw Gandalf's signal go up. Taking a deep breath, he followed after the dwarf and couldn't help but trust that in the end, Thorin would protect them.

They made their way into a splendidly carved wooden cabin with animal motifs decorating the great doors and curved archway that sat above it. Bilbo could recognize many of the wild things that lay on the outskirts of the Shire, but there were more beasts lining the pillars than the hobbit could ever possibly hope to know.

Thorin and Bilbo pushed into the doors to see the rest of the company and Gandalf sitting around a large wooden table, squished onto two benches that lined either side.

"So…" A voice came from near the roaring fire in the back of the room. "This is the hero of your story, I must say he is rather… smaller than I expected."

Bilbo's eyes snapped over to a large man covered in furs and leathers. His beard was cropped close
to his chin and his hair pulled into a knot at the back of his head, though wild strands fell down to frame his face. What was most striking about the man, Bilbo thought with his mouth slightly agape, were the yellow almost animalistic eyes that were set deep in his face.

"Yes, well…" Gandalf added quickly. "That is what makes his tale all the more impressive, my friend. That a creature so small could achieve so much is truly heroic, don't you think?"

Bilbo frowned at this, feeling righteously indignant. Surely Thorin wasn't that small. Perhaps compared to a man he would be considered short, but he was still nowhere near the size of a hobbit.

"Thorin is a great warrior!" Bilbo shot in angrily. "There is nothing a man any size could do that he could not!"

Gandalf merely sighed at the hobbit and rolled his eyes. "I was referring to you, Bilbo Baggins."

The hobbit jumped in again angrily before Gandalf finished. "He is just as – wait, what?" Finally realizing what the wizard had said, Bilbo looked between Gandalf and their host. "Me?"

Gandalf raised a bushy eyebrow and shot him a very pointed stare from underneath his hat."Yes, you Bilbo Baggins. Unless I have been misled, you are the only hobbit in our company."

"I – uh, yes… Well, carry on then, I suppose." Bilbo wasn't quite sure how to react. Gandalf's face said not to push the subject and Beorn was looking just as incredulous as the hobbit felt.

The pair of yellow eyes fixed themselves on Bilbo who could swear he started to feel the sweat begin to trickle down his neck as he adjusted his collar nervously. There was something about this man that felt… well, that he wasn't quite just a man.

"Either he is the most modest hero I have ever met or you are the most pretentious wizard." Beorn stood up from leaning against the wall to his full, and extremely impressive, height and Bilbo couldn't help but gulp nervously.

Thorin, who was still standing but a few feet from the hobbit seemed to sense his distress and moved in front of Bilbo while aiming a rather furious scowl at Beorn. The man just snorted looking nowhere near as intimidated as he should have given he was on the receiving end of the Durin glare.

"You mean me to believe this…" Beorn made a vague gesture at Bilbo who was beginning to feel less nervous and more peeved that a person who he hadn't even so much as been introduced to was treating him like – like some sort of helpless infant!

"Took on a pack of wargs. He can't even speak to me without hiding behind his pet," Beorn sneered at Thorin whose face grew even more thunderous. The dwarf looked about ready to draw his sword when Bilbo had just about enough with this impossibly rude man!

'I don't care if Gandalf says we need to stay here!' Bilbo thought furiously to himself as he placed a hand on Thorin's shoulder before placing himself once again in front of the dwarf. 'He will not speak to us like we are nothing more than dirt!'

The hobbit placed a hand on his hip and fixed Beorn with his most impressive Baggins' glare. "I will have you know, Master Beorn, that while I may be small, I am not helpless! I will not stand by while you insult this company with your ignorance. If you – If you do not apologize to Thorin, I will show you just how – just how not helpless I can be!" Bilbo finished with a huff before adding with quiet incredulity, "… and he is not my pet."

The dwarves all looked to be caught between a mix of surprise at their burglar's outburst and wanting
to vacate the premise as soon as possible. Fili and Kili shared a shocked glance as they gaped at the hobbit.

There were several moments of tense silence while Bilbo quietly contemplated how many times in the last few weeks his blasted mouth had almost gotten him killed. The hobbit kept his arms crossed and his face stern, but couldn't help imagining the numerous ways in which a man of Beorn's size and strength could make him… uh, regret his little outburst.

Beorn's face was impassive as he seemed to consider the hobbit before he let out a bark of a laugh. "And now, Master Baggins, I am slightly more inclined to believe your tale. You have spirit for such a small being. I respect that."

The massive man moved forward until he was about a foot from Bilbo. Up close, the hobbit could see the numerous scars that covered his arms and hands. Bilbo could feel Thorin tense slightly behind him, but Beorn simply stuck out a large hand.

Bilbo looked confused between the hand and Beorn's inscrutable yellow eyes. 'Well its not in the shape of a fist at least,' the hobbit thought still feeling perplexed but at the same time relieved the hand had stopped before it made contact with his rather vulnerable fleshy bits.

Fili let out a small cough from the table. "I believe the next step is for you to shake, Master Baggins."

Bilbo glanced at Fili with a start realizing he was being rather rude. "I – uh, yes of course." Using his two smaller hands to grasp around Beorn's much larger one, the hobbit tentatively shook.

Beorn let out another short, amused laugh before clapping Bilbo on the shoulder. The hobbit couldn't help but fall forward slightly at the impact, but his pack was quickly caught by one of Thorin's fists as he hauled Bilbo back up.

Shooting the dwarf a grateful smile, Bilbo looked back to their host quickly as Beorn addressed Gandalf once again. "I believe there is some truth to your tale, wizard. If wargs are on these borders again, I must go see for myself."

The man moved towards the door of his cabin before turning back to face them again. "I will be back in two days, you are welcome to rest here before you continue on."

Gandalf gave Beorn a relieved smile. "Thank you. We are in your debt Master Beorn."

Giving them one last nod, the man walked out the door and if Bilbo hadn't been sleep deprived and hungry he might have sworn he saw the man start taking off his clothes.

The hobbit turned and blinked his tired eyes a few times before looking back at the doorway but there was nothing but a garden and the field it hid greeting his sight. He must be far more exhausted than he thought if he was hallucinating. Why anyone would get naked to investigate wargs was beyond him.

Bilbo sighed as he rubbed his eyes before he felt an arm come across both shoulders. Looking up, he saw the grinning faces of Fili and Kili on either side of him.

"Well now, Master Boggins," Kili gave him a sly smile, "I thought for sure you were going to faint for a second."

Fili nodded in agreement with mock concern. "You did look a bit green, I must say."

The younger brother ruffled Bilbo's hair with delight. "And then you just told him off, like he was
Uncle or something! Brilliant! I think your share should be a bit more than one fourteenth given the work you're putting in!"

Fili joined quickly, "You make an excellent point, brother! Seeing as how Master Baggins is not only fulfilling his role as burglar, but also so very kindly defending our honor."

Kili sprung forward before turning to face them, his hands clasped together and his eyelashes batting. "My hero!" Kili made swooning noises as pretended to faint, "How could we ever possibly repay you?"

The blond dwarf laughed at Bilbo's frown, a wicked grin spreading across his face. "I believe the hero usually gets a kiss from his damsel! Or, I suppose in this case, damsels."

Kili pretended to hide a blush behind the hand now fanning his face. "Oh, how silly of me, of course my hero deserves a kiss!" The dwarf puckered his lips making utterly grotesque slurping noises.

Bilbo couldn't help but let out an exasperated laugh. "If you two are the best damsels the dwarves can offer, I can assure you your gratitude is absolutely all that is necessary."

Fili and Kili let out mock gasps as they shot the hobbit affronted glares. "I believe, dear brother, that Master Baggins thinks we are not fair enough for him!"

Kili clutched his heart as he let out a despairing wail. "Oh woe is me! Master Boggins thinks us ugly! Uncle, uncle!"

The younger dwarf turned to Thorin, "Our hobbit just said that your nephews, your very own flesh and blood were not the very picture of beauty!"

Fili nodded covering his eyes with an exaggerated sob. "You cannot possibly let this slight against our house go unanswered!"

Thorin simply stared at the three of them before letting out an exasperated snort. "I can hardly fault Master Baggins for not finding you two dolts to his taste. Now go get some rest before I am forced to separate you."

Fili and Kili let out twin laughs as their uncle moved away to speak to Gandalf. "Come now, Master Boggins, you heard him! Mustn't get on Uncle's bad side this late at night!"

The cabin had one massive bed in a far corner that Bilbo could only assume belonged to their host. The table took up the area opposite to the door, but near the fire there was a great open space with many fine furs laid down on the floor.

The hobbit eyed them with greedy anticipation, feeling practically giddy at the thought of getting a warm and safe rest for the first time since Rivendell.

Bilbo and the two dwarf brothers made their way over to an area near the still merry fire and gathered some of the better furs to them before the rest of the company could claim them.

Setting down his pack, Bilbo removed his blanket and sat down on a fur with a groan of satisfaction. Fili and Kili plopped down on either side of him after removing their plethora of pointy objects.

The hobbit raised an eyebrow at them. He wasn't unused to sleeping next to the two, but that was usually only when the weather made it near impossible for Bilbo to rest.

"I don't mind but… wouldn't you rather, uh… I don't know, have your own space while we can?"
Fili's smile turned slightly somber as he looked at the hobbit. "The last time we let you sleep alone you tried to leave, Master Baggins."

Bilbo felt his stomach twist with guilt. He had been sure the rest of the company was asleep! The hobbit couldn't bring himself to look at Fili, fearing the expression on the dwarf's face. "So you, uh… heard that, did you?"

Kili gently placed a hand on Bilbo's shoulder. "It's not like we don't understand why you wanted to leave, Master Boggins. This life is hard, we know that. But that doesn't mean we're going to let you go so easily now."

Feeling a sudden urge to apologize, the hobbit couldn't help try and assuage some of the guilt he felt. "I was just so – just so… scared. And frustrated and I felt alone." Bilbo sighed, not feeling any of the guilt subside.

"I know now that I wasn't. You both have been far better to me than I deserve, especially after the things I said." Bilbo glanced up to the two brothers and couldn't help but feel the small shameful swell of hope in his chest that his friends would forgive him even if they shouldn't.

"I should not have despaired. I am sorry, truly."

The two dwarves looked at each other then back at Bilbo as they broke into bright grins. "There's nothing to forgive, Master Baggins. You have proven yourself more times than you know, it is an honor to call you our friend."

Kili clapped the hobbit on his shoulder. "You saved my life, Master Boggins! And Uncle's! You are a true friend of Durin no matter what, so wipe that frown off your face and trouble your heart no further!"

Bilbo felt suddenly light at that moment, as if he had been dragging about a heavy weight and just then realized that if he simply let go, it would burden him no further. Beaming at the two dwarves, he couldn't quite believe that he could be so lucky as to have made friends as kind and true as these.

"Thank you. Both of you. I don't know what I'd do without you two." Bilbo grinned at them.

Fili laughed and shoved the hobbit playfully, "Alright, enough serious talk for tonight, I'm exhausted!"

They laid down above the soft furs that covered Beorn's floor and under Bilbo's blanket. Huddled close together even though it wasn't cold, Bilbo felt a sense of peaceful happiness wash over him as he listened to the slow breathing on either side of him. At that moment, if anyone had asked him if leaving Bag End and going on an adventure that had almost killed him a dozen times over already was worth it; the hobbit would have simply laughed and said "of course."

Bilbo woke the next morning with a stretch finally feeling well rested. Rubbing his eyes blearily, the hobbit sat up and looked around. To his surprise he was the only one left in the circle of furs that the company had rested upon the night before.

Looking over to the rest of the cabin, Bilbo could see that the sun was indeed quite high up. 'It must be at least noon!' he thought as he scrambled up.
"Well look who finally decided to grace us with his presence!" Came a friendly voice from over by the fire. Bilbo looked over to see Bofur and Ori sitting next to a large skillet that rested just above the flames, a most delectable sent wafting from it.

Bilbo smiled as he walked over to the two, "What're you two cooking? It smells delicious!"

Ori let out a small laugh as he put his pencil down from where he had been scribbling previously. "Oh I'm not allowed to touch anything near the fire anymore! But Master Bofur here has been making sausages and eggs, would you like some Master Baggins?"

Bilbo looked at the young dwarf skeptically. "You're not… allowed?"

Ori gave him a bright smile. "Nope! On our way to the Shire I was in charge of cooking one night and I accidentally ended up setting fire to half the camp, so Dori thought it best that I… perhaps take an extended break from cooking duty."

Bofur let out a laugh as he put a heaping portion of food onto another plate. "An' quite right he is too, Ori. Mean no offense, but I do rather like bein' more than a dwarf crisp."

"How did you manage to set fire to half the camp?" Bilbo wasn't sure he wanted to know the details but there was something oddly impressive about Ori's apparent talents with combustion.

Ori chewed absently on a smudged finger as he reminisced. "Well… truth be told I, um – I was reading a truly fascinating account on one of our ancestor's travels and… I supposed it slipped my mind that I was supposed to be cooking. It all happened rather quickly…"

The hobbit couldn't help but let out a small laugh as he took the plate and dug in greedily.

"Anyway, I wasn't ever much good at it, so I suppose its all for the best now that we have you two and Master Bombur here to cook."

Bofur sat down next to Bilbo with a plate of his own. "Ain't nothin' to it, I'm sure you could learn if you tried. Bilbo here couldn't even start his own fire when we began! With that big brain o' yours, I'm sure it'd take no time at all!"

Bofur gave Ori a kind smile before starting to shovel the food into his mouth rather unceremoniously. They ate in a friendly silence for a few moments before Bofur suddenly looked at Bilbo. "Oh! Master Baggins I was almost forgettin', Master Thorin told me to tell ya to go see him once you were up!"

Bilbo, who had been chewing a sausage, spluttered a bit as Bofur clapped him several times on the back. "He what?"

The dwarf chuckled. "Nothin' too serious, I don't think my fine hobbit friend, but I wouldn't be keepin' him too long. Master Thorin isn't known for his patience."

The hobbit shoved the rest of his food into his mouth, chewing vigorously. Thorin had never requested his presence before so it had to be, well, serious. Bilbo frowned as he contemplated what the dwarf would need from him while in the relative safety of Beorn's cabin.

"Thank you for breakfast, Bofur! Any idea where I can find our esteemed leader?" Bilbo handed his plate back to Bofur with a warm smile.

"Hm, last I was seein' him, Master Thorin and Master Dwalin were out on the porch, I'm thinkin' you would do best startin' there."
The hobbit nodded at the two dwarves before making his way to the door. The day looked to be bright and sunny, though now that he saw the sky, he guessed it was already sometime in the late afternoon.

Bilbo didn't need to look long as he saw Thorin and Dwalin sitting in two of the beautifully carved chairs that sat on the porch. The two older dwarves were watching what appeared to be Fili and Kili engaging in a rather spirited wrestling match over who had better hair.

Shaking his head with exasperation at the sight of the brothers, the hobbit came to stand next to the chair Thorin was sitting in. Glancing sideways at the dwarf, Bilbo could tell their leader was leaning forward to keep the weight off his injured back.

"Bofur said you needed to talk to me?" Bilbo started hesitantly, debating whether or not to tell Thorin he needed his wounds inspected.

The dwarf looked back at Bilbo with his usual impassive face. "Ah Master Baggins, you're finally up."

The hobbit just shrugged. "Well you know me, can't help but take in the comforts of safety while they're available."

Dwalin snorted, still looking at the brothers trying to place elbows into each other's sides.

"It has…" Thorin began, gingerly crossing his arms, "Come to my attention that while you do indeed own a sword, you are woefully untrained in how to use it."

Bilbo gave him a sniff before muttering, "You didn't seem to mind when I was saving you with my woefully untrained sword."

The dwarf was right, of course. Bilbo would normally be the first to admit he referred to the blade as the 'pointy bit' and was more likely to take off his own nose than land a hit; but there was something irritatingly pushy about the way Thorin talked to him.

Thorin sighed. "Be that as it may, I doubt we will reach our goal without having to draw our swords again. I have decided that you will be trained."

Bilbo let out a laugh. "Uh, yes, well now that is amusing and all, but I would much prefer to stay out of the fighting from now on, thank you very much."

The dwarf scowled at him, clearly not at all impressed with Bilbo's argument. "And what if the fighting comes to you? What if none of us can get to you in time to protect you, what then Master Baggins?"

"I will…" Bilbo stuttered, trying to think of a way out, but knowing deep down that Thorin was right. "I will – oh fine! I can see there is no talking you out of this farce."

The dwarf nodded with a self-satisfied smirk that made Bilbo want to argue more, even if it was fruitless. "Good. I would train you myself but Dwalin –" the dwarf in question grunted, "tells me it would be counterproductive in healing my injuries."

Bilbo felt his eyebrows draw together. 'If not Thorin, then who?' He thought puzzled. 'Perhaps Fili or Kili, I'm sure they wouldn't mind…'

"Dwalin will train you." Bilbo was shocked out of his reverie, "What? But – but surely, um, Fili or Kili would… would…"
Dwalin looked out of narrowed eyes towards the hobbit who couldn't help but gulp nervously.

It wasn't that Bilbo didn't like Dwalin. It was just he had never really even talked with him since the night in Bag End. The dwarf always seemed to be either hitting something with his massive axes or looking intimidating behind Thorin. Plus, he had seen those arms lift mighty stones and weapons alike, and Bilbo couldn't imagine he would get through a training session without being horrible bruised.

"Dwalin helped train myself and my nephews, you are in very competent hands, Master Baggins." Thorin adjusted slowly, "Though I suggest you start now, we are losing daylight."

The bulky dwarf stood up to his full height, taller than even Thorin, and grunted at Bilbo to follow him into the clearing in front of the porch and next to the garden. "Call us when dinner is ready," Dwalin added to Thorin over his shoulder.

Fili and Kili stopped their grappling to see the two newcomers in their area. "Ooh, Master Boggins! Are you finally getting some training?" Kili tried to give the hobbit a smug smirk, but the dirt smudged across his nose and face sort of ruined the effect.

Fili laughed with his brother as they stood up, attempting to brush the dirt off each other. "Now this is an interesting development! Who will have to protect in battle if our dear hobbit is a master swordsman?" The blond dwarf shot Bilbo a mock pout.

The hobbit sighed, "I don't think I could be a master with any amount of training." Dwalin crossed to the edge of the clearing and snapped two branches from a nearby tree. He walked back to Bilbo and held out one of the pieces.

"Worry not, Master Baggins!" Fili said brightly, "Dwalin here trained both of us when Mother was busy, there's no better teacher in all the kingdoms."

Fili and Kili made their way to a pair of rocks sitting on the side of the clearing and sat down to watch. Bilbo looked nervously from Dwalin, who was still holding out the sick to him, to the matching grins on the brothers' faces.

"I, uh, really don't think this is a good idea…"

Dwalin raised his eyebrows, "Thorin says you'll be needin' training, lad, so training is what you'll get. Now take the twig so we can get a move on."

Bilbo reached out hesitantly before snapping his hand back. "No, no, what if I – what if I take my eye out?" He anxiously shuffled back a few steps. "What if I take your eye out?"

The dwarf merely sighed. "Lad, if you even manage to land a hit let alone draw blood I will eat my own axe. Take the stick."

The hobbit raised his hand to grab the piece of wood, felling utterly resigned that the next few hours of his life would be filled with no small measure of embarrassment and pain.

"You'll be fine, my friend!" Fili called out before his brother joined in, "Show us how it's done in the Shire!"

Bilbo shot them a glare as he gingerly held the branch in both hands, planting his feet in what he thought what a sturdy position.

Dwalin backed up a few paces, holding his own branch with one hand. "Alright lad, now's the time.
Come at me."

The hobbit looked up wide eyed at Dwalin. "What? Now? Aren't you going to, I don't know, show me how to do it before I start hitting things?"

The dwarf let out a short, booming laugh. "Best way to learn is to do, lad. I saw you take down that orc on the hill, come at me like you did the wretch."

Bilbo couldn't help but feel a little annoyed, these were completely different situations. For starters, the only thing in danger here was his pride. 'Alright then, if he wants to get hit then so help me, I will give him a damn good thrashing!' The hobbit thought, utterly disgruntled at Dwalin's lack of real instruction.

Gripping the stick tightly and squaring his shoulders, Bilbo took a deep breath before running as fast as he could towards the dwarf. There might have been a moment in which the hobbit closed his eyes right before he raised his stick to strike the dwarf, but Bilbo would never admit to making such an amateur mistake.

There was a flurry of movement as Bilbo brought the stick down in an arc. One second he was running the next he was on his back, blinking stunned at the now red tinged sky.

The hobbit felt him self be pulled up to his feet as he heard whistles and whoops from his unwanted audience. "Not bad, for a hobbit." Dwalin grunted. "Though next time, don't close your eyes, lad. That's a sure way to get yourself killed quick."

"I, uh – thanks? I suppose…" Bilbo still wasn't really sure what had happened, but no one was laughing so it couldn't have been that atrocious. Dwalin backed away from him, resuming his same pose, "Again."

They continued like this for what felt like hours to the hobbit. Fili and Kili left to go hunt after the sun had started to set, but Dwalin had Bilbo coming at him again and again.

Although he felt bruised and tired, Bilbo couldn't help but feel a bit hopeful that he was improving. Slowly, but at least now he wasn't getting knocked to the ground every time he ran at the dwarf.

Dwalin had even nodded his approval at some of Bilbo's strikes after a few hours. The sun had set now, but the clearing was lit by the merry fire coming from inside the cabin. The night was clear and relatively warm for autumn, and the stars were blinking brightly from above them.

Bilbo let out a small groan as he rolled the shoulder that had just been thoroughly thwacked by one of Dwalin's strikes before the dwarf spoke up, "I think that's enough for today, lad. We'll keep practicing when time allows."

The hobbit couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief before giving Dwalin a smile. "I must say I was rather nervous when we began, but I feel much better about this whole fighting business now."

The dwarf laughed as he grabbed a flask from inside his shirts and took a deep swig. "Don't be getting' too confident, lad. These are only sticks, not the real thing." He held out the flask to the hobbit who looked at it skeptically.

"It's considered a grievous offense to refuse a drink offered." Dwalin looked at him straight-faced and Bilbo couldn't tell if he was joking or not. There was a moment of silence where neither of them moved before Bilbo reached out and took the flask. He didn't want to seem rude after all, not since the dwarf had taken time out of his day to train him.
Bilbo gave the flask an experimental sniff and couldn't help but pull his head back at the strong sent wafting from it. "What – what is it?"

Dwalin raised an eyebrow. "My special brew, now drink before I decide to be offended."

Bilbo tentatively raised the opening to his lips and with a deep breath, tilted it back and took a deep drink. For a moment Bilbo thought his mouth and throat were either on fire or in the extremely uncomfortable process of being dissolved. The hobbit couldn't help but let out a few wrenching coughs as he gave the flask back to Dwalin who was laughing at the sight.

"Can't hold you liquor, I thought so. Come here, lad, sit down it'll pass in a second and you'll be light as a feather." Dwalin led him over to the rocks where Fili and Kili had been sitting earlier and they each leaned against one of them while resting on the grass.

Still coughing slightly, Bilbo pounded on his chest. "What sort of poison did you put in there?"

Dwalin smirked at him before taking another pull. "That's for me to know, lad. Like I said, it's a special brew."

Bilbo sat there for a few moments collecting himself before he felt a warmth spread from his chest to his toes. "Wha—I feel so – so light!" The hobbit marveled as he wiggled his fingers front of his face, though the movement seemed slow to his eyes.

Dwalin laughed as he looked at the hobbit's amazed face. "It'll do that. Have another."

Slightly more prepared this time, Bilbo only flinched as the liquid went down.

They sat together, passing the flask and gazing at the stars. Bilbo, feeling impossibly like he was floating, looked up at the now dancing lights and couldn't help but gaze in wonder at their beauty.

"I wanted to thank you, lad." Dwalin spoke as he leaned back, also gazing up at the night sky.

Bilbo felt sluggish as he processed the words. "Wha – what? What do you have to thank me for? I should be – I should be thanking you!" Bilbo wasn't quite slurring, but there was more of an easy lilt to his speech.

Dwalin raised an amused eyebrow at the hobbit as he spoke but his face grew more serious. "For saving Thorin. I should been there first." The dwarf's face grew tight, "If you hadn't gotten there in time, lad…"

Bilbo looked at the dwarf closely for a few moments. "You care about him a lot, don't you? How long have you two know each other?"

Dwalin took another drink before looking back up towards the sky. "I've known Thorin since he was born. My brother served Thror when he was King under the Mountain. I supposed I was a… guardian of a sort. It's hard to define."

Bilbo raised his eyebrows as he tried to focus his eyes on the dwarf. "A – a guardian? But you can't be that much older than Thorin…"

Dwalin shrugged. "About twenty years or so, not that much by our standards. It is tradition for a prince to have someone to watch over his safety and training."

"So you were like his – his teacher?" Bilbo asked feeling curious and excited to learn something new about the mysterious culture.
"In a way… The role is much deeper than that. My duty wasn't just to teach him about hittin' things, but also of friendship and duty."

"I was to be someone Thorin could trust implicitly, someone that would be ready to die for his sake. It is a position I cherish, lad, for I have not met a dwarf more honorable than he."

Bilbo smiled at Dwalin as he spoke, the hobbit heard the gruff affection in the dwarf's voice and it was obvious to anyone who looked just how much he cared about their leader.

Feeling a bit more than tipsy now, Bilbo couldn't help but ask a question that had been burning in the back of his mind now that Dwalin was actually speaking to him.

"So… is it traditional for dwarves to have those marks?" Bilbo made a gesture to Dwalin's head, "It's just… well, in the Shire, I don't think I've ever seen a hobbit with any."

The dwarf raised an eyebrow at Bilbo who had sort of slumped closer in a bit of a stupor. "Now that is a very personal question, hobbit."

Bilbo flailed his hands as his eyes widened. "Oh no, no, I didn't mean anything by it! I was just… curious… Sorry."

Dwalin let out a short laugh. "You saved Thorin's life, lad. You can ask me anything you like. Though I wouldn't suggest doing it to just any dwarf you meet, might get a nice axe to the face if you don't know them well enough."

Bilbo nodded vigorously in agreement. "Of — of course, I'll be more careful in the future…"

Dwalin chuckled as he took another drink. "There are mainly two kinds of markings among dwarves. The first are family symbols, you'll find those mainly among the nobility or higher bred dwarves that care about such things. I suppose you could talk to Thorin, but I'm not sure he'd be willing to show."

Bilbo felt his eyes widen slightly before the dwarf continued. "The other kind is meant to… remind us of significant events or battles. You'll be more likely to find these," He made a sweeping gesture at his body, "on those who have seen war."

The hobbit looked more closely at Dwalin's head. "And those... What are those for?" Bilbo quickly added an "if you don't mind," hoping he wasn't accidentally offending the dwarf.

Dwalin's face went blank. "They are for… a woman I once knew. One of the bravest dwarves I ever fought with." The hobbit saw the tension in his companions face and knew the time for questions was over.

To his surprise, however, Dwalin continued with a sigh as he drained the rest of the flask. "You've heard of Dís, have you? Thorin's sister, mother to the two brats."

Bilbo nodded. "A bit… Fili spoke with me about her some. She sounds like a very… intimidating dwarf."

Dwalin let out a loud laugh. "That's certainly one way of putting it, lad. She's got the temper of a dragon that one, but she'd tear down all of this earth stone by stone to protect her family."

There was a brief silence before Dwalin continued quietly. "I… loved her once, an age ago."

Bilbo felt his eyes widen, shocked that the dwarf was sharing so much with him, but as his vision
swam, he felt that maybe the brew was affecting the dwarf a bit more than he led on.

"She was… is one of the most remarkable dwarves in all the Blue Mountains. Though she would probably knife me for saying so," Dwalin chuckled with a grin. "She had a shield-maiden, Bragi, who used to trail her everywhere she went. Them two used to spend nearly all day with Thorin and me."

"Dís didn't want to get left out on anything Thorin was doing, so the four of us spent many years wandering the great halls of Erebor. She used to get Thorin into so much trouble," the dwarf spoke with a small smile on his face. "I think he started perfecting that mighty scowl of his when Dís was born."

Bilbo couldn't help but smile at the dwarf but it quickly fell as he remembered that Dwalin was, in fact, not the father of Fili and Kili.

"I thought she might have felt the same way for many years… But I was young and stupid and never did anything about it. I waited too long and that golden dwarf came out of bloody nowhere and stole her heart."

The hobbit reached out a hand and tried to pat Dwalin on the arm, his swimming vision not making it easy. "Couldn't talk to her for weeks after she announced her betrothal. I think a few walls remember my fist well enough anyway."

Bilbo felt suddenly sorry for the dwarf, he had never lost a love but he couldn't imagine it felt anything but painful. "Did… did Thorin ever know? About how you felt."

Dwalin let out another short laugh. "Thorin? No, I don't think he would notice anything of that nature even if it were hitting him in the face. He had his own… well, lets just say I wasn't the only love sick dwarf in our little group. Bragi couldn't take her eyes off Thorin if he was in the room and wouldn't shut up about him when he wasn't."

Bilbo let out a little laugh, though he found it hard to feel anything in that moment but sad. "Did Bragi get to tell Thorin at least?"

Dwalin shook his head sadly. "Nay, laddie. She… she died before she got the chance. Not sure what would have come of it anyway, I don't think Thorin ever really took that much notice of her in that way."

"When Thrór announced he was going to Moria, of course Thorin and I went with him. I tried to convince Bragi to stay behind with Dís, but I don't think she could bear the thought of Thorin going to battle without standing by his side."

Dwalin had a sad, small smile on his face as he remembered the distant past and looked at even more distant stars. "I should have made her stay but I… I knew how better than most how she felt, so I held my tongue."

The dwarf let out a great sigh but continued with his story. "We all got separated once the battle started. There were too many orcs and so few of us, it was miracle any made it out alive that day. The sheer carnage, lad… Be grateful you've never experienced war."

"I got separated from Thorin and Bragi only a few hours in. I tried to fight my way back to them but…" Dwalin shook the flask wistfully as if he hoped there was just a bit more left. "She was surround by a whole group of orcs. Bragi was one of the fiercest fighters I'd ever met, she could do things with an axe that would have even the most seasoned fighters pissin' themselves."
"I saw her run to help Thorin, shouting at him to go to Thrór, telling him she'd hold them off… By the time I reached her she'd been already hit by five arrows, had one right to the neck," the dwarf gestured to the vein on the side of his throat, "Not even Bragi could come back from that."

As Bilbo sat next to the Dwalin, looking up at the immensity of the stars he couldn't help but wonder if all the pain and suffering the dwarves had endured had been worth it; if Dwalin ever thought back on all his scars and thought they were sacrifice he would make again.

"I held her as she died. I felt her blood run down my arms. The last thing she did before she died was look at Thorin and smile. I think I…" Dwalin spoke slowly, "I think I knew in that moment I could have loved her."

Bilbo felt his heart clench with sadness as he looked at his companion. "But we each had our own Durin to pine after and never enough time to realize they would never love us back."

"Each of these," the dwarf pointed to the five marks that lined his head, "is for one of the arrows that killed Bragi. They are meant to remind me to act. To remind me that loyalty and love are the highest qualities to be found among friends. To remind me that time is not a kind mistress."

Dwalin looked down from the stars to Bilbo. "But most of all they are to remind me of her. One of the truest friends I ever had."

The hobbit, embolden by the liquid courage running though him, turned on his knees toward the dwarf and gave him a quick, fierce hug.

Dwalin looked utterly perplexed, clearly not used to or expecting hobbit hugs, but awkwardly patted Bilbo's back nonetheless. "Alright there, lad, that's enough with the touchin' tonight."

Bilbo pulled back with a smile. "For what its worth, I think Bragi would be very proud of the dwarf you are now. I hope you find happiness when we take back Erebor."

A shout came from inside the house, calling them into dinner as merry singing wafted out towards them. Dwalin stood up and pulled a still tipsy Bilbo with him. "C'mon, Lad. All this talk is making me want to hurl."

The hobbit laughed as the two of them walked into the cabin where the rest of the company was laughing and singing around the fire. Even Thorin had a small smile on his face.

"Well look who it is! Master Boggins joins us at last!" Kili practically bounced over to Bilbo before shoving a plate full of food into his hands. The hobbit dug in quickly, not quite realizing how hungry the day's training had left him.

The group had a long dinner and told many stories around the fire until Thorin told them they should probably get to bed if they were to be on the road the next day. There was a collective groan at their leader bringing down the mood again, but the company shuffled back to their furs.

Bilbo was about to join Fili and Kili who had both already laid down, when Gandalf called him back to the fire and away from the group.

"Bilbo, a word."

The hobbit looked quizzically at Gandalf but made his way over just the same.

"What is it?" Bilbo asked curiously as he reached where the wizard stood next to he glowing embers.
"I have a matter of great importance that I can trust to no one else," Gandalf began as he reached into the satchel that sat on his hip. The wizard pulled out a small enveloped and held it out to Bilbo.

"This," he shook the letter in his hand, "has something of great value and importance to Thorin inside. An heirloom of his family that I was given by his father along with the key and map."

Bilbo took the envelope gingerly, not expecting the slight weight and bulge in the paper. "If it's Thorin's heirloom, why are you giving it to me?"

The wizard straightened out again. "Because he is not yet ready to have it. If it were my decision I would never even let him see it, let alone posses it, but I am bound by promise."

"I have written instructions to Thorin inside, but I must ask you for one last favor Bilbo Baggins." Gandalf looked at him with heavy severity, "You must do everything in your power to keep him from putting it on. I fear what would become of him should he do so. I will leave it up to your discretion when to give it to him, but I caution you to do so with much care."

Bilbo looked warily at the envelope in his hand, feeling very uneasy about holding something that sounded so dangerous. "Alright…" Bilbo started anxiously, "but why me?"

Gandalf let out a booming laugh. "Oh my dear Bilbo, because it must be you. Thorin will not listen to me, but he respects you, my friend; he sees you as an equal now. You hold great sway in this company, whether you realize it or not."

Stuffing the envelope into his pocket, Bilbo looked up at the wizard. "Well, if you say so… I will try my best."

Gandalf rested a hand on his shoulder. "That is all I ask, my friend. Now go get some sleep, I fear the young brothers can no longer rest without your presence. Good night, Bilbo Baggins."

The hobbit nodded with a smile to the wizard. "Good night."

And with that he walked over to Fili and Kili, finally ready to rest his weary arms and legs. Bilbo felt bone tired but as he snuggled into the furs in between the steady breathing of the two dwarves, he felt a wash of contentment and couldn't help but marvel again at all the truly extraordinary friends he'd made so far, and, with any luck, would make soon.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I hope this sort of goes without saying by now, but seriously thank you so much for taking the time to read, review, like, or follow. I hope you enjoy! :)

I got a tumblr to post my shitty class note scribbles on so if you guys want some half-assed Hobbit fanart all up in your eye holes, its fruuba.tumblr.com, I might get around to doodling some scenes from the story but who even knowwwwwws

Bilbo woke the next morning to the sound of a door banging open. Blinking blearily, the hobbit felt the two dwarves on either side of him shift rapidly. There was a brief moment of confusion as Fili made to jump up in their defense but ended up catching his foot on a fur and falling back down on his face. Kili was hardly any more impressive as he made to draw an arrow from thin air while spitting out a chunk of hair from his mouth.

The two brothers spluttered for a moment as Bilbo finally managed to rub the sleep out of his eyes. Beorn had burst through the door and proceeded to throw his giant fur lined coat onto a chair. The large man eyed them with a small measure of amusement. "A good effort, boys, but I think even the least skilled orc would have had you by now."

Fili pushed himself off the floor, rubbing his nose gingerly as Kili gave Beorn a petulant frown.

"We are not boys, Master Beorn." Kili crossed his arms with a huff.

"Of course." Their host scoffed as he looked towards where Gandalf and some of the company were standing near the fire. "I must have imagined the distinct lack of beard on you, friend. I thought dwarves prided themselves in their mighty facial hair, but clearly," Beorn smirked at Kili, "customs change."

The younger dwarf flushed as red as one of Gaffer's ripe tomatoes and Bilbo couldn't help but feel a bit bad. Fili shot a glare at Beorn's retreating back and gave his brother a reassuring pat. "Don't listen to him, he doesn't know what he's talking about."

Kili gave a short and rather unconvincing laugh as he shrugged off Fili's hand. "Of course, nothing I haven't heard before anyway. Doesn't bother me in the slightest." The blond dwarf's concerned frown deepened as he continued to gaze at his brother but seemed to decide against pursing the topic further.

Bilbo's glance shifted between the two but before he could offer Kili any reassuring words, the dwarf stood up and stalked through the open door to sit next to Ori who was on the porch with his notebook in hand sketching furiously.

"What – uh, what was that about?" The hobbit turned to Fili, not entirely sure if he should pry. "He's okay, right?"

The dwarf nodded with a small smile as he started shoving the various daggers around him into his coat.
"He… Yes, Kili will be fine. It's just a bit of a… sore spot for him. It doesn't really matter, anyway. Well, it shouldn't matter." Fili shrugged as he helped Bilbo up, "I'm sure you would find it strange not being a dwarf, Master Baggins, but we - oh this is all very stupid…" The dwarf sighed as he shook his head, "we have different standards of handsomeness, so to speak, and let's just say Kili has always been a bit self-conscious about not necessarily adhering strictly to that standard."

Bilbo narrowed his eyes as he looked from the blond dwarf to his brother. "But surely Kili is considered at least somewhat handsome by your people? I mean he would for a hobbit at any rate… I can't imagine these types of things are that different."

Fili winked at Bilbo as he wiggled his eyebrows with a laugh. "Perhaps you should tell him that, Master Baggins, I'm sure it would cheer him right up!"

The hobbit rolled his eyes. "Oh, you know what I mean."

Fili chuckled as he playfully elbowed Bilbo's shoulder. "I can't speak for hobbits, but he certainly did get some attention in the towns of men, though I don't think it did much for his confidence. The dwarf maidens mostly just laugh and tell him to wait some years until his beard grows in. I think any, uh, proposals from humans just made him feel worse."

The hobbit couldn't help but think this was all very strange and confusing. After all, dwarves didn't look that different from the folks he'd met, but then again, he probably shouldn't expect to be anything but confused when dealing with dwarves at this point.

"But you never had any problem?" Bilbo's eyebrows furrowed, "No, uh—no offense but it's not like your beard is that, uh… voluminous."

The dwarf stuck his hands on his hips and winked at Bilbo again. "Ah, but there you have hit the nail right on the head, Master Baggins, it's all about confidence! I've tried to tell Kili over and over but he won't listen."

Fili hooked his arm around Bilbo's shoulders as he steered them towards the delicious smells of breakfast. "Dwarf women will eat you up and spit you out faster than Smaug if you don't have a certain conviction!" Fili leaned down to whisper conspiratorially in the hobbit's ear, "They can smell fear, understand?"

Bilbo laughed as he elbowed Fili lightly in the stomach. The dwarf made a show of keeling over at the contact, but Bilbo rolled his eyes again. "You may think me a fool, Mister Dwarf, but even I know that can't be true!"

The blond dwarf grinned. "Might as well be! They can certainly smell something on Kili! He'll grow into his own soon enough, once he realizes that beards don't mean anything in the face of true boldness!"

Fighting a smile, Bilbo felt his mouth quirk as he looked at the dwarf's bright grin. "And I supposed your boldness floweth over, hm?"

Fili puffed out his chest and flipped one of his braids over a shoulder. "Why yes, Master Baggins, I have been told by many reliable sources that it does indeed."

The two laughed together as they reached where the group was chatting over what promised to be a very good meal. Gathering their own plates, Bilbo and Fili sat on the edge of the circle next to Thorin as Beorn began to talk.

"I went scouting to the borders of my land to see what of your tale was true, wizard." Beorn nodded
at Gandalf who was sagely smoking while leaning on the wall near the fire. "You were telling the truth. Though I don't think even you know just how many are in pursuit."

Yellow eyes flitted between the wizard and the utterly impassive Thorin. "I have slain a group of wargs, but the wild things tell me that more than a score of goblins are thirsty for vengeance against the company that murdered their king."

"I suggest that you take the northern pass through Mirkwood —" Beorn began but before he could finish an angry voice cut over him. "We will not." Thorin had stood up suddenly, clenching his fists, "I would not lead this company towards that foul place even if it were the last option we had!"

Beorn looked simultaneously unimpressed and annoyed. "That is unfortunate because it just so happens to be the last option you have. With goblins and orcs on your trail, I can hardly understand why you'd be opposed to the only safe passage left."

Thorin let out a deep growl as he narrowed his eyes. "That place is infested with traitors and beasts, I would rather face ten thousand goblins than to even look at it again! I would—" The dwarf had been about to continue his rant but was interrupted by Gandalf.

"Enough, Thorin. Beorn has been kind enough to find you passage and I strongly suggest you listen to him."

The dwarf opened his mouth, looking angrier than ever at being scolded, but before words left his mouth, Bilbo placed a tentative hand on Thorin's forearm, squeezing it lightly. The hobbit looked up somewhat nervously at their leader, whose glare had turned from Gandalf to the offending appendage.

There was a moment in which Bilbo thought maybe he had chosen the exact wrong thing to do, but, much to his surprise, Thorin snapped his mouth shut with a snarl and sat down again slowly.

Beorn smirked at Thorin with bared teeth. "Yes, make sure you keep your pet leashed."

Bilbo felt the dwarf tense next to him, all coiled muscle ready and quivering to lunge, to attack, but he simply tightened his grip on Thorin's arm.

'Well it worked once,' Bilbo thought to himself nervously, 'hopefully I won't soon be short a hand for trying twice.'

Thorin didn't take his eyes off Beorn, the fist on his uninjured arm still clenched tightly, but the dwarf seemed to relax minutely and sit back a little at the stronger contact. Once Bilbo was satisfied Thorin wasn't going to run over and start mauling their host, the hobbit removed his hand.

'Huh…' Bilbo looked at his fingers with no small measure of amazement, 'well would you look at that…' Bilbo was both pleased and confused that Thorin had calmed, but as the conversation moved on around them, he wasn't exactly in the position to analyze what happened.

Beorn detailed the route they should take, warning them to stay on the paths no matter what. Bilbo couldn't help but feel some of the anxiousness that had lessened over the last day start to creep back into his stomach. The hobbit was no fool, but even he would admit that he had hoped the worst was behind them.

However, as Beorn started to go through the rather extensive list of creatures and foliage that would like nothing better than to maim or poison them, Bilbo realized that he had been just a tab bit too optimistic.
"I will lend you ponies until you reach the borders of Mirkwood, but they will not go into the forest, so no use trying to steal them." Beorn crossed his arms as he scanned the room with slightly mistrustful eyes.

"We would not dream of it, Master Beorn," Gandalf piped up from next to the fire. And, just for good measure, the wizard sent Thorin a stiff glare to show the dwarf there would be no debate over the issue.

There was a bustle of movement as the group made to pack up their supplies. It was still fairly early on in the day and Gandalf insisted they could reach Mirkwood and beyond before the sun fell. Beorn had been kind enough to supply them with not only ponies, but also enough supplies and packs to reach the land beyond the forest.

Bilbo packed up his own few possessions with a small sigh. He wasn't eager to leave the safety and comfort of Beorn's cabin, especially since Thorin wasn't healed yet and they could all use a few more good nights rest.

"Hobbit."

Bilbo started as he heard a low voice behind him, turning around he was met with the sight of a rather large pair of crossed arms belonging to their host.

"Uh – yes? What can I do for you Master Beorn?"

Beorn stuck out a large hand, opening his fingers to show a small pot. "You're supposed to be some sort of healer for this lot?"

The hobbit furrowed his eyebrows feeling slightly confused. "Um… I guess? I haven't had any formal training per say, but everyone else," Bilbo narrowed his eyes at Thorin's back, "seems less than eager to take it seriously."

Beorn barked out a laugh. "Thought as much. This is balm is made to heal most minor wounds and prevent festering." Bilbo reached out to take the earthen pot from their host, but the fingers were suddenly closed again.

"Make sure you use it sparingly, Baggins. Just a bit will take care of most scrapes and brusin'. I suggest you use your unique powers of persuasion on that stubborn dwarf or he might not last the journey to his home."

The fingers opened again and Bilbo quickly placed the pot into his pack, deciding to ignore the tone in Beorn's voice that indicated he would be neither surprised nor wholly displeased if Thorin didn't make it. "I will try, thank you Master Beorn. I wish I had something to repay your kindness…"

The man grinned at Bilbo, but to the hobbit it looked more like Beorn was baring his teeth. "Just try to stay alive, hobbit. It'd be a shame for a spirit as strong as yours to be snuffed out before its time."

Bilbo didn't quite know what to say to that so he just settled for a safe, "Uh… Thank you. I'll try to stay alive?"

Beorn clapped Bilbo on his shoulder with a laugh. "I'd be sorry never to hear more of your tales. I wish you safe journey Bilbo Baggins, perhaps we will meet again before your time in these parts is done."

The hobbit smiled up at Beorn, he was a very strange man to be sure, but once you got past his well… unique personality, Bilbo supposed he could be quite nice. "It would be my pleasure, Master
Thorin's company, now laden with supplies and atop ponies, waved their goodbye to Beorn and continued on their journey. Gandalf said he would ride with them to the edge of the forest before going his separate way. Bilbo would be sad to watch him leave, not just because the wizard was an extremely valuable asset in a fight, but also because the hobbit found Gandalf had been a consistently amiable and reassuring companion in these travels.

The hobbit rode near the back of the party next to Ori who was valiantly trying to sketch the landscape in his notebook with the reigns tucked between clenched teeth. Despite the constant jostling, Bilbo thought the drawing was quite good, though the dwarf wasn't in much of a position for chatting.

Bilbo settled for passing the time by trying to imagine what the forest would be like on the inside. They were only several miles away by midday, Mirkwood a towering mass of green in front of them. Not that he would ever admit it aloud, but Bilbo couldn't help but think the forest looked almost… alive.

Not in the pleasant way that some flowers seem to have merry faces and waving leaves, this forest appeared to be seeping a murky shadow, like darkly sinister fingers reaching out to snare anyone who ventured to close.

Bilbo gulped as he tried to look away from the sight before him, but the trees grew across such an expanse that he could do little to avoid it short of riding his pony backwards.

The hobbit spent a good while actually considering the logistics of twisting around on his pony without falling off so he could look at the distant sunflowers of Beorn's garden instead, but his thoughts were eventually interrupted as he heard Thorin call for a halt. They had arrived.

Bilbo reluctantly got off of his pony and made to say his goodbyes to Gandalf. The wizard had gathered the hobbit in tight hug before pulling away at arms length. "Do try and stay safe, Bilbo Baggins." Gandalf's eyes crinkled at the corner as his face broke into a warm smile.

"You too, my friend." The hobbit smiled back, though on the inside he couldn't fight the swelling of melancholy that spread through his chest. He knew in his heart that their quest was going to be significantly more difficult without their wizard to guide them.

Gandalf seemed to sense the trepidation within Bilbo and gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "I will see you sooner than you think, do not fret." The wizard stood back up to his full height and took his leave of the group, galloping south on his swift steed.

Beorn's ponies apparently could sense that their duty was done and once the last of the dwarves were off their saddles, they turned around back the way they had come.

"Shame that," Bofur muttered with disappointment, "woulda' been mighty useful…"

Bilbo chuckled at the dwarf's exaggerated sigh, but Thorin's voice from the front of the group called the company to attention. "We stick to the paths," their leader began gruffly, "according to the wizard, there will be little light during the day and none during the night hours. It is absolutely crucial that we all stay together and make sure no one leaves the trail unless necessary."

The company took a moment to ready themselves, not one of them thinking this experience would be anything less than highly unpleasant.

"We move out." Thorin turned and began to lead the group into the ominous forest of Mirkwood.
The two dwarf brothers had taken Thorin's words, in Bilbo's humble opinion, a tad too literally.

"You see, Master Baggins," Fili pulled out two long strips of cloth from his pack, "if we're tied together, then there's no way any one of us will get lost!"

Kili nodded enthusiastically like his brother had just solved all the world's problems. "Quite right, brother! I'll take one end and you take the other, and Master Boggins here will be safe in the middle!"

Now Bilbo Baggins was all for safety and security in numbers, but even he felt this to be a bit ridiculous as he rolled his eyes. "Oh come on, you two. I am not a child, trust me when I say I will not be wandering off."

Fili leaned forward and mock whispered into the hobbit's ear. "A little secret between us, Master Baggins. It's much less for you, and much more for my brother. He has an unfortunate habit of getting lost even more frequently than Uncle does."

The younger dwarf punched his brother in the shoulder. "Hey!" Kili started indignantly, "I don't get lost that often!"

Fili laughed as he continued to tie one end of the cloth to a strap on Bilbo's bag. "And I suppose you were just taking us on a completely necessary two day detour on our way to the Shire then?"

"I was – I was..." Kili spluttered, "taking the scenic route..."

The hobbit couldn't help but laugh. Denial, he supposed, ran thick in the line of Durin.

"Of course, dear brother," Fili gave Kili a mock bow of apology. "My mistake."

Kili tied his own piece of cloth to the opposite strap on Bilbo's bag and turned up his nose at the blond dwarf. "You are forgiven. Though I expect one favor in return for this unfounded slight against my person, to be collected at a time of my choosing."

Fili laughed again as the three of them set out at the back of the company; Bilbo in the middle and the two dwarf brothers on either side of him attached to their hobbit by two strips of cloth.

As the company made its way further and further into the forest, the sunlight grew murkier and soon enough, Bilbo found himself frequently trying to refocus his eyes to make sense of the shadowed shapes that lined the path.

Though he had thought it silly at first, Bilbo was suddenly grateful that he was attached to the two dwarves, who kept up a constant stream of chatter that at least somewhat lessened the nervous sense of anticipation the hobbit felt seeping into his stomach.

The company continued slowly along the narrow path for several hours. The deeper they got, the more the forest seemed to grow around them. The tree trunks became thicker and more tangled; even the mushrooms seemed to grow to sizes even bigger than Bilbo. There were several moments in which the hobbit could have sworn that he heard the sound of scuttling and twigs snapping along the path, but as soon as he concentrated on the noise, it was gone.

Despite the ominous sense of foreboding that emanated from the very heart of Mirkwood itself, Bilbo supposed it could be going worse. Although he probably should have known as soon as the thought entered his mind, there was very little chance the universe would let him become complacent.

The hobbit thought it must be sometime in the evening when they reached a dark, twisted river.
Luckily there was a small dock and boat that jutted out into the swiftly flowing water, though Bilbo would not have said no to something that looked a bit less like some random pieces of wood hammered together as if staying afloat was a mere afterthought and not the entire purpose of its structure.

Thorin decided to send them over in groups of three including Bofur who volunteered to paddle; their leader did not want to tempt the thing very loosely defined as a boat into taking on water with any more weight. Calling the hobbit over, Thorin sent Bilbo, Bofur, and Balin over together first.

There were a few minutes in which Bilbo was immensely glad that he had learned how to swim as a young hobbit, though that knowledge did little to unclench his fingers from the edge of the boat that wobbled dangerously with every stroke of the paddle Bofur took.

The three companions made it to the opposite side of the bank, though the swift current slowed their pace down. Bilbo scrambled onto the bank and turned to help Balin out of the boat. The hobbit walked down the bank a bit and they waited along the bank as Bofur turned to boat around to collect the next group of dwarves.

It was a time consuming process, but Bofur turned out to be a surprisingly competent helmsman and sure in his strokes. The dwarf had gotten about half of the group across the river and had turned back to collect Fili and Kili, who both stood on the short dock waiting to board.

Kili bent down and to catch the boat and, while occupied with his task, didn't have time to register the shout of warning that Bilbo let out. Out of the water there leapt a giant creature. It looked to be some sort of massive fish with long, sharp teeth flashing as it flew in the air towards Kili's exposed neck.

Fili's eyes widened as he saw the monstrous creature and was spurred into action by the hobbit's yell. The blond dwarf gave his brother a swift push, forcing Kili to fall face first into the boat. The creature missed Kili's neck by a only a few seconds and latched onto Fili's arm instead as it crashed into the dwarf, forcing him off the dock and into the swirling water.

Thorin let out a shout as his nephew disappeared beneath the water. There was a split second were they could hear nothing aside from the coursing water, but Fili suddenly emerged with a gasp of air and the hobbit could see him plunge one of his many daggers into the monster's neck. Rather than let go, the creature seemed to close its jaws around Fili's arm even harder, thrashing its body wildly.

The dwarf let out a cry of pain before he was submerged once more. Bilbo could see the current forcing the twisting forms underneath the water over towards the side he was standing on. The hobbit took a split second to consider his options before he started to sprint down the side of the river towards a fallen tree that jutted out into the water. He was now the closest member of the company, if he could only get there in time, then Bilbo knew he might be able to pull Fili out.

Legs burning, the hobbit ran as fast as he could, his feet slipping on the wet pebbles underneath him. Once he reached the tree, Bilbo scrambled onto the trunk and spared no time for safety as he crouched low and made his way to the end.

Bilbo panicked for a split second, unable to locate Fili in the water, but after a few moments of blood pounding in his ears, the hobbit caught a flash of gold almost level with the log.

Bilbo pressed his stomach to the surface of the tree, his clothes quickly becoming soaked by the current, and plunged his arm into the water. He frantically swept his hand back and forth before he felt the collar of Fili's coat underneath his fingers.
The hobbit closed his fist and hauled the dwarf with all his strength onto the fallen log. Unfortunately for Bilbo, Fili appeared to be passed out and the creature was still thrashing, its jaws locked onto the dwarf's arm. Bilbo let out a yell as he grasped Fili's dagger and with a hard yank, pulled it out before burying it deep into the monster's skull.

Its black, glossy eyes rolled back into its head and its jaw loosened as the creature slipped back into the river. Bilbo panted for a few long moments, adrenaline pumping through his veins, his clothes now utterly soaked along the front.

Well, that was an experience he could do with never repeating. Ever.

Fili gave a few weak coughs as his head fell limply to the side, his arm leaking blood from the puncture wounds of the monster's teeth. Bilbo stood up as best he could and pulled Fili's unconscious form slowly down the tree trunk, though he moved quite slowly since the dwarf's clothes were soaked with water.

The hobbit was almost off the tree, when Dwalin came skidding into view.

"Is he alive, lad?" The dwarf shouted, "Is he alive?"

Still trying to catch his breath, Bilbo nodded and gave Fili one last yank before Dwalin let out a great sigh of relief and leaned over the trunk to gather the blond dwarf to his chest before making his way back to the company.

Slipping off the trunk onto shaking legs, Bilbo closed his eyes as he leaned back against the wood and took a few calming breaths. Not for the first time, Bilbo thought that his poor hobbit heart wouldn't be able to take much more of this adventuring business.

Opening his eyes, Bilbo saw that the rest of the company had managed to cross the river and were now huddled around Fili's unconscious form. Thorin and Kili knelt closest as the older dwarf gently shook his nephew.

"We'll camp here tonight," Thorin said shortly, his voice strained. "Bofur start a fire."

The miner nodded and started to gather his supplies. The rest of the dwarves were spurred into motion and quickly began to assemble their camp. Bilbo made his way slowly over to where Thorin and Kili sat near Fili and the fire.

Just as the hobbit reached them, Kili sprang up and pulled Bilbo into a fierce hug, his face buried in Bilbo's neck. "Oh thank you, thank you Master Boggins! You saved his life!"

The hobbit hugged the shaking dwarf back as he clutched at Kili's with a weak chuckle. "You know me, just trying to earn my keep."

Kili let out a watery laugh and squeezed the hobbit once more before letting go to sit next to his brother again.

"I can – I can take a look at his arm, if you'd like…" Bilbo said quietly, not wanting to intrude on their family moment.

Thorin nodded to him stiffly and moved aside to let the hobbit kneel down next to Fili's injured arm. Pulling the wounded limb into his lap, Bilbo pulled up the sleeve of the dwarf's coat revealing four punctures oozing blood.

The hobbit couldn't help but wince slightly at the sight, but the wound could have been a lot worse
considering the size and number of the monster's teeth. Bilbo reached into his pack and pulled out a cloth and the balm Beorn had given him earlier that day.

He took a few minutes to wipe away the blood before starting to apply the salve to the wounds. Much to his surprise and relief, as soon as the balm touched Fili's skin, the bleeding slowed and it started to look almost immediately better. Thorin and Kili let out matching sighs of relief.

"Do you think he'll be alright, Master Boggins?" Kili couldn't help but sound somewhat hopeful that his brother would be fine soon enough.

The hobbit gave Kili a small smile, "Well I'm no healer, but I think he should be okay with some rest." Fili was still shivering, but his grimace had lessened a bit. "He might be getting sick though," Bilbo said softly as he touched a hand to the dwarf's forehead. "That river certainly wasn't warm. I think we should keep him wrapped up and near the fire overnight."

Thorin nodded his approval and gently removed Fili's wet coat before wrapping his shaking nephew in a few blankets volunteered from the rest of the dwarves. Kili settled his brother's head on his lap and took to absently trying to squeeze the water from Fili's hair while a worried frown settled on his face.

Thorin stood up and almost hesitantly placed a hand on Bilbo's shoulder, "It seems I must thank you once more, Master Baggins. You acted bravely and without selfish thought today. I owe you my life in return for my fool nephew." Thorin gave Bilbo a small smile before turning away to go oversee the camp and speak with Dwalin.

Suddenly feeling the cold, Bilbo removed his wet jacket and vest before wrapping himself in his own blanket and settling next to Kili to watch over their wounded companion.

"Are you..." Bilbo began hesitantly, "are you alright?"

Kili let out a short, agitated laugh. "Yes. I am," The dwarf unconsciously gripped one of Fili's braids in a tight fist as a grimace broke across his face. "I'm always alright because Fili always takes the fall trying to protect me."

Bilbo moved a hand to grip Kili's arm tightly and the dwarf slowly began to unclench his fist from around the braid. "He's always doing stupid things like this. Ever since I can remember he never let me take the blame for anything even if it was my fault."

Kili's face bent down so Bilbo couldn't see his expression, but the hobbit knew angry tears were falling from his eyes onto Fili's face. "I wish he would --" Kili started angrily, "I wish he would just stop. Then he wouldn't..." The dwarf took a shuddering breath, "then maybe he wouldn't get hurt so often..."

Bilbo gave Kili's arm another squeeze. "I know it hurts to see him like this, but that's what brothers do, Kili. I know he would do anything to keep you safe."

The dwarf grimaced again. "But he doesn't do anything to keep himself safe."

Kili let go of his brother's braid with shaking fingers. "He never even considers letting me learn from my own idiotic mistakes. I can't even count how many times mother or Uncle punished him for something I did. And now – And now this..."

Bilbo looked from the young dwarf's twisted expression to the shaking hand that rested beside his brother's head. The hobbit hesitantly moved his cold fingers from Kili's arm to his quivering hand and squeezed it until the dwarf stopped shaking.
"He loves you, Kili," Bilbo kept his grip strong and firm. "He loves you unconditionally and sometimes that means we means we do foolish things. But mostly it means that the only thing worse than something happening to the person we love is doing nothing to try and stop it. Even if that means we get hurt."

Kili looked up from his brothers face to stare at the hobbit.

"You are fortunate, more fortunate than anyone I know to have a bond of such strength and devotion as you have with your brother." Bilbo gazed back at Kili, hoping to somehow reassure his friend. "Cherish what you have, Kili, few ever know what it means to be truly loved."

The dwarf looked back to his brother with a sad but fond smile. "I suppose… I suppose you're right, Master Boggins, I am lucky." Bilbo let out a sigh of relief that Kili seemed to be at least a little cheered up and made to move his hand away but the dwarf just gripped it tighter. "Could you – could you just stay here? Just for a minute. I feel better knowing you're watching over him too."

Bilbo let Kili keep his grip tight on his hand and smiled at the dwarf, "I wasn't going anywhere."

The dwarf let out a watery chuckle as he returned to trying to get the last bit of water out of Fili's hair with the hand that the hobbit wasn't holding.

"Fili is right, Master Boggins, you are a lot smarter than you look."

Bilbo shoved the dwarf lightly with a laugh. "I know you meant that as a compliment, so I will choose not to take offense."

Kili couldn't help but smile at the hobbit's face but quickly grew serious once more. "No really, Master Boggins, the others don't give you enough credit, but I want you to know that Fili and I… Well, we're very grateful you decided to come along. And not just because you've saved our lives!" Kili added quickly, his face flushing, "What I meant was you have been a truer friend to us, all of us, than we deserve. And even if we don't always say it… we are much better for having you with us."

Bilbo nodded with a grin. "You give yourselves too little credit, Kili, perhaps it's me that is better off for having known all of you. But thank you. That's… that's very kind of you to say."

Kili smiled back at Bilbo as they sank into an easy silence, both watching Fili shiver as he slept. Finally starting to feel warm again, Bilbo hummed quietly as he snuggled further into his blanket, edging closer to the dwarf so they sat shoulder to shoulder.

"What song is that?" Kili broke the silence softly, looking up curiously to his companion. "It sounds familiar…"

Bilbo looked up from Fili, his eyebrows furrowed trying to recall where he had heard the tune. "Oh, I think I heard Bofur whistling it once or twice while we made dinner; I didn't even notice I was doing it."

Kili gave an 'ooh' of recognition. "Now I remember! My mother used to sing that to us while when we were small."

The hobbit frowned as he tried to remember some of the random words Bofur used to sing between spurts of whistled notes. "Is it a lullaby?"

The dwarf nodded. "Yes, if I recall correctly it's about a dwarf hero that rescued a maiden from terrible peril by swinging his long beard down to pull her from a cliff! Though I can't really remember the words anymore…"
Bilbo chuckled. "Why am I not surprised you dwarves have songs for children about the epic feats of beards?"

Kili's face fell a bit before he responded. "Well it's a… it's a mark of maturity for both the males and females of our race, Master Boggins, the longer and bigger the better! It's hard… it's hard to be considered anything more than a child if you don't have one."

Remembering Kili's short but unpleasant conversation with Beorn earlier in the day, Bilbo realized he had accidentally trodden on sensitive territory with the young dwarf. "I'm – I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bring anything up again."

The dwarf shrugged as his face went blank, "Don't mention it, Master Boggins. Fili says I'm overreacting and he's probably right but…" Kili stopped short for a moment before plowing forward with an irritated huff. "I'm no dwarfling anymore! No one in this entire company save for you and my brother take me seriously! I'm – I'm sick of always being seen as a child. Even Ori gets more respect than me."

Bilbo squeezed the dwarf's hand again with reassurance. "You know that's not true, Kili. Your uncle and the rest of the dwarves… Well, I'm sure they just want to protect you as long as they can. They don't want to see you hurt is all."

Kili scowled at the flickering flames of the fire. "I don't need protection anymore. I'm an adult, even if they don't see that. I can take care of myself."

Bilbo sat silent for a moment, considering how to best make the dwarf understand the strength he saw in Kili.

"Have I ever told of my father, Bungo Baggins?" Bilbo broke the stiff silence.

Kili looked at the hobbit quizzically before shaking his head. "No… I don't think so."

Bilbo smiled as he launched into his tale. "Well, my father was a Baggins of well-repute. He was considered by all the shire to be a very respectable hobbit."

"Bungo never did anything unexpected or even remotely considered adventurous."

Kili chuckled softly. "I'm starting to think you aren't a very good hobbit, Master Boggins."

Bilbo gave the dwarf a wink before he continued. "No, I suppose I'm not anymore. But my father, he was one of the very best."

"My father married my mother, despite her tendencies towards less than savory activities like exploring and a desire to meet strangers, and they had me. My mother told me once I was born, my father grew more and more suspicious of the outside world. He wanted to protect his wife and child, so he wouldn't let any of us leave Hobbiton unless it was absolutely necessary."

Kili frowned at the thought of never leaving such a small and confined area like the Shire. "My mother tried to respect his worries but as I grew bigger, she knew the Took in me would have to go outside the Shire and explore or else I would wither under the confinement."

"My father couldn't stop my mother from doing what she wanted once she set her mind to it, but he refused to let me explore the lands around Bag End, even safe as they are."

Kili snorted in indignation. "That sounds awful, Master Boggins!"

Bilbo simply smiled back at his companion. "I'm not finished yet. Anyway, My mother finally convinced my father to let me go fishing in the stream near our hole as long as he accompanied me."
"Now my father was a, uh, rather large hobbit, who neither desired nor found any need to fish as long as he could buy them from the market, and so he never found any cause to learn how to swim."

Bilbo pulled the blanket tighter around him as he continued his story. "We got down to the stream, but my father still wouldn't let me go in past where the water would cover my feet. I think this almost goes without saying, but my father was a bit of a nervous hobbit."

"Things were going fine until a rather large bird swooped down over his head and, in his surprise, my father slipped on the pebbles and fell into the stream. Mind you it was nothing too deep, but seeing as how my father didn't have the faintest idea how to swim, he naturally thought he was drowning."

Kili looked up concerned at his companion. "Was he alright?"

Bilbo couldn't help but let out a small chuckle. "Oh, he was fine. *After* I pulled him out."

The dwarf grinned, "You seem to be making a habit of rescuing people from rivers, Master Boggins."

"What can I say? It's a gift," The hobbit chuckled. "My point was, that until my father saw that I was not a helpless little hobbit anymore, until he had no choice but to admit that I could not only fend for myself, but take care of him as well, he couldn't see me as anything but a helpless infant that needed constant minding."

"So you're saying… you're saying they see me as an infant?" Kili looked thoroughly put out at the thought as Bilbo shook his head with a sigh.

"That's not what I meant, Kili, what I meant was that sometimes… Sometimes for the people closest to us – for the people who have spent years protecting us from harm and the dangers of this world, sometimes they need a… well, a push of sorts to be able to let go of that instinct to treat us like we're fragile."

"I don't think it's that Thorin and the rest of the company see you as a child, Kili. I think that they are holding on to that instinct to protect and shield you from harm, even though you know you are ready and strong enough to take it. They do it because they love you, just as my father loved me, but they need an extra something to make them realize that stifling you is not the same as protecting you."

Kili's face fell into a pout. "And what is that something, Master Boggins?"

The hobbit shrugged and gave the dwarf a small smile. "My friend, I haven't the faintest clue. But I have faith it's bound to happen, so just be patient a little longer."

The dwarf let out a small chuckle, "I suppose it was a bit too optimistic to think you had all the answers…"

Bilbo squeezed the dwarf's hand once more. "Perhaps, but I think you should hold on to that optimism, there's far too little of it in the company as it is without you becoming a brooding shadow to your uncle."

Kili laughed with Bilbo for a few moments, both of them imagining the thought of the young dwarf's face in a mighty scowl to mimic Thorin's. "Thank you, Master Boggins," Kili added quietly once the laughter had died down.

"Don't mention it."
They sat in companionable silence for a long time, leaning against each other for warmth and comfort as Fili rested. Bilbo felt his eyes beginning to itch tiredly and realized that several hours must have passed as Kili's soft snores permeated the quiet of their small area. The dwarf's head lulled forward onto his chest, but a hand still gripped tightly to his brother's braid.

Bilbo had been about to close his eyes and try to move closer to the young dwarf when he felt a thick and heavy coat fall around his and Kili's shoulders so that they were both enveloped in its warmth.

The hobbit tried to turn his eyes up to see who had put it on them, but his vision was obscured by a thick, furred lining. 'Ah,' Bilbo thought to himself, 'that could only be one dwarf.'

Thorin sat down next to Bilbo with a surprising amount of grace for a man injured so recently. "How is he doing?" The dwarf asked quietly not wanting to disturb either of his nephews' sleep.

"The wound stopped bleeding and he seems to be shivering less. I think with a good night's sleep and he'll be more or less fine in the morning. Aside from the bite, of course, but I think the large teeth missed so it shouldn't take that long to heal, especially if Beorn's medicine keeps working the way it does."

Thorin nodded with a small sigh of relief as he looked at his injured nephew.

"... And yourself?" The dwarf added quietly. "I apologize for not asking earlier, I suppose I became a bit... overwhelmed at the thought of losing Fili."

Bilbo tried to wave off the dwarf's apology but found he was rather firmly wrapped in his own blanket and now Thorin's own coat. "Oh no, I'm perfectly fine. I was a little cold and I think I might have lost a few years from stress, but otherwise as sound as ever."

"That is... good. I am pleased that you are well."

Bilbo almost let out a bemused chuckle but thought better than to poke fun at Thorin's efforts at friendship, no matter how endearingly awkward those efforts were. There were a few moments of silence as they both gazed at Fili's unconscious form before Thorin spoke again. "You have shown my nephews great kindness and friendship, Master Baggins, the line of Durin owes you a life debt many times over."

Bilbo couldn't help but sigh at all this talk of debts, life or otherwise, again. "I didn't help any of you so you would be in my debt, Thorin. I did it because I consider each of you a friend and because that's what anyone in my position would have done."

"You do yourself disservice, Master Baggins. I have seen the cruelty of this world and not just anyone would act as you do," Thorin spoke softly in his low voice. "I know I do not often say as much, but I am... I am glad you are here Master Baggins."

Bilbo shifted slightly so he could at least somewhat face Thorin with the smile that had crept onto his face, despite being utterly tangled in blankets and surrounded in heavy fur. "I am too, Thorin, I am too."

And with that they settled into a friendly quiet, the rest of the dwarves having retreated to their own mats and settled into sleep. Bilbo couldn't help but feel the warm comfort of sleep start to surround him as he leaned his head against Kili's shoulder and tucked himself further into Thorin's coat. It wasn't long before the hobbit fell asleep between his friends, facing the fire, and listening to Thorin's steady breathing beside him. Despite where they were and what had happened earlier in the day, in the moment just before sleep claimed him, Bilbo Baggins couldn't help but feel safe.
Chapter 12

Bilbo Baggins woke up the next day feeling incredibly sore. He had fallen asleep with his head resting against Kili's shoulder as they watched over Fili's unconscious form. Though the hobbit thought that it was probably after dawn, almost no sunlight came through the thick trees of Mirkwood.

Looking around as he tried to blink the sleep out of his eyes, Bilbo saw that Thorin was already up, hobbling around the camp rousing the other member's of the company, though his thick fur-lined coat still surrounded his and Kili's forms.

The hobbit attempted disentangled himself from his tightly wrapped blanket but in his growing frustration and irritated jostling, Bilbo accidentally placed a poorly timed flail right into Kili's sleeping face.

"What the—" Kili looked incredibly confused and brought his hands up from his brother's face to hold his smarting nose, "Ow! Master Boggins! What was that for?" The dwarf glared at his companion who, in his defense, tried his very hardest not to chuckle at Kili's petulant stare.

"Sorry, sorry," the hobbit muttered as he finally disentangled himself from the blanket, "got a little, uh, enthusiastic there for a moment." Kili stuck his tongue out at Bilbo as he gave a great stretch and moaned in discomfort when seemingly every bone in his upper body creaked back into place.

Bilbo stood up to get some much needed blood flow back into his rather tingling legs when he heard Kili speak in a small voice, "Shouldn't he —" the dwarf stopped as Bilbo looked down, apprehensive at the tone of his friend's voice, "Shouldn't he be moving or something?"

"Sorry, sorry," the hobbit muttered as he finally disentangled himself from the blanket, "got a little, uh, enthusiastic there for a moment." Kili stuck his tongue out at Bilbo as he gave a great stretch and moaned in discomfort when seemingly every bone in his upper body creaked back into place.

"Shouldn't he —" the dwarf stopped as Bilbo looked down, apprehensive at the tone of his friend's voice, "Shouldn't he be moving or something?"

The hobbit couldn't help the small spark of panic that flared in his chest as he looked wide-eyed from Kili's worried face to the still expression on the blond dwarf. 'Please, please be alright!' Bilbo thought with rising panic at Fili's lack of response even as his brother prodded him in the face. It would be his fault if anything happened to Fili! After all he had, for reasons that escaped him, been appointed as the makeshift healer of this blasted group.

Bilbo sank down quickly to examine the still unconscious dwarf. Putting his ear close to Fili's mouth and placing a hand on his chest, Bilbo remained utterly still for a few moments. Breath! Sweet, rhythmic breathing reached his ear and his hand rose and fell as the dwarf's chest moved steadily.

The hobbit sank back with a sigh of relief, "He's alive!"

Kili gave Bilbo a horrified look as his gaze moved rapidly between the hobbit and his brother, "You
mean there was a chance he wasn't?" The dwarf practically shouted as his hand unconsciously gripped a blonde braid tightly.

"How am I supposed to know?" Bilbo shot back, feeling equal parts anxious and indignant that he was supposed to have all the answers when he had received a grand total of zero lessons in healing thus far.

The hobbit only needed to take one look at Kili's stricken face to see he had made a mistake. "I—I'm sorry, I know this is hard, I shouldn't have snapped." Bilbo placed a hand he hoped wouldn't be slapped away on the dwarf's arm, "let's just… check his wounds, okay? Maybe if we work together we can figure out what's wrong."

Kili looked at the hobbit for several moments before stiffly nodding his assent, his eyebrows furrowing once more as he looked at Fili's face. Bilbo moved closed to the blond dwarf's bandaged arm and slowly began unwrapping it. To his immense pleasure and surprise, the wound looked to be… well, almost completely healed. Except for four round scars where the monster's teeth had bit down, the arm itself looked to be perfectly healthy.

"Mister Beorn's balm is amazing," Bilbo let out a slow appreciative whistle as he lifted the arm to examine it closer.

"Once you're finished gwaking, Master Boggins, would you be so kind as to inform me if my brother is alright?" Kili snapped, forcing Bilbo from his reverent reverie.

"I, uh… yes sorry," the hobbit flushed as he looked apologetically at his friend, "I don't think the problem is with the wound since it looks to be - well, healed."

They were quickly interrupted by Thorin's uneven pounding footsteps as their leader hurried his way over with a slight limp, "What happened? Why were you shouting, Kili?" The dwarf's face looked dark and worried as his glance shifted between his nephews.

"Nothing happened, that's the problem uncle," Kili met Thorin's gaze, his face the picture of anxiety. "Master Boggins said the wound looks fine but he's still not waking up!"

Thorin's face grew dark as he scowl deepened, "I was afraid you'd say that."

"What?" Bilbo and Kili interjected in unison.

"What do you know?" the hobbit surged forward, his hands worrying at the edge jacket. Thorin gazed at the hobbit for a moment before letting out an angry sigh.

"Beorn, he... he warned me that the river could have adverse effects on anyone who fell in and strongly suggested that we should avoid doing so."

"Adverse effects?" Bilbo shot in angrily, placing his hand on his hips, "What does that even mean? And why didn't you tell us anything earlier?"

Thorin frowned at the hobbit's indignant glare; "It seemed pointless to worry you all since I had no intention of leading us through any rivers. I assumed he was referring to the creatures within it, not the waters themselves!"

Bilbo felt his face fall into a scowl of his own, "Oh well, as long as you assumed. Did Beorn say anything else that might be, oh I don't know, useful while we're on the subject?"

Thorin crossed his arms and glared right back at the hobbit, "No. He didn't, Master Baggins. And
while I'm sure you didn't mean it, I must add that I find the implication that I would do anything to purposely endanger this company and my own nephew to be extremely offensive."

The hobbit's eyes narrowed even further as he took a few steps forward, his hand raised and ready to stick a finger into the dwarf's chest and tell him just what exactly he found offensive about the dwarf's stubborn unwillingness to share crucial information just because he thought it would save them some anxiety, when Dwalin suddenly appeared, hauled Bilbo over his shoulder, and started making his way to the opposite end of camp.

"What – what're you doing? Put me down you – you… great oaf! Oh, I am going to give him a piece of my mind and there's nothing you can do to stop me!" Bilbo tried his best to wriggle out of the dwarf's iron grip but nothing, not even beating his much smaller fists against Dwalin's back could make the dwarf let go.

"Alright, that's enough lad." Dwalin hauled his companion down and placed the hobbit on the ground in front of him, now on the far end of camp.

"Enough? Enough?" Bilbo spluttered, "Oh it is not nearly enough! I get that Thorin wants to protect us, I really do, but he had no right to keep something like that from us!"

"I'm going - I'm going to… Oh, I don't know, but he will regret it I promise you that!" Bilbo made several attempts to move around Dwalin but found his path blocked no matter what angle he tried to take.

"Are you done?" Bilbo looked up at Dwalin from glaring daggers into Thorin's back as their leader conversed with Kili in hushed tones. "I… No! I'll be done when he apologizes to Kili for not warning him what might happen to his brother! Who knows that river water did to Fili once he swallowed it!"

Dwalin crossed his arms as he looked at Bilbo with an irritatingly calm expression on his face, "I think you know as well as me Thorin would never to anything to intentionally hurt the brats." Bilbo crossed his own arms disgruntled, though in comparison he would admit it looked rather less impressive.

"Yes, of course I know that. But even you can't pretend like he's doing us any favors by not telling us things just because morale might go down!"

Dwalin sighed like he was just about to go through the laborious and not doubt unpleasant experience of explaining something that Bilbo should already understand.

"Do you honestly think his only consideration was morale?"

The hobbit felt his eyebrows furrow, "Well that's what he said not more than about five minutes ago."

The large dwarf shook his head like Bilbo was being particularly obtuse, "Sometimes I forget you haven't known Thorin as long as the rest of us, lad. He has a… difficult time expressing what he means, particularly when worried. There are two cases in which I have seen this less than exemplary trait become even more exaggerated, one is when his family is in danger and the other is when he's talking to you."

"What? Me? This is hardly my fault!"

The dwarf let out a grunt, "What Thorin was trying to achieve by not telling the rest of the company about what Beorn said was not to keep you blissfully ignorant. You may not know this about
dwarves, lad, but most of us have some level of anxiety in dealing with water craft."

"Most of us can swim, at least passably enough so we don't drown, but put a dwarf in a boat as shoddy as that one and you'll be more likely to tip than make it to where you're going. We like the rock and earth solid against our feet."

Bilbo looked at his companion trying to remember if he had read any great tales of dwarves and ships so he could undermine this nonsensical argument and continue his righteous ranting; but, to his disappointment, the hobbit could recall just about nothing.

"Now I'm sure most of our company normally would have been fine if not for this forsaken wood, lad, but just imagine if Bombur had panicked and fallen in, what then? Anyone heavier than Fili or Kili and I doubt you'd have been able to pull them out of the current."

"You should consider that while you may not understand all his reasoning — even with he gives it — Thorin wants to see us all to Erebor alive and unhurt. I hadn't seen him so worried since Kili fell off that ledge."

Bilbo started to feel his angry bluster fade the more Dwalin spoke. Perhaps he had lashed out a bit too quickly at Thorin… After all, no one cared more for Fili than his brother and uncle. The hobbit started to regret his words as a gnawing sense of guilt began to rather uncomfortably seep into his chest.

"He calmed down quite a bit once he spoke to you last night, lad." Dwalin placed a strong hand on Bilbo's shoulder with a squeeze, "Don't underestimate the power your words have on him, Master Baggins. Thorin rarely trusts or truly respects anymore, but you proved him wrong, lad, you saved his life. You have more influence on him than you know, don't forget that."

And with that Dwalin walked back where Thorin and Kili were still talking. Bilbo let out a groan and hung his head feeling ashamed that his temper had gotten the better of him again and hoped that he hadn't angered Thorin enough to make the dwarf regret their tentative friendship.

Bilbo wasn't sure if he should go back in case Thorin was still cross with him, but seeing as how all his things were there, he could hardly avoid it for long. Sighing, Bilbo started back to where the three dwarves stood. He walked as slow as he could, dreading Thorin looking at him with his fearsome glare, or worse, looking hurt.

The hobbit had made it about halfway back when he spotted something lying on the ground. The light was so poor that he couldn't quite make it out, but as Bilbo reached down to grasp it, he realized it was a small, square metal locket with what appeared to be intricate carvings its front.

Opening it curiously, Bilbo angled the two inner stone faces towards the embers of the fire. On each of the slates there was a carving. But where the front was covered in sharp, angled lines, these had a face each. The hobbit couldn't help but marvel that such delicate detail could be carved into stone and felt is eyes widen in awe as his finger traced the portraits.

One appeared to be a dwarf maiden, her beard braided with many beads, hair piled atop her head in countless twists, and a warm smile on her face. The opposite stone had what he thought must be a very young dwarf. Unruly hair shot out from the dwarf's head, but the face emanated humor. Bilbo glanced up, trying to figure out who this could belong to, but before he had time to give it much thought, he heard Thorin growl at his companions.

"I will carry him, he is my nephew. And it is... It is my fault he's still unconscious."
Kili shot in quickly, his face sporting a irked frown, "And he's my brother. I want to look after him!"

Dwalin rolled his eyes before grunting a loud, "Enough." The large dwarf straightened up to his full height, "Thorin, you are still injured, don't be an idiot. Kili, you can barely carry your own supplies, how do you expect to lift your brother on top of all of that?"

The two Durins' made matching scowls of displeasure as they sent twin glares at Dwalin who merely shrugged, looking not at all impressed. "I will carry him, and that's final." Thorin looked like he wanted to debate the issue but seemed to realize quickly the wisdom in Dwalin's words.

"Fine. We move out as soon as we're packed."

Their leader gathered his coat and made his way back to the center of camp where his supplies were still sitting. Bilbo gripped the locket tight in his hard, preparing to apologize or grovel or something as the dwarf was level with him. "Thorin, I—" Bilbo started nervously but was quickly cut off as the dwarf passed him with a stiff, "You'd better get moving, Master Baggins, we're leaving."

Bilbo felt his stomach sink at the dwarf's face. He was used to the glares and the frowns, what the hobbit wasn't prepared for was the blank face and complete lack of emotion in the quick look Thorin gave him.

'Well this is…' Bilbo thought dejectedly, feeling his hand tighten on the cold metal in his hand almost unconsciously, 'not good. Not good at all…'

They had been walking for hours down the narrow and sometimes almost invisible path that ran through the forest. The deeper into the forest the company went, the harder and harder it became for even the youngest of their company to make out much more than a few feet in front of them.

Kili had insisted that he and Bilbo stay tied together as they trailed closely behind Dwalin who had a limp and still unconscious Fili slung over his shoulder. Thorin stayed at the front of the group and, much to the hobbit's dismay, hadn't said a word to him since they had packed up camp.

Bilbo had been so distressed at the thought of offending the dwarf past the point of forgiveness that all thought of the metal locket slipped his mind in a flurry of anxiety. The hobbit had tried to make some small conversation with Kili as they walked through the dark murkiness of the wood, but the young dwarf seemed too absorbed in thoughts of his brother to do anything but frown at the bobbing blond head in front of them.

And so, as he was wont to do in situations such as these, Bilbo felt his mind begin to spiral into a whirling torrent of worry. He was worried that Fili would never wake up, he was worried what Kili would do without his brother, but the gnawing thoughts that surfaced most frequently in his mind were those concerning Thorin.

He hadn't wanted to offend the dwarf; it was just so – so frustrating being kept in the dark while one of dear friends was hurt. Bilbo felt guilt once again curl its way into what seemed to be a now permanent residence deep in his stomach. He hadn't meant Thorin to think he thought the dwarf capable of hurting his nephews! Or anyone for that matter! Maybe if he just… explained that to Thorin, the dwarf would forgive him…

The hobbit wrung his hands nervously; he couldn't just do nothing, not after what Dwalin had said, not after all they had been though… Bilbo was about to pluck up some courage and plan an apology to Thorin when the dwarf in question called for a halt.

"We'll make camp here, no point continuing when we can't see."

"Fine. We move out as soon as we're packed."
Kili let out a small sigh of relief and followed Dwalin to what appeared to be a relatively smooth patch of earth. Setting Fili down as gently as he could, Dwalin placed the dwarf's lolling head onto his pack for support.

Kili quickly knelt down next to his brother and began to cover him with all the blankets at his disposal. Bilbo placed his own pack down next to Fili and let the sounds of camp being made wash over him. Bofur had built a small fire and the rest of the dwarves set their supplies down encircling the flame. Thorin was deep in conversation with Dwalin on the opposite end of camp and Bilbo couldn't help but feel that he just might have missed his chance at apologizing for the day.

Shoving his hands into his pockets with frustration, the hobbit felt his fingers come in contact with a something small and cold, 'what –' Bilbo thought confused as he pulled out the object, 'oh! The locket!' He had completely forgotten it! The hobbit pulled it out and tapped his friend on the shoulder, "Say Kili, do you happen to know who this belongs to? I found it at camp earlier and it slipped my mind."

Kili looked up from Fili and took the locket in both hands before opening it to examine the contents. "Oh! This would be Master Gloin's! You should probably give it back soon, he'd be really cross if he knew this was missing."

Bilbo’s eyes widened, he hadn't meant to keep something so valuable! Not for the first time, the hobbit cursed his absent-mindedness as he made his way over to where Gloin was sitting on his bedroll, absentely chewing on one of Beorn's honey cakes.

Bilbo Baggins hadn't had much cause to speak to the red haired dwarf before, but since Gloin hadn't been anything but gruffly polite, the hobbit hoped he wasn't overstepping any sort of boundaries.

"Uh, Mister Gloin?" Bilbo began slowly as he approached the dwarf who looked up at him curiously.

"What do you need, lad?"

Bilbo stuck out his open palm with the locket resting on it, "I, uh, found this earlier today on the ground. Kili said it was yours so I was just making sure you got it back."

The dwarf's eyes widened as he quickly palmed his shirt as if searching for the familiar lump of a now missing object. "I... yes that is mine! I must've dropped it in all the confusion of last night."

Gloin reached out and took the locket from Bilbo's hand before granting the hobbit a warm smile, "I must thank you lad. If I'd of lost this... well let's just say when I return I don't think my beard would've remained uncut long in the presence of an angry wife!"

Bilbo smiled back, happy to have done at least one good thing today, "Is that... Is that your wife?"

Gloin gave what the hobbit thought might have been a beaming smile, but to be fair it was rather hard to tell underneath the sheer amount of beard that rested on the dwarf's face.

"Aye, that she is!" Gloin scooted over a tad and patted the ground with enthusiasm, clearly pleased at the opportunity to sing the praises of his family. Bilbo stared for a moment, not sure if he was interpreting the motion correctly or if dwarves were prone to pounding the ground with their hands when eager.

"Well, don't just stand there lad, sit down!"

Bilbo quickly folded onto his legs next to the dwarf who opened up the locket so he could once
again see the carvings that rested lovingly on the stone.

Gloin grinned at him, "The rest of our esteemed company have grown tired of what Oin tell's me is 'constant and incessant prattling' about my family, but you, lad, you don't have any such excuses!"

Bilbo chuckled at the dwarf's face, feeling small swell of happiness that at least one of the dwarves appeared to have something to go back to, a real home.

"She's a very handsome dwarf, Mister Gloin, I'm sure they're just envious of your fortune."

The red-bearded dwarf threw back his head and let out a great guffaw as he slapped Bilbo on the back, "That they are, lad! That they are."

The dwarf suddenly narrowed his eyes at Bilbo, "Though I won't be havin' to worry about a hobbit pining after her too, will I?"

Bilbo's eyes widened in shock, "What? No – no of course not! I would – I would never dream of anything like that!"

There was a tense second in which Bilbo thought he might die in a rather undignified manner on the end of one of Gloin's axes in a fit of jealous rage when the dwarf's face broke out another wide smile, "Hah! You're as red as a ruby! I was only teasing you Master Baggins, no need to worry."

Bilbo let out a giant sigh of relief, thankful to be alive another minute but his pounding heart was not so eager to forgive or forget this most recent exercise in panic.

"Not that'd I blame you, she is stoutest dwarf maiden in all the Blue Mountain, thousands have journeyed to have but a mere glance at her beauty!"

The hobbit felt his eyes widen curiously, "What? Really?"

Gloin simply laughed again, "Well, perhaps not thousands, lad, but there certainly should be! Her beard is like a river of the deepest red veins in the mountain, her eyes like the finest shimmering amber!" Bilbo let out a laugh, the sight of any dwarf waxing poetic was something the hobbit would cherish for many years to come.

"And, she bore me my son, my greatest treasure," Gloin gestured to the second portrait.

"That's him?" Bilbo peered closer, the young dwarf looked like he could pass for a miniature version of his father.

"Aye, his name's Gimli," Gloin's face was the picture of pride, "Tough he takes less after his mother in appearance, my boy has just the same fierce determination as my wife. He'll be a great leader amongst my people one day, Master Baggins, I can just feel it."

Bilbo smiled at Gloin who was fondly tracing the outline of his son's face, "He looks to be very capable, Mister Gloin, you should be proud."

The dwarf nodded enthusiastically, "Oh yes, my boy is already a master with both axes and swords, though he much prefers the axe." Gloin's chest puffed out a bit, "Just like his father."

The hobbit could tell that the dwarf obviously loved his family more than anything and suddenly felt the question of why he would leave all that he held dear to go on some adventure bubble up.

"Why..." Bilbo began before he could stop himself. Gloin looked at his companion, an eyebrow raised curiously. 'Well too late to stop now;' the hobbit thought to himself. "Why did you come on
this quest? If you don't mind me asking…"

"Ah," the dwarf nodded his head sagely, "why would I leave my family behind, do you mean?"

Bilbo shrunk back into himself slightly with a small nod, hoping he hadn't offended the dwarf.

"Well… I suppose I felt that I had to come. I am related to Thorin rather distantly, but that is not why I left my wife and son. I left, lad, because someone has to watch out for my brother."

"Oin is… well, he's as sharp as he ever was, but there's no denying that he is getting on in years and after his accident..." Bilbo looked over to the older dwarf who was snoring softly on a sleeping roll nearby. "My brother makes his fortune by… investing in ventures he deems profitable around the Blue Mountains. He's a dab hand at knowing where and when to put the gold, but he becomes so obsessed with monitoring those investments he can't let anything happen not under those old eyes of his."

Gloin glanced over at his brother with a slightly irritated fondness, "He put a large amount of gold into one of the mining ventures a while back. They were going to dig up a new portion of the mountain and Oin was sure there would be a veritable kingdom of gold inside, though I don't think he trusted the dwarves working for him much."

"The fool went to go survey the opening operations but one of the explosives went off unexpectedly. Took out a good deal of the company minin' and my brother lost most of his hearing from the blast."

Bilbo had been curious why the older dwarf always held that absurd horn up to his ear, but the hobbit had always thought it was due to age. "But he was otherwise unhurt, yes?"

Gloin nodded, "Aye, lad. Got off better than the miners at least. I've always admired my brother for not letting anything hold him back, but when he told me he had invested a large sum of gold into Thorin's expedition I just knew he meant to come along."

The red-haired dwarf shook his head with a sigh, "He told me it was to reclaim our birthright, that Thorin was our cousin and we had a duty to join him, but I know some small part of him had to make sure he could monitor his assets."

"So you came along to… help him?" Bilbo questioned his companion.

"I came along for all the reasons Oin said, but yes, lad. Mostly I came to make sure my fool of a brother doesn't get killed by some orc that he couldn't hear coming."

"And your wife was fine with you leaving?" Bilbo's eyebrows furrowed as Gloin let out booming laugh.

"I wouldn't say she was fine with it, lad, but she knows that family is worth more to me than all the gold and fine gems in the world. I think that's why she accepted my courting in the first place."

"I would have stayed if she had asked," the dwarf shrugged as he grinned at the portrait of his wife in his hand, "I wanted to stay, but she knows me better than I even know myself, lad. She knew I couldn't have lived with myself if Oin got injured or worse on this quest…"

Bilbo gave the Gloin's arm a small pat with a smile on his face, "She sounds like an amazing woman, Mister Gloin."

The dwarf beamed back at him, "Aye, that she is lad, that she is. And I know my boy would keep her safe if anything ever happened to me. The only thing Gimli loves more than hittin' things with
those axes of his is his mother."

"Maybe," Gloin began as he put the locket back into the safety of his shirts, "when this is all over and Erebor is safe enough to visit you'll get a chance to meet them, lad. My wife is always reading about the other folks of this world in all her books, I'm sure she'd love to meet a hobbit such as yourself."

Bilbo chuckled as he grinned at the dwarf, "I am always looking for another opportunity to educate dwarves on the respectable and admirable ways of hobbits, Mister Gloin. I'd be honored to meet your family should I ever get the chance."

Gloin patted him once more on the back with a grin of his own, "Better goin' back to Master Kili, over there. I don't think he can sleep without you there anymore." Bilbo stood up to make his way back to where Fili and Kili were as Gloin spoke up once more, "And thank you, lad. For returning this."

The hobbit nodded. "Of course, Mister Gloin, rest well, I'm sure we'll be needing it in the morning."

And with that Bilbo walked quietly back to where the Durin brothers were.

The younger dwarf looked up as Bilbo approached, a relieved smile on his face. "He made a noise, Master Boggins!" Kili began excitedly, his words rushing together in his eagerness to get them out, "Fili made this odd sort of groan and fell right back asleep but at least it was something!"

Bilbo couldn't help but let out a relieved laugh, "that's wonderful, Kili! I'm sure he'll be fine soon."

Kili nodded with a small smile, "I – I hope you're right, Master Boggins. It is… strange not to have heard his voice for so long."

Kili set up his roll on one side of Fili as Bilbo unfolded his own on the opposite one. "I can't imagine how hard this is for you and Thorin, but Fili is strong. One of the strongest people I know, he wouldn't let some water keep him down for long," Bilbo winked at his companion, "especially if that meant losing so many opportunities to tease his brother."

The young dwarf chuckled as he looked at his brother fondly, "I suppose you're right, Master Boggins, I guess all we can do is wait for him to wake up."

Bilbo gave Kili a warm smile, "Which I'm sure will be soon now if he's making noises, let's try and get some sleep."

Kili and Bilbo both edged in closer to where Fili lay in the middle and each placed part of their blankets on the blond dwarf as they huddled together, making sure Fili would be warm once he woke up.

"Good night, Master Boggins."

"Good night, Kili."

Bilbo Baggins discretely wrapped his arms around one of Fili's, willing the dwarf to wake up soon. The hobbit missed Fili's quick laugh, steadfast friendship, and sound advice, especially in regards to one Durin in particular. At that moment, Bilbo couldn't think of anyone's advice he could have used more and it dawned on him just how much he had grown to depend on the friendships he had formed in the company.

Thorin, he decided, would have to wait until tomorrow for Bilbo to apologize. Right now it was Fili who needed him to be as steady a friend to him as he had been to Bilbo. The hobbit focused in on
the blonde dwarf’s rhythmic breathing and hoped with all his might that his companion, his friend, would recover soon.
Bilbo Baggins was comfortably warm. He had his arms wrapped around his favorite pillow and the light of dawn had not yet started to leak through the curtains of his window. The hobbit let out a little yawn, snuggling in closer to his blanket and pillow, savoring the those few minutes in which he knew he didn't have to quite yet get up.

"Are you quite comfortable, Master Baggins?" his pillow spoke with a chuckle. Smiling into the softness, the hobbit nodded with a contented sigh, "Mmhm, very comfortable, thank you for asking."

Wait.

Shooting up in surprise, Bilbo flailed for a moment trying to orient himself in a place that was most certainly not Bag End. The hobbit looked down to see that his pillow was, in fact, a dwarf. A blonde dwarf with a grinning face that looked very much healthy and alive.

"Mister Fili! You're alright!" Bilbo let out a relieved laugh as he gathered the dwarf into a tight hug, "we were so worried!" Fili laughed as he patted the hobbit on the back, "I must've been out long for you to be so anxious! The last thing I remember was that bloody thing going after Kili, then I fell in and… well, I woke up next I suppose."

Bilbo sat back down next to the dwarf and his still sleeping brother, "Apparently there was something in the water that can, from what I can gather, almost drug you if swallowed."

Fili frowned as he pulled back the sleeve on his coat, "I knew nothing good could come from going through this wretched forest. My wound looks… healed?" glancing up curiously at Bilbo, the blonde dwarf raised an eyebrow in question, "Mister Beorn gave me some balm before I left, it worked wonders on the wounds, they were gone after the first night!"

Fili's eyes widened slightly in surprise, "the first night? How many has it been?"

Bilbo gave his friend small shrug, "Only two, though I think without the balm it could have been longer…"

The blonde dwarf sighed as gave his brother a fond smile "and… how has Kili been? Not too much of a wreck without me?" Bilbo chuckled lightly, "Well considering we didn't know what was wrong with you, he did very well. He didn't leave your side once, Mister Fili, I don't think I've ever seen him so worried."

Fili patted his brother's head gently; "I know he doesn't like it when I protect him… He thinks I'm doing it because I don't think he's strong enough but all I could think about when that monster was coming towards him..." the dwarf shook his head slightly with a bitter smile, "all I could think about
was what I would do if he… died."

Looking up at his companion, Fili's expression held the weight of someone who knew a deep and unconditional sort of love, "I couldn't even comprehend it, Master Baggins. I couldn't even begin to imagine waking up the next day and not being able to… I knew – I knew that what ever happened to me would be infinitely better than that."

Bilbo reached over and squeezed the dwarf's arm tightly, "you protected him, Mister Fili. Kili knows why you did it, of course he does, but I don't think that makes it any easier seeing you hurt."

Fili nodded and smiled at the hobbit, "I know… But I'm not sorry for what I did. I will never be sorry for protecting my brother, even when he thinks I shouldn't" The blonde dwarf gave his brother a gentle nudge, "Kili."

The younger dwarf groaned and sluggishly swatted his brother's hand away, "g-go awayyyy." Fili laughed as he resumed his shoving, "Kili, wake up you clot."

Kili groaned again and covered his face with his arms, "I said go awayyy." There was a moment of silence as Kili stilled before he sat up rather violently with wide eyes, "Fili!"

Surging forward to give his brother a great hug, Kili let out a shaky laugh, "you-you're awake! Thank Aulë!" Fili grinned back at his brother as they pulled away from each other, "of course, dear brother, you should know by now nothing can keep me down for long!"

Kili grinned back but still gave Fili's arm a swift and hard punch, "Ow! What was that for?" The blonde dwarf rubbed his arm indignantly as his brother huffed and stuck up his nose, "that was for being an idiot of course. And to give you some incentive not to do it again, or else next time it'll be your face."

Fili glared at the younger dwarf muttering something about his great misfortune about having such an ungrateful sod for a brother, "Anyway you should really be thanking Master Boggins here, he was the one that took care of your arm and pulled you out of the river!"

The blonde dwarf looked over to where Bilbo was watching them with an amused smile, "Did he really? I'm beginning to think you are collecting life debts from the line of Durin Master Baggins," Fili grinned at Bilbo, "though it seems a bit redundant at this point, I must thank you once again, my friend, it seems needing a hobbit savior is a family trait."

Bilbo flushed as he crossed his arms, "really, you dwarves are might bit obsessed with all this debt business. I did what any friend would do, Mister Fili, and friends do not require payment of any sort for helping each other out."

The dwarf brothers gave him twin grins, "this is why you're our favorite, Master Boggins!" Fili bowed with a flourish, "quite right, brother, Master Baggins is certainly one of a kind!"

Bilbo laughed at two, "just because I don't act like a dwarf doesn't mean I'm unique! You just haven't met many hobbits…"

Kili leaned forward with a warm smile, "No need, Master Boggins! We've got the best one right here!"

The hobbit couldn't help the fond smile that crept across his face. Fili was fine and that's all that mattered. Well, that's all that mattered until Bilbo looked up at the sound of crashing footsteps coming over towards them.
Thorin limped hastily towards his nephew; his eyebrows drawn and a dark frown on his face. He reached where they were sitting and stopped right in front of Fili. The dwarf took a few deep breaths, closing his eyes before he almost collapsed to his knees and gathered his nephew into a hug.

"Don't you ever, ever do something that reckless again, do you understand?" Thorin spoke quietly but Bilbo could still hear the weary relief that laced every word. The older dwarf reached out an arm and pulled Kili into the hug gruffly, "that goes for you too."

Kili let out a small laugh, "we love you too, uncle." They remained embraced for several moments and Bilbo swore he heard a muttered "idiots" from where Thorin's face was buried.

Thorin hobbled back up into a standing position with the help of his two nephews, "we leave as soon as you're ready." Bilbo rose hurriedly, not wanting to miss another chance to apologize. He hadn't had any time to even consider what he was going to say, but knowing there was yet again this growing chasm of stiff silence between them made the hobbit's stomach twist rather uncomfortably.

The dwarf turned towards the center of the camp and started to limp away. Bilbo steeled himself as he jogged after Thorin's back, "Thorin can I—" but the dwarf wouldn't turn back, wouldn't even face him, "get your things, Master Baggins." The guilt swam back into his gut but at the same time, the hobbit's previous anger threatened to return.

He only wanted to apologize! Why couldn't Thorin just see that! Why couldn't the dwarf stop being so stubborn and let him do something, anything to try and make up for what he had said…

Bilbo reached out and grabbed one of the sleeves on Thorin's coat, the same coat the dwarf had let him use not two nights previous, "Thorin please I just want to—"

Their leader stopped suddenly, turning to face the hobbit, his expression utterly blank. Reaching down, Thorin gripped Bilbo's wrist so lightly he almost couldn't feel the touch at all and dislodged his coat from the hobbit's hand.

As they looked at each other, Bilbo saw in the dwarf's eyes the worst possible thing he could imagine. He didn't see anger, he didn't see sadness, he didn't even see hurt. Bilbo Baggins saw nothing at all. Thorin turned once again and left the hobbit standing with his hand still outreached, gripping at nothing more solid than the cold forest air.

It felt like Bilbo had been punched in the gut, like all the breath inside him was forcibly removed and for a moment he couldn't seem to make his lungs work. 'Oh no,' the hobbit thought as he stared at his hand, 'oh no, no.' He had ruined it. He had ruined his friendship with Thorin because he couldn't keep his blasted mouth shut. The hobbit felt a hand land on his shoulder and he started at the contact, "everything alright Master Baggins?" Fili glanced between his companion and his uncle, eyebrows raised curiously.

"I…" Bilbo tried to find the words, "I… think I might have made a mistake, Mister Fili." The blonde dwarf looked at Bilbo's expression and seemed to gather while he'd been unconscious, something unfortunate had happened.

"Would you like to talk about it?" Bilbo felt Fili's grip tighten in comfort. The hobbit turned, wanting to spill out every worry, every concern he had; but as he looked at Fili's worried face, Bilbo suddenly felt very selfish. The dwarf had just been mauled by a fish monster and then unconscious for two days after inhaling some no doubt wicked river water so he could save his beloved brother from near death. What right did Bilbo have to go hoisting his burdens – burdens that were entirely his fault – on
Fili?

The hobbit wanted ask for advice from Fili, oh he wanted it more than almost *anything* at that moment. But, the hobbit decided with a sudden resolution, he would fix his own mistakes this time. *He* would find a way to make it up to Thorin.

"No… I—No, thank you Mister Fili, I'll sort this one out myself. Nothing you need to worry about." Bilbo tried to give the dwarf a warm smile but even *he* could sense that it was probably strained at best. "Well if you're sure…" Fili gave Bilbo's shoulder one last squeeze before he went back to his brother.

The company set off in the near darkness of daylight. They made their way around massive trees and gnarled roots. The very air seemed to grow more and more stale and thick the further along they went.

While Beorn had given them food, he hadn't had enough in his cabin to feed fourteen for an extended period of time. Even on their second day in the forest, the company had started to ration out what they had.

Days passed and supplies grew scarce. The company started to become more nervous and irate as time went on. Day and night seemed to bleed together in a blur of dark anxiety. The longer they walked, the more exhaustion and misery grew to be their closest companions.

Bilbo stayed tied between the dwarf brothers, though their conversation was now almost as sparse as the food that remained. The hobbit had never felt such a lingering despair in his life, like the taste of rotten food clinging to his tongue no matter how much he tried to convince himself that it forest itself wasn't affecting his heavy melancholy.

The company barely spoke other than for Thorin irritably grunting out instructions from the front. To Bilbo it seemed that any spark of hope or happiness was crushed within an instant, devoured by the malevolent starved trees of Mirkwood.

Though the path was barely visible anymore and seemed at times to disappear entirely, Thorin made absolutely sure to stay on its course. They had finally decided to rest for the day, though Bilbo wasn't sure they had actually been walking for more than half of it.

Barely any food and even less sleep made their progress sluggish at best; the company breaking the uneasy silence of the forest only to quietly voice their displeasure at their growling stomachs.

"Uncle we have to *eat*, let us go try and find something. I promise we won't stray far from the path." Fili and Kili rounded on Thorin who, despite their dire circumstances, was having nothing of their concerns, "No. We do *not* leave the path, that is final."

"Please, uncle!" Kili shot in, placing a hand on Thorin's arm, "we won't last much longer in these conditions! Just for bit." Looking at his two nephews with a thunderous scowl, Thorin let out a huff. "I don't *care* how hungry we are, Gandalf assured me nothing good could come of leaving the path."

Fili looked about ready to tear out his braids in frustration, "it won't *matter* how dangerous it is off the path if we starve to death *on* it!" Thorin turned towards his nephew's indignant face, "I have spoken on the matter. *No one* leaves."

Their leader made to turn back towards the center of the camp where Bofur was fruitlessly trying to start a fire when Fili all but growled at his uncle, "I will not sit here doing *nothing*. I am going whether you approve or not."
Bilbo and Kili shared identical looks of shock, no one, not even his brother, had heard Fili speak to Thorin with anything other than fondness and respect – let alone directly disobeying his orders. Thorin turned around to face his nephew, but before he could say anything, Fili stormed off into the trees.

Kili looked nervously between where his brother had left and where his uncle stood, mouth slightly agape. The young dwarf debated for all of a few seconds before he quickly made after his brother, shouting at Fili to wait for him.

Looking back, Bilbo could have guessed the whole mess that happened next probably wouldn't have occurred had they not been short on food and tempers while in a clearly baleful forest, but at the time the panic that shot through him forced all thought from his mind but the potential danger his friends were walking into.

The hobbit shot up and chased after where Kili had disappeared into the dark, ignoring Thorin's yell. Bilbo stumbled around blindly for several minutes making what was probably more noise than advisable when he felt a hand clamp on his arm.

Bilbo let out a rather undignified yelp and drew his sword, spinning to face this mysterious stranger. "Woah there, Master Baggins, put that down before you take someone's eye out." Fili let go of the hobbit, raising his own hands in placation.

Clutching his shuddering heart in shock, Bilbo took a few deep breaths to calm himself before rounding on the dwarf. "What do you think you're doing!?" The hobbit charged forward, shoving an accusatory finger into Fili's chest, "you heard Thorin! We have absolutely no idea what's out here! You could have been killed! Or – or poisoned! Or eaten!"

Fili had the grace to look at least slightly ashamed, "I… I'm not sure what came over me. I was so hungry and tired… All of a sudden I just felt this – this rage sweep through me and I couldn't help it."

Bilbo sighed, his irritation passing and now replaced with relief that his friend was safe, "It's this blasted forest! I swear I can feel something seeping from the trees themselves! The sooner we get out of here the better…" The hobbit trailed off realizing there was a rather suspicious lack of Kili in the immediate vicinity.

"Where… where is Kili?" Bilbo began slowly, feeling more and more anxious as he spoke. "Back at camp, why?" Fili narrowed his eyes suspiciously as if realizing that something was about to go horribly wrong. "No he's not, he went chasing after you…"

The blonde dwarf let out a string of curses that normally would have made his pointed hobbit ears flush, but at the moment; he was finding it hard to feel anything but panic. "Kili!" Fili started to shout, "Kili! Where are you?!",

Fili spun around in a flurry of movement, and went crashing off into the forest. Bilbo shot after him, trying to keep up with his friend. They had to search for only a few minutes before Fili ran straight into an object that was eerily Kili-shaped.

The brothers stumbled back, each holding their own throbbing noses.

"Kili! What're you—"

"Fili! I just found—"

The two dwarves proceeded to speak over each other before Bilbo shot in irritably, "One at a time!
Please!" He was tired and he was hungry, at that moment, Bilbo Baggins had no patience to spare
trying to decipher who was saying what.

Kili was practically bouncing in excitement as his words poured out in an eager rush, "I saw some
lights! And there was a camp and – and there were people! At least I think they were people, but
there was music and dancing! And food, Fili, food!"

Bilbo couldn't quite believe his ears. The idea that there were folks in this forest not only enjoying
themselves but also making merry with food? It was almost too absurd to consider given the suffering
their company had gone through since they entered Mirkwoods borders.

Fili's face broke out in an exited grin, "Food you say? Oh uncle is going to have to eat his own
words first! Where are they?" Kili grabbed his brother's and Bilbo's hands in each of his, "this way!
C'mon!"

Bilbo felt himself being pulled through the murky darkness for several minutes as the trio stumbled
on roots and other unsavory things. They made their way to a particularly large root that was able to
hide all their forms from view. Fili, Kili, and Bilbo all stuck their faces just slightly above the gnarled
wood.

Though he hadn't believed it a few minutes ago, before his very eyes there was indeed a group of
figures dancing and singing around a large fire. The hobbit rubbed his eyes just to make sure he
wasn't imagining it. Refocusing his eyes back on the scene in front of him, Bilbo concluded that this
was indeed actually happening.

Though it begged the question why Beorn and Gandalf were so adamant that they not leave the path.
Surely if there were friendly folk in these forests, they'd be willing to help a group of starving
travelers? Right?

At this point, Bilbo was finding it extremely difficult to decide between what his stomach thought
was a good idea and what the nagging voice in his head that usually spoke in Gandalf's gruff tone
was telling him was a very bad idea.

"I'm going to talk to them," Kili shot up unexpectedly. Before Fili or Bilbo had the chance to grab
him, the younger dwarf vaulted over the root and started jogging towards the group that still danced
around the fire.

"Kili no!" Bilbo and Fili hissed in unison. They took one look at each other before launching
themselves after Kili. They made it only a few feet into the clearing before the light of the fire
suddenly went out, all noise except for their own snuffed out immediately.

Bilbo felt a sudden and immense wave of drowsiness wash over him. Grey stars filled his vision as
he stumbled forward, unable to keep his balance. 'Wha—what's going on?' the hobbit thought to
himself sluggishly, trying his hardest to fight the almost irresistible urge to fall asleep.

"—ilbo. Bilbo! Where are you?" the hobbit heard Fili's voice come somewhere from his left as he fell
forward. "I… I'm right…" the words felt foreign in his mouth, like some other hobbit was speaking
them as he tried to force them out.

"I'm right… here…" Bilbo landed on the ground, his face resting on a cluster of mushrooms. If he tried
really hard, the hobbit could almost imagine he was home in Bag End, his head laying against
his plush pillow, ready for sleep.

'Yes… sleep…' Bilbo thought, no longer able to keep his heavy eyes from shutting, 'that does
sound… nice…' Darkness filled his vision and the hobbit felt his mind go blank, passing into the realm of unconsciousness.

When Bilbo Baggins finally came to, his first thought was of just how incredibly uncomfortable he was. His head was throbbing and his legs had that odd numb and yet tingly sensation prickling through them.

The hobbit blinked as his eyes adjusted to the darkness around him. Groaning, he rolled over onto his stomach and Bilbo gently kneaded his aching lower back. 'What,' he thought feeling increasingly confused, 'what happened?'

The last thing he remembered was chasing after Kili and then he… then he must've passed out. Bilbo tried to stand up but quickly fell back onto his face, realizing much to his rapidly rising horror that his legs were bound. No… not bound, they were stuck.

Bilbo reached down with shaking hands to where everything up to his mid-thigh was covered in a thick, disgusting substance. Plucking at it experimentally, the hobbit quickly retracted his hand trying to wipe it off. 'What even is this?'

However, Bilbo Baggins did not have long to consider what was going on when a sinister hissing coming from disturbingly close behind him made the hobbit realize that who was probably the more pertinent question.

The hobbit struggled onto his knees and turned around just in time to roll out of the way as a spider pounced onto the spot he had been occupying. A giant spider.

This was not happening. Bilbo Baggins of the Shire was used to insects. He was used to spiders, only those he normally encountered were not the size of a horse. As he just barely rolled out of the way of the spider's snapping pincers, the hobbit realized he was getting rather tired of running into beasts larger than himself that seemed to want nothing more than a hobbit snack.

Bilbo scrambled back, pulling out his sword in a clumsy flourish. The spider lunged again with a piercing screech, but this time as he flopped away, the hobbit flailed his weapon and hit the creature right across the face with an effective, albeit unskillful, slash.

The spider hissed as it scuttled back, it's two front legs quivering in front of it's face in pain. Taking his foe's momentary lull in attack, Bilbo started to quickly hack away at the substance binding his legs. The beast, now more cautious of it's prey being able to fight back, slowly advanced on the poor hobbit.

Bilbo felt his heart hammering in his chest but, despite his panic, the hobbit finally sliced the last bit of webbing away in a burst of adrenaline. As Bilbo tried to stand up quickly, he cursed silently as his still numb feet gave way.

Though, considering the spider took that exact moment to leap forward, its pincers closing on the spot where Bilbo's neck had just been, the hobbit had been strangely lucky.

Now facing up at the spider's chest, Bilbo let out a great yell as he thrust his sword up into the unprotected underside. The hobbit plunged his weapon in until nothing but the hilt was left visible. Giving it a twist then a hard yank, Bilbo closed his eyes as some foul smelling spider fluid spurted out from the beast onto his face and clothes.

The creature keeled over with a horrible shriek, it's legs twitching rather unpleasantly but otherwise, Bilbo thoroughly hoped, dead. Erebor, Bilbo thought as shook with lingering fear, had better be the
most fantastic place in all the world because anything short of that would be most certainly not worth the shambles of terror and discomfort his life had turned into. And certainly not worth getting – getting spider bits on his favorite coat.

Trying to wipe off the general mess from his person and pack, Bilbo felt his hand graze past something rather small and round in his pocket. 'The ring!' he thought excitedly, pulling out the golden band from his pocket, 'how could I have forgotten about that?'

Allowing himself to feel a small kernel of hope, Bilbo slipped his magic ring onto his finger. The world ran grey around him and the hobbit felt a newfound determination, as long as he was invisible there's no way any other repugnant forest creatures could attack him!

The hobbit finally took the chance to figure out exactly where he had ended up. Bilbo saw that he was in a clearing much like the one they had seen the group of people dancing.

Glancing up over to where the clearing ended and the trees began again, Bilbo saw a strange cluster of round, white sacks hanging from the branches. 'That's odd,' the hobbit thought as he walked closer to them, 'that looks like the same stuff that was on my – on my…'

Bilbo felt dread wash over him like the waters of the icy river they had passed over days ago. 'Oh no…' the hobbit prodded one of the sacks, 'oh no, no, no…'

He didn't have long to let his realization sink in as he heard what sounded like a group of many-legged creatures coming over to him. Bilbo forgot for a moment that he was invisible as he leapt behind one of the trees to watch as five of the massive spiders scuttled into the clearing.

Despite being invisible, Bilbo felt his heart clench nervously as the spiders swarmed around their fallen brother. There was a frenzy of clicking and hissing before the hobbit heard one of them hiss, "He has been ssslain!" The spiders' frantic clicking started up again.

Bilbo felt his jaw drop in surprise, 'these – these creatures could talk.' The hobbit almost let out a strangled laugh, 'oh of course they can talk. Well this is just absolutely brilliant.' The hobbit crouched down behind the tree trying to collect himself for a moment.

If they could talk, they were clearly more intelligent than your average Shire spider. In a halfhearted effort to console himself, Bilbo tried to remember that he could deal with at least one of them. Perhaps not so much deal with it, as hope his dumb luck would continue to serve him well on this journey.

The hobbit took a deep breath and stood up once more to see what the beasts were doing. They were still huddled around the fallen corpse of their brother, though the largest one was now poking one of its many hairy legs at the dead creature's body.

"He's been stung by ssssomething," the spider clicked its pincers angrily. Bilbo looked down at his still drawn sword, 'stung?' Bilbo Baggins was no insect, but as he gazed at the short piece of steel resting assured in his hand, perhaps that was an appropriate description for his sword.

After all it was no great, hulking weapon that crushed or hewed, it was small, quick; and all it really needed was one short but deadly thrust; one swift sting. 'Now that is a good name!' Bilbo thought to himself as he clenched the hilt, the hobbit would call his sword Sting. Balin had told him all weapons were named after great deeds they did in battle, but as he held fast to the sword that had saved his life countless times, Bilbo realized that his sword was different.

It was not meant for wars like those Dwalin and Thorin had told him about. It was not meant to strike
fear into the hearts of his enemies or leave them shaking at the very sight of it. No, his Sting was meant to be swift and efficient, understated but still just as deadly as its larger counterparts; and as Bilbo watched the creatures hiss and snap, he wouldn't have traded his trusty weapon for any other in all this earth.

"It doesn't matter," snarled one of the spiders and it shifted towards where Bilbo was standing, "there's more for the rest of us now." The rest of the monsters hissed in agreement as their beady eyes faced their almost ready meals.

Bilbo felt cold panic flood through his chest, they were going to eat the dwarves! He had to do something, anything fast or else the company would soon be in the rather unfortunate position of being utterly dead.

The hobbit knew he couldn't fight all five of the spiders at once, even as invisible as he was, there was a chance one of the creatures would accidentally hit him if he got too close. 'I have to lead them away somehow…' Bilbo thought to himself with no small amount of desperation. Glancing around with growing apprehension, the hobbit couldn't make out anything except for roots and some small rocks.

'The rocks!' Maybe, just maybe he could make a distraction that would lead the spiders away from their prey just long enough so Bilbo could get his friends down. Grabbing one of the rocks near his feet, the hobbit gave it a great toss. The stone sailed through the air and landed with a thump just outside the clearing.

"What was that?" hissed one of the smaller spiders as it scuttled around to face where the noise came from. There was a titter of nervous clicking as the rest of the creatures turned as well. "Does it even matter?" The largest one shot in angrily, "the food is here and those filthy elves left last night, whatever it is won't make a difference."

Bilbo felt his stomach sink in fear, he hadn't expected it to be that easy but the thought of doing anything more… drastic did nothing but fray his already thin nerves. 'I've got to think of something!' the hobbit shifted his weight back and forth as the spiders resumed their advance. It was in that moment, as he gazed into the many eyes on the largest spider that Bilbo realized that the only distraction big enough to dissuade the monsters from their meal was himself.

He didn't take a second to consider how painful death by multiple spider bites would be as he shot out from behind the tree. The only advantage Bilbo had was that his foes couldn't see him, though as he grew closer to their hulking forms, it didn't seem to count for much.

Bilbo dodged in between their hairy legs until he was behind them, "Hey! Hey you!" the hobbit called out in a shaking but loud voice. The creatures stopped suddenly and whipped around in a flurry of limbs. "Yes you lot! You – you ugly, uh, nasty things! That's right" he let out a panicked laugh, "I said ugly!"

"Where is that coming from?" one of the spiders form the back snarled as its body twitched in anticipation. Bilbo ran quickly to the edge of the clearing and picked up a stick, snapping it with all his strength, "over here you dimwits!"

"I can't see anything! Spread out!" The hobbit stumbled back as the spider came towards him and felt his arm brush against one of its legs. "I felt something! Over here!" Bilbo quickly raised Sting and brought the blade down on the limb that had just touched him, slashing deep into the creature's leg. It let out a great shriek and pulled the injured limb into its body.
Bilbo scrambled away further into the woods as the spider lunged with flashing pincers at where the hobbit had just been standing. "You're too slow!" Bilbo called out with much more confidence than he felt. "I will tear your flesh from your bones!" the spider screamed in pain. "You'll have to catch me first!" the hobbit picked up another rock and threw it as hard as he could into the depths of the forest, away from where the dwarves were hanging.

The creature let out a frustrated screech and hobbled after the noise, "it's going this way, follow me!" The rest of its brothers quickly followed, soon leaving the clearing empty save for the company. Bilbo hurried back to where his friends were hanging, feeling that time was a luxury he did not have much of.

The hobbit reached the closest sack and with a few swift hacks of Sting, brought it crashing down to the forest floor. As gently as he could, Bilbo made an incision at the top and carefully cut the substance until he could see who was inside.

Fili's face appeared as he pulled away at the coating and Bilbo quickly leaned down to see if the dwarf was still breathing. Placing his ear near the dwarf's face, Bilbo held still for a few tense moments before he felt the light puffs of air on his face, Fili was alive!

The hobbit resumed his lacerations with renewed vigor and soon enough he was able to pull the dwarf out of the sticky sack. "Fili!" Bilbo gave his friend a shake, "Fili! Now is not the time to go passing out on me!"

The blonde dwarf gave a little groan as his eyebrows furrowed, "That's right, Mister Fili, time to wake up!" Bilbo continued to shake the dwarf's shoulders until a pair of light blue eyes met his own.

"Wha—what happened?" Fili slurred sluggishly as he tried to sit up but simply fell onto his back. "Spiders," Bilbo whispered urgently, "haven't got time to explain, we need to leave now! You've got to help me get the rest down!"

Fili nodded slowly, his pupils blown wide, movements jerking, and apparently too out of it to realize that Bilbo wasn't even visible. Bilbo guessed his friend had some of those nasty spiders' venom still inside him, but he had no time to worry about that. Either they got the rest of the company free or they would all die in a most unfortunate manner.

Bilbo pulled Fili up; though the dwarf stumbled a bit, he also seemed to realize that now more than ever, he had to push onward for the sake of his friends and family. The hobbit pulled out one of Fili's swords from its scabbard and lifted dwarf's hand, placing the hilt in his palm. "There you go, Mister Fili, we need to move."

Bilbo sprinted over to the farthest sack, leaving Fili to deal with the closer ones. Though the hobbit felt his anxiety grow exponentially as the minutes passed, he tried his best to concentrate on the task at hand. First he got Bofur down, then Balin and Dwalin, until he and Fili had cut down all of the company.

Sweating, tired, and extremely hungry Bilbo leaned against one of the trees panting. Their group was free but the dwarves were clearly in no state to travel. By far the best of them was Fili, though that wasn't saying much seeing as how the dwarf had collapsed next to his brother with a groan once he'd finished.

Bilbo looked around at the unconscious or moaning dwarves in his group, dread pooling in his stomach. They didn't have time to lay there, the spiders could be back any minute! The hobbit glanced around looking for Thorin, surely their leader wouldn't be so out of it he couldn't rally the company. But, as Bilbo looked at the dwarves sprawled across the clearing, he saw no trace of the
Thorin was gone. The hobbit felt nervous nausea rise into his throat, Thorin was gone and he had no idea where the dwarf could have possibly gone. Bilbo's vision started to swim and he collapsed down onto his knees, despair clouding his mind. What if Thorin had been captured? Or worse, killed?

Leaning forward onto his hands, the hobbit took a few deep breaths trying to calm himself and wait for the dizziness to pass. Though he waited almost a minute, the sensation never ceased, 'Oh no,' he thought fighting the urge to gag, 'I… I didn't even say sorry! What if – What if…'

However, Bilbo Baggins had no time to contemplate 'what if' as the sound of many footsteps surrounded the clearing. The hobbit's head shot up as he tried to see what new devilry had come to torment them in these cursed woods.

Much to his surprise, what stepped out from the trees was not an orc, spider, or any of the countless foul beasts that roamed these dark parts. It was an elf. An elf with hair like white gold, a soft green tunic across his chest, and a white wooden bow in his hand.

"Well this is certainly… strange," the elf walked forward until he was standing a few feet from where the dwarves were laying down. Another elf joined him with a light chuckle, her hair a deep auburn and twisted into a braid on top of her head. "And here I thought one dwarf in our lands was odd, and now there's a whole group of them."

The elf with the light hair motioned for the rest of their party to join him and gestured at the unconscious dwarves, "bring them to my father, I'm sure he'll be… interested to know why they trespass here."

Bilbo felt his eyes widen in shock, 'no… no they couldn't take them away! He had to – had to…' But as Bilbo looked at their pale faces, the hobbit saw little of the warmth that had graced Elladan and Elrohir. Something inside him urged the hobbit to remain silent. If the worst came to past, it would be better for Bilbo to remain undetected so he could help the company from the shadows.

The dwarves were hauled up by the elves rather unceremoniously as if they weighed no more than a sack of flour. Bilbo sheathed Sting and, as quietly as he could, followed the company of elves as they wound their way through the dark forest with practiced familiarity.

They walked for what felt like hours. Though Bilbo was rather tired and hungry so he couldn't be too sure if that was merely his weary body protesting more movement. Bilbo was about ready to collapse when they broke through the dense wood into clearing.

But it wasn't quite a clearing. In the middle of the space, there grew the largest tree Bilbo had ever seen in his entire life. The trunk looked like it could have been bigger than all of Hobbiton put together. At the base of the tree there was a great archway, guarded by several finely armored elves. Vines and branches grew around the opening like a delicate and intricate wreath, embracing and curling between one another in a beautiful pattern.

The hobbit would normally liked to have taken much more time to appreciate the natural wonder but he was spurred once again into action as the elves continued down the path into the tree itself.

Though the inside was dark, it held none of the sinister aura that the outside forest did. The hobbit didn't know how, but there was a natural light that leaked in through the bark itself, making the hallways they walked through seem not eerie, but calm and almost ethereal.
They made their way deeper and deeper underneath the ground, farther into the roots of the great tree than Bilbo ever would have thought possible. Walking into a large room, the elf that led them was greeted with a salute by what looked to Bilbo to be a guard. "More prisoners for us, hm?"

The pale-haired elf nodded, though he looked not to be taking much pleasure from taking anything captive. "Yes, place them in separate cells and make sure they are fed once the spider's poison fades from their bodies. I'm sure my father would like them at least somewhat coherent when he speaks to them."

The elf and his party left and the guard pulled the dwarves into the next room one by one. Bilbo saw the guard had left a meal on the table and, before he could consider if he was being reckless, the hobbit ran over and stuffed his face with the food. As the food and water passed his lips into his eager stomach, Bilbo thought it was the best thing he had ever tasted. Sure, he hadn't had a proper meal for days, but let no one say a hobbit under appreciates a finely cooked dish, especially when it was free.

Bilbo polished off the plate in a matter of minutes and suddenly felt all the exhaustion and anxiety of the last few days envelop his aching body. He was tired. Suddenly barely able to keep his eyes open, the hobbit spotted a group of barrels in the corner and ambled over. He collapsed behind them, leaving his magic ring on, and closed his weary eyes. He would get up in a few hours to help his friends. He just needed a few minutes to—a few minutes to… rest…

And with that the hobbit fell fast asleep.

Bilbo Baggins woke up with a start to the sound of laughter. Slamming his head against the hard wood behind him, the hobbit cursed silently as held his smarting skull.

"He refused to say a thing! Kept going on and on about being starved!" The elf let out another laugh before his companion added in hushed tones, "I heard he spat at the king! Even tried to fight him!"

"He did not," the first elf muttered back, "you believe anything those palace guards say." The second elf shoved his companion, "I do not! Anyway I'm just upset I missed it, dwarves always make for the best amusements."

The elves laughed together before the first one let out a sigh, "Come, we need to get these barrels upstairs for the party. You know Thranduil, anything goes wrong at one of his feasts and it's our heads."

The two elves grabbed barrels that lay just in front of where the hobbit was still laying before they turned and exited the room. Bilbo sat up slowly and took in his surroundings. Feeling better rested and slightly less hungry, the hobbit noticed there was a large fire in the corner of the room and two massive doors and either end. In the middle there was a great table with food placed on its surface in droves.

The hobbit heard his stomach give a loud growl and quickly made his way over to the table, snatching what he could and stuffing it into his face. Bilbo took a few minutes to quell the aching sensation in his belly. Feeling at least somewhat satisfied, the hobbit crept over to where he saw the elves take his companions the night before. He presumed it was some sort of jail or dungeon, he just hoped that nothing dreadful had happened to them while he slept.

Glancing behind him to make sure no one would notice the door opening up mysteriously, Bilbo gave it a great push before rushing inside. His eyes were met with near total darkness, though he could make out that a number of doors lined each side of the hallway. These, he surmised, were most
likely the cells that the dwarves had been put into.

Making his way over to the first one, Bilbo stood on his toes so he could push his face against the bars that lined the wood framed window. The hobbit glanced around the cell until his eyes were met with the familiarly pointy hair-style of Nori. "Psst! Nori!" The hobbit hissed as loud as he dared.

The dwarf stirred but did not wake, "Mister Nori! Wake up!" Bilbo shifted his weight nervously from side to side, willing the dwarf to wake up. Much to his relief, Nori sat up slowly before turning to face the door, "Baggins? Is that you?"

Bilbo let out a sigh of relief, "Yes! It's me! Are you alright Mister Nori?" The dwarf stood up and walked over to the door, his face drawn in confusion as he looked out the opening in the wooden door but saw nothing.

"Yes, I'm fine but… where are you?" The hobbit slapped his forehead, 'of course! The ring!' He'd almost forgotten that he was still wearing the magic band. "I'm, uh, it's a long story…"

The dwarf narrowed his eyes shrewdly, "I don't have anything but time right now, Baggins." Bilbo frowned as he looked at Nori, "I think figuring out how to get you all out is the more pressing matter at the moment, Mister Nori."

Nori stared at where the hobbit's voice was coming from for a few moments before he shrugged, "Have it your way. If you can find where our supplies were put, I have a set of lock picks in my bag. Get those and we might have a solution."

Though invisible, Bilbo nodded in agreement, "I'll be back as soon as I can, Mister Nori." He turned around and took a step towards the door before he stopped suddenly. "Mister Nori?"

"What is it Baggins?" The hobbit clenched his fist at his side, half dreading the answer he was about to receive, "Is… Do you know if Thorin – if Thorin made it?"

"I haven't seen him, but I think I heard the guards talking about another dwarf brought in before us. Good chance it's him, now hurry up and go get those picks."

Bilbo couldn't stop the swell of relief that flooded into his chest. They had found him! As soon as Bilbo got the lock picks to Nori he would go find Thorin and, even if it got him punched squarely in the nose, Bilbo Baggins was going to apologize and there was nothing Thorin Oakenshield could do about it.

Bilbo opened the large door swiftly and crept back into the main room. It was thankfully empty for the moment and so the hobbit could begin his search without being too careful of the noise.

He looked behind barrels and under chairs; beside the fire and in between crates but all he could find was a fat load of nothing. Sighing in frustration, Bilbo wheeled around. As he spun on his heel, the hobbit caught sight of a large cabinet in the corner of the room.

Sprinting over to it, Bilbo flung the doors open and to his relief, he was the packs and weapons of the company stashed haphazardly within. The hobbit fumbled through the lot until he found Nori's bag, reaching inside, Bilbo felt what he thought to be an assortment of small tools and sheathed daggers. Pulling out each of them in turn, Bilbo searched for a good minute before he found a small leather pouch that contained what he needed.

Shoving the pack back inside the cabinet, Bilbo made his was across the room and through the door once again. He padded over to Nori's cell, "Mister Nori, I'm back!" The dwarf, who was leaning against the wall of his cell walked over to the door, "Good, now pick the lock."
Bilbo looked down at the tools in his hands then back up to Nori. He hadn't even the faintest idea how to go about – about picking locks! Bilbo Baggins was no thief! When the hobbit needed to enter doors, he simply knocked like a civilized person. "Mister Nori," Bilbo began irritably, "I don't know how."

Nori crossed his arms and raised a braided eyebrow, "I thought you were supposed to be a burglar. And a very good burglar at that." Bilbo gave an agitated sigh, "Well clearly I am not, now am I? Can you just talk me though it?"

He had thought it was obvious to everyone in the company at this point that Bilbo had about as much skill in burglar-ing as he did with wielding a sword.

"Thought so. I know a thief when I see one and you are most definitely not a thief." The hobbit felt his irritation grow; this was completely beside the point! "And I'm sure that's a very valuable skill, Mister Nori, but it is unfortunately completely useless right now!"

The dwarf's mouth quirked slightly and Bilbo couldn't quite tell if he was being made fun of or not. "Very well, Baggins. I'll tell you how." And so the dwarf and hobbit spent a very frustrating twenty minutes trying to make Bilbo into a proper burglar.

On his thirty-fifth attempt, Bilbo finally heard the satisfying click of the lock releasing and almost let out of whoop of success. The hobbit pulled the lock off and opened the door. However, just as the hobbit swung the door wide, they heard the larger one only a few feet to his left begin to creak open.

Nori blindly grabbed at Bilbo's form and swiftly pulled the hobbit into his cell, shutting the door just as the guard entered the room. Bilbo felt his heart hammering as he leaned against the wall of the cell trying not to make any noise. The dwarf quickly laid down, pretending to be asleep.

The guard stumbled into the hallway, swerving drunkenly with each step he took. Pressing his fair face against the bars of the cell, the elf let out a slurred giggle. "Dwarf… Hey dwarf!" The guard laughed again as if he had said something extraordinarily funny. Bilbo saw Nori's face tighten in anger, but the dwarf said northing, still pretending to be unconscious.

"Fineee, be like that," the elf pouted, his eyes starting to droop, "you lot aren't nearly as fun as your… as your leader…" The guard slumped out of sight, presumably passed out against the door of the cell in a drunken stupor.

'Well this is just fantastic,' Bilbo thought to himself as he looked out of the cell's windows, all he was able to see were a pair of finely booted feet awkwardly splayed on the floor. He couldn't get out if there was a guard leaning right against the door!

Nori stood up and joined Bilbo at the door, "great. Trust the elves to be a constant nuisance." The hobbit sighed and shook his head; it looked like he would be stuck there until the guard woke up again. "Make your self visible, Baggins. It's unsettling."

Bilbo glanced up at Nori who was looking just a few inches shy of where his face was. He supposed if he stayed away from the window it wouldn't really matter… The hobbit slipped off the golden ring from his finger back into his pocket and was suddenly visible.

The dwarf eyed him suspiciously, "And what manner of trickery is that? I didn't take you for some wielder of magic."

Bilbo traced the slight outline of the ring in his pocket with a finger as a possessive jealously filled his mind. It was his ring, not Nori's! It was his alone, his precious.
The hobbit was about to snap something at the dwarf about it being none of his business before he seemed to realize he was being a bit foolish. Why would it even matter if Nori knew? He was going to have to explain eventually, might as well be now...

Shaking his head slightly, Bilbo looked up at the dwarf, "I found a ring while I was separated from you lot in Goblin Town. It, uh, well I suppose it is a magic ring. Makes me invisible when I put it on."

Nori seemed to consider him for a second before giving him an approving nod, "that's quite useful, good for you. I'd love to get my hands on something that powerful..." Bilbo chuckled at the dwarf's wistful face, no doubt imagining all the theft he could get away with if no one could see him.

"Sorry, Mister Nori, only got the one." The dwarf pouted a little as he walked over to the wall and sat down with his back against it. "Not like I need it, just be useful is all. Might as well sit down Baggins. Given the state of him," Nori nodded at the door, "I think you might be stuck here awhile."

Bilbo made his way over to where the dwarf was sitting and sat down hesitantly. He didn't dislike Nori by any means, but ever since Ori had told him his older brother was a criminal, well let's just say Bilbo had been slightly wary.

The hobbit clutched his legs with his arms and rested his chin on his knees. It was going to be a long night. There was a good half hour of silence before Nori finally spoke up. "I suppose I should thank you Baggins."

Bilbo, who had just been starting to nod off, rubbed his eyes and looked at the dwarf curiously, "hm? What, uh, what for?" Nori raised his eyebrow as he glanced down at the hobbit. "For saving Ori obviously. From the trolls."

'Ooh,' Bilbo thought with sudden realization. He had almost forgotten about that! It felt like an age ago anyway. "Uh... you're – you're welcome Mister Nori."

"Ori likes you for some reason." Bilbo frowned at the dwarf. Even if Nori didn't think much of him, he didn't need to be rude about it. "Well I can't speak for Mister Ori, but he has been very nice to me. And he is as kind as he is talented, I think he likes just about everyone, Mister Nori, whether or not you think they deserve it."

Nori gave him an appraising stare, "Ori trusts too easily." Bilbo shot in to defend his friend as he felt his agitation grow, "Mister Ori looks for the good in people, there's nothing wrong with that."

"That is because Ori knows nothing of cruelty." The hobbit felt his eyebrows furrow in anger as he looked at Nori. "I think Mister Ori is much less naïve than you give him credit for. He chooses to see their qualities because he is a caring person, not because he is some unworldly fool."

"Just because you choose to live like some distrustful criminal doesn't mean Mister Ori has to!" Bilbo tried to quash the irritation he felt his chest, but it frustrated him beyond belief to hear someone Ori loved talk about the kind dwarf as if he were some – some sort of guileless dolt."

"So he told you about that did he?" Nori crossed his arms as he looked up at the ceiling. "He told me you – you were on the, uh, wrong side of the law."

Bilbo felt his eyes widen curiously, "No... I don't think he, uh, knows why." The dwarf let out a little sigh of relief, "good. It should stay that way." The hobbit stared at Nori, feeling his curiosity grow, "What? What does that mean?"
The dwarf huffed with a slight measure of agitation, "it means exactly what it sounds like Baggins."
The hobbit turned his body slightly so he could face the dwarf, "so there is some reason for you being a criminal then? Something you couldn't even tell Ori."

Nori looked at Bilbo as if considering what he should say next. There were a few moments of silence as they stared at each other. "You might as well start talking, Mister Nori," Bilbo shrugged, "it's not like we have anything else to do right now."

"Fine. But only because you saved Ori's live. And you are not allowed to tell Ori or Dori anything. If you do I'll know and I will make you regret it." Bilbo felt a slight shudder go through his spine, knowing in his heart that Nori could and would follow through; though as he looked at the dwarf's face he could see a slight strain there. The strain that only years of hiding a burdensome secret could leave behind.

The hobbit nodded as he continued to gaze at the dwarf who seemed reluctant to start speaking. "Ori said you were involved in some sort of… crime ring?" Nori let out a small bitter chuckle, "That's certainly one way of putting it. I didn't… I didn't start off that way."

The dwarf sighed, seemingly resigned to sharing his tale, "It was long ago, before Ori was no more than a small dwarfling. I'm sure he told you, but my parents ran a rather lucrative business for a while."

"Everything was rubies and emeralds for many years but they grew… reckless in their investments. I don't think to this day Dori and Ori know, which is well enough because they only reason I did what I did was so they could keep living in comfort."

Bilbo felt his curiosity grow once more, clearly there was much more to this story that even Ori knew. "My parents made a few deals with some… less that savory characters. The places they wanted to invest weren't strictly speaking legal but they are rather ignorant about the ways of the world. I don't think they realized just who they were dealing with."

"One bad bit of luck happened after the next and soon enough they were in a great amount of debt to the wrong sort of dwarves." The hobbit felt his stomach sink slightly, "They didn't get – get hurt did they?"

Nori glanced down at his companion before shaking his head, "No. I found out which of the syndicates they were in debt to and went to talk to their leader myself. I was… very young. I thought if I could just reason with them, they'd give my parents more time to pay back their loans."

The dwarf let out a small sigh, "they were… predictably uncooperative. Sent me home looking more a bruise than not. I told Dori I had gotten into a pub fight but I don't think he quite believed me."

"I went back the next day. And the day after that and for the next week. Each time they laughed in my face, told me to keep my nose in my own business and sent me away bloodier than the last. But I thought… I don't know really, I suppose I thought that if I showed them I was determined they'd eventually listen to me."

Bilbo suddenly felt very bad for the dwarf he had hardly given much thought to throughout their journey. He had written off Nori as some criminal, as someone not worthy of knowing. But as he looked in the dwarf's face, he saw the love Nori felt for his family, saw the strength it must have taken him to bear such secrets and pain for his brothers' sakes.

"And it worked. In the end I think they saw how desperate I was, saw that I would do anything to keep them safe. They realized they had all the power and there was not a thing I considered above
me if it meant Dori and Ori wouldn't be touched by my parent's mistakes."

Nori crossed his arms again and fiddled with one of the cuffs on his sleeves. "I did things for them… Many things I am not proud of, many things I would rather die than let Ori know occurred at my hand." Bilbo almost reached out a hand to comfort the dwarf but couldn't decide if it would be welcomed.

"But they were safe and that's all that mattered. I paid off my parent's debt. I was good at my work, one of the best. And I rose through the ranks. I tried to be there for Ori as best I could, to support him as he grew up, but the more important I became, the harder it was to separate that life from the one Ori and Dori knew."

Bilbo's heart clenched tightly as he looked at the dwarf, wishing he could offer something to him in comfort. "Soon I wasn't just gone for weeks at a time. It was one year, then two, then five. I grew too… involved. I never lost sight about why I did what I did, but the less I saw of Ori and Dori, the more it felt like my life was consumed with lies and violence."

"My organization grew larger, more successful. Too successful. We drew more attention than was wise and eventually the nobles couldn't ignore us any longer. They sent in soldiers to our hideout, just barely made it out without being killed. I… panicked when I saw my crew slain, I knew I had to see my brothers one last time before I was executed, so I went home."

Bilbo's eyes widened, "so Ori told you about Thorin's expedition?" Nori nodded slowly, "Yes it was… almost too good to be true. I could get away for a while until things died down and if I helped the great Thorin Oakenshield, well, no one would accuse me of my crimes if I didn't die along the way…"

"I tried to make Ori stay but he… he can be quite stubborn once he sets his mind to something," Nori's face grew into a fond smile. "Then Dori wouldn't let us leave without him and that was that, we made our way to the Shire and here we are stuck in some bloody elvish cells."

Bilbo smiled at the dwarf. Sure, Nori was not the most… sociable of the dwarves, but he clearly loved his family dearly and cared for Ori like a brother should. Bilbo found he couldn't fault the dwarf his impoliteness if he cared that deeply and gave up so much for his siblings.

"I think… I think if you told Ori it would mean a lot to him," Bilbo said hesitantly. "No. No I would not have him know of what I've done. I know Ori and he would… blame himself. I can live with many things Baggins, but I couldn't live with that."

Bilbo threw caution to the wind and gave Nori the swiftest hug he had ever given anyone, so quick not even the dwarf could have pushed him away in time. "That's from Ori." Nori looked shocked as he gazed at the hobbit, not quite sure if he had actually just been hugged. "If he could… If he knew what you'd given up for him, I think he'd want you to know how much your sacrifices meant to him so, since he can't, I'll just have to do it instead."

"I…" Nori gazed at the hobbit as if seeing him for the first time, "thank you, Baggins." Bilbo gave the dwarf a wide smile, "Though if you do that again, I'll knife you."

The hobbit's smiled faltered as he gulped. Perhaps he had been a bit… rash. Letting out a nervous laugh, Bilbo scooted back slightly. "I was joking," Nori rolled his eyes at the hobbit. Bilbo sighed in relief before narrowing his eyes, "your sense of humor leaves much to be desired, Mister Nori." The dwarf chuckled, "so I've been told."

There was a sudden groan from the door as the guard pulled himself up off the ground. Nori rolled
swiftly to the middle of the room, closing his eyes in pretend sleep as Bilbo slipped on his magic ring.

The elf stumbled away from the wall, holding his head and making his way for the door, muttering curses Bilbo couldn't quite hear. They listened carefully as the door creaked open then closed again. Nori shot up and looked out the window of the cell.

"Alright, Baggins, he's gone. I think it wise if we all stay put until we have a plan." Bilbo stood up and walked over to the dwarf. "Yes I suppose…"

Nori turned to where Bilbo's voice came from and held out the small bag with the lock pick in it, "go find Thorin, I think he'll be down the hall somewhere. He might be plotting something already."

The hobbit opened the door carefully enough not to make any noise before he heard the dwarf call out after him, "And Baggins?"

The hobbit turned back to look at Nori's cell, "Yes?"

"Stay safe." Though the dwarf couldn't see him, Bilbo gave him a warm smile, "you too Mister Nori. Don't worry I'll have us out of here in no time at all!" The hobbit turned again and made his way to the largest door at the end of the hallway. Sure enough, as he looked in, he saw Thorin's form laying down in the corner.

"Thorin!" Bilbo whispered as loud as he dared. "Thorin! It's me, Bilbo! Wake up!"

But even as the hobbit called to his friend, the dwarf did not stir. Dread welling up inside him, Bilbo felt his stomach sink. What if the elves had tortured him? What if—what if Thorin was too hurt to answer? What if Thorin was... was dead? Killed for his insolence against their king?

Bilbo picked the lock on the door with more skill than he thought his hands possessed; adrenaline and anxiety making his fingers work more swiftly than they while unlocking Nori's cell. He heard the lock click open and practically threw himself into Thorin's cell, slipping the ring back into his pocket.

"Thorin!" Bilbo ran over to where the dwarf was laying, unmoving and unresponsive. The hobbit fell to his knees and started shaking the dwarf roughly, "Thorin! I swear if you do not wake up right now I will – I will end you myself." Gripping the dwarf's shoulder tightly, Bilbo yanked until Thorin was on his back. "Come on! You – you can't be dead!" The hobbit let out a strangled laugh and shut his eyes tightly, "I didn't even get to apologize, so you – you wake up this instant! I will not –"

The hobbit was cut off as he felt firm hands grip each of his arms. "Bilbo Baggins," Thorin began gruffly, blinking several times, "I am not dead, just trying to sleep. Will you please calm down?"

His eyes snapping open, Bilbo was met with the sight of a slightly confused and irritated Thorin, "You're alive! I thought – I thought…"

The dwarf sat up slowly, his back still injured from his fight with Azog and grumbled, "You thought I was dead. I gathered that much from your ramblings as you manhandled me awake."

The hobbit let out a relieved laugh, feeling suddenly very light, if only for the moment, and hugged Thorin fiercely. "Oh thank goodness! I was so worried!" The dwarf sat still for a moment before gingerly patting Bilbo on the back a few times. Bilbo sat back, with a beaming smile as he delivered a swift but firm swat to Thorin's uninjured shoulder.

The dwarf looked at Bilbo with indignant shock, "What was that for?"
Bilbo shrugged still smiling, "For making me worry unnecessarily when you were just sleeping."

Thorin narrowed his eyes at the hobbit, "Oh I must beg your forgiveness then, Master Baggins, how dare I consider sleeping when you were obviously trying to get into my cell?"

Bilbo laughed softly as he sat back onto his legs. He wasn't sure if this was the right time, but given the rate he was going, if he didn't apologize now, he might never get the chance.

"Thorin I… I want to apologize. For what I said the other day. Of course I know you would never to anything that would endanger Fili and Kili, or any of us. I suppose I just… I was so worried that Fili wouldn't wake up I forgot myself. I know I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

The dwarf stared at the hobbit for a few moments and Bilbo felt his nervousness begin to grow. He had sort of counted on Thorin forgiving him, not sure what he would do if the dwarf threw him out of his cell.

"I…" The dwarf began, but stuttered to a halt as he looked at Bilbo. "I would… like to apologize as well, Master Baggins. What you said was true, I should have warned you all and trusted that no one would do anything foolish."

Thorin looked down at his hands, worry furrowing his brow. "I could not speak to you Master Baggins, I could not face you because I was reminded that Fili's injury was my fault and I could not… could not live with myself if he had died because of my foolishness."

Bilbo placed a hand on Thorin's arm and squeezed, "It wasn't your fault Thorin, no one could have known that would happen."

The dwarf looked up at Bilbo, his face dark and worried, "It was. I should have listened to Beorn but he… irritated me and in my anger I could not see the wisdom in his words."

"I apologize for the way I treated you, Master Baggins. You have done nothing but help my family and myself and I have done nothing to repay your kindness but take out my inadequacies on you like some spoilt dwarfling. I would… have your forgiveness if you would grant it."

Bilbo looked at the dwarf's face, seeing the hurt and frustration with himself in Thorin's eyes. For the first time, he saw what Fili had told him as they left Rivendell. He saw the dwarf who took on every burden and wanted so badly to protect his family and those who followed him from the hurts and cruelty that had been dealt to him. He saw a dwarf who needed, more than anything, a friend who owed him nothing, a friend who would take some of the mighty weight that constantly rested on his shoulders.

Giving the dwarf his brightest smile, Bilbo placed a hand on Thorin's shoulder and squeezed, "Of course, Thorin, what're friends for, eh?"

He hoped that the dwarf understood what he was really saying. That Thorin would never need to ask his forgiveness because there would never be time when Bilbo wouldn't consider the dwarf to be his friend. And that's what friends did for each other. They fought, they laughed, they told each other when they were being frustratingly irrational, but they would always be there when needed; ready to forgive and pick each other up off the floor with a smile.

Thorin looked at the hobbit, as if he couldn't quite believe that Bilbo so readily accepted his apology. "I… Thank you, Master Baggins, that means more to me than you know." The dwarf gave Bilbo a small smile, his blue eyes showing rare warmth that Bilbo wished was there more often.

The hobbit smiled and nodded before he leaned forward, "So… what are we going to do about this
mess?
Sorry for the like two week hiatus in updating! I had papers then exams and went to Berlin for a few days so it was all very busy :) Thanks as always to those of you who took the time to review, it means a lot! :) Hope you enjoy!

Thorin looked from the floor to where Bilbo still had a smile on his face. Rather than launch into an intricate plan that the hobbit had _hoped_ the dwarf prince had been meticulously plotting and formulating; Thorin shifted his eyes uncomfortably to the side.

"Well… I haven't exactly had the opportunity to consider the layout of our enemy's stronghold yet. It would be unwise to try and plot any sort of ill-thought escape pla—"

"You don't even have the faintest idea do you…" Bilbo interrupted Thorin who had tried to puff out his chest in a forced show of leadership as he scowled at the hobbit.

"I did not _say_ that, Master Baggins—"

The hobbit stood up before Thorin could finish his sentence, "You don't _need_ to say it, Thorin,"

Bilbo let out an exasperated chuckle as he considered the dwarf who was so determined to appear infallible, "I know a load of old toss when I hear it."

Bilbo waved off the dwarf's indignant 'hmph' and started to pace several feet in front of Thorin, holding his chin in his hand, "What we need is a good escape plan, a _very_ good escape plan… Though I've only really seen the cell area and where the guards sleep. I suppose I could go out and explore for a –"

The hobbit didn't have the opportunity to finish his sentence as Thorin shot in suddenly, "No, you will not risk yourself being captured."

Bilbo raised his eyebrow and an unimpressed frown, "And what exactly do you suggest? Go and _talk_ to the elves?"

The dwarf let out a growl and made to stand up probably, Bilbo thought, to use his definite height advantage in order to intimidate the hobbit. Though this action was rather less impressive and rather more extremely worrisome due to Thorin collapsing almost immediately with a pained groan.

"Thorin!" Bilbo hissed in surprise as he surged forward to catch the dwarf's quickly slumping shoulder. 'Stupid, _stupid_ hobbit!' Bilbo thought to himself angrily, 'of course he's still hurt! And all this imprisonment business probably hasn't make it any better!'

"Thorin, are you alright?" The hobbit helped Thorin gently lower himself to the ground again with slightly labored breaths.

"I am…" the dwarf winced as he settled again, "I am fine. Just… I fear I may have reopened some of the wounds."
Bilbo felt his hand unconsciously clench the fur on Thorin's great coat as a frown spread across his face. "Why didn't you say anything?"

The dwarf looked over sideways at his companion as he rolled his eyes, "I did just wake up, Master Baggins, unless you forgot about your less than considerate rousing not more than five minutes ago..."

The hobbit flushed to the tips of his ears. Perhaps shaking Thorin for all he was worth had not been the... best decision he had made recently. "I... uh, sorry... about – about that." Though as Thorin raised a dark brow at him, Bilbo felt none of his embarrassment lessen, "Let's just uh, let's just... get those wounds looked at; I've still got some of Master Beorn's balm left."

There. That was something Bilbo Baggins knew he could do competently enough and would serve as a much-needed distraction for his nervously waving hands that tried their best to shoo the embarrassment away.

Thorin gave a little sigh and shrug as he started to shift off his coat. It seemed to Bilbo that he had finally impressed upon the dwarf that fighting him on healing of all subjects would simply end in Thorin getting aggravated but inevitably still under the careful hands of the hobbit. 'As well he should,' Bilbo thought with no small measure of pleasure that Thorin was finally letting some of that stubborn pride go.

As the dwarf slowly took off layer upon layer of mail then cloth, Bilbo sat down his pack. It took him only a few moments to locate the earthen jar the balm resided in his bag. Turning around, Bilbo almost dropped the medicine with a gasp as his eyes met the sight of the dwarf's back.

The bruises left from Azog's great mace seemed to have gotten even worse, their color deep shades of purple and blue intertwined in angry and beaten flesh. What worried Bilbo the most, however, was not the multitude of large dark marks, but rather the four great lacerations that the white warg had left that seemed to have reopened and were now leaking a most unpleasant puss. The skin around the claw marks was a puckered, angry red and, to Bilbo's horror, starting to look slightly green in some places.

"Oh, Thorin..." Bilbo gave a little groan as he slowly walked towards the dwarf's back, "what did they do to you?" Reaching out a slightly trembling hand, the hobbit – as gently as he could – placed a single finger on one of the better-looking bruises.

Thorin arched forward away from the touch and let out a small grunt. "They... There was a disagreement when I first arrived. Let's just say some of the guards are looking even worse."

Though the hobbit couldn't see Thorin's face, he could just about picture the look of grim satisfaction on the dwarf as he remembered whatever damage he had done to some of the eleven guards.

"You fool..." Bilbo almost whispered as he saw Thorin's shoulders tense, "you really shouldn't have done that, what were you thinking?"

The dwarf glared over his left shoulder, "I was thinking the filthy traitor that betrayed my people was mere feet from me and nothing, nothing," Thorin let out a bitter laugh, "would have delighted me more than tearing his head from his body."

Bilbo met the gaze of the one eye of Thorin's he could see. There was something resting deep in the bright blue of the prince's expression; a pain and a... hunger for something Bilbo hoped he would never fully understand.
He had seen a similar look in the dwarf's eyes the last night in Rivendell when Thorin had accused him of understanding nothing of his hatred and the suffering of his kin. However, now there was something new; there was something starved, like a ravenous man had been given a taste of one of Bombur's succulent roast rabbits only to have it torn away from him after a single bite and then dangled from a tree, just out of reach.

Revenge, Bilbo realized, was something Thorin thought to be just within his grasp now. Not some sort of abstract ideal that could possibly be attained sometime in the distant future. No, as the hobbit looked into Thorin's face, he could see as clear as a sunny day in the Shire, the dwarf prince thought he could and would get his vengeance soon.

As the hobbit looked from Thorin's expression to the dwarf's horribly injured back, he could not help but feel that the pursuit of his revenge in the elf's very own palace was not only incredibly foolish, but also extremely suicidal.

'This is…' Bilbo took a small gulp of air, frantically trying to think of ways to calm the dwarf's fury, 'not good. Not good at all.' Maybe if he could… Maybe if he could figure out just what exactly the elf-king had done, he could try and persuade Thorin that escape should be paramount.

Remaining silent as he thought, Bilbo stuck a hand into the balm and gently started to apply the salve as softly as he could. The moment the medicine touched the inflamed and angry flesh on Thorin's back, the dwarf let out a low growl of satisfaction; his thunderous scowl lessening into one laced with relief.

"Were you…" Bilbo began slowly, "Did the elves get you from the spiders like the rest of the company?"

Thorin shook his head slightly, "No… At least I do not believe so. The last thing I remember are my fool nephews and you," the dwarf looked back with another accusatory glare, "running off into that infernal forest. When you hadn't returned, we went out searching in groups. And then I think we… must have been cast under some sort of spell. Passed out within minutes of leaving the path."

Bilbo continued his slow and careful work of rubbing the balm into Thorin's wounded back as the dwarf spoke. "When I woke up, I was being dragged into the traitor's hall. I saw Thranduil's face," Thorin spat the elf-king's name as if the very sound poisoned his tongue, "and my opportunity to get my revenge. If I hadn't already been injured by that wretched orc, I would have his head on my sword this very moment."

Thorin looked back at Bilbo with a bloodthirsty smile that shook Bilbo to the very core. He had seen the dwarf fight, he had seen the dwarf kill, but never with such a… delight and eagerness to commit the act. He had to do something to get Thorin away from these dangerous thoughts or the hobbit feared what might become of his friend.

Bilbo steeled himself for his next question, knowing in his heart that it could very well turn Thorin's friendship away from him. But, as he looked at foreign expression of greedy death that was etched across the dwarf's face, Bilbo knew he had no choice but to find someway to steer Thorin away from this all-consuming need.

"What happened Thorin? What happened the day Smaug attacked?" The hobbit refused to look at the dwarf's face, fearing Thorin's rage and hurt directed towards him again. He didn't want to pry, but Bilbo thought the only way he could possibly help was if he actually knew from Thorin himself what his friend had lost that day.

There was a minute of infinitely long silence as the hobbit continued to work on Thorin's back but
still refused to look up from his task. The longer the tense stillness stretched, the more Bilbo felt his fear grow that he had crossed some sort of line, that he tried to delve far past where the dwarf was willing to let anyone in.

"The day…" Thorin began quietly, not facing the hobbit and shoulders tensing, "the day the dragon attacked was one of the worst in my life." Bilbo looked up suddenly at the dwarf's voice, his hand halting its task as his friend spoke.

"It began as hundreds of others before it. We delved further into the mountain and our kingdom flourished. If anyone had told me that was the last day of prosperity Erebor would see, I would have laughed in their face."

Thorin leaned his head forward until it rested in one of his large hands. "Erebor was strong. Our stone was impervious to even the sharpest swords, our trade with Dale and the other dwarven kingdoms had never been more lucrative, even watching my father rule seemed almost… boring in its simplicity. Life for us was good."

"The only thing that seemed to be wrong was my grandfather's growing lust for the golden hoard that had amassed within our halls." Bilbo started to work the balm into the deep grooves that the warg's claws had left, though the dwarf seemed thankfully distracted from the pain as he continued his story. "It seems… obvious to me now that the reason the dragon attacked was probably due to my grandfather's greed but at the time, I… Well, I suppose I couldn't even comprehend a danger our walls couldn't defend against."

"Life was peaceful. My sister had just given birth to a strong and healthy dwarfling, ensuring our line would be continued and my… brother, he…" Thorin stopped briefly as his face slumped further into his hand. "He was off avoiding responsibility as usual, probably off in Dale or somewhere around the lands that lay on Erebor's doorstep.

Bilbo looked up saddening, 'wait… had Thorin said his brother?' the hobbit thought confused.

"You – you have a brother? I never knew…"

The dwarf let out a pained sigh, "I had a brother. He… died that day. I still find it painful to speak of. Dwalin tells me I should talk of him more, if only to get some sense of… closure I suppose, but he knows it makes me uncomfortable so even he does not mention Frerin often."

The hobbit felt his heart clench in a deep and painful sadness as he resumed his work on the cuts. It seemed to him that Thorin's losses knew no bounds and the more he discovered about the dwarf, the more Bilbo found that the memories Thorin held were far too often intimately intertwined with tragedy.

"Frerin was… quite like Fili, now that I think on it. They both hold their family and their duty closest to their hearts, but they do not… They are both happier… freer without the pressures of the throne to weigh upon their shoulders."

"My brother never truly felt any great measure of fulfillment by running a kingdom from a distant throne. He had to learn, of course, as he was in line for the throne behind myself; but Frerin always felt his duty to the people was better fulfilled by interacting with them directly, by going to new and foreign places so that he could enrich the kingdom with knowledge and experience. He… dearly loved to explore and find adventure."

Thorin's shoulders relaxed minutely as he spoke of his brother, his voice fond but tender in its sadness. "Fili will be a fine king once I am gone, just as Frerin would have been, but I fear… I fear
that ruling from a throne will stifle his spirit as it would have smothered Frerin's...

Thorin let out another pained sigh.

"The day Smaug attacked, Frerin was out. Probably exploring the forests around Dale for new resources for the kingdom. He must have seen the fires of Dale first and run back to Erebor."

Bilbo, finished with putting salve into the grooves of the cuts, started on the mass of bruises that resided at the center of Thorin's back. But unlike before, Bilbo made sure as he applied the medicine, his fingers lightly made comforting circles, just so he could try and convey some sort sympathy for his friend.

Thorin seemed to lean back slightly into the touch, but never lifted his face from his palm. "Once the dragon reached our walls, there was so much death. The stone of Erebor did little to halt the fury of the dragon's wrath and the screams were deafening within minutes."

"I found Dís and my father as soon as I could and did my best to get them out. Our soldiers were decimated within half an hour of the dragon's attack and I…" Thorin tensed once again, "I prayed Mahal would keep Frerin away from Erebor."

"We got out as many of the citizens as we could but there was so little time to warn anyone. The streets were littered with charred, wailing corpses as far as you could see." Bilbo shuddered at the image in his mind; scarcely able to imagine the sheer amount of carnage Thorin must have witnessed that day.

"I tried to rally our troops, but the beast tore through us as if we were little more than wisps of smoke. As the dragon moved towards the treasure room, I saw Dís had… my sister stayed behind to make sure all her kin also escaped. She told me our grandfather was still trapped with the treasure."

Bilbo couldn't help but let out a small shiver of fear, it was unsettling to hear that the place they were going, that their very goal was guarded by the same beast that had completely destroyed an entire kingdom in less than an hour.

"I told Dís to leave, that I would go find Thror. She tried to refuse, of course, but I reminded her that Fili would need his mother more than ever in the face of such destruction. I was able to rescue my grandfather just in time, though it was not easy. Thror… refused to leave."

Bilbo looked up sharply to the back of Thorin's head, "What? Why?" the hobbit couldn't help but interject, not quite understanding why anyone would want to stay near a giant, flesh-eating, fire-breathing monster.

"His…" Thorin began slowly, as though he was not sure himself what the answer was, "love of gold had become an obsession. He said he would rather die with his riches than leave but I managed to drag him out through the smoke and chaos."

"We finally made it back through the gates, but as soon as we… as soon as we emerged, Dís ran up to us shouting that Frerin had – had gone in after me." Thorin took the hand from his forehead and looked down into his empty palms, as if he saw the blood of an entire city leaking out from the lines that covered them.

"I felt… the deepest despair I had ever experienced in my life. I could imagine only the end my kin, my very own brother, could be meeting because he was trying to save me." Thorin clenched his fists together, "until I looked up to the ridge that bordered our lands with those of Mirkwood. Thranduil was there," the dwarf's fists squeezed together so tightly small trickles of blood started to leak from
where his fingernails dug into his palms.

"The elf," Thorin spat, "that had pledged eternal friendship and aid between our kingdoms had an entire army of swords, ready and armored. I allowed myself to hope for that moment, like the fool I am. I allowed myself to think that I could still save my brother because our trusted allies had come to our aid."

"But as I waited, as the minutes passed, I realized my people's cries for mercy, for swift a death to end their pain, meant nothing to Thranduil. The traitor just looked on, even as I pleaded for aid. But apparently," Thorin hissed, his hands now bloody, "loyalty means nothing to scum like the elves. They turned and left us to face the wrath of the dragon alone. I knew then I could never forgive, I could never forget my people could have been spared some of their suffering, that my brother might have – might have lived, if the elves were not a simpering load of oath-breakers."

Bilbo looked down at the dwarf's hands and moved around to Thorin's front. Kneeling down in front of his friend, the hobbit took the prince's clenched fists in his own and held onto them.

"It was…" Thorin shook his head, his eyes squeezed shut, "it was my fault Frerin died that day. He would not have gone in to face the dragon's wrath if he had not been looking for me."

Bilbo, as gently as he could, pried the tight fists open until they slowly began to release. Thorin opened his eyes and looked at Bilbo. For the first time, Bilbo saw in the dwarf's expression his need for absolution, for forgiveness. Not from anyone, but from himself. For no one loathed Thorin and held him more responsible for the burdens and death his kin had suffered more than he.

"I should have – should have known the elves were going to betray us. I should have known the moment those traitors pledged allegiance." Bilbo held Thorin's gaze but said nothing as he used the cuff of his coat to wipe up the blood that spread across the dwarf's hands.

Once they were relatively clean, Bilbo reached down and got some salve on his fingers before rubbing it into the crescent shaped cuts that lined each of the prince's palms. "Thorin…" the hobbit started softly, "you… you need to forgive yourself."

The dwarf's expression turned into one of guilt and pain.

"It was not your fault," Bilbo took one of Thorin's hands into each of his own, "whatever happened that day, you were not responsible."

The dwarf closed his eyes again, ready to pull away, but Bilbo simply held onto the prince's hands tighter, refusing to let go when he finally had the chance to make some small amount of difference in Thorin's life.

"I believe it is… easy to blame yourself, to make yourself the sole bearer of that great burden," Bilbo kept his grip firm as he spoke, "because acknowledging that it was chance or – or some great misfortune means that life can be… well, that it can be so incredibly cruel and ruthless without cause."

"When we take the blame for these things, it gives us something to—to channel that anger towards, gives us something to make sense of what can be pointless acts of violence or losses of life. What is hard, what truly takes strength is accepting that sometimes we are insignificant. That no matter what we did or could've done, it wouldn't really have made any difference in the face of such chaos."

Thorin stared at Bilbo, his expression unreadable and foreign to the hobbit as he continued to talk, "What happened to your people, to your brother, was not done by your hand Thorin. You did
everything within your power to save as many as you could. And if your brother is _anything_ like Fili," the hobbit stared back at Thorin, determination pouring into every word, "_I know_ he would not be very happy with you taking on such a burden in his name. He would want you to live, as you wanted him to live, free and _happy_._

"I won't pretend to understand how you feel about Thranduil and the elves, but _right now_, we all need to get out of these blasted cells. Nothing good will come of you seeking revenge while you're still injured." Bilbo squared his shoulders to show Thorin he meant what he said, "You'd ruin any chance for your company to escape. And, for what it's worth, I don't think your brother would approve of your own peace of mind being prevented because you want revenge in his name. But even if you _do_; now is most _certainly_ not the time to try and get it."

Bilbo squeezed Thorin's hands one last time, "You mean more to your nephews and the rest of this company than I think even you know. Please, _please_ do not throw away your chance for you and for them to see Erebor again. I think – I think Frerin would be happiest knowing you got back home and… even more so if you – if you forgave yourself for something that was never your fault."

The hobbit was about to pull his hands away, when he felt Thorin grip them tightly. Looking up at his friend curiously, Bilbo couldn't quite make out the expression on the dwarf's face. "I… will think on what you said, Master Baggins," Thorin began, his voice deadly serious, "I will never be able to forgive the elves for their betrayal that day." The dwarf's face tightened before he let out a great sigh, "But… I believe you are right about Frerin. He would want us to return home… he would want his nephews to see the great halls of Erebor restored to their former glory. And he – he would want Dís and I to be… to be happy. More than anything."

Bilbo sent Thorin a warm smile, "Good, then we continue on as planned! We just need a, uh, plan first. An _actual_ plan."

Thorin let go of Bilbo's hands with a nod and leaned back, rolling his shoulder in its socket with a wince.

The hobbit frowned as he stood up again. "_You_," he pointed at Thorin, "need more rest as those wounds heal. I don't think _any_ escape plan, not matter how good, is going to go well if you're that injured."

Thorin crossed his arms in opposition, "I am _fine_, the sooner we get out of here the better."

Bilbo let out a little huff; some things, he supposed, would never change, no matter how much he wished the dwarf's stubbornness would've shrunk a bit.

"Fili's wounds healed in a night using that balm, so I think we can wait another for yours. Plus that gives me time to scout the area." Thorin once again looked displeased that Bilbo was going to be sneaking around in the bottom of Thranduil's palace alone, "And seeing as I am not the prisoner," the hobbit sent his friend a sly smile, "I will be the one making the rules. So you," he started to shuffle Thorin into a horizontal position, "_rest_."

"I…" the dwarf was about to argue further but couldn't seem to find it in himself to genuinely fight the hobbit that was using his vastly inferior strength to try and _force_ a son of Durin to go to sleep. "Oh _fine_, but… Master Baggins?"

"_Hm?_" the hobbit replied as he dragged Thorin's coat on top of the dwarf.

"Be careful. And do _not_ do anything idiotic." Bilbo raised an eyebrow, with an unimpressed crossing of his arms.
"…Please."

Bilbo let out a small chuckled as he made his way to the door of the cell, "That's more like it. A little manners from the royalty," Thorin gave Bilbo what he could safely say was the very first petulant pout the prince had allowed grace his face in the hobbit's presence. "I'll be back before you know it!"

Bilbo quickly padded out of the cell, the door locking behind him. He would have to figure out some way to get the dwarves out of not just their cells but the palace as well… As it dawned on Bilbo just how impossible this task was going to be, he felt the panic start to rise in his chest.

Of course he had tried to sound confident to Thorin and Nori, but he really hadn't even the faintest clue how to go about getting thirteen dwarves out of the elven fortress. Oh, if only they all had magic rings instead of just him, this could be so simple…

The hobbit slipped the ring back on his finger as he made his way to the end of the hallway. He hoped the party was still going on upstairs, as it would provide a very convenient distraction; hopefully one that lasted long enough for him to at least find a way out.

Bilbo crept up to the door and pressed his ear to the wood. He couldn't hear any voices from the other side, which relieved him immensely seeing as how a door inexplicably opening was probably not a usual occurrence, even amongst the elves.

Gripping the handle, Bilbo pushed it open as gently as he could and made his way through to the room on the other side. He turned to close it, but before he could finish his task, the hobbit heard a calm voice from the opposite end of the room.

"Who is there?"

Bilbo's heart all but exploded working in fright and he gave a great jump, his arms failing out as he spun around. Unfortunately, because this was Bilbo Baggins and he was most certainly not a hobbit that performed especially well when scared, Bilbo felt his right foot catch on his left as he whirled around.

The hobbit fell to the floor with a great crash as he hit one of the chairs by the door and sent it tipping over as well. Bilbo held his smarting chin as he lay on his stomach, feeling dread pool in his stomach. Even though he was invisible, there was no way the elf in the room hadn't noticed the racket and general mess.

Oh this was so very typical. Of course Bilbo Baggins, in one of the only times in his life when stealth and silence were essential, would end up crashing about the room in a whirlwind of destructive clumsiness. The hobbit looked up to see the elf that had walked over near where Bilbo was laying was in fact the same elf that lead the party that had taken the dwarves prisoner.

'Ooh no,' Bilbo thought miserably, 'he's probably some sort of – of warrior! Some sort of dwarf-hating, hobbit-devouring, master of torture and pain that will – will do unspeakable things with red-hot pointies!'

"You might as well show yourself. No point pretending you didn't just knock down half the furniture." The pale-haired elf had a wry smile on his fair face, a smile that indicated a good nature and… perhaps not an inevitable exercise in pain and mutilation?

Bilbo hardly wanted to trust the slight welling of hope in his chest as he searched the elf's face for
something sinister. "I will not harm you," the elf's eyes scanned over the place on the floor Bilbo was still laying on, "I promise."

Everything Thorin had told him about this particular sect of elves had done nothing to engender the hobbit towards them, but on the other hand… The elves he had met in Rivendell had been very pleasant towards him. And this elf had just promised not to hurt him…

"I… don't want to show myself." There. He would talk but he wouldn't take off his ring until he was sure the elf really harbored no ill will. The elf immediately looked at the place where Bilbo's voice had come from.

"Understandable but also not very forthcoming," the elf let out a small chuckle, "I believe it is considered rather rude to so blatantly turn down an extension of trust."

Bilbo frowned as he looked at the lithe elf, "And why should I trust you when you were the one to take my friends captive?"

The elf tapped his chin in contemplation, "I rather suppose you shouldn't, but the fact remains that you are the one in the rather unfortunate position of having been caught sneaking."

The hobbit stood up, brushing off his pants before he really took in the elf's appearance. He was dressed in a fine shimmering, silver tunic that almost looked to be made of lustrous leaves delicately strung together. Though Bilbo had never seen an elf not dressed well, this one seemed to be clothed in especially fine garments.

Just his luck that the elf would be some sort of important noble or someone equally obligated to report his presence to the king. The elf seemed to sense that Bilbo's silence meant the hobbit was no closer to revealing himself than he was a minute ago.

"Perhaps you would find it easier to trust me if you knew my name…" The elf seemed to be thinking out loud before he righted himself and gave a deep bow in the direction of Bilbo's voice, "I am Legolas."

Bilbo squirmed uncomfortably for a moment, years upon years of social training made him want to give his name in return, his father's scolding voice swimming in his ears, telling him not to be rude. "I'm… Bilbo…" he muttered cursing his inability to avoid the pleasantries of introductions.

"Well Bilbo, it is a pleasure to make you acquaintance. Though that is a very unusual name for a dwarf." Legolas raised a pale brow as he shot the hobbit a sly smile.

"That's because I'm not a dwarf." Bilbo crossed his arms feeling more and more conflicted. The elf… well, he seemed nice enough… Though the thought of what Thorin would say if he knew Bilbo was contemplating trusting the elf gave him pause.

"Hm," Legolas resumed the tapping on his chin once again, "so you are not a dwarf, you are somehow invisible, and have taken to sneaking around the cells of Mirkwood. You are a very unusual individual."

Bilbo couldn't help but let out a small chuckle, "Yes… I – I suppose I am."

Legolas laughed as he clapped his hands together, "Would it be too forward of me in our budding friendship to ask just why, exactly, someone like yourself would be going into visit the dwarves? If you are not one of them, I do wonder why you would want to speak with them at all."

"I'm…" Bilbo started hesitantly, "not sure I should tell you that."
The elf pouted as he crossed his arms, "That *is* a shame, for I find myself to be very curious."

Bilbo started to worry the hem of his jacket, "How do I know you won't just report whatever I say to your leader…"

Legolas let out another bright chuckle, "You don't, of course, but I will give you my word if it would put your mind at ease."

Bilbo let out a frustrated sigh, this was… complicating matters. Perhaps if he could figure out just why the elf wouldn't simply report him, the hobbit could use the elf to find a way out.

"I am… traveling with the dwarves."

Legolas nodded at his voice, "That would make sense. Are you always invisible? Some sort of spirit perhaps?"

Bilbo sat down on one of the chairs behind him, feeling that this conversation was not going to be done quickly. "Uh… no, not a spirit, no. I have an… item that keeps me hidden."

"That must be a very rare and powerful item then, my friend, something quite magical. Why was your company traveling through our forests?"

Bilbo hesitated, not sure how much to reveal quite yet, "We are… trying to get somewhere."

Legolas rolled his eyes with a smile, "Yes, *that* much is obvious, my friend."

"We are on a – a, uh, quest of sorts I suppose. To get back something lost to my companions."

Legolas pondered for a moment before his face fell into a small frown, "Was your company, by chance, taking the northern pass before you wandered off the path?"

Bilbo gulped, not liking the sudden look of concentration on the elf's face. "Uh… yes?"

Legolas leaned forward, his eyes widening slightly as if in comprehension. "The northern pass opens somewhat near the Dale… You travel with a group of *dwarves* heading towards Laketown, which is very close to the Lonely Mountain…" Bilbo could see that there was no fooling this elf, try though he might to be as circuitous in his responses as he could.

Legolas sighed as he shook his head; "You mean to take back Erebor from the dragon. That certainly explains the presence of Thorin Oakenshield, though I did not think him *quite* so foolish as this."

"He is not *foolish,*" Bilbo shot in feeling defensive, "maybe a little stubborn, but Thorin is just in his cause."

Legolas seemed to consider the place where Bilbo's voice came from for a moment before tilting his head in apology, "I beg your pardon, my friend, I was merely… surprised. I feel I must warn you, as you are not kin to this quest, the dwarf's chances of success are quite slim."

The hobbit felt the anger rise in his chest, this – this elf who had no *idea* of the hardship and pain Thorin and the dwarves had endured thus far had no right to pass judgment on their quest! Bilbo knew they would reclaim Erebor, even if the chances were *slim.*

"Thorin's chances," Bilbo ground out irritably, "are irrelevant. We *will* get Erebor back, even if – even if you think it is impossible! This company has gone through more suffering than you could ever hope to know, even in all your long years, and that has made them determined."
"I will –" Bilbo spluttered feeling nothing but indignant, "I will do *whatever* it takes to get my friends out of these blasted cells!" There was a moment of tense silence as the hobbit considered his choices in words were probably not the wisest he had ever chosen, but damn it all! This quest was not going to stop here of all places as long as Bilbo Baggins was fit enough to help.

Legolas let out a bright laugh as he shook his head. "You certainly are a very loyal and brave friend to have! A little brash," the elf gave a little shrug, still smiling, "but you have much heart. I will do what I can to help you Bilbo."

"You… what?" The hobbit began, finding it hard to believe the elf that had been responsible for bringing the dwarves here was now offering to help them escape from the very place he had brought them!

"Why would you want to help us?" Bilbo spoke with no small measure of disbelief.

"Oh *because*," Legolas began with a sigh and a wave of his long, pale hand, "do I need a reason? Perhaps I am simply a being of immense generosity and selflessness?"

Bilbo raised an eyebrow, "Yes. I think in this case a very good reason for betraying your king would be *fundamental* in trusting you."

Legolas gave an exaggerated shrug, "I see your friendship is hard won, Bilbo. Alright, if you require a reason then I shall have to concede."

Legolas suddenly looked old. Not in the way hobbits look old after many years of life, but in a way only someone who had seen countless ages of men could look. The bright blue eyes that had been laughing with merriment a second ago now looked much… deeper, he supposed. Much more experienced in both the wonder and cruelty of life.

"Perhaps it is because I…" The elf started slowly, "feel for their plight. I know why it is Thorin Oakneshield hates my kin as furiously as he does. He and his kind have suffered, more than I could ever imagine."

Legolas was silent for a moment but then continued with conviction, "I do not think this quest will be without hardship, Bilbo. But I can hear in your voice the passion needed to succeed. I do not… I do not think my king made the wrong choice that day, but I also do not think my kin are without fault; that we do not need to make amends for the wrongs dealt to out dwarven neighbors, no matter how many elven lives were spared that day."

Bilbo looked up at Legolas with slightly wide eyes, for the first time feeling in his heart that the elf could be trusted. The hobbit remained still for a moment, but then slowly took off the golden ring. With a little pop, Bilbo sprang into visibility.

Legolas looked down at him with a smile, "So you are a halfling. I must say I was not expecting that!" The elf put a long-fingered hand on Bilbo's shoulder, "It is a pleasure to finally see you, little one, the dwarves have found a true and loyal friend in your companionship."

Bilbo smiled up at the elf, "I, uh, thank you, that's… very kind of you to say."

Legolas used the hand on the hobbit's shoulder to usher him towards the guard's table that was piled with more of the delicious food that Bilbo has seen earlier.

"Come now, Bilbo, no need to plan on an empty stomach. You should take advantage of the food, it is especially good tonight." The hobbit chuckled as he sat down, not even pretending not to salivate at the thought of a real, succulent meal.
Bilbo began unceremoniously shoving everything within reach into his mouth before it occurred to him that it was probably a bit strange his new elf friend was not at the party being held in the palace. "Aren't you, uh, I don't know, supposed to be up there and not here? I mean you don't look like a guard…"

Legolas laughed before winking at Bilbo, "A very astute observation, my friend. I must confess though," the elf leaned forward to mock whisper, "I have been to many of these feasts in my life and they can become a bit… dull after a while. I like to wander the halls of the palace when everything starts to get stuffy."

The hobbit nodded, agreeing whole-heartedly that parties, while potentially enjoyable, could also most definitely take a turn for the tedious. Especially when the Sackville-Bagginses came to call.

"So…" Bilbo began as he swallowed a particularly large piece of delicious mushroom, "is there… a way out? I mean one that fourteen can sneak out of undetected of course."

"I…” Legolas started slowly, "think I might have an idea, though it is one that I must investigate further."

Bilbo felt a small wave of relief wash over him; they would escape!

"I will make sure the guards are gone tomorrow night. Bilbo, you should have your dwarves ready to leave by the evening. If all goes well," the elf smiled at him, "you will have a way by then."

The hobbit was about to thank Legolas when they heard the sound of voices coming from the door opposite of the cells. Bilbo felt his eyes widen in shock. The elf stood up quickly, "Make yourself hidden again, my friend, I will be back tomorrow night. Make sure you're ready!"

Bilbo slipped on the ring just as the door banged open and two drunken guards practically fell through. The hobbit scampered as quietly as he could back to the barrels he had slept behind previously, missing the elves' boisterous greeting to Legolas in order to get into his hiding place.

"I've just checked on the prisoners, I think it would be best for you two to get some rest." Legolas looked at the guards, who were barely able to stand, with raised eyebrows.

"We're – we're…" The guard on the left slurred before he gave a giant hiccup.

"We were only gone for a – for a second, don't… don't tell Thranduil!" The guard on the left spoke in a drunkenly hysterical cry. Clearly their absence from duty was not strictly speaking allowed.

"I will say nothing if you go to your quarters now and get some rest." Legolas started to usher them out the door as they gave sobs of relief, "You are so – so kind and understanding! Nothing like –" the guard hiccupped again as he stumbled out the door, "nothing like the king, he can be so—"

The pale-haired elf laughed as he pushed the guards out of the room, "Yes, yes, that's very nice, now come along."

And with that the hobbit was alone again. The silence was… unsettling as he tried to position himself on the ground to get some rest. After a few minutes of shifting around to get comfortable, Bilbo let out an aggravated sigh and sat up again. He needed to be well rested if they were going to hatch some daring escape tomorrow! This floor was just so – so cold and uncomfortable!

The hobbit sat up and made his way over to the cell door and went through once more. He went over
to the first cell opposite of the one Nori had been in earlier and saw mane of blonde hair in the
corner. It was Fili! Bilbo picked the lock as quick as he could and made his way over to the sleeping
dwarf.

At leas the cells had straw and leaves on the ground to make it at least a bit comfortable. And with
Fili here he could stay somewhat warm and hopefully be rested for the next day. Bilbo sat down next
to the blonde dwarf and gave him a little poke, "Fili, its me!"

The dwarf shifted slightly before an eye opened and his gaze was met with bright blue. "What?
Bilbo? Is that you?" Fili sat up looking around confused, "where are you?"

"Right here," Bilbo placed a hand on Fili's arm and the dwarf gave a small start. "Why can't I see
you? I'm not going blind am I? Oh I knew that spider poison was doing permanent damage!"

The hobbit let out a small chuckle, "Your vision is fine, Fili. I've got a, uh, magic ring. Found it in
Goblin Town; long story short, it sort of makes me invisible."

Fili let out a little 'oh' of understanding, "So that's how you got passed the goblins. You have quite
good luck, Master Baggins," the dwarf laughed with a small hint of disbelief at his friend's fortune,
"is… Kili is fine? I thought I heard from another cell but we were all so out of it from the poison,
well… it was hard to tell what was real and what tricks our minds were playing on us."

Bilbo patted the dwarf's arm, "Everyone is fine, Fili, and hopefully we'll all be out of here by
tomorrow night."

Fili let out a sigh of relief before looking up excitedly, "So you have a plan then?"

The hobbit gave a slightly strained laugh, "I… uh, yes, I think so. Point is we all need to rest tonight
so we can be fit to get a move on tomorrow."

Fili winked at the place Bilbo's voice emanated from, "And so you came to me! Always knew I was
your favorite dwarf, Master Baggins, even though you said you didn't have one."

The hobbit gave Fili's shoulder a light swat, "Oh hush, you were the closest. Trust me, I don't want
to feed your already generous ego."

Fili let out a mock gasp of indignation, "Why Master Baggins, I am shocked and appalled! Perhaps,"
the dwarf stuck his nose in the air, "you should find some other poor, abused dwarf to cuddle."

Though the dwarf didn't see him, Bilbo rolled his eyes in exasperation, though he couldn't help the
swell of easy happiness at their familiar banter. Hopeful optimism that this would work started to
build in his chest. Maybe, just maybe, everything would turn out all right for once.

"Iam exhausted. Some of us did more than sleep today."

Fili laughed as he laid down on the straw once more and Bilbo curled up next to him. "Fine, fine, I
can see you need your rest, Master Baggins."

The hobbit felt the exhaustion of the last few hours start to weigh on him and soon enough sleep was
dragging his eyelids down, pulling him into the realm of unconsciousness as he listened to the steady
breathing of the dwarf next to him.

Chapter End Notes
Okay so I checked the wiki and is says that Frerin actually died in the battle for Moria but I'm switching some shit up to make it suitably angsty :)

EDIT: I posted a Frerin-centric fic on the day Erebor got smoked, so if you're into that shit, you can check it out on my page thingy
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Thanks to everyone who took time to review, I very much appreciate your immensely kind words :) On a side note, I wrote a one-shot based on Frerin and how he died (aka why this chapter took so long to get out) which you can find on my page (or: http://archiveofourown.org/works/707672) if you're interested in more Durin family feels/flashbacks to when Thorin and Dís were younger in this fic universe. Also, I had this awesome thought of doing a modern hobbit AU in which Bilbo is a therapist and all the dwarves go to him to solve their fucked up pasts but then I realized I had pretty much already written it in here, so, I'm thinking of revising the title to A Very Respectable Hobbit: How Bilbo Baggins Got His Middle Earth Ph.D in the Therapeutic Sciences of Dwarf Psychology (╯°□°）╯︵ ┻━┻

Enjoy!

Bilbo Baggins was feeling confident. Yes, that's right, the hobbit was indeed savoring the feeling of having something for once go right on this quest. He had somehow convinced an elf to help them, Thorin's wounds were healing very well, and he had had a quiet, if short, sleep in Fili's cell.

Of course, looking back, Bilbo thought he should have immediately stamped out the feeling as soon as it had begun because nothing, nothing guaranteed complications like the expectation he was going to succeed.

Bilbo had woken up and quickly gone to check on Thorin's wounds. The dwarf seemed to finally have gotten a good rest, whether it was because of Beorn's balm or not, Bilbo didn't know, but he was extremely grateful. Having snuck into the prince's cell as quietly as he could, Bilbo silently checked on Thorin's wounds, seeing that the slashes left by the warg's claws had closed up.

Now instead of four horrible, puss infested wounds, Thorin had four thick scars that ran from his spine to his shoulder. The dwarf was a warrior, Bilbo could tell that much from the lines left from previous battles that littered his skin, so he hoped Thorin wouldn't mind too much that there was a permanent reminder of that awful night on his skin.

The bruising was no longer a mess of purple and blue splotches, but merely skin with a slight yellowish taint. The hobbit had sighed with relief, feeling that he could now stop watching the stubborn dwarf limp around and finally stand strong and tall as he was meant to.

It had made Bilbo... sad, he supposed, to see such a proud and noble dwarf hunched and pained. The Thorin that the company needed, the Thorin that the prince needed himself to be perceived as was not an injured wreck, but headstrong.

Bilbo had let himself gaze at the dwarf's face for a few uninterrupted minutes. He had never really had the opportunity to take in Thorin's features without those fierce blue eyes staring back at him. The hobbit would like to think now they were friends, Thorin's stare would make him less nervous – and it did – but he had yet to feel like he wasn't being stared through. Like the dwarf's gaze passed his own eyes and face, passed his expression, and simply delved into the very depths of his mind.
It was… unsettling to have the absolute focus of such a dwarf on him for extended periods of time. Thorin always seemed to expect the best out of his company, and more intensely, himself. Even though the hobbit knew he could probably never be the brave or resourceful type of soldier that Thorin was used to relying on, Bilbo couldn't help but want to try.

As he looked at Thorin's face in sleep, Bilbo saw it truly peaceful for one of the very first times in all the months he had known the dwarf. He had seen the prince angry, despairing, and – on a few very rare occasions – pleased, but the hobbit rarely saw their leader looking relaxed.

The weight of a thousand lost souls that Thorin usually seemed to carry around was lifted and the dwarf looked so much younger and untroubled. Without his usual scowl, Bilbo thought Thorin appeared far more like he should. Like someone who could wake up and smile at you, easy and friendly, and you wouldn't think anything of it.

But Bilbo did think of it. He remembered what Thorin had told him the night before. That the dwarf had not only lost a countless number of his people, but also a brother. Of course, Bilbo didn't have any siblings to speak of, but, if Thorin and his brother were even remotely as close as Fili and Kili… Well, Bilbo didn't even want to begin to imagine what one of the Durin brothers would do if the other were to die.

Bilbo made his way to the door of the cell again, but before he left, the hobbit took one last look back. He hoped so deeply at that moment that once all this adventuring business was done, Thorin would be able to keep that look of peace on his face even while awake. That he would finally be able to let himself feel free.

The hobbit made his way over to the door to the guardroom, slipping the ring back on his finger. Pressing his ear to the door, Bilbo listened for voices. Hearing nothing but his own breathing, the hobbit made his way through quietly.

However, Just as he shut the door behind him, the opposite door slammed open and two elves came through. "And so he told me, me, that we had to take all the barrels away! Like we have nothing better to do!" The elf farthest from him let out a groan as he turned towards the twenty or so barrels that stood on the opposite side of the room.

"All of these?" The closer elf nodded, holding up his hands in exasperation, "I know, that's exactly what I said! First they want us to guard the prisoners, then get their leader ready for more questioning, and then take all the barrels out!" The two elves shook their heads, "I don't understand why we don't just make the dwarves do it. They might as well do some lifting if they're here eating our food."

Bilbo felt his eyes widen in shock, 'they're going to take Thorin again!' He couldn't let his friend face the elf king again! Not when he had finally got the dwarf to agree that revenge was worth putting off at least for the time being. If Thorin saw Thranduil again… Bilbo didn't want to even contemplate how poorly that would turn out.

The far elf started speaking again and jogged the hobbit out of his panicked thoughts, "At least the storeroom is just down the hall and the river does the rest… I don't know why the prince insists we even need to trade with Esgaroth, their wine is barely palatable."

The closer elf shrugged, "Something about fostering closer relationships with our neighbors. I'm of the personal opinion that they should be the one's doing the fostering but it's not like anyone would ask me anyway."
The feeling of elated confidence was quickly slipping out of Bilbo faster than Lobelia Sackville-Baggins could swipe his fine silver into the ruffles of her dress. All the time he thought he had, all those hours to plan and alert the dwarves was dwindling away. He had to get them out before the elves took Thorin again. He could only hope that his new elf friend would know that whatever plan he had been making better happen well before nightfall.

"That's because your ideas are generally a notch higher than absolutely horrible," the far elf chuckled as he eyed the barrels distastefully. "Better start moving these, the prince will want them in the river by nightfall."

The other elf groaned rather spectacularly but nodded in agreement.

As the two elves began their task of lifting the large barrels out of the room one by one, Bilbo sat stock still trying not to let his mind run wild with the sheer number of ways that they were now most likely going to be caught.

Thorin seeing the elf-king was not an option so he had to think of something, anything else. If only he knew where to find Legolas, then maybe they could work together… But as Bilbo watched the elves going about their task, he couldn't help but feel that, short of leaving the dwarves and going to look for Legolas in a completely unfamiliar palace, there was little he could do.

Bilbo would wait. He would wait a few hours for the elf to come and tell him his plan and if he didn't show, well then, Bilbo would have to figure something out himself. Though he dearly wanted to, the hobbit dared not pace for fear of making noise that might rouse any suspicion.

The first hour crept by in a fit of nervous anticipation. He hoped, oh how he hoped that Legolas would just hurry up already. It was… Well, it was very rude to keep someone waiting, especially at a time like this! Bilbo could feel his very nerves begin to fray.

As the second hour passed, Bilbo felt well and truly helpless. He was running out of time, and what little he did have left before they came for Thorin, the hobbit didn't want to waste it sitting around doing nothing but nervously wringing his hands.

Bilbo had been about to throw the far door that fed into the hallway open in his panicked anxiety, but as soon as his hand touched the wooden frame, it popped open.

The hobbit jumped back in surprise, clutching his heart, but let out a gasping sigh of relief as he saw it was not one of the elven guards, but Legolas.

"Bilbo? Bilbo are you in here?" As soon as he saw the expression on the elf's face, however, the hobbit's momentary sense of elation was quickly doused in cold fear.

Slipping off the ring, Bilbo popped into visibility. "What's wrong?" He asked anxiously, fearing that something big was indeed about to make their plans for escape much more difficult.

"Things have… changed, my friend."

Bilbo gaped at Legolas' slightly down turned mouth, "Changed? What does that mean?"

The elf shifted somewhat nervously, "It means that the guards are coming for Thorin Oakenshield now. My… The king has ordered that he not be returned to his cell until he talks."

Bilbo let out a sting of curses that would have earned him a swift spoon to the head from his father, but felt that, in this case at least, he was rather more than justified. "Legolas, we need to get out of here now!"
The elf looked slightly taken aback at the hobbit's yell, "Now? I was going to suggest we wait until tomorrow night."

Bilbo couldn't help but wave his arms frantically as the hysteria started to well within him. "Thorin can't see Thranduil now! It won't… it won't end well for him."

Legolas narrowed his eyes slightly at the hobbit. "Does he plan to hurt the king?"

Bilbo shook his head swiftly but couldn't help but feel that the elf didn't quite believe him. "No – no nothing so… premeditated, I just… Look, I know Thorin, and I'm telling you we need to leave now."

The elf sighed as he ran a hand over his pale hair. "I… I am sorry, my friend, but I do not think it can be done."

Bilbo let out a frustrated hiss as he crossed his arms, "Of course it can be done! We just have to… we need to think of it! There has to be something, a secret passage? Places like these have secret passage's right? Or – or some sort of… of…"

And then it hit him, their way out.

"We could… use the barrels."

Legolas looked at him like he had sprouted an extra pair of hobbit arms. "I'm afraid I am having some difficulty following your thoughts, little one."

Bilbo looked up at the elf, his eyes widening in hope. "The barrels! The barrels that go to Esgaroth! I heard the guards talking about them, if we could just – just get in them somehow, we could follow the river out!"

"You want to… ride inside barrels down miles of rapid filled waters?"

Bilbo nodded enthusiastically, feeling that his mother would have been immensely proud of his quick wit.

"I feel compelled to inform you how absolutely ridiculous that sounds."

"Well, do you have a better idea?" Bilbo shot defensively, "Because I am open to suggestions at anytime, you know."

The elf raised his hands in placation, "I just… This will be dangerous Bilbo. Not just because you might get caught, those waters will not be safe especially inside barrels."

Bilbo felt about ready to tear his hair out. Of course he knew that this would be risky, but the alternative was letting Thorin go back to face the elf-king! He… he would do anything to keep that from happening.

"I know. But we need to leave now, not tomorrow night or whenever Thranduil sees fit to send Thorin back to his cell. Thorin will never talk, so this might… this might be our only option."

Legolas nodded slowly, "Alright, if this is what you want, then I will aid you as best I can."

Bilbo shot the elf a small, albeit strained, smile. "I… thank you, Legolas. You have shown us great kindness."

Legolas gently laid a hand on Bilbo's shoulder, "Of course, my friend. I will go try and stall the guards as long as I can. You must go gather your dwarves. I hope we meet again under better
circumstances one day."

"Me too."

Bilbo smiled warmly at the elf who turned towards the door again before pausing and looking back over his shoulder.

"… And Bilbo?"

The hobbit looked questioningly at his new friend.

"Be careful."

The hobbit let out a strained laugh, "Oh it's just a bit of water, how dangerous can it be?"

Legolas smiled gently, though his old eyes looked almost sad. "I meant when you reach Erebor. A dragon is not the only enemy to Thorin Oakenshield that resides there."

Bilbo felt equal bits confused and annoyed at the cryptic nature in which the elves seemed to be partial to offering their advice. "There's something worse than a dragon?"

The elf turned back to the door and started to push through it. "In its way, I suppose it is. Good luck, Bilbo. May the Valar watch over you."

There was a moment of silence as Bilbo considered what the elf said but he felt nothing but more confused than he had before. But, even if he had wanted to, this was most definitely not the time to be solving elvish riddles.

Bilbo ran into the cell room and, as quick as he could, freed Nori, the only dwarf he was confident who could easily free the others from the cells.

"Nori," the hobbit began hurriedly handing his companion one of the other lock picks from the dwarf's bag, "haven't really got time to explain but we need to leave."

Nori seemed to instantly grasp that right now was not the time to argue or ask questions. The dwarf and Bilbo started to make their way around the room, rousing the dwarves from their cells. Sooner than Bilbo could've hope for, the room was filled with the confused faces of thirteen dwarves.

"Alright I need you all to listen closely and carefully," Bilbo began, speaking as fast as he could, "I have a plan to escape but we need to leave right now. Just… please don't ask questions until we're gone, we really don't have any time."

"What, exactly, are we—" Dori began irritably from the back but he was quickly cut off by Thorin.

"Lead on, Master Baggins."

Bilbo held the dwarf's gaze for a few moments. He could see in their leader's eyes a willingness to trust, a willingness to give up control of the situation for once. If the hobbit hadn't been so anxious, he might have had time to think about more than the warmth that spread through his chest. Thorin trusted him, believed him capable of getting the company out of this infernal place.

And so get them out he would, because Bilbo Baggins was not about to betray the trust of a friend that had been so hard won or, as he suddenly realized, deeply valued as Thorin's was to him. The hobbit turned around quickly and led the parade of dwarves into the next room.

There were a few minutes filled with stressed panic as the dwarves raided the cabinet with all their
possessions inside. Bilbo worried the hem on his coat, willing the dwarves to move faster. Legolas could only buy them so much time before it became suspicious.

Once they had sorted out all the packs, Bilbo ran down the hall, checking every door until he heard the faint sound of rushing water. 'There!' he thought excitedly, 'that had to be it!' The hobbit opened the door and ushered the dwarves through until they were all inside a dark room filled with barrels and the sound of a river.

"Alright everyone get in a barrel." If his heart hadn't already been beating far faster than Bilbo could ever consider healthy, he might have found the looks on their faces amusing.

"You want us to... get in?" Kili began, his tone as incredulous as his expression.

"Yes I want you to get in! This is our way out!" Bilbo waved his arms trying to emphasize that it was, in fact, the only way out. "The river feeds right into somewhere called Esgaroth, which I'm assuming you'd all much prefer to being in cells here."

There was a chorus of grumbling from the dwarves until Thorin shouted something in a language Bilbo couldn't understand.

"Everyone choose a barrel and get inside. Now." There was a good ten minutes of shuffling as the dwarves wedged themselves into the barrels.

Thorin and Bilbo started to fit the lids on the barrels; working together to secure them tight enough on that water would not seep through. Bilbo couldn't help but nervously eye the rushing water that seemed to cut through the room. Given what happened the last time the company had tried to go through the rivers of this land, he thought the tightness in his chest was well deserved.

As soon as they had put all the lids on the barrels, Thorin and Bilbo started to push them one by one into the water and watched them bob swiftly out of the room. They had just pushed the last dwarf filled barrel left into the water when they heard pounding of footsteps and shouting coming from the hallway outside the room.

Bilbo felt his heart skip a beat, as he looked panicked between Thorin and the door. He had to get the dwarf out now! The hobbit started to push the prince with all his strength towards one of the remaining barrels.

"Get in the barrel!"

Thorin seemed to allow the hobbit to push him for a few moments before he realized what was happening.

"No, Master Baggins, you get in first!" Thorin hissed angrily as he tried to twist them around so that Bilbo was closer to the barrel.

"No! You get in first!" The hobbit scowled back as he tried with all his might to make them switch places.

"Bilbo Baggins. Do." Thorin grunted as they locked in a very strange sort of half tugging, half pushing battle of wills, "As. You. Are. Told!" Each word accompanied one of them pulling against the other.

"Why don't you-" The hobbit panted as he glared at the Thorin, "do as you're told!"

The dwarf looked about ready to just pick Bilbo up and throw him in, when the door finally gave
way and two guards rushed in, swords drawn. Thorin let go of Bilbo to place himself in between the hobbit and the elves but as soon as he lifted his foot to step forward, Bilbo placed both of his hands on the back of the prince's fur-lined collar and yanked as hard as he could.

Thorin let out a rather undignified grunt of surprise as he stumbled backwards until he hit the side of the barrel. "No time to fight!" The dwarf looked furious as he narrowed his eyes at Bilbo, clearly ready to push him out of the way so he could fight the guards.

The hobbit grabbed Thorin's coat with a small shake and looked up at his friend and pleaded for him to see reason.

"Please Thorin!"

The dwarf looked from Bilbo to elves and then back. Thorin clenched his eyes shut for a brief moment before he grasped Bilbo underneath the hobbit's arms and hauled him into the barrel.

"Thorin! Thorin! No!" Bilbo yelled as he was rather ungracefully plopped down into the wooden keg. The hobbit struggled up as he felt the barrel start to be pushed towards the edge of the water, "I am begging you, please don't do this!"

Time seemed to slow down to a sluggish pace as the ground gave way to water and the guards started to rush towards his friend's unprotected back. Bilbo watched in horror as they about to close the distance on the dwarf, but just when Bilbo thought Thorin was going to turn around and draw his sword, the dwarf jumped. Towards him. Where he was standing. In a barrel.

There were a few brief moments in which Bilbo Baggins was not entirely sure which way up or if their lungs were soon going to become intimately acquainted with the water. As the barrel finally righted itself, Bilbo had never been more grateful for his small size in his entire life. With Thorin now miraculously squished in the barrel with him, it was... Well, the word cramped would have been a generous description.

Bilbo was practically underneath the dwarf until Thorin pulled him up so they were now chest to chest and his friend's arms were hanging out the side to give them more room.

Despite the sheer absurdity of the situation, Bilbo couldn't help but look up at his friend and feel a swell of happiness within his chest. Thorin had listened to him, had chosen his friends over his revenge. The dwarf narrowed his eyes as he looked down at Bilbo's wide eyes.

"What...?"

The hobbit shot his friend a beaming smile. "I think you know, Thorin. Though you did have me worried there for a second."

The dwarf scoffed as they bobbed down the dark passage ignoring the shouts of the guards. "Regardless of what you may think of me, Master Baggins, I am not that foolish. And I... thought about what you said. About Frerin. It made me... consider a few things."

"Well, whatever the reason, I'm glad you -" but Bilbo didn't get the chance to finish his sentence as there was a sudden and rather terrifying drop. The darkness of the passage abruptly opened up to the light of the outdoors and the barrel plummeted down a large drop. The hobbit let out a yelp of surprise as he clutched at Thorin's coat and shut his eyes hoping this unfortunate experience would be over soon.

As soon as the barrel reached the waters below, they began swirling down swift, coursing rapids. If there had been any room left in the barrel, Bilbo was sure the force of the waters crashing against
them would have thrown him from side to side. The hobbit was not proud of the fear that seemed intent on flooding every possible vein in his body. But as they tipped dangerously close to the surface of the river and taking water in, Bilbo couldn't help but clench Thorin's coat in his fists and bury his face so at least he wouldn't see the countless close brushes with a very wet death they were currently having.

The dwarf thankfully realized that Bilbo was in no way going to be anywhere near collected or composed while they were spinning wildly in the wooden death trap. Thorin brought an arm up and held the hobbit tightly to his chest.

Bilbo decided that he would not concentrate on the water crashing around them or the nauseating swirling of the barrel. As he tried to calm his panicked breathing, the hobbit decided that he would concentrate on the strong, fast heartbeat of his friend. The consistent thrum of sheer life pounding in the dwarf's chest gave him something to focus on and be grateful for.

He… he felt like he had almost lost Thorin in that place. Not to the elves or to the dark cells. Bilbo felt that he had almost lost Thorin to himself. To the rage and the pain. To the hunger for revenge, for the blood the dwarf felt he was owed. But now, now the hobbit could feel Thorin, solid and here with him; still leading their ragtag company to Erebor and Bilbo had never been more relieved.

Before joining Thorin Oakenshield's company, Bilbo had never experienced something that he would categorically refer to as an event he would never, under any circumstance, ever, ever want to repeat.

However, since that fateful night in Bag End, Bilbo thought the amount of miserable and terrifying things on this journey that he could go happily through the rest of his life never thinking about again could fill several tomes and Volume One, Chapter One of Bilbo Baggins' Book of Horrible Happenings would be appropriately titled Barrels: Why They Are Malicious and Spiteful Modes of Transportation and the Relative Merits of Never Going Near Rivers Ever Again.

While the waters had calmed down considerably, there was not much either Thorin or Bilbo could do for comfort. The hobbit had had just about enough of this whole travelling business as he still felt the remnants of the nausea that had been plaguing him for the last chaos filled hour. Why they couldn't just, for once, take a nice, relaxing carriage somewhere, Bilbo had no idea.

He had finally let go of Thorin's coat though the dwarf still had his arm around the hobbit. Bilbo had looked up questioningly at his friend but he was only met with a grunt and a shrug as the dwarf muttered something about it not having anywhere else to go.

Bilbo didn't mind really, it kept him warm at the very least.

"I…” he began slowly as they bobbed down the waters with the line of twelve barrels in front of them, "I hope the others are alright."

Thorin looked down from where he had been absently gazing off into the distance. "I'm sure they'll be fine, Master Baggins. If this quest has taught me anything about this company, it is that they are a uniquely hardy set of dwarves."

The hobbit couldn't help the small chuckle that escaped him. "I suppose you're right… Though they certainly won't be pleased, I can't imagine they're any more comfortable than we are."
Thorin shrugged at him and glanced away briefly, "I am fine."

Bilbo laughed again, not at all surprised that his friend would never admit to being anything other than 'fine.' "Well I am dying for a stretch and a good night's sleep. Is Esgaroth near Erebor?"

Thorin nodded slowly, "... We will be close."

The hobbit smiled up at Thorin encouragingly, "That's good then!"

Bilbo certainly wasn't eager to go anywhere that might possibly have a dragon lurking somewhere in its depths, but he knew that for his friend nothing could have been more important. They were finally close to the place Thorin had dreamed of for endless years. Finally close to the dwarf hopefully getting… whatever it was that he needed so he could finally start to live again.

"I've been wanting this for so long, it seems almost... impossible to be so near home."

Bilbo patted his friend's arm, "Nothing impossible about it!"

Thorin raised a black brow at him.

"Well... Yes, it was a bit... touch and go there a few times, but we're all fine! No need to dwell on all those, uh, unfortunate incidents."

"Are you referring to the occasions where you saved my family and myself from death?"

Bilbo let out a strained chuckle. "Those occasions exactly. Like I said, no, uh, no need to dwell."

Thorin gave him a small frown as his brows creased, "A Durin does not forget his debts, Master Baggins."

The hobbit rolled his eyes, "Oh, not that again, I was merely saying that while we're here right now, thankfully breathing the fresh air and seeing daylight again, we might as well try to enjoy it."

Thorin continued to frown at him, as if finding it frustratingly hard to believe that someone could so casually wave off a matter of such great importance as if he were merely saying 'no thank you, I've had enough cheese tonight.'

The dwarf looked ready to pursue the topic further but seemed, at the last second, to settle for muttering something about the strangeness of the Shire folk and their complete disregard for propriety. Bilbo simply gave him an exasperated sigh before he almost tipped the barrel over in his sudden flailing.

As they rounded a bend in the river, Bilbo saw the water opened up into a great lake and on that lake there looked to be a town!

"Thorin! Thorin!" Bilbo began excitedly.

The dwarf looked distinctly disgruntled as he tried to keep the barrel from tipping.

"What?" Thorin ground out irritably.

The hobbit grinned and pointed over the Thorin's shoulder, "Look!"

The dwarf twisted his neck so he could see behind him. As the prince's gaze met with the sight of the town, Thorin let out a relieved sigh, "Oh thank Mahal."
The cluster of barrels continued to drift slowly towards the shore, but, given his immense excitement at finally being able to stretch his legs and move, Bilbo thought the time passed rather quickly. As soon as the waters were shallow enough, Thorin dislodged himself from the barrel and jumped into the clear lake. The dwarf dragged Bilbo up to the sandy bank and helped the hobbit out until his feet touched the delightfully not wooden ground.

Bilbo all but collapsed on the beach as he let out a groan of satisfaction. Stretching out on his back, the hobbit just laid there for a few peaceful moments until he heard a gruff cough. Opening one eye, Bilbo looked up to see Thorin glaring down at him with his arms crossed.

"No, please, Master Baggins. On your own time, I'm sure the rest of the company doesn't mind waiting any longer."

The hobbit made a face but decided to lay still for just a few more seconds before reluctantly getting back up on his aching legs. He and Thorin dragged the barrels up onto the beach one by one, opening the lids to reveal twelve very unhappy dwarves.

"That," Fili choked out as he practically burst from the barrel, "is the last time I am listening to you, Master Baggins."

The blond dwarf ran over to a small bush and proceeded to throw up into it. "You've put me off apples forever. I hope you're happy."

Kili groaned as he took a few hobbling steps before collapsing onto his face. "You are a cruel, cruel hobbit, Master Boggins."

The young dwarf threw out his arms as if pleading to the sky, "What did we ever do to deserve that?"

The hobbit rolled his eyes at the two dwarves, feeling equal parts annoyance at their blatant ungratefulness for getting them out and sympathy for having been shoved into a confined space for most of the day.

"While I am sorry that the circumstances were not ideal, I would like to remind you that you are, in fact, not currently in a cell."

"At least the cell," Fili paused to throw up once more, "wasn't filled with bloody apples."

Bilbo couldn't help but laugh at the dwarf's rather green face. Fili looked up at him with a glare.

"Oh, come now, it's a little funny."

The dwarf made a rather rude hand gesture. "Positively hilarious."

The hobbit tried to stifle his laughter as he patted Fili's back a few times. "See if you get any of our blanket tonight, Master Baggins," the blond dwarf stuck out his tongue petulantly.

"Yeah, Master Boggins," Kili groaned from the ground beside them, "no more sharing for you."

Bilbo smiled as he held his hands up in exasperation. "Fine, I offer you, Fili and Kili of the great line of Durin, my most sincere and deepest apologies for rescuing you from the elves. Had I known," Bilbo gave an exaggerated sniff, "dwarf princes were more accustomed to being freed from imprisonment in greater comfort, I of course would have made more of an effort."

Fili laughed as he clapped Bilbo on the back, "I feel that in this case, we perhaps could show you
some mercy, what do you think brother? Is a royal pardon in order?"

Kili stood up shakily but grinned all the same, "Hm… He has been on rather good behavior recently, so… I suppose just this once, Master Boggins, we will be lenient."

Bilbo gave them a deep and ridiculously flourished bow, "I thank you for your kindness, my kings. All the Shire will hear of your abundant and generous good will."

The two brothers grinned back at him and put an arm around a shoulder each. "Well I am thinking that a nice, strong drink is in order," Fili glanced up at the town with eager anticipation.

"Too right, brother," Kili joined in with fervent agreement.

Bilbo looked over to the dock that lay about twenty yards from them and saw the dumbstruck face of two fishermen who seemed to have forgotten they were holding nets. Clearly seeing thirteen dwarves and a hobbit burst out of some barrels was not a common occurrence for the residents of Laketown. Bilbo gave them a little wave as the company set off, stiff-legged and exhausted, towards the nearest place with enough ale to get them all good and drunk.

Despite having spent most of the day stuck inside cramped barrels, the dwarves had taken to the availability of ale with the fervor of a man dying of thirst being offered the sweetest life-water imaginable. Though, to be fair, Bilbo imagined that was exactly how the dwarves were feeling at that moment.

It wasn't long before the company had downed several tankards each and started to grow loud. They had tried to set up relatively unnoticed in the corner of the tavern, but, seeing as how this was a group of drunken dwarves celebrating their liberation from their hated elvish foes, Bilbo probably shouldn't have been surprised that it didn't take long for the singing and laughing to spread around the entire establishment.

The men that had littered the tavern looked shocked at first to see the first dwarves in many, many years to visit there, but there was no party quite like a dwarf party. After only a few hours, the men and women of Laketown seemed to have all gathered to hear the merry company of dwarves tell tales and sing songs.

There was ale flowing generously from keg to mug and soon the noise was joyful and boisterous. Some of the dwarves had gotten their hands on instruments not unlike the ones that they had played in Bilbo's home and, sure enough, as soon as their skilled fingers began to play, dancing and singing had started to surround the company.

The dwarves now littered the tavern in smaller groups surrounded by intent listeners but by far the most popular was the slightly odd ensemble of Fili, Kili, Bofur, and Gloin playing an almost impossibly fast and lively tune. Gloin had improvised a set of small drums on two upside-down bowls, while Bofur had been given something that sounded like a deep flute.

However, it was Fili and Kili that had delightfully surprised him. How they got their hands on a pair of identical fiddles, Bilbo hadn't the faintest clue, but there was no doubt that they were incredibly skilled. Fili and Kili didn't simply stand and play; they had jumped on top of one of the tables and twirled around wildly as their fingers and bows moved fast and sure across the strings.
Bilbo had been watching them from a slightly more secluded bench near the back that had a mostly uninterrupted view of the festivities. Bilbo liked a merry gathering as much as the next hobbit, but he was feeling mostly exhausted from the last few days. Bilbo felt someone slide into the seat next to him and a mug of ale entered his vision.

Looking up the arm that held the ale, Bilbo met Thorin’s gaze. He smiled as he took the mug and sipped it slowly. The dwarf leaned back against the wall with a small sigh but a little smile crept onto his face as he watched his nephews play.

"They are quite skilled."

Bilbo smiled warmly at Thorin, seeing the pride in the dwarf's eyes, "Yes they are, certainly very popular with the crowd."

The prince laughed softly as he took another swig from his mug, "They have never been shy about their musical talents. When times were… difficult, my nephews used to play for coins while I worked in the smithy. I'm ashamed to say they often brought back more in one night than I did in a week."

The hobbit felt his smile falter; it was… sometimes hard to remember that there was a time when Thorin and his family had little more than the clothes on their backs.

"Did…" Bilbo began softly, "did you teach them how to play?"

Thorin shook his head, "No, my sister taught them. Her chosen loves… loved to hear Dís play. She thought it important her sons learn if only they were closer with their father's memory in some way."

"She must be very proud of them." Bilbo spoke softly as they watched the two young dwarves jump from table to table, smiles wide on their faces.

"Very. They are dearer to her than anything else in this world." Thorin's face grew slightly tense as he looked down into the depths of his mug. "She… didn't want them to come along."

The hobbit looked up at his friend curiously, "Because of the danger?"

Thorin nodded as he sighed, "I suppose that's not entirely accurate, I should say that she didn't want them to come along without her."

"Kili is young. He wants to prove himself," Thorin smiled softly at his nephew. "I know he thinks we do not treat him as an adult, and perhaps that's why he was so eager to come along, but in many ways Kili is still naive to this world."
Bilbo took another sip of his ale as he watched Thorin gaze at his nephews.

"Fili and Kili love their mother more than anything. For them Erebor is… little more than a dream, an abstract idea that has been gilded in other's memories, and for that I blame myself. Kili wants to show himself capable and Fili doesn't want his brother to get hurt. Of course they… want to get Erebor back, but I think they would be just as happy with Dís in the Blue Mountains."

Thorin frowned once again, his eyes growing dark with worry. "They snuck off to your Shire leaving nothing more than a note before I went to meet with our kin. Dís was… furious that they had left. The last thing she told me was that they had better come back to her without a single hair out of place or she would skin me alive."

The dwarf thumbed at the handle on his mug absently. "If anything happens to them it would… destroy what's left of my family. Dís is a strong dwarf. Probably the strongest I know but without them... Without them I fear she would lose her will to continue on."

Bilbo placed an hand on the dwarf's arm an squeezed it gently. "They are very capable fighters, Thorin. Fili and Kili can take care of themselves.

Thorin nodded almost imperceptibly as his gaze slowly moved to meet the hobbit's eyes. "I also fear that I would… lose myself. When their father died, I tried the best I could to fill that role. Whatever they think of me, they are just as important to me as sons of my own flesh would be."

Bilbo smiled up at Thorin, "They love you just as they would love a father, Thorin."

The dwarf seemed to consider his companion for a moment. "I pray that should Mahal see fit to spare any of the company on this quest, that it would be them. I know that is selfish of me, but they deserve… they deserve long, happy lives." Bilbo squeezed the dwarf's arm once again in comfort, "I hope that life is within the halls of Erebor, but should we fail, I… would want them, at least, to get back to my sister."

Bilbo looked at Thorin deadly serious. "We will not fail, Thorin. I may have had my doubts in the beginning, but I have seen you lead. I have seen the courage of every member of this company."

The hobbit hoped Thorin could see that the faith the company had in him counted for something, that the faith he had in his friend counted for something.

"I have never been more sure of anything in my life."

Thorin simply looked at the hobbit for a few moments, but a smile soon broke out on the dwarf's face, "Thank you, Master Baggins. That… means a great deal to me."

Bilbo smiled back warmly and brought his hand back to the mug of ale.

"So…" Bilbo began feeling a sudden, intense curiosity, "If you don't play the fiddle… what do you play?"

Thorin raised a brow at the question before turning to face his nephews again.

"The harp."

Bilbo Baggins had chosen exactly the wrong time to take another sip from his mug as the ale in his mouth soon found its way onto the floor in front of him as the hobbit spit in shocked amusement.

Thorin narrowed his eyes at the hobbit, clearly not thinking his answer was in any way humorous.
"And what, exactly, is amusing about that?"

Bilbo pounded his chest with a fist, trying to pass off the snort as a cough.

"N – nothing at all!"

There was just something about the idea of Thorin Oakenshield playing an instrument as delicately beautiful as a harp that Bilbo found nothing short of absurdly hilarious. Surely, surely Thorin would play something...Something that would require the dwarf hitting it violently, like a – like a drum of sorts.

Though as he pictured Thorin angrily strumming a harp, Bilbo thought that if Thorin had played the drums, it would be infinitely less amusing for him. The dwarf had an expression on his face like he could tell exactly what the hobbit was picturing in his mind.

"It is tradition, Master Baggins, that the first born learn to play the harp."

Bilbo finally stopped beating his chest and tried his best not to let a grin creep out onto his face, "Then why doesn't Fili play it?"

Thorin's mouth snapped shut as he turned away from the hobbit, glaring at nothing in particular, "Because Dís said it was for 'simpering elves' and Fili strongly agreed with her."

The hobbit couldn't stop the laughter from pouring out as he held his stomach. Thorin refused to look at him for a good minute straight as the happy tears started pouring out of Bilbo's eyes, but the hobbit could have sworn he saw his friend's mouth lift into a small smile.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

So exciting news! AVRH broke 100K! I just wanted to take the opportunity to thank everyone who has taken time out of their days to read, fav, follow, and most especially write me very kind and generous reviews! I think I started to write this story in early January and it's already mid-March (yikes). Basically I never thought it would be this long hahaha so thank you once again for sticking with it so far and I hope you continue to enjoy it! :) EDIT: shit I just realized it only broke it on the fanfic version because of that massive A/N. Fuck it I'm still celebrating its close enough

Bilbo Baggins thought he probably should have guessed once the dwarves started drinking, it was only a matter of time before something bad happened. He and Thorin had watched to two youngest of the Durin line play late into the night. Fili and Kili probably would have plucked away at their fiddles until dawn if not for Gloin's shout rising above the crowd.

"Because that!" Bilbo looked over to see the flustered and very drunk dwarf flip over the bowls he was using for drums in a clumsy flourish.

"Is Thorin Oakenshield! Prince and rightful ruler of Erebor! And soon-" Gloin stood up with a wobble onto the table as he practically shouted, "-the richest dwarf in all the kingdoms!"

The music stopped and the talking died out as everyone in the room turned to see just who, exactly, Gloin was pointing to. Bilbo was suddenly in the unique position of having just about a hundred unfamiliar people gazing just a few inches to his left. Thorin shot the red-haired dwarf a glare and seemed to be unable to stop his hand slapping against his face.

There were a few brief moments of silence as Bilbo watched the people of Laketown start to piece together what it meant to have one Thorin Oakenshield amongst them and apparently going on a quest to retrieve a mountain full of gold. A low murmuring started to swell in the room and the hobbit started to feel distinctly uneasy. The faces now turned towards he and Thorin were not… angry or ominous per say, but there was an undeniable look of greedy hunger in some of the older eyes that perhaps had heard stories of Erebor and it's great wealth.

It wasn't long until the small groups of men and women that had clustered around various dwarves had moved into one large knot that was currently shifting closer with their eyes all set on Thorin. The dwarf heaved a sigh and seemed to know exactly what was going to happen next and was not at all enthused about it.

There were a few chaotic moments and the crowd seemed to be spurred by everything and nothing at all and in an instant had swarmed around Thorin, each begging to express their wishes luck or to remind the dwarf prince about one of their parents or grandparents who all seemed to be intimately acquainted with either Thorin's father or grandfather.

Not much liking crowds or the sensation of receiving not one, but three poorly placed elbows to the face, Bilbo Baggins shot his friend one last look of sympathy before beginning the arduous process of fighting his way out of the group.
This wasn't at all like the Green Dragon in Hobbiton, he thought feeling his sense of disgruntled irritation grow as yet another knee made its way into his stomach. Sure, it was crowded at the end of the day, but at least hobbits had enough common decency to move when someone was clearly trying to leave.

Bilbo finally broke through the mass of people to and made his way to the door, gingerly rubbing his now arching chest.

'Now -' he thought with a sigh, '- is probably a good time to get some fresh air.'

The hobbit slipped outside and felt instantly refreshed once he was in the cool night air and away from the busy commotion of the pub.

Reaching up with a stretch, Bilbo looked to his right to see Bifur sitting on one of the wooden railings with a small knife and what appeared to be a little figure in his hand. The hobbit nodded to Bifur in greeting before setting down the steps on the cobbled street. He wasn't much surprised to see the dwarf outside of the pub instead of inside with the rest of the celebration.

From what Bofur had told him, his cousin often found it… frustrating to be around large groups that only spoke the common tongue instead of his native one. Something about the goblin axe that was imbedded in his head had muddled Bifur's understanding of foreign languages. Bilbo found the dwarf pleasant enough but it wasn't as if the hobbit could do a whole lot communicating to foster much of a friendship.

The hobbit took a deep breath as he started down the street, looking up at the stars. He shouldn't have been surprised, but some part of him found it hard to believe that these could be the same bright specks in the sky that he had watched for years from his comfortable, and now very distant, hobbit-hole.

They held the same shape and the same pattern but something about them felt… different. Almost as if he were seeing them for the first time. Though as he considered it more, Bilbo Baggins found it harder to decide if it was the stars he was looking at seemed new, or if the eyes that were doing the gazing were the things that were different. That he was somehow the thing that had changed.

As Bilbo thought back on his journey so far, the answer was obvious and yet it was simultaneously a terrifying realization. Of course he was different now, how could he not be? But… was it good? Was this new Bilbo better for having journey with the dwarves on their quest? What would he even do back in the peaceful stillness of Bag End after having seen so much, experienced so much of this wondrous and terrible world?

The hobbit, however, did not have as much time to contemplate his thoughts as a group three men staggered down the steps with worrying smirks plastered on their faces.

"H-hey…" The tallest one slurred as he staggered off the porch onto the street. Bilbo looked over his shoulder and felt a sense of anticipation and panic begin to fill his stomach. Picking up his pace, the hobbit started to walk faster down the street.

"Hey you!" The man shouted, "don't walk away now, we just want to talk!"

The other two men laughed as they stumbled forwards after the hobbit, "we saw you earlier!"

The shortest man who looked sickly with his broken teeth and thin hair, "Talkin' with the king, you wouldn't happen be friendly would you?"

Bilbo stopped suddenly and turned to glare at them with his arms crossed, despite the nervous fear
that edged at his consciousness. "And what business of it is yours if I am?"

After having been roughed around just trying to leave the pub, he was in no mood to deal with more drunken people.

"Ooh, did'ja hear that?" The man who appeared to be their leader sneered, "the half-pint is talking back, isn't it sweet?"

Bilbo narrowed his eyes even further as the man's cohorts started to laugh raucously. "Why don't you three head back home? I'm not sure you should be out in this state."

The man's face grew instantly furious. "It thinks it can tell us what to do, what do you think of that lads?"

The third man, who seemed to be suffering a nervous twitch, shakily pulled out a small, crudely made knife from his belt. "I'm – I'm not sure w-we're, uh, appreciating that."

The tallest one spoke up again. "A very good point, my friend. Maybe we should teach 'im a lesson."

The man with the missing teeth practically giggled in drunken excitement. "If he's with that dwarf king, he's probably loaded with gold!"

The leader spit as his face broke into another dangerous grin as he pulled out his own knife, "Mm, yes and we should take this opportunity to educate him about manners."

Bilbo felt panic begin to swell in his chest. They were drunk, so he assumed they weren't going to be that coordinated at least. But there was no denying that there were three of them and they all had at least a foot and half on him. Pulling out Sting with a clumsy flourish, the hobbit nervously started to back away,

"Stay back! I'm warning you, I will use this!"

The group of men laughed as they advanced slowly, seemingly savoring the fear in Bilbo's face. The hobbit took a deep breath, trying to remember all the tips Dwalin had given him as he braced himself for what was undoubtedly going to be an unpleasant and quite possibly deadly fight.

The group's leader lunged towards Bilbo with a shout and the hobbit jumped backed to avoid the wild jab. The knife, much to Bilbo's displeasure, sliced a shallow cut along his arm. Hissing in pain, the hobbit slashed upwards and caught the man's chest with the tip of Sting, causing him to stumbled away clutching at the bloody wound.

"Why you little shi—" But the man didn't have the opportunity to finish as the end of a pike stuck it way though his chest. He let out a small gurgle as he fell forward, eyes wide as he looked at the wound in disbelief. Bilbo gaped at the sight until he forced his gaze upward to see Bifur pulling out the weapon and starting to advance towards the man with thinning hair.

Bifur lunged forward and missed by just an inch if only because the man fell backwards. Bilbo had almost completely forgot that there was a third drunken member of the group having been absorbed by Bifur's assault on the second. There was an angry shout as the nervous man shot forward to stick Bilbo in the neck with his small knife when an arrow suddenly came from nowhere and hit the man in the hand, forcing the knife to fall as he let out a pained shriek.
"Back away, Ratliff. I don't want to hurt you."

The hobbit watched the man writhe around on the ground in pain, gripping the shaft of the arrow with claw-like fingers, and couldn't seem to shake himself out of a daze to look at the newcomer.

Bifur made quick work of the other man as a tall, hooded figure made his way out of the dark of the night. If Bilbo could have torn his gaze away from the screaming man, he might have tried to catch a glimpse of this new person's face. Ratliff tore the arrow out of his hand and turned his manic, hate-filled eyes towards Bilbo.

"Don't you even think about it Ratliff, I will kill you if I have to."

Ratliff's mad eyes flicked between the hobbit and the hooded man for a few moments until his shaky hand began to lower the arrow towards the ground. Lowering his bow, the stranger let out a sigh and continued to make his way over. There was a tense moment in which Bilbo wasn't sure if he should be, oh, running as far and as fast away from this clearly insane person when Bifur seemed to decide that just because the man had lowered his arrow, didn't mean he was no longer a threat.

The dwarf thrust his pike, tearing across the man's neck who had no time to do anything but let out on last gurgle before falling onto his face. Blood and other unsavory people bits sprayed onto the hobbit's rather shocked face. There was… something wet and unpleasantly salty on his tongue. Bilbo was… well, he suddenly felt extremely unwell. He had seen goblins die, he had seen orcs die, but he had never… Never witnessed the death of a person or had said person's blood proceed to cover his face.

Bile rose quickly in his throat and the hobbit spun around before letting the contents of his stomach loose on the cobbled road. Bilbo spent a few minutes simply trying to hold himself as his stomach contracted again and again. Now on his hands and knees, the hobbit took a few heaving breaths as he squeezed his eyes shut trying to block out the world.

"Was that really necessary? I had it under control." The stranger's voice swam into Bilbo's pounding ears. He heard the dwarf angrily reply in the gruff language he had no understanding of. There was some irritated arguing that the hobbit couldn't make out as he tried to concentrate on calming his rapid heart rate.

The hobbit thought he heard feet stamping away as a leather-clad hand rested on his shoulder. "Are you alright?"

Bilbo wasn't sure he could quite make words yet and so settled on slowly nodding his head. "Are you alright?"

Curious green eyes looked down at him from a face framed with shoulder-length brown hair that seemed to be hastily half tied back.

"I'm…" Bilbo began shakily as he started to stand up, "I'm fine… just, uh, need a second."

The man's mouth quirked as he pulled Bilbo up the rest of the way onto his feet. "I'm sorry they followed you tonight mister…"

The hobbit quickly wiped his mouth before glancing up at one of his saviors, "Baggins. I'm Bilbo Baggins."

The man stood back up to his full and impressive height as he reached out a hand, "Never met a Baggins before, though that's probably to be expected, seeing as how I've never met a halfling either."
The hobbit smiled up at the green-eyed man who had a grim sort of smile as he shook the extended hand. "I am Bard, though you'll probably hear the people of this town call me the Bowman."

The man looked down at him as he gave Bilbo a small bow. The hobbit couldn't help but raise an eyebrow as he tried to shakily wipe blood away from his mouth. "Uh… yes I can see why."

Bard simply shrugged, "A nickname the town gave me, I'm not overly fond, but it you know how these things stick." He said as he affectionately caressed his bow, "just call me Bard."

Bilbo nodded as he tried to smile at the tall man, though the sensation on blood still trickling down his face not to mention the feeling of other things he didn't want identified made it rather difficult to force his face into any expression other than disgust.

"I should… uh, thank you Bard. If you and Bifur hadn't been here…” The hobbit paused as he looked around trying to locate the dwarf, "Where is Bifur?"

Bard shrugged once again, "The dwarf with the axe in his skull? Not sure, he yelled something at me then stalked off. Didn't seem much the type for conversation."

Bilbo gagged slightly as he pulled off a small chunk of what was most likely skin before he collected himself enough to answer. "No… he can't speak the common tongue anymore."

"Hm…” Bard turned his green eyes towards Bilbo's face. "You look… rather unwell."

The hobbit glared up at the man. "You'll have to pardon me, I'm not exactly used to being covered in blood."

Normally Bilbo would try to be as genial as possible towards a new acquaintance, especially one that had just helped him, but he was rather not in the mood to do anything except get cleaned up.

Bard looked at him for a moment before he grunted a gruff apology. "Of course, allow me to assist you," the man rummaged around in one of the leather pouches that were slung on his belt before pulling out a fine green cloth.

"Use this," Bard held out the cloth, gesturing for the hobbit to take it.

Bilbo eyed it nervously, the cloth looked far too nice to be used for something as disgusting as mopping up blood. "No, I - uh, thank you, but I couldn't possibly. I don't want to ruin it."

"I insist. It was my duty to patrol the streets tonight, I should have prevented anything from happening in the first place," Bard grunted as he held out the cloth firmly. The man spoke in a low, gruff voice and Bilbo could tell there was a conviction within him, a strong sense of duty and loyalty. He sort of… reminded the hobbit of Thorin, especially because it seemed to him that they both shared a similar grim disposition.

"I… thank you. Again, I suppose." Bilbo could see there was no persuading the man otherwise and so tried to keep the filth to one small corner of the cloth.

The hobbit started to wipe away at his face gingerly but felt the sinking suspicion that there was not much he could do for his hair without a nice long bath.

"So…” Bard began as he leaned against his longbow. "What are you doing here?"

The hobbit sighed as he carried on his wiping. "I'm guessing you weren't in the pub tonight."
Bard shook his head and continued to look down curiously at Bilbo. "No… It did seem rather…
rowdier than usual."

Given that most of the folk they’d met on this journey had either tried to stop them, eat them, or
imprison them; Bilbo Baggins was not entirely sure just how much he should reveal. Though…
After Gloin's outburst, there probably wasn't much the entire town didn't know already.

"We're, uh… on a quest of sorts."

Bard raised an eyebrow. "A… quest? What sort of journey would bring a dwarf and a halfling
together?"

Bilbo thought he had gotten as much of the blood off as he could and started to hand back the cloth,
though he couldn't help the hiss of pain when he moved his injured arm.

"A very complicated one."

Bard's eyes widened slightly as he scanned the hobbit, trying to locate where the injury was. They
swiftly settled on Bilbo's arm and he placed a firm hand under it so he could examine the limb better.
The man's face fell into a frown as he looked up at the hobbit.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Bilbo winced as Bard proceeded to poke around the tender flesh, "I sort of… forgot it was there I
suppose."

"It's not too deep," Bard spoke slowly as he finished his examination. "Though it could use some
stitches. Where are you staying?"

The hobbit tried to get his arm free, he didn't want to bother Bard anymore than he already had this
night. "I'm fine, really, you needn't trouble yourself."

The man simply scowled at him, "It is my duty to protect the anyone in this town, I will make sure
you are well."

The similarities between Bard and Thorin seemed to be piling up by the minute. If Bilbo knew
anything about dealing with Thorin it was that once the dwarf really set his mind to something, there
was almost nothing that could be done to persuade him against his stubborn nature.

The hobbit let out a soft sigh, "We're staying in the inn above the pub."

Bard gave him a serious nod before pulling him around and ushering the hobbit back towards the
pub where the rest of the dwarves still were. By the time they reached the doors, it seemed that most
of the men of women of Laketown had decided to call it a night. There were a few stragglers here
and there, but nearly all of the remaining occupants belonged to Thorin's company.

The dwarf prince was standing near the fire with his nephews, seemingly in deep conversation.
Looking up at the sound of the doors opening, Thorin gaze took a moment to take in the sight of a
blood-covered Bilbo followed by a tall man with his hand still gripping the hobbit's arm. There was a
brief moment where the dwarf's eyes widened before he was spurred into action. Bilbo couldn't be
entirely sure, but he thought he saw panic flood the bright blue eyes of their leader as he practically
ran over to the door.

"Master Baggins!" Thorin began as he approached Bilbo.
"What happened? Are you all right? Are you injured?" The dwarf gruffly grabbed the hobbit's shoulders and started to twist him left and right to see if there were any wounds.

"I'm fine Thorin --" Bilbo tried to get a word in but the dwarf seemed not to be listening.

"And you!" Thorin grunted as he glared up at Bard. "What did you do? Were you responsible for this?"

The man glared down at Thorin with an equal amount of distrust, "I did nothing to Mister Baggins."

The dwarf let out a snarl, clearly not believing him. Bilbo could see that this was… going to get very violent very fast if he didn't do anything. Wedging himself in-between the two, Bilbo placed his hands on Thorin's wrists and gave them a little shake.

"He's telling the truth, Thorin. Bard saved me, along with Mister Bifur. He was just making sure I got back in one piece."

Thorin seemed to need to exude a great deal of effort to shift his narrowed eyes from Bard to the hobbit. "Saved you from what?"

Bilbo smiled encouragingly at the dwarf if only to try and indicate that he was, in fact, fine. "There were some men, they followed me out of here. I think they thought I had some money because they knew you were from Erebor."

Thorin's face went from its furious scowl to looking slightly pained.

"…They attacked you because of me."

"No, Thorin, don't be ridiculous. They were drunk and I'm sure they were just looking for a fight, no matter the cause. I just happened to be there at the wrong time." The dwarf's expression twisted uncomfortably, "Anyway, Bard here and Mister Bifur helped me almost right away, so no harm done."

"You are injured, Mister Baggins," Bard shot in from behind him. "We should get that looked at."

Thorin's eyes widened again, "Why didn't you say anything?"

The dwarf shifted his glare up to Bard, "Why didn't you say anything?"

Bilbo sighed again, there was just no reasoning with anyone tonight. "I'll clean it up right now, Thorin. It's not Bard's responsibility, so don't go blaming him."

Thorin's mouth snapped shut for a moment but his if anything his expression got even darker.

"I will clean it for you, Master Baggins. You," the dwarf gestured at Bard, "can go now."

The man scowled right back and snorted gruffly, "It would be my pleasure."

Before he turned to leave, Bard put a hand on Bilbo's shoulder. "I'm sorry again about tonight, I hope you feel better Mister Baggins."

The hobbit shot him a smile, despite Thorin starting to try and pull him away by his good arm, "Thank you again, Bard. I hope we meet under better circumstances next time."

Bard gave him a small smile before walking back out the door again.
"Oi, stop pulling, Thorin. It won't make me move any faster," Bilbo ground out irritably as he found himself practically being dragged back to the bench by the fire.

"Well maybe if you moved at a reasonable pace I wouldn't have to." Thorin looked over his shoulder still frowning. They reached the bench where Fili and Kili were waiting with looks of concern plastered on each of their faces.

"Why are you covered in blood, Master Boggins?" Kili began worriedly as he examined the hobbit who was currently being forced down by a still rather angry Thorin.

"You aren't injured are you?" Fili added as he started to hover around Bilbo's back looking for wounds.

"I'm fine, just don't look it right now I suppose."

But the hobbit wasn't even sure that Fili heard him as Thorin cut in rather loudly over his words.
"He's wounded, cut on the arm. Fili go get some water, Kili go get the supplies out of Master Baggins' pack."

"Really now no need to fuss—" Bilbo began but rather hurriedly shut his mouth at the identical looks of nervous concern on all three faces as they each turned to glare at the hobbit.

"Enough, Master Baggins," they spoke in unison.

"We're going to get this taken care of and there's nothing you can do about it," Kili grumbled as he sprinted away towards the room Bilbo had put his things.

Fili at least gave him a small smile before starting to walk over to the bar to get some fresh water. "He's right, my friend, better just sit back and let us do our work."

The hobbit sighed and settled on the bench feeling resigned to the fact that even if he tried, there wasn't much he could do when the three dwarves of Durin's line set their minds to something. Thorin began to roll up his sleeve with a gentleness the hobbit rarely saw given to anyone except his nephews. Bilbo opened his mouth to break the now stretching silence but as he looked at his friend, the hobbit saw Thorin's glare promised swift retribution if he tried to get away.

"Unless you are about to say 'thank you very much, Thorin,' I don't want to hear it Master Baggins."

Bilbo's mouth snapped shut as he narrowed his eyes. 'Of all the pompous dwarves...' The hobbit thought to himself with no small amount of agitation. Thorin had finally rolled the sleeve up to the wound and as he tried to move the cloth around the cut Bilbo couldn't help but let out a small hiss of pain.

Thorin quickly moved his hands away but they remained close, hovering around the hobbit's arm.
"I...I am sorry, are you alright?"

Bilbo looked out of the corner of his eye to see his friend's face etched with concern and, despite the fact that he knew he shouldn't laugh, the hobbit couldn't help but let out a small chuckle as he pictured Thorin's apparent mother hen-ish tendencies being used on a small Fili and Kili.

"I'm fine, Thorin, really. I'm not going to break."

The dwarf shot him a small glare, no doubt for daring to laugh at him while he was trying to help, and resumed his rolling; though this time he did it with even more delicacy if that was possible.
"I never said you would, Master Baggins. That doesn't mean I wish to cause you undo harm if I can help it," Thorin grumbled as he pushed the rest of the sleeve onto Bilbo's shoulder.

"You know…" Bilbo began slowly as he leaned back slightly closer to the fire, closing his eyes, and feeling a nice, calm sense of warm wash over him despite being covered in blood. "You really should just call me Bilbo."

The hobbit felt Thorin's hands stop suddenly but there were a few moments in which Bilbo waited for an answer but heard nothing except the crackling of the fire.

"I mean, I call you Thorin. It just feels a bit strange that you wouldn't use my first name as well," the hobbit cracked one eye open as he spoke.

"I…" Thorin began as he made a show of examining the wound with probably more concentration than was absolutely necessary. "It would be… Dwarves would only presume such familiarity with our own people or very close friends."

Bilbo frowned slightly, "So you don't consider me your friend?"

"Of course I do!" Thorin shot in quickly with indignation before he paused.

"…You saved my life, Master Baggins."

The hobbit sighed feeling once again that he would never even come remotely close towards understanding all these strange dwarf customs. "So what's the problem then, hm? We're clearly friends, life-saving events aside."

Thorin sighed with a small measure of irritation like the hobbit should just inherently understand why it wasn't quite that simple, "Because… You didn't ask."

Bilbo opened both eyes to look at his friend with exasperation, "I need to ask you to call me Bilbo?"

The dwarf nodded looking relieved that he was finally catching on. "Yes, Master Baggins. It would be considered… rude for any dwarf to address you by your given name without permission."

Bilbo raised his good arm to place his face in his hand with a disbelieving laugh. These dwarves were so strange sometimes. It was odd for him to have to even consider giving someone permission to call him by his name! But, he supposed, the way hobbits lived their lives seemed to have much less… restrictive… And if Thorin was royalty, it was probably even worse for him.

"But you've called me Bilbo before, I could've sworn it."

Thorin looked away sheepishly, "Never without your family name as well, though even that would be considered improper. I apologize."

The hobbit felt his chuckle grow into proper laugh now, thinking that Thorin's hesitation to break with custom as was predictably ridiculous as the customs themselves. The dwarf looked to be fighting another scowl as he watched Bilbo hold his shaking body.

"It is not funny, Master Baggins."

The hobbit took a few deep breaths before turning on the seat to face Thorin, "No, of course not."

Though he had calmed his laughter, Bilbo couldn't seem to wipe the wide smile off his face. The dwarf crossed his arms indignantly as he glared at some spot slightly above the hobbit's face before
Bilbo raised his hand in placation.

"Thorin Oakenshield, I humbly request that you do me the honor of calling me by my first name." The dwarf prince quickly looked down at his friend, though his face seemed to indicate that he was at least somewhat surprised Bilbo was actually following through. After a few brief moments of silence the hobbit added with no small measure of cheek, "if it pleases you, of course."

Thorin remained silent for a few seconds before a small smile crept onto his face, "It… It would please me. Thank you, Bilbo."

The hobbit laughed softly as he turned back to his original position. "See, was that so hard?"

But before the dwarf could answer, Kili skidded back into view, "I got it, uncle!"

Thorin smiled at his nephew as he took the small bag of supplies and Fili sauntered back to them with a bowl of water.

Thorin rummaged around in the bag before he found the jar of Beorn's balm and quickly unscrewed it only to find that the contents were all but empty.

"Where is the rest?" The dwarf asked rather pointedly as he looked up at Bilbo.

"Well it got used, obviously." The hobbit replied with a slight roll of his eyes, "Your nephew needed some for his arm and I used the rest on you."

Frowning down at the jar as if he could simply will more into existence, Thorin's brows drew close together. "Why didn't you save some?"

Bilbo shot the dwarf a glare, "Because you needed it! I wasn't about to skimp on it when you were in such a state!"

Thorin shoved the jar back into the bag before muttering angrily, "I was fine."

The hobbit sat up immediately, he was not going to deal with this again. "Oh, you were not, by any measure of the word, fine—"

"What uncle meant," Fili began quickly as he shoved a cloth into Thorin's hand and Kili grabbed his uncle's wrist and started moving it up and down as to dunk it into the water. "Was that he wishes there was more left for you. Isn't that right?" Fili shot his uncle a pointed look.

"I… yes, that is what I meant, Bilbo." Thorin shook his wrist free of Kili's hand and started to clean the wound himself.

The brother's eyes widened simultaneously and exchanged a glance that went unnoticed by the other two before their faces broke out into twin grins. "See, Master Baggins, all just a misunderstanding."

Fili began as he smiled rather too sweetly at his uncle. "Yes, Master Boggins, no need to quarrel," Kili added with a simpering tone.

Thorin glared at his nephews but continued to work on cleaning the cut. "Why don't you two run along to bed, you must be very tired after all that playing tonight."

Kili frowned as he crossed his arms, "What? I'm not tired at all! In fact I think –"

But before he could finish Fili let out an exaggerated yawn to drown out his brother's voice. "Now that you say it, uncle, I am positively exhausted!"
Kili still looked ready to argue, "But you just said –"

Fili yawned loudly again as he swiftly elbowed his brother in the stomach, "Aren't you just absolutely exhausted Kili?"

"I…" Kili began as he looked from his brother, to his uncle, to a rather bemused Bilbo, "I – uh…"

Then his mouth formed a small 'O' as he seemed to catch onto what his brother was saying, "Y—yes! I am so tired! Never been more tired in my entire life! Can barely keep my eyes –"

Fili winked at Bilbo before wheeling his brother around, "I think we can all see that, Kili, why don't we go to bed."

Thorin sighed as he watched his nephews walk away to the stairs that led to where the beds were located and reached around in the bag before he located a thread and needle. Bilbo, still feeling rather confused, didn't notice there was a rather pointed and sharp object about to enter his skin until he felt a small prick.

"Ow! What're you doing?" The hobbit yelped as he jumped away.

"I am stitching your wound." The dwarf replied as if it was the most obvious thing in the world and he was not wielding a shiny instrument of pain.

"I – I…" Bilbo spluttered as he eyed the needle, "I don't need stitches! Look! It's tiny! Barely even a scratch!"

Thorin scooted forward on the bench still looking utterly unimpressed. "If I say you need stitches, you need stitches."

The hobbit pushed himself as far away from Thorin as the bench would allow but much sooner than he would have liked, Bilbo hit wall. The dwarf's brow rose as he simply shifted closer to him on the bench.

"Thorin. Thorin, come now," the hobbit laughed nervously as he tried to figure the out the best escape route away from being stabbed, "do you even know how to do this?"

Thorin gently grabbed Bilbo's arm as he steadied the slightly shaking limb. "I have taken care of many wounds, Bilbo, there is no need to be frightened."

The hobbit's laugh became a near manic cackle as he tried to pull away. "Frightened? Frightened? I'm not frightened, I just don't want to be stuck unnecessarily!"

Thorin kept his grip firm but not enough so that the hobbit couldn't get away if he really wanted to.

"Do you trust me?" The dwarf spoke quietly but Bilbo didn't have any trouble hearing him.

"I…" The hobbit shifted uncomfortably, still eyeing the needle.

"Do you trust me, Bilbo?"

Finally looking up at his friend, Bilbo Baggins saw in Thorin's face calm reassurance and in that moment he knew that he did trust the dwarf. He trusted him more than just about anyone. Not to always do the smart thing, or the reasonable thing, but Bilbo trusted Thorin to keep him safe. He trusted Thorin Oakenshield with his life.

And suddenly, as Bilbo searched his friend's eyes and saw only warmth and a solid sort of strength
there, letting Thorin stitch him up didn't seem like such an ordeal.

"I… I do trust you Thorin, of course I do."

The dwarf nodded resolutely as he pulled the hobbit's arm towards him, "Then let me do this, I promise it will be done soon enough."

The dwarf positioned the needle next to the cut but did not begin his task until he saw Bilbo nod slowly.

Thorin worked about his task with a silent efficiency that the hobbit had grown accustomed to. Bilbo could do little to hurry the process along aside from grit his teeth and try not to shift around too much. Looking over at his friend, the hobbit watched Thorin work with the steady concentration of someone who had done this a hundred times before. And yet, there was certain gentleness in how the dwarf pulled every stitch through Bilbo's skin, something that the hobbit very much appreciated.

Bilbo knew he should be able to deal with things like this without fear by now, seeing as how he had almost died a few times on this journey, but there was something about having a needle repeatedly piece his skin that the hobbit was finding hard to endure. Perhaps it was the… normalcy of the task. He had had stitches before after a few childhood mishaps running around Hobbiton.

To having something this regular, he supposed, happen to him on this fantastic journey reminded him of the old Bilbo, the Bilbo who wouldn't have done anything more than dream of going to far away lands with a company of dwarves; the Bilbo who have blanched at the very notion of being seeing an orcs or giant spiders.

It seemed to him that the old Bilbo was still inside him, still balked at the thought of violence and blood; but as he sat in front of the fire, covered in all manner of unsavory things, with a dwarven prince sewing up his skin, the new Bilbo was also there, was growing inside him. He could be afraid of needles and still rush into a group of blood-thirsty, massive spiders. He could miss home and yet still love the feeling of seeing the sunrise after sleeping on the open road. He could miss his neighbors and friends back home and still treasure the moments and memories he had made with this strange company of dwarves.

Bilbo couldn't help but smile at Thorin who took that moment to look up from his work, feeling eyes upon him. The dwarf pursed his lips slightly in question.

"…What is it? You are not going to faint, are you?"

The hobbit chuckled but quickly stopped at he jostled the thread still being stuck into his arm. "No, I'm not going to faint Thorin, I was just… thinking about things."

The dwarf raised a brow, but looked down again and continued his task.

"…I see." Thorin made a few more loops of the string before he added quietly, "About what?"

The hobbit hummed for a moment as he absently looked at the opposite corner of the pub. "I was thinking… about how I used to be. And I suppose… about how I've changed."

The dwarf paused for a moment but still looked down, "I do not think you have changed."

Bilbo felt his eyes widen as he looked over at his friend. "What? Really?"

The dwarf looked up with a slight frown, "I meant that you are still… good. That you have always been good."
The hobbit looked at his friend curiously, "I, uh… what?"

Thorin let out a little sigh as he started to work again. "You are more used to this life, to being on the road and having to defend yourself, but… what you are and what you were is still good. I think you are able to grow and change with your surroundings, Bilbo, but at your core… what makes you, you, is that you are kind and selfless and… brave."

The dwarf finished up the last stitch and deftly knotted the string before finally looking up at his friend.

Bilbo felt his face break out into a bright smile, "Thank you, Thorin. That is very kind of you to say."

The dwarf seemed to shift slightly uncomfortably as Bilbo continued to smile at him, "… It is true. I would say otherwise if it were not."

The hobbit laughed as he rolled down his sleeve. "I know. I can always trust you to speak your mind, even if you are being infuriatingly unreasonable."

Thorin rolled his eyes while he gathered up the supplies. As the dwarf made to sit up, Bilbo put a hand on his arm. "And thank you, Thorin. For the—" Bilbo made a vague gesture at his arm, "this."

Thorin nodded but the hobbit still held his arm, trying to find the right words to say. "Also for… being my friend. Being a very good friend. I suppose I just want you to know that I feel… fortunate for having known you."

Bilbo let go of his friend's arm as Thorin opened his mouth. The dwarf remained silent for a few moments but started to speak softly. "… And I you, Bilbo. You have been a truer friend to me than I deserve."

The hobbit laughed as he stood up and patted Thorin on the arm, "Nonsense! Who else would stitch me up when I get attacked by overly aggressive drunks?"

The dwarf narrowed his eyes as he looked down at Bilbo, "I do wish you would avoid getting into those situations in the first place."

The hobbit shrugged as he patted Thorin's arm once more, "It's not like I'm trying, it just seems to… happen."

The dwarf sighed as he put the supplies back into Bilbo's pack and handed it to him before grumbling.

"That is precisely what worries me. You should get washed up and go to bed, Bilbo. I have a feeling tomorrow will be quite an ordeal."

The hobbit nodded and said his goodnight then made his way up the stairs to the washroom.

The water wasn't warm, but Bilbo was relieved enough to be getting the blood out of his hair and clothes that he couldn't really care less about the temperature. At least the inn had some thick, soft cloths to dry himself with that, while not being quite to the standard of Bag End, certainly were preferable to what they had been dealing with on the road.

Bilbo made his way into the room he was sharing with the dwarf brothers who had all but insisted that they do so. Upon walking in while toweling his hair dry, Bilbo saw Fili and Kili had pushed all three beds together to make one massive bed. The hobbit couldn't help but let out an exasperated,
albeit affectionate, sigh.

"I believe," came a voice from underneath the mound of covers that all but exploded outward as Kili shot up with a grin on his face, "that Master Boggins has finally decided to retire."

"Ugh, Kili -" came a groan from the other side of the bed, "go back to sleep, you know no one else can get any with you shouting all the time," Fili's face came into view, bleary eyed, and his hair pulled up into a tangled mound on top of his head.

Kili shot his brother a dark look as he pouted, "But I wanted to make sure Master Boggins was okay! You said you didn't mind if I waited up for him!"

Fili sat up and spat a stray braid out of his mouth, "Fine. Master Baggins does your injury bother you further?"

The hobbit chuckled as he looked at the brothers. "Uh, no? Thorin stitched it up pretty well I think."

Fili nodded absently, "You see, brother? He's fine. Now sleep."

The blond dwarf reached across the expanse of bed and pushed his brother down so Kili's eager face was stuck in a pillow.

Bilbo ignored the muttered bickering as he set his stuff down and made his way over to the bed. "If you two insist one making these beds into a bed, then can you please save the arguing for tomorrow?"

Kili immediately stopped pulling on his brother's hair and Fili loosened his chokehold on Kili's neck.

"Oh fine then, Master Boggins. No fun as always," Kili stuck out his tongue before scooting over to make room for him in the middle.

The hobbit shuffled around until he was comfortable and finally collapsed in a heap, not having realized just how tired he was from the day's events. There were a few moments of shuffling as they adjusted but soon enough there was blissful, calm silence.

Bilbo had almost fallen asleep when he heard a small voice from his left, "… Master Boggins?"

The hobbit turned his head so he faced Kili. "Hm?"

The dwarf looked at him with concern, "You sure you're alright?"

Bilbo smiled at the young prince and nodded, "I am."

Kili smiled back before letting out a small yawn, "Good."

The hobbit turned his head back but he felt Kili shuffle a little closer before they fell asleep in comfort for the first time in what felt like a lifetime.
Chapter 17

Bilbo Baggins, as what used to be his usual custom in the mornings, was going on a walk. Most of the dwarves were sleeping off what was no doubt a rather unpleasant headache and so the hobbit found himself alone wandering the relatively deserted streets of Lake Town on a chill but sunny autumn morning.

Fili and Kili had offered to accompany him on his stroll but after taking one look at the large bruises under their eyes, Bilbo insisted that they go back to sleep and that, despite his recently rather spotty record of being assaulted, he would not be attacked in the street.

Though his assurances were firm to the dwarf brothers, Bilbo very secretly hoped that he was not being overconfident in this new place that had already proved to be rather dubiously guarded by one shaggy looking man with a bow.

But, Bilbo thought as he took a deep breath of fresh air, it was hard to believe that anything bad could happen while the sun was still shining clear and there were no giant spiders or nasty goblins on their tails.

Placing one foot in front of the other, the hobbit started to make his way down the street. In the light of mid-morning it didn't seem as… scary, he supposed. Lake Town itself wasn't even that large from what he could tell. Bigger than Hobbiton of course, but as he was beginning to realize, not much in this world wasn't.

The wooden houses themselves were closely crammed together, their roofs looked to be the sort that might have been grand some time ago but many years and a turn of fortune had caused their sturdy beauty to fade. As he looked closer, Bilbo could see that most of the pillars had the patterns of different kinds of fish etched into them with a proud hand. Though many had started to fade as nature began to take back her wooden children, moss and other soft green things had begun their steady creeping up the houses.

The hobbit reached up to trace one of the fish, but as his fingers were about to make contact with the wood Bilbo heard a shout ring through the streets. Glancing up quickly the hobbit tried to see just where exactly the commotion was coming from so he could very swiftly run in the exact opposite direction. He was most certainly not about to get caught up in more unnecessary mischief so soon after last night.

There were a few moments of silence as Bilbo strained his ears until he heard the pounding of footsteps. The trouble was they they very suspiciously didn't sound like they were coming from one
of the alleys or side streets. They sounded like they were coming from above him, like someone was running on top of the closely packed roofs.

'Which is, of course,' he thought with a scoff, 'completely ridiculous. No one runs on top of their house unless their house is in the ground.'

Still… Bilbo was starting to feel like he should probably head back before he inevitably got pulled into some mess or another that in no way should even remotely be considered his business. He didn't want to say it was becoming a habit or anything of that nature, but he was willing to admit he had a rather unfortunate knack for trouble.

Turning on his heel, Bilbo was about to start making his way back when the soft padding of feet stopped. The hobbit scrunched his eyes shut.

Bilbo felt his Took curiosity begin to well inside him again. 'No. I am not looking up there because there is nothing to look at. Nothing at all. Nothing at all.'

It took every ounce of his willpower to open his eyes again and start moving forward, to ignore the itch in his neck to turn just a little bit up. However, Bilbo Baggins didn't have to look up, he didn't even have to move forward to see what sort of unsavory hooligan had taken to running across rooftops because just he was about to make his way back to his friends, a pair of boots flew into his vision followed closely by what he could only surmise was the rest of this person and not, as his eyes suggested, a brown blur.

There was a flurry of leather and hair as the person fell into a tight roll onto the ground before standing up to face him.

"Bard?"

Bilbo choked as he clutched his rapidly thumping heart. The green-eyed man looked down at him with a level of impassivity that the hobbit found to be slightly inappropriate for someone who had just jumped off a roof.

"Oh. Hello, Mister Baggins." Bard looked down at him not with a smile, per say, but rather more of a not wholly displeased grimace.

"'Oh. Hello, Mister Baggins' is all you have to say?" The hobbit glared as he took a few deep breaths to calm himself.

"Do you have different customs in your land?" Bard asked curiously as he crossed his arms. "You can't really expect me to know how halflings greet each other—"

Bilbo cut in before the man could get any further, "I was referring to you jumping off of a roof."

Bard was silent for a moment until he gave the hobbit a short nod. "Fair enough. I should be moving—"

Whatever he had been about to say was drowned out as six of what appeared to be the town's guards came hurtling into sight at the end of the street.

"There he is! Get him, lads! And his accomplice too!" Bard let out a little sigh as Bilbo's glance moved rapidly between the bowman and the very angry looking guards with drawn swords running towards them.

"His a-accomplice?" The hobbit spluttered with indignation before turning on Bard, "They think I'm
with you!"

The man scowled as he narrowed his eyes towards the guards, "I would not suggest staying long enough to argue."

"But I—" Bilbo hissed with nervous anger, "I haven't even done anything yet!"

Bard simply shrugged as he bent down slightly, "I am sorry for this."

The hobbit had started to back away slightly with narrowed eyes.

"For what?"

The man moved forward so swiftly that Bilbo didn't have the faintest idea what was going on until he felt his feet leave the ground.

"You people really—"

The hobbit grunted, jostling from side to side as Bard swiftly made his way through the narrow streets with Bilbo tucked under his arm.

"Need to stop thinking you can just pick me up—"

Bard jump down a set of steps causing the hobbit to yelp mid-stream.

"And go—" they skidded around a corner, "gallivanting through the streets!"

Bard ducked into what appeared to be an old, run-down house filled with a multitude of aged, decaying objects. Putting Bilbo down on the floor, Bard quickly stood up and peered out the hole where there should have been a window.

"We needed to leave quickly."

"Oh—oh we needed to leave quickly, did we?" Bilbo shot back with no small measure of sarcasm dripping from his words. "You know what, I'm actually fairly certain it was you who needed to leave quickly!"

Bard glared at him before turning back to watch the streets, "I said I was sorry."

The hobbit threw up his arms in frustration, his voice going steadily higher and higher. "Then everything's alright! I'm not running from the town guards and they don't want to arrest me. How silly I was being—"

The bowman stuck out a hand to cover Bilbo's mouth and put a finger to his mouth. "A little discretion, if you would be so kind."

The hobbit put both his hands on the one covering his mouth and yanked the offending appendage down before whispering, "What did you even do?"

Bard was silent for a moment longer until he glanced down at Bilbo.

"I was… doing my duty."

Feeling suddenly confused, the hobbit realized that perhaps this man was not the city guardian he had thought from last night.
"And why would the guards not want you to do that?"

"They… we do not see eye-to-eye on what is best for the people of Lake Town. Most of guards are too deep in the pocket of the Master and the rest are too afraid to say anything different."

Bilbo's eyes widened slightly. "The… Master?"

Bard nodded shortly before turning back to the street.

"He's—" But there was suddenly another shout from the street,

"Fan out boys! He has to be down here! Anyone who brings me the Bowman will be handsomely rewarded!"

Bard's already grim face fell into a thunderous scowl. "We need to leave."

Bilbo started to nervously play with the sleeves of his jacket feeling altogether like this would not end will for him and couldn't stop his steam of muttering. "Oh bugger. Oh bugger, bugger, bugger!"

Bard began pushing him towards the back of the room where another door was barely hanging off its hinges.

"Move, Mister Baggins, and be quick about it."

The hobbit made his way to the back as fast as he could, winding around piles of old things and trying not to choke on the dust that plumed out whenever he accidentally hit one of the stacks. Finally shoving the broken door aside Bilbo stumbled out onto the street followed by a coughing Bard. Looking around quickly, Bard let out another little sigh as he shook out his hair.

"I think we lost—" But at that very moment, the old door seemed to decide that right then was a fitting occasion to fall to the ground in a spell of dramatics, taking out several piles of musty objects.

Crash after crash echoed around the street, each new noise causing Bilbo to flinch. The clattering stopped and the silence rung in their ears as Bard and the hobbit shared a look of equal resignation.

"What was that?" They heard a shout come from the next street over.

"It came from over there!" Answered another voice.

"I think we should go." Bilbo started to back away from the door.

Bard, despite his ever-present glum calmness, gulped a little as he nodded in agreement.

"A wise suggestion." The bowman made to bend down, probably - much to Bilbo's annoyance - to pick him up again.

"I am not a child, Bard. I can run."

The man shrugged but before he could reply, one of the town guards burst through an ally down the road from them. "I found them, I found them!"

Knowing Bard would be able to keep up with him about ten times over, Bilbo did not wait for the man as he started to sprint down the street.

"Where do we go?" The hobbit panted as he pumped his legs as fast as they would go.
"Follow me!" Bard grunted as he ran in front of the hobbit and took a sharp left into another ally. Before taking the turn himself, Bilbo made the mistake of looking over his shoulder to see there was no longer just one guard chasing them, but all six. And they were gaining on them. Fantastic.

They sprinted down the narrow path, over old cobblestone and dirt. Bilbo ran after Bard who took them through twisted back alleys and under wooden arches. There was no longer a comfortable distance between them and the guards, all of whom seemed to know the town just as well as Bard did. The people of Lake Town had started to filter into the streets now, making their escape that much harder.

The more they ran, the more people filled the streets with apparently nothing better to do than block their path.

"Anyone who stops them," they heard a guard call out from behind them, "will get a cut of the gold!"

Everyone seemed to stop at that instant and all the faces watched the man and the small hobbit sprint through the streets. Feeling a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach, Bilbo couldn't help but remember the looks of greedy hunger they had on their faces when Thorin's identity slipped out.

No one immediately did anything to stop them and the hobbit foolishly allowed himself to hope perhaps the people of Lake Town wouldn't try to hinder them until he saw an old man stick out his foot right in his path. The hobbit was running fast enough that he could do little but try to protect his face as he fell to the hard, stone ground. Bard ran for a few more moments but seemed to realize that he was currently short one small, hobbit-shaped figure at his side.

Skidding to a halt, the bowman saw Bilbo laying on the ground and started to run back.

"No! Bard go!"

The guards were just about on top of them now and the hobbit would just have to hope that once he explained to the guards it was all a misunderstanding, they would let him go. Bard ignored him as he started to lift the hobbit onto his feet but was almost instantly tackled by one of the guards. Another placed a gauntletted hand on Bilbo's collar and yanked him up, holding a small sword to his neck. The bowman and one of the guard's grappled with each other for several confused moments until Bard placed a well-aimed fist to the man's head, knocking him out cold.

Wiping blood from his nose, Bard spun around only to see that Bilbo currently had a very sharp and very deadly piece of steel to his throat. "Surrender, bowman, or I'll cut your little friend."

Bard's face hardened as he automatically went for his bow. "Release him, Otho, and maybe I'll consider letting you go unharmed."

The guard let out a grunting laugh. "I don't think you understand how this works. See, you move an inch and I will kill this little man. Not even you can draw your bow that fast."

Bard's eyes narrowed as he glanced from Bilbo to the guard before slowly lowering his hand down to his side.

"Go get him, lads." Otho sneered, "I think the Master would very much like a visit from our favorite vigilante."

The remaining guards lunged forward and began hitting Bard until the man fell to his knees, taking blow after blow to his body. One of the guards pulled away his longbow as another hit him in the
face. Bard spat out the blood filling his mouth onto the guards face as he shot his assailant a bloody smirk.

"That the best—" but before he could finish another guard placed a hard fist into his stomach.

"Get a move on!" Otho shouted at his men, "there'll be time for that later."

Keeping his grip tight on Bilbo's collar, the guard practically dragged him through the streets as his companions pulled Bard along. They wound their way through several unfamiliar roads, the crowd behind them growing steadily. Soon they had a procession of what seemed to Bilbo to be about half the town gathered behind them.

They reached the town square after what seemed like an eternity. In the center there was a building placed on a mound of dirt to raise it about all the others around it. It looked far more grand to Bilbo than any of the others he had seen in the town but it was almost... too extravagant, like the owner decided he must have every expensive and fashionable piece of architecture available and so put them all together in one garish mesh of affluence.

The crowd formed a ring around them as the guards threw Bilbo and Bard into the center.

"Master!" Otho shouted out and the group of people seemed to grow uneasily quiet. "I've brought you a gift!"

As the silence stretched, the hobbit shuffled as close as he could get to Bard and shook him lightly. "Are you alright?"

The Bowman coughed and spit out another glob of blood but nodded, "I've had worse. You?"

Bilbo forced his face into a strained smile, "I'm fine."

Bard sat up but not without difficulty. Clutching his stomach, the Bowman winced as he pushed upward and the hobbit's hands started to flutter nervously.

"Maybe you should just stay down," Bilbo urged his companion with a hushed whisper.

Looking over at the hobbit from the side of his eyes, Bard let out another bloody cough. "I will not let him see on my knees."

Bilbo considered the Bowman for a moment, seeing the fierce determination in his eyes and knowing that there was a violent, vibration of hatred buzzing with agitation right beneath the surface the man's skin.

"I..." Bilbo began but hesitated almost immediately.

He knew Bard should stay down and not provoke these men further. He might be a novice healer, but even he could tell that the man would need to be thoroughly bandaged and rest for at least a few days. But as he looked at those green eyes, eyes hardened by some tragedy, eyes that were both familiar and foreign to him.

They were a different color, set in a different face, but Bilbo Baggins had grown to know that look. The look of bitter anger twisted around some old, festering wound. He knew that look well because he saw it in Thorin every day and as soon as the hobbit realized they were the same, he knew what Bard needed now was not reasonable or rational, what he needed was to face this person, this 'Master' with a strength he didn't have. Strength Bilbo would have to give him.
Standing up on slightly shaky legs, Bilbo hooked his arms underneath one of Bard's and gave a great
heave, pulling up the Bowman to his knees and then to his feet. The man slowly stood but leaned
heavily against Bilbo the entire time, his hand eventually resting on the hobbit's shoulder.

Bard's eyes were permanently fixed on the rich, wooden door that stood still on the face of the great
building in front of them. As the minutes passed where nothing happened save for the thickening
atmosphere of anticipation, his hand gripped Bilbo tighter and tighter. Whatever was about to
happen, Bilbo thought now feeling utterly resigned, was most definitely not going to be good.

Time slipped by, slowly it seemed, if only because Bilbo had taken to counting every single
heartbeat in his chest. The crowd had grown until it appeared that the entirety of Lake Town was
gathered around them. It was their faces that confused the hobbit. It seemed to him if Bard was a
common criminal they would be… well, happy to see him captured. But as his eyes scanned the
people closest to him, he saw no glee, no righteous satisfaction. Instead he saw some mixture of
dread and something of a slow horror. As if they knew what was about to happen but couldn't quite
accept the fact that it was occurring now.

The door at the top of the steps leading the building burst open and through it came a man. Not a
great man, as Bilbo had been expecting, but a… sick man. He was not covered in boils or coughing
wildly. It was not that type of sickness, but as the hobbit looked at the horribly blotched face framed
by stringy red hair that seemed more grease than anything with beady blue eyes almost clouded by a
greedy thirst for more, more, more; Bilbo knew the man was ill in his desires.

"Well, well, well..." The Master began in a revoltingly saccharine tone, "if it isn't Bard the Bowman
come calling to visit my most humble door so early in the morning."

Everything about the man beside Bilbo seemed to tense, his fingers digging sharply in the hobbit's
shoulder. Though the Master was clearly expecting some response, Bard simply remained silent,
though his face was so cold Bilbo thought in that moment it could have turned even boiling water to
frigid ice.

"Nothing to say for yourself?" The Master continued as he made his way down the steps as quickly
as his massive girth would allow, "that is very unusual for you..."

Bard's eyes narrowed even further, never leaving the other man's face. As soon as the Master was
close enough, Bard tilted his head back and spit a great glob of blood onto the luridly patterned shoe
in front of him.

The Master's face grew red and furious as he started to splutter with anger while a small man clothed
all in shabby black robes scurried forward and dropped to his knees to clean his lord.

"Get off!" Hissed the Master as he kicked his servant in the face. "Otho, teach our friend some
respect."

The captain of the guard started walking towards them with a viciously delighted smile on his face. "
It would be my pleasure, sir."

Bilbo's brain sluggishly tried to catch up with what was going on. Glancing nervously at Bard, the
hobbit knew the man couldn't take many more hits like he had if the damage wasn't going to be
permanent. Making a split-second decision, Bilbo turned himself so that he was fully facing the
guard and spread out his hands in defiance.

"You can't! Whatever Bard did, it isn't worth killing him over! I won't let you do it."
Otho's face darkened at the prospect of being impeded by a halfling of all things. "You won't let me, half-man?"

The captain of the guard stopped when he was barely two feet from where Bilbo and Bard were standing.

"I – no, no I will not stand by while you brutes beat a man to death!"

Otho was silent for a moment before he let out a roaring laugh. "And just what are you going to do? Bite my ankle?"

There was a chorus of snide laughter from the rest of the guards as Bilbo bitterly regretted leaving Sting back in the room of the inn.

"I may be small, but at least I am not a coward willing to kick a man when he's down," Bilbo shot back feeling both furious and intensely nervous.

Otho immediately stopped laughing as his angry eyes fixed on Bilbo. "What did you say?"

The hobbit let out a manic laugh as he planted his feet and ignored the voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like Thorin telling him to shut up. "I called you a coward, or are you an imbecile as well? I just want to be accurate –"

Bilbo felt a gloved fist hit his face, right beside his mouth. The pain was intense and throbbing, but as he brought his hand up, he couldn't feel any loose teeth, which was, in a way, a mercy. The impact had forced his head to snap to the side as he stumbled back into Bard who thankfully had found some strength in him to brace them against a fall.

Wiping the blood away from his split lip, Bilbo glared up at Otho who was smirking down at him.

"You would let this child do your fighting for you now?" The Master taunted as he watched the scene unfold, "I knew you had no honor, bowman, but I've never known you to back down from a fight."

Bard let out another cough as he turned his furious gaze from Otho to the Master, "And what would you know of honor?"

The red-haired man smiled back at Bard though it was really more of a twisted smirk. "Only that it is the one thing that has kept me from having your stain wiped from this town. After all, my sister would have lamented your death for reasons that I must admit escape me."

There was a flurry of movement as Bard lunged forward and Bilbo stumbled back. Reaching down to the small knife strapped to his leg, the bowman pulled it out in a flash and brought it to the Master's neck.

"Do not speak of her!"

The Master tried to step back, his beady eyes flashing with fear, but the vice grip of Bard's other hand on his neck made it impossible.

"O-Otho!" The portly man spluttered as he tried to claw at Bard's arm. The guard stepped forward but was stopped as Bard pressed the knife into the Master's throat harder.

"Don't. Move."
Turning back to the red face that was now leaking sweat profusely, Bard brought his mouth to the Master's ear, "If you ever mention her again, I will —"

The red-haired man let out a strained laugh over Bard's voice as he tried to wiggle away, "What? Mention Liana? I'm not the one responsible for her death, I believe —"

The Master choked as the knife was pushed even harder into his neck. "The blame for that lies exclusively with you."

Bard let out an angry hiss as he tightened his grip, "You did nothing to help us! You wouldn't even look at her!"

The Master laughed again. "As I shouldn't have! Liana —" the knife dug in again, "m-my sister was the one who chose to bed a common criminal. It is not my fault your past caught up with you and she suffered for it!"

Bard's eyes grew wild as he coughed again, "I – I stopped! She made me stop!"

The Master seemed to sense the bowman was losing his ground and pounced. "And so much good it did her, I'm sure she appreciated your efforts as your 'colleagues' cut her to pieces!"

"You didn't… you didn't help us." Bard countered, his voice shaking with a gnawing sadness.

"Helped you? And what? Gotten dismembered myself? My sister made her choice, as did you."

The bowman's hand started to fall from the Master's neck, "I did – I did what I could to save her—"

The Master let out a bitter laugh as he started to slowly inch away from Bard. "And what did you do to save your child?"

Bard's grip seemed to loosen as his eyes widened. Otho took the opening to lunge forward and tackle the bowman to the ground. The guard knocked the knife out of Bard's hand as he rained blow after blow down on him.

"Stop!" Bilbo shouted, wincing as he opened his mouth, but nothing happened. "I said stop!"

The hobbit rushed forward and grabbed the back of the guard's collar and yanked as hard as he could. Otho fell back on top of Bilbo and twisted, his angry fist raised to hit the hobbit until the Master bade his dog to stop.

"Enough."

The Master walked over to where Bard was curled on the ground, blood and tears leaking from him as his arms shielded his face from the hands that were no longer beating him.

Toeing him with disgust etched into every line on his face, the Master sneered. "I allow you to be in Lake Town, Bard. I allow you to fight the criminals and patrol in your deluded attempts at redemption. I allow you to live."

"But steal from me again, touch me again, and I will have Otho cut every limb from your body so you can feel how my sister felt as she died. Her memory will not protect you anymore, bowman."

"Otho." The Master turned his twisted face to the guard, "Relieve our friend of his hand. Perhaps that will remind him who holds the power in this town."
The guard smirked back and turned away from Bilbo and he unsheathed his dirk. The hobbit glanced wide-eyed between the blade and Bard's shaking body. He couldn't let this happen! It wasn't – it wasn't fair!

The hobbit scrambled up and sprinted so he was between Otho and Bard. "No! You can't just go – go cutting off hands!"

The Master let out a laugh as he watched. "I can do anything I want, half-man. I own this town. And Bard here would do well to remember that."

Bilbo could see the hatred set deep in those small blue eyes. This was personal, that much was obvious, which meant the hobbit would probably do well not to get in the middle of it. But as he looked down at Bard, at the man who had saved him last night, he knew there was good in him. Whatever the man's past was, whatever was between himself and the Master of Lake Town, Bard the Bowman was worth saving, and Bilbo could not just stand there and do nothing.

"I won't – I won't let you do it."

The hobbit had hoped his voice would have rung across the square with the assured confidence of the fearless heroes he had read about many years ago, but there was no denying the nervous shake that his words were laced with.

The Master looked at him of a moment but scoffed as he turned around to go back into his house. "Take his hand as well, Otho."

"I won't, I won't let you do it."

The guard looked at Bilbo with a vicious pleasure. "Not so brave now, are you?"

The hobbit eyed the steel as dread filled his veins, cold and cloying. Taking a few deep breaths, Bilbo tried to calm himself, to think like a brave fighter, to think like Thorin when suddenly he heard the most welcome voice in the world burst out of the crowd.

"What is going on here?"

Bilbo's face snapped to the cluster of people when he saw Thorin Oakenshield push his way through the mass of bodies followed closely by his nephews and the rest of the company. The crowd started to part and make room for the company. Soon enough Thorin stood in the middle of the open space, his arms crossed and chin raised, looking every bit the dwarven prince he was.

The Master spun around and his eyes widened as he saw the group of dwarves.

"W—Who are you and what are you doing here?" The red-haired man tried to sound authoritative but his voice slightly stuttered.

Thorin glared at the man and for a few moments, sizing him up and apparently not impressed by what he saw.

"We are the dwarves of Erebor and we have come to reclaim our homeland."

There was a hushed silence for a few seconds as the Master stared back at Thorin with a gaping mouth and the whispers of the crowd started to build. Looking around the square, Thorin seemed to notice there was someone else between the guard and the man curled on the ground.

Apparently Fili noticed at near the exact same time as their uncle as he all but shouted, "Master Baggins?"
The hobbit poked his head around the hulking guard's form. "Uh… yes, hello..."

He tried to smile but the bruise on his mouth had started to swell and made it all too difficult.

Fili and Kili ran forward and drew their swords as they placed themselves in front of their companion and glared at Otho who looked nothing but bewildered at the developing situation.

Fili glanced over his shoulder. "Are you alright, Master –" bright blue eyes fixed on his bleeding mouth.

Fili's eyes narrowed, his words halting as he turned back to Otho who was starting to back away slowly. "Where are you going friend? You haven't been introduced to my swords yet."

The blond dwarf started forward, letting the tips of his twin blades scrape across the stone ground as he grinned up at the guard and Kili moved to stand right in front of the hobbit.

"It would be very rude to leave before proper introductions have been made."

"Fili," Thorin spoke with a dangerous sort of calm in his voice. "Stay your blade."

Turning to his uncle, Fili lifted one of his swords to point inches from the guard's face. "But uncle! He hurt Master Baggins, I can't just let him –"

"Come now, come now," The Master seemed to finally find his voice. "No need for that! I'm sure we can reach some sort of understanding."

Thorin ignored everyone as he made his way forward until he was right in front of the hobbit. "Are you injured, Bilbo?"

Shaking his head, Bilbo took the hand offered to him and stood up shakily. "N-no, not really. Bard is much worse off."

Thorin reached up and gently turned the hobbit's chin so he could examine it closer. The dwarf let out a small sigh as he examined Bilbo's cheek.

"What did I say about getting into trouble?"

The hobbit couldn't help but let out a chuckle. "That I should try my utmost to avoid it. Though to be fair, this one wasn't my fault either."

Thorin smiled though it was the exasperated, strained sort, "There will be some bruising, but I think you will be fine." Eyes suddenly turning hard as stone, Thorin looked over to where the Master was still standing.

"You. What is the meaning of this?"

"I – I…" The Master spluttered as his eyes shifted from the swords in Fili's hands to the great elvish blade strapped to Thorin's back. "I'm sure it was all a misunderstanding! Our quarrel is with Bard, not your friend here!"

Thorin's eyes narrowed as he glared back. "Then would you care to explain why he has been assaulted by what appears to be the head of your guard?"

"He – he refused to let us dispense justice!"

Fili let out a snort. "And your sort of justice is beating a man in the street, is it?"
The Master flushed even more red than he already was and took a short step forward. "You see here, this is my town, how it is run is no business of some wandering pack of dwarves!"

Fili let out a small growl as he pointed his other sword towards the balding man but Thorin spoke up first.

"You ordered one of your guards to attack a member of my company, I think you'll find that you have made it my business."

The Master was visibly shaking now, whether it was rage or nerves, Bilbo had no idea.

"Your friend was aiding a known criminal, his punishment was well within my right to give. I might ask just to whom I am speaking to that he thinks he has the authority to undermine my judgment?"

"I am Thorin Oakenshield, Son of Thrain, Son of Thrór, King under the Mountain. I have no authority here, but there was a time when the people of this town counted themselves among the allies of Erebor. If you would like to do so again, I suggest you call off your man."

Thorin stood tall, his shoulders back and face set in an imperious frown. If there was ever a time Bilbo had seen what must have been many years of royal training, it was now.

The hobbit turned to look at the red-haired man and could almost see the gears turning inside that glistening head. Bilbo could tell having a forgotten would-be king order him around grated against the Master's nerves and yet there was also obvious opportunity in this situation. Having no doubt heard the rumors of the dragon's supposed absence from the Lonely Mountain, there was now a great deal of wealth sitting perhaps completely unprotected.

From looking at the man's house, Bilbo knew the cool touch of gold was something the Master's fingers knew well and craved to feel more of. But he was also a fearful man, a cautious man, a cunning man. And a man like that never did the dirty work when there were others around to do it for him. Yes, Bilbo could see plain as day the Master knew a potentially profitable opportunity when it was staring him in the face.

The Master took a deep breath before plastering a giant, sickly sweet smile on his face as he gave Thorin a little bow.

"Of course, Master Oakenshield, nothing would delight me more than reviving that old, noble friendship. Otho," he gestured at the guard. "Put away your sword."

Otho glanced between the Master and where Bilbo and Bard were being protected by a glaring Kili. "But – but we need to –"

Cutting him off abruptly, the Master shot in with an angry hiss. "We need to do nothing. Put away your sword immediately or I will replace you with someone better equipped to follow orders."

The head guard reluctantly sheathed his steel before backing away to stand next to the Master. He kept his angry eyes on Bilbo the entire time but seemed to think losing his position wasn't worth exacting his punishment on the hobbit.

"See?"

The Master clapped his hands together with another smile. "All friends here! Why don't we talk somewhere more… private, Master Oakenshield. My house is right here, very convenient."

Thorin glanced back at his company and nodded, though it seemed to Bilbo to be somewhat
"Yes, I suppose we should."

The portly man's grin widened further to reveal almost mossy green teeth. "Of course your… company is welcome."

The Master turned and started up the stairs to his door and opened it with a flourish.

Thorin jerked his head to indicate that the company should follow and they filed into the house one by one. Soon enough it was just Thorin and Bilbo in empty space left by the still muttering crowd.

"Coming?" Thorin looked at the hobbit with concern, eyeing the now blooming bruise.

Bilbo shook his head gently as he glanced down at Bard. "I, uh – I don't think me being there would help negotiations any. Plus, Bard needs someone to look at his wounds…"

The dwarf nodded slowly. "Are you sure you will be alright? I can delay the meeting for a time…"

Bilbo clapped a hand on his friend's arm. "Of course, Thorin. Go do you prince business; glare at some innocents, mock some subordinates, scowl majestically…"

Though the dwarf glared at him, Thorin seemed to be put at least somewhat at ease at Bilbo's teasing. "If you're sure…"

"I am. Run along my prince and don't be late for dinner!"

Thorin rolled his eyes before making his way to the door and entering into the Master's lair.

The hobbit knelt down beside Bard. "Uh… Bard? You aren't unconscious are you?"

The man groaned from underneath his arms, "if that I were." He let out a rather wet sounding cough before removing his arms from his face.

Bilbo couldn't help the small gasp that escaped his lips as he saw Bard's face. Well, calling it a face at this juncture was a bit generous. It seemed as if every part of flesh was covered in the blood that had leaked from his nose and mouth. One eye was swollen like a great purple plum and his lips were split in several places.

"That bad, huh?"

The hobbit forced himself to look back up at the only visible green eye.

"It's, uh… no, it's fine! Totally and completely fine! Just a little… bloody?"

Bard let out a small laugh that turned into a coughing fit. "You are a terrible liar."

The hobbit glared down at Bard.

"Fine. You look completely awful. Let's go back to the inn, I have some supplies there at least."

"You needn't bother, Mister Baggins, I'll be fine."

Bilbo closed his eyes and prayed for a just a sliver of the patience he needed to deal with the stubborn sort of folk he apparently was determined to associate with these days.
"You are not fine and I am not wasting time listening to you try and convince me otherwise. You are coming with me and that's that."

They spent a good ten minutes just getting Bard into a standing position as the crowd dissipated. It was lucky, the hobbit thought with relief, that the inn wasn't actually that far from the town square and so they had only to limp down several streets until they reached the familiar building.

Bilbo sat Bard down in front of the fire and went to fetch some fresh water and his supplies. It seemed so long ago that he was the one being stitched up even though it had only been the previous night.

Setting the bowl of water down next to Bard, the hobbit dipped the cloth and started to wipe away the blood that coated the bowman's face. Once most of the red had been wiped away he supposed it didn't look... well, it still looked bad, there was no arguing that, but it didn't look as bad. It was a shame he had none of Beorn's balm left, but thankfully Oin kept a stash of some dwarvish variety.

Bilbo started to rub it into Bard's forehead where there was a large cut running horizontally across his brow when he felt his curiosity start nag at the back of his mind.

"Why do they... why does the Master hate you so much? Are you really a criminal?"

Bard closed his good eye with a sigh.

"I... was, many years ago. Until I met his sister and... then I wasn't I suppose."

Bilbo saw an intense sadness creep into the man's face. A deep and sharp sort of sadness, the kind that left cuts and wounds that never seemed to close all the way no matter how much time passed, no matter how many scabs he pretended to cover the seeping gashes with.

"And what do you do now?" Bilbo asked quietly as he continued his work.

"I protect the town. patrols, helping people with their problems. I... try to make their lives better, safer. As best I can."

The hobbit's brows furrowed in question. "That certainly doesn't sound illegal... Why were the guards after you today?"

"They came after me because I grew careless." Bard coughed as his face fell into a bitter smile.

"The Master is arotting sore that pollutes this town. He taxes the goods coming in, the goods going out, he finds every way he can to sap these people of their hard-earned wealth and puts his thugs in power to keep them complacent and afraid."

"When I can, I take back some of what he has stolen and give it to the people. Today I got caught."

Bilbo's hand stilled as looked at Bard in surprise. "So you are a thief!"

The bowman glared. "I am, but so is he. Why should the people suffer while the Master does nothing but leech them so he can eat too much, drink too much, and fuck too many pretty whores? He couldn't even love his own sister, why should he love the people of this town?"

"... But you loved her, didn't you?" The hobbit added quietly, fervently hoping he wasn't pushing the topic too much.

"I love her still. More than anything. She... She would have wanted this town to thrive, not wither
under her brother's greed."

Bilbo felt his heart clench slightly but didn't question the man further. He had known Bard barely a
day, albeit a very violent and terrifying day, but not nearly long enough to pry into his life.

There were a several minutes of silence as the hobbit continued with his work until, to his surprise,
he heard Bard speak up again.

"She saved me. Saved my life when I least deserved it, when I was a violent drunk who thought strength
was power and power was everything."

Bilbo finished wrapping the wound on the man's head before moving down to his arms and neck.

"She was… kind," Bard's face broke into a sad smile. "She loved this town and she loved me for
some reason. When I… changed, there were many very powerful, very bad people who were less
than pleased. They thought she had made me weak, made me soft."

Bilbo looked up at Bard's eyes now, at how they stood in such stark contrast on his face, one half
swollen and purple, the other tired but open and clear. He had known loss and pain, he had known
what it meant to have your heart ripped clean from your chest just when you hoped that maybe, just
once, life was going to be fine. Bilbo had seen that look in Thorin and he saw it here in Bard as the
man told him of tragedy; and it broke his heart.

It broke his heart to see good men brought to their knees, to see them claw at that elusive idea of
wholeness with every aching fiber of their beings and come up short again and again.

"And I suppose she did make me soft. But when I looked at her, when I saw her pregnant with my
child, smiling just for me, I wanted nothing but to be weak."

Bard turned his head so he was facing Bilbo. "Have you ever been in love, Mister Baggins?"

The hobbit looked up slightly shocked. "I, uh… I'm not sure. I… don't think I have."

Bard gave him an almost infinitesimal smile, the cuts on his lips splitting again. "Sometimes it's quiet,
Mister Baggins. It builds and builds until one day they smile at you and you realize that going one
day without seeing that would be unbearable. You realize that they are the beginning and the end of
your happiness."

Bilbo looked into Bard's eye and for the first time saw warmth there. It was small and flickering, but
it was there. And that, he supposed, was love. It was the ability to make a man smile even when his
wife had died. It may be small and strained, a barely kept up charade, but those memories, those
good memories kept a man with nothing left going, trying for something.

"They killed her, the men I used to call my friends."

Bilbo squeezed the bowman's shoulder. "I… I am sorry, for what its worth."

Bard nodded with a bitter smile. "It was my fault she died. I live with that everyday and so I try to be
how she would have wanted. Helping the town out as I can."

The hobbit hesitated for a moment trying to find the right words, "I… I think she would be happy to
see you now."

"I mean you saved my life, so perhaps I'm a bit biased," Bard gave him a small smile, "but I saw in
the crowd today no one really wanted you hurt. Even if they don't say anything, can't say anything, I
think you are making a difference."

"I… hope so, Mister Baggins. Though I won't lie and say it doesn't feel like fighting a losing battle most of the time."

Bilbo smiled up at Bard as he finished wrapping the man's chest with bandage. "I think the most worthwhile things often do."

The hobbit stepped back to examine his work. "Well I did the best I could, I'd suggest getting your chest examined by someone who actually knows what they're doing; nasty things can come of ignored injuries."

Bard nodded as he stood up with a groan, "I will. Thank you, Mister Baggins you have been more than kind."

The hobbit waved him off before placing his hands in the bowl trying to wipe the blood off. "You helped me last night, I'm just repaying the favor."

The bowman looked at him intensely as he slowly slipped his leather coat back on. "It was my fault you were involved in the first place, I will not forget your generosity. Should you ever need my help, all you need to do is ask."

Bilbo smiled at the bowman, "I appreciate that, Bard. Do you need help getting home?" The hobbit asked as he eyed the man limping towards the door with some suspicion.

"Thank you, but no. I'll go home and rest awhile. If I do not see you before you leave," Bard turned around to face Bilbo as he reached the door, "good luck on your journey and stay safe."

Bilbo smiled once again and waved to the bowman's retreating back. He had a feeling they would not be in Lake Town long enough to have an excuse to help Bard reclaim it from the Master's greedy grasp, but he hoped with all his heart that the man was successful, for his sake and the town's.
The company stayed in Lake Town only a few more days after the incident in the town square. Thorin and the rest of the dwarves had come back to the inn after meeting with the Master all grumbling and looking none too happy.

From what Bilbo could gather based on their leader's angry mutterings, the Master had done everything but ask for a share in their gold. He had given them provisions, ponies, and many fine clothes (though Thorin vehemently refused the garishly ruffled shirts) always simpering that 'of course there's no need for payment, Master Dwarf' and 'it is simply a token of fostering friendship.'

The hobbit shuddered at the thought of the Master's horrid lips pulled back to reveal green teeth as he smiled with such sweetness that made him want to vomit. Bilbo hadn't needed anyone to tell him that what hadn't been said was infinitely more important. While they hadn't needed to pay for anything while staying in Lake Town, there was naturally still a price.

"He'll want gold if we succeed," Thorin had grumbled as he poked the fine piece of duck plated before him on the night before they had decided to leave, "and not just a piece or two."

The hobbit couldn't help but feel that the Master's friendship, if you could call it such, was much more like a poisonous flower. It might look pretty and harmless, but one wrong shift of your hand and there would sooner be sickness in your future than the small pleasures of lovely treasures. On the other hand, Bilbo also knew they wouldn't get very far on their way to the Lonely Mountain if they didn't have food to eat or water to drink.

With this thought firmly set in the front of his mind, the hobbit tried to force the image of Bard laying on the stone street, bleeding and broken, from igniting the hot, bubbling anger that rose from the pit of his stomach every time he thought of the Master and his guard.

There was nothing much he could do for Bard and his plight. The Master already hated him and he held no sway with the people of this town. He wanted to help, to try and dislodge this awful man from his seat of stolen power, but with Bard laying low and the people too scared to act out, the hobbit couldn't see much chance in the situation. The one small glimmer of hope that Bilbo kept close to his heart was that when they took back Erebor, when Thorin had his people back in the Lonely Mountain and enough gold to buy the town thousands of times over, then maybe he could
convince his friend to aid Bard.

While the Master had been nothing but cloyingly nice since his talk with Thorin, there was no doubt in Bilbo’s mind that the balding man wanted them gone and out of his hair. Or, the hobbit supposed, lack thereof. Combined with their leader growing more and more impatient to finally get back on their quest, the company of Thorin Oakenshield had set out that morning to follow the Celduin north to the home of the dwarves.

Laden with packs and ponies, the company made their way through the town. It seemed that all the inhabitants had gathered together to see off their mysterious guests. Bilbo heard small snippets whispered between eager ears as they proceeded down the streets. Most seemed split between either thinking they would soon have some very rich dwarf neighbors or that the dragon still resided deep within the mountain and the company would be charred smears on the stone floors.

The hobbit tried to tune out the voices as he clutched the reins of the pony he was leading, and couldn’t stop thinking was most definitely not Mertyl, but the voices crept into his ears against his best efforts. Trying to distract himself, Bilbo turned to look the wares being sold in the stalls next to him.

They was no conformity to the stalls other than their shared eclectic nature. Bilbo’s eyes fell upon baubles and cakes, fish and clothing, meats and vegetables. Several of the stalls were selling some small kites that were delicately crafted to look like fish, tails that could twist back and forth, able to swim in the sky instead of the water and couldn’t help but think they would be quite a hit with the young hobbits back in the Shire.

He almost considered stopping for a moment to purchase one but as soon as he took a closer look, he realized that the fish were made a delicately painted paper. Paper that would no doubt be incinerated instantly if they ran into a dragon. Bilbo gulped at the vision of fiery death flashing behind his eyes and shook his head trying to quell the sudden nervousness he felt. Despite the assurances he given Thorin, and he did truly believe that they would reclaim Erebor, there was no denying that a dragon was quite possibly waiting for them in the empty kingdom.

No… he would wait to buy the kite. Perhaps on his way home, after all this was done, he could stop back in Lake Town and pick one up. Bilbo was about to walk past the stall when a small flash caught his eye.

Laying half-covered by a pile of small woven baskets, the hobbit thought he something glinting and metallic. Bilbo stopped and moved a few of the baskets aside and picked up what appeared to be a thin carving knife, it's handle a smooth, black obsidian inlaid with golden runes he recognized to be dwarvish.

It looked rather like the kind he had seen Bifur using to whittle the night the dwarf had saved him from those drunks from the tavern. Guilt pooled in him as he remembered he had yet to thank Bifur for that. Deciding after a few moments of thought, Bilbo picked up the knife and turned to the old, crooked man who ran the stall.

"Uh, how much for this?" The hobbit asked as he held the knife up.

"Oh that, little master, is of dwarvish make, very rare these days." The man smiled at him, every tooth but one missing from his mouth, "worth a pretty coin or two, my friend."

Biblo raised a brow, "Alright, how much then?" He didn't have any coins per say… The Master had given them many things, but money had not been one of them.
The old man winked at him and leaned forward before whispering, "I saw you help Mister Bard, laddie, not many would've stood up for him against the Master." The hobbit looked up in surprise at the man's face, "I'll give it to ya free of charge on behalf of the folk in this town who are knowin' the good work that lad does."

Bilbo glanced wide-eyed between the knife and the old man, "Are you sure? I don't want to just take it for nothing!"

The old man chuckled as he sat back again, "Wish we had more folks who thought like you in this town, lad. I insist you take it, just..." and his voice lowered once more, "if your prince does get his mountain back, remember there are people in this town who are sufferin' and can't be fightin' their battles alone, you hear?"

Bilbo nodded fervently, stuffing the knife into his pocket, "I will."

There was a call that sounded much like Kili coming from the back of the company who had kept moving down the street, "Master Boggins c'mon! What's taking so long?"

The old man nodded, smiling his toothless smile once again, "There's a good lad, now I'd get a move on if I were you, they might just leave you behind."

The hobbit thanked him quickly and ran back to the company, pulling his pony along.

"What were you doing back there, Master Boggins?" Kili asked with a raised brow as he narrowed his eyes at the old man. The dwarf had acted nothing but frostily cold to the people of Lake Town since the incident in the town square.

Bilbo sighed a little, "Nothing dangerous, I assure you, just wanted to pick something up quick."

Kili didn't look away from the stall as his eyes narrowed even further, "I still don't trust these people... and you shouldn't wander off alone, Master Baggins." The young dwarf swung his gaze to Bilbo, a frown still firmly set in place.

"It's nothing to worry about," Bilbo patted Kili on the shoulder gently.

"Nothing to worry about?" The dwarf hissed angrily, "You've been attacked twice since we got here, Master Boggins! They do nothing to help a man who spends his days protecting them and let you get beaten for being in the wrong place! They have no honor here!"

Bilbo considered Kili for a moment. The dwarf wasn't... wrong, but he also wasn't right. The hobbit had seen the fear in their eyes, heard Bard speak of the Master's oppression, and when he thought of the folks of Lake Town, Bilbo Baggins felt nothing but pity.

"The people of this town are frightened, Kili. And they have... much to be frightened of. Not everyone can be brave and strong all the time, not all of them know how to fight like you do." Bilbo turned his gaze to the faces that lined the road. While they were all different, each held the same sense of tired anxiety. Like every day for them was a routine in suppression. Like they were stuck and the only man with the means for change was the one person who wanted things to stay exactly as they were.

"Well they should do something," Kili growled as he looked towards where the hobbit's gazed now lingered. "How can they just stand by and let that awful man tell them what to do!"

Bilbo looked back towards his friend, "Because they don't have any hope. They don't see any way for life to get better, so they don't risk getting hurt for something they see as just a dream."
"Then someone should make them hope! Like Uncle does for us!" Kili said with such it reverent fervor, Bilbo couldn't help but smile. There was no one who idolized Thorin more than his nephew. The hobbit wasn't sure if even their leader knew how deeply and unconditionally Kili's love for his uncle ran. While Bilbo would never doubt that Kili loved his brother first and with all his heart, he also knew that the young dwarf would never think anything but the world of Thorin.

Bilbo smiled up at the dwarf whose face was determinedly set, "I think… that's what Bard is trying to do here. He wants to inspire these people. To let them know that they can have a better life."

Kili snorted, "Well, he's not doing a very good job of it, they almost let him get killed. Probably would have too if we hadn't shown up."

The hobbit let out a small sigh, "I don't think it's that easy. Have you ever been truly and utterly without hope?"

The dwarf frowned as he pondered the question for a few minutes, "There was… one time when I got lost. Fili and I were playing in the forest. I would hide and then he would try to find me, then we'd switch. I saw this great big tree, tallest I'd ever seen," Kili gestured up to the sky, waving his arm to emphasize how gigantic this tree had been, "so I decided to climb it. I got up near the top and one of the branches I was on snapped and I almost fell."

Kili's eyes clouded as he sunk back into memory, "I grabbed onto one of the branches but I couldn't see anyway to get down. I thought… I thought I was going to die up there. That Fili would forget we were playing and no one would hear me shouting for help."

"I spent hours there," Kili said with a sigh, "the sun started to set and my throat felt like it was bleeding from shouting so much. I… that was the only time in my life I thought Fili had abandoned me. I know he didn't, of course!" the dwarf started quickly, glancing down at Bilbo, "but I was young and… afraid. After a while I gave up, couldn't even cry anymore," the dwarf added, "so I just sat there on the branch. I felt… I don't know, I suppose empty the best way to describe it. I thought no one cared and that no one would miss me."

Kili fiddled with strap across his chest that fixed his quiver to his back. "It was almost night when I heard Fili and Uncle shouting for me. I'd never seen Thorin so worried before that and Fili was covered with cuts and bruises from chasing though the forest trying to find me." The young dwarf's face broke out in a small, fond smile, "When they found me I couldn't even talk, just started sobbing like some pathetic little dwarfling. Thorin practically tore the tree down to get to me."

Bilbo chuckled at the thought of Thorin ripping down a large trunk with his bare hands.

"Once he got me down, he pulled Fili up and hugged us so tightly I couldn't even breathe. Made us promise we would never get separated in the woods again." Kili looked over to where his brother was chatting with Ori before grinning down at Bilbo, "Fili certainly took it seriously, don't think we've ever been apart since. But… I think when I was up there, stuck in that tree, that was the most helpless I've ever felt."

Bilbo smiled back gently. "Then you do know how they feel, Kili. It's like…" the hobbit paused as he considered his words, "it's like these people are stuck in a tree, but they don't have an uncle to come help them down yet."

The dwarf nodded slowly, his face turning contemplative, "I... never thought about it like that I guess. Nothing is ever simple, is it Master Boggins?"

The hobbit laughed loudly as he shook his head, feeling that nothing so accurately surmised life more
than that little thought, "No, I don't think it is. But I hope Bard will be able to make some difference for these people."

Kili nodded as he slung an arm around the hobbit's shoulders, "Me too, Master Boggins, me too."

From what Thorin had said, there was only a few days journey to the Lonely Mountain from the edges of Lake Town. As long as they followed the path along the river, the road would be relatively smooth. Bilbo, though it would have shocked him at the beginning of this adventure, was happy to be back on the winding roads and out of the town.

There was a new sort of vigor within the company as they made their way up the river. They were close and every member of their group could feel it in their very bones. There was nothing between them and their goal but some miles of road and a dragon. Now, that second bit worried Bilbo very, very much but there seemed to be an unspoken rule that no one should mention Smaug lest they bring down the mood.

The first day they travelled until well past nightfall, though no one complained because they had finally broken through the forest and could now see the mountain with eyes unhindered by trees. It was… awe-inspiring to say the least. The sun had set, casting the massive form in darkness against the red-tinged sky.

As soon as Thorin saw it, Bilbo could tell the dwarf was filled with… something that made him stand taller and move with more purpose. The hobbit was certain their leader wouldn't have wanted to rest, to travel all through the night if not for Kili stifling a yawn beside his uncle.

They set up camp a little way from the road in a thicket of small trees and soft grasses. The fire had been built and Bilbo along with a happily whistling Bofur made dinner together for the first time in a long while. It was good to talk to the dwarf again, Bilbo thought. He hadn't had much chance since Beorn's house and as soon as the genial dwarf had started laughing and joking, the hobbit realized how much he missed the seemingly boundless humor of his friend who grinned at him from beneath the brim of his hat.

The supplies the Master had given them were good; in fact they were very good, so good even Bilbo had to grudgingly admit the quality of the meats as he bit into a juicy piece. He didn't like being indebted to a man as horrid as the Master, but his growling stomach appeared not to care even in the slightest where the food was coming from as long as it was there.

Most of the dwarves sat around the fire and sang old songs from the halls of Erebor in honor of almost coming home. Bilbo pulled his blanket a little tighter around his shoulders but as he shifted he felt something poke into his stomach. The hobbit's brows pulled together in confusion as he reached into his pocket and pulled out the small, black knife he had been given earlier. Glancing up, Bilbo looked around to see where Bifur was but couldn't see the dwarf among the group packed tightly in the center.

Bilbo excused himself from the group, ignoring the groans of Fili and Kili who told him to stop being allergic to fun but took a final moment to swat the brothers on their heads. Walking away from their laughter, Bilbo made his way to where Bifur sat on the ground, delicately carving a small figure
into the wood. There were several other little wooden things on the ground next to him that the hobbit tried not to step on as he approached the dwarf.

Waiting for him to look up, Bilbo watched the dwarf whittle away at the wood. Bifur glanced up at him with a questioning grunt, his brow raised. There was a still moment as the hobbit panicked. Sometimes it escaped him that the dwarf couldn't understand him nor could they really communicate apart from wild hand gestures.

"Uh…" Bilbo said rather lamely as he stared back at Bifur before he pointed to himself them down at the ground next to where the dwarf was sitting. Bifur looked… well, not displeased, but certainly puzzled as to why the burglar was suddenly seeking his company. After all, Bilbo was quite literally the only member of the group who knew exactly none of the dwarf tongue.

Bifur grunted again with a shrug and went back to whittling the small figure. The hobbit sat down hesitantly and in silence for a moment before he pulled the knife from his pocket and held it out to the dwarf. Stopping his work, Bifur glanced over to it but made no motion to take the knife.

Bilbo opened his hand so the knife lay flat on his palm and pushed it forward once more. Bifur raised a brow again and pointed a solitary finger towards himself as if asking the hobbit if the knife was for him. Bilbo sighed with relief and nodded vigorously with a wide smile. The dwarf hesitantly took the small knife from Bilbo and examined the blade and handle with certain reverence.

The hobbit could tell from Bifur's face the knife was at least of some quality and felt a little wave of relief run through him. He hadn't wanted to offend Bifur with shoddy workmanship seeing as how he knew how much dwarves prized skilled smith work.

As Bifur examined the small knife, Bilbo looked at the small figure that now rested on ground right in front of the dwarf's legs. Though it was somewhat hard to make out much detail in the dark, the light of the almost full moon helped the hobbit make out that it was a little person. No… not a person, Bilbo thought as he leaned forward to take a closer look, a dwarf. And it was not just any dwarf.

Looking back at him with small wooden eyes was Thorin Oakenshield. Though he was very small and rather more… still than the real Thorin. The little wooden figure had a grim expression on his face, Orcrist held out in from of him, and his old oaken-shield on his other arm. The hobbit couldn't help but let out a little whistle at the sheer level of detail on the figure. The fur-lined coat that had the same patterning as it's woolen counterpart and there were even small braids carved into the hair.

Bilbo reached out to take it but quickly looked up at Bifur to ask permission. "Can I—" he started before halting almost as quickly. The hobbit flushed in embarrassment before pointing to himself and then down to the figure. Bifur nodded before going back to his inspection of the runes on the knife.

Gently taking the figure into his hand, Bilbo held it up in he moonlight. Turning it slowly, the hobbit marveled at the skill it must have taken to carve such tiny detail without the wood cracking in the thinnest places. Holding it up against the moon, Bilbo squinted his eyes and could almost pretend it was the real Thorin. A smile crept across the hobbit's face as he moved the wooden dwarf from side to side as if he was walking.

"Ghunum melhekh," came Bifur's gruff voice from beside him.

Bilbo stopped squinting and looked over questioningly at his companion, "Uh… what, sorry?"

The dwarf gestured at the carving in the hobbit's hands, "ghunum melhekh."
Bilbo glanced back and forth, hoping some sort of understanding would suddenly come to mind but, predictably, nothing came. "I'm sorry, I don't know what that means…"

Bifur shook his head but not with frustration, appearing more resigned that the look of confusion on the hobbit's face was not going to be remedied by his doing. Leaning over to his other side, Bifur picked up two of the other carvings and handed them over gently. Bilbo put down the miniature Thorin and saw that the two resting in Bifur's hand were actually three.

The larger one was Fili and Kili, each had an arm wrapped around the other's shoulder and their wooden faces grinned up at him with matching expressions of mirth. The other one was… well, much to Bilbo's surprise it was *him*. There was no mistaking the pointed ears and walking stick. The tiny him was leaning against the stick with a curious look on his face. Like he was gazing at something bright and wondrous but also… sort of sad in a way.

Bilbo glanced over to where Bifur had picked up these new additions and saw that most of the company also resided there strewn about on the grass. Bifur had put aside his old knife and was now whittling away at a new chunk of wood with the black blade the hobbit had gifted him.

He had never really talked with the dwarf. The most he knew about Bifur was that he was a very skilled fighter and the small bits of information Bofur had imparted about his cousin while he cooked with Bilbo over the campfire. To be honest, Bilbo hadn't given the dwarf much thought. And as he looked at the figures resting in his hands, he felt sadness and guilt at the very notion.

To have carved them with such accuracy, Bilbo knew the dwarf had to be incredibly observant. But more than that, there was care put into every cut of the wood. The hobbit was sure even if he practiced for a hundred years, he might have been as skilled, but he would never have been able to give them such *life*.

He wished he had… put more effort in trying to know the dwarf, language barrier or no. Bifur had defended him with no hesitation and the hobbit knew from Bofur's tales that the dwarf cared for his family deeply. Bilbo took one last look at the figures before he tried to hand them back, holding his hands out.

Bifur glanced down and shook his head. Feeling nothing but confused once again, Bilbo thought maybe the dwarf had misunderstood. The hobbit pushed his hands forward once more before he heard Bifur sigh. The dwarf put down his knife and small bit of wood then put his hands by Bilbo's. Bifur put his hands underneath the hobbit's fingers then gently folded them so the figures were still in Bilbo's palms but covered. The dwarf pushed his hands back towards the hobbit's chest with a significant look before pulling his own away and going back to his carving.

'He… wants me to have them?' Bilbo thought to himself with wonder. He didn't want to take something so precious from the dwarf but… the look on Bifur's face told him not to argue and just take them. So the hobbit clutched them to his coat and smiled widely at his companion, "I, uh – thank you, Mister Bifur."

The dwarf seemed to recognize his name or the sentiment at least and nodded his head.

Bilbo felt a warm glow flood into his chest as he glanced down again at the little wooden figurines. He would treasure these, long after he returned home to Bag End and grew old and fat and tired, Bilbo Baggins would treasure these gifts.

He and Bifur sat together for a long while, not talking of course, but it was a comfortable silence. Bilbo hoped the dwarf understood how much it meant to him that Bifur had saved his life and how he grateful he was for of the sturdy sort of strength that emanated from his companion.
The moon rose higher in the sky and the talking died out behind them as the rest of the company dropped off to sleep, but Bilbo stayed sitting next to Bifur who was still carving what was slowly starting to look like Bofur. The hobbit silently watched each of the cuts with fascination and was grateful the dwarf didn't seem to mind.

Bilbo thought they must have sat there for at least a few hours before the hobbit heard footsteps behind them. Looking up, Bilbo saw Bofur approaching them with a wide grin on his face. The dwarf leaned down and spoke to his cousin in dwarvish before playfully shoving him as he saw the figure in the other dwarf’s hands was, in fact, himself.

They spoke for a few minutes until Bofur leaned back up with a stretch before moving a few steps over to sit next to Bilbo. "My cousin tells me you gave him a fine present, Master Baggins."

The hobbit nodded as realization dawned on him, this was perfect! Bofur could translate for him!

"Could you, uh, could you tell Mister Bifur thank you for saving me the other day?"

Bofur laughed genially as he spoke to his cousin again. The other dwarf muttered something back which caused the miner to laugh even more, "he says you're welcome."

Bilbo raised an eyebrow as Bofur grinned back, "well something like that anyway, never was one with words, our Bifur." The dwarf looked down into Bilbo's hands and 'hmm'd' appreciatively. "I was wonderin' if he was goin' to be givin' those to ya. Glad he did, they look right with you protectin' them all mother hen like."

The hobbit glowered at his friend, "I am not a mother hen. And why should they be mine? Don't get me wrong," he added with haste, "I very much appreciate them! But… they should no more be mine than anyone else in the company."

Bofur laughed again but it trailed off as he looked at Bilbo's face, "Yer serious, aren't ya laddie?"

The dwarf rolled his eyes as if the hobbit was missing something incredibly obvious and essential. "For bein' a relatively smart hobbit," Bofur winked playfully, "ya sure do make a habit of bein' utterly oblivious, don't ya?"

Bilbo sighed, apparently he wasn't going to get a straight answer tonight.

"Fine, don't tell me. But next time you need something burgled, don't go asking me for help."

Bofur shoved him with his shoulder, "I'm thinkin' we both know ya couldn't steal nothin' to save your own life."

Bilbo narrowed eyes, "Be careful, Master Dwarf, I could have some hidden talents yet to be revealed. You might just eat your words."

The dwarf chuckled and said something to his cousin who smiled back before responding in his gruff voice, "He says he believes you, Master Baggins. Suppose I'll be havin' to believe as well, my cousin is unrivaled in the arts of perception."

The hobbit sniffed at the air, "Glad to see one of you has some lick of sense."

They chatted away with familiar companionship for a while longer until Bifur excused himself. The dwarf gathered up his supplies and wished them good night. Well at least that's what Bofur told him Bifur had said, though the hobbit was inclined to believe him this once seeing as how he was now convinced Bifur was just the good sort of dwarf.
Bilbo, however, wasn't quite ready to retire yet and it seemed neither was Bofur. The dwarf sat with him as they gazed at the moon making its steady way across the sky before a sudden thought came to the hobbit.

"Say, Bofur..." he began slowly, looking over at his friend, "what does, uh, ghunum melhekh mean?" The words sounded foreign on his tongue as he molded them with his lips. Bilbo was sure he butchered the pronunciation but he hoped it was good enough that Bofur would understand.

The dwarf raised a brow in question, clearly not expecting the hobbit's question, "Trying to learn a bit o' the native tongue now, are ya?"

Bilbo shrugged, it had occurred to him to try and learn but... he had thought the dwarves would probably be as secretive with their tongue as they were with most other aspects of their culture. He was sure Ori or the Durin brothers wouldn't be opposed, but it seemed somehow rude of him to ask without invitation.

"Your cousin said it to me, I was just curious."

The dwarf pondered for a few silent moments as he gazed up at the moon again. "It means lonely king." Bilbo looked over sharply at his friend then down at the figure resting in his hand. "Or that's the closest I'm thinkin' it'll get in the common tongue."

The hobbit felt a sudden sadness wash over him as he looked upon the wooden Thorin's face. He hadn't noticed it before, thinking the expression was the familiar look of grim determination he'd seen on Thorin's face a hundred time before; but as he looked at it now, he did see a loneliness there and it made his heart ache.

"Bifur is..." Bofur began as he followed Bilbo's gaze to the hobbit's palm, "more observant than most folks are givin' him credit for."

Bilbo couldn't help but nod in agreement, still finding himself surprised that the dwarf had managed to show all these things through carving. "Does the axe... does it hurt him?"

Bofur leaned back on the grass to his head rested on his hands, "It's not the axe that hurts him, laddie..." The dwarf sighed as he paused. "I don't think you'd be any sort of surprised knowin' his story ain't nothing too happy. Don't think any dwarf here hasn't gone through somethin' so terrible it didn't make him a touch mad."

Plucking a long piece of grass and placing it between his teeth, the dwarf continued, "...Well maybe not Master Gloin, but don't think anyone would be callin' him sane when he starts rantin' about that lady of his." Bilbo chuckled quietly in agreement.

"But Bifur he... well, he didn't lose everything right away, not like me and Bombur did."

"He and his chosen lived with their little boy outside of Erebor. Did huntin' and scouting jobs for the city plus a little toy makin' on the side but he didn't take much to livin' in the mountain like the rest of us." The hobbit felt his heart clench a bit, knowing this was not going to end happily. "So when the beast attacked us, he and his family were safe as they could've been I suppose."

Bofur's expression went sort of blank. "You remember when I was tellin' you about our journey? When we were attacked by goblins on the road?" The hobbit nodded slowly, "when I said Bifur got hurt protectin' us, he... he thinks he should've been protectin' his wife and child."

"When the goblins came it was all sorts of dark. No one really was knowin' who was friend or foe or even where the bastards came from." The dwarf rubbed his forehead, all his familiar humor seemed
to fall away from his face, "Bifur told me he left them with a group of soldiers so he could be findin' Bombur an' me. We weren't too far of course, but with the confusion of the attack, everyone was gettin' separated."

"He took the axe trying to defend us from a dozen goblins. There was fightin' till the sun rose and we barely got him to a healer. Didn't hear about his family until it was…" Bofur let out a small cough and took a deep breath, "They were with a group of warriors, all seasoned in battle, but I was told they… they were cut off when the horde was attackin' us. Every dwarf in that group died, suppose Bifur would've died too if he hadn't come to save us."

Bofur was silent for a few long moments before he looked up at the hobbit with a pained expression on his face, "Sometimes I think he wishes he had, Master Baggins." Bilbo reached out and squeezed the dwarf's arm in comfort. "Bifur was out for a few weeks, healers told us he wasn't goin' to make it but Bombur and me knew better. When he finally woke and we told him… well he went a bit mad for a while."

"He's gotten better over the years, but… There are times when the rage takes him and there's not one dwarf in all the lands that could talk sense into him." Bofur sighed gently as he chewed absently on the grass, "This journey has been good on him, Master Baggins. Givin' him some purpose was the best thing to do, I've been thinkin'."

"He does seem calm," Bilbo added softly, "… and very thoughtful. I wish I could speak to him."

Bofur smiled up at him though it was still pained and small, "I think he wishes that too, Master Baggins. But he does what he can." The dwarf gestured at the figures, "And it's somethin' special, ain't it?"

Bilbo smiled down at his friend, "It really is."

"I know it's selfish of me, but sometimes I do send a little prayer to Mahal thankin' him for savin' Bifur's life. I wish with all of my heart that his family was livin' but… he's still here and that's somethin' to be grateful for I think."

Bilbo looked up at the moon and thought about the family he'd lost. About his mother and father. They hadn't been attacked by goblins or taken away by dragon fire, but as he thought of their smiling faces, laughing as they had when his family had been happy and whole and together, Bilbo thought he understood at least a little.

He… didn't really have anyone. Sure he had relatives and friends but… seeing as how he never married and started his own family he was, in his own way, alone. He remembered his mother's laughter and his father's hugs; and for the first time in many years, Bilbo felt the sharp sting of loss.

"It is. Something to be grateful for, I mean," Bilbo could remember the times he and his mother had sat atop Bag End watching a moon much like this one rising and falling in the warm evening nights of summer. "Life is precious," the hobbit said quietly, "it should be… treasured above all else, I think."

Bofur nodded as they both now stared at the silver orb hung in the sky, "I'm thinkin' you're right, Master Baggins."

Chapter End Notes
So I in regards to the pacing of this story and the lack of actual Bagginshield so far, I thought I'd kinda go through what's been going on since people seemed to respond well to that last time. First things first, there will be BAgginshield stuff in this story, not just me being a little shit and implying it. That being said, however, I would also like to stress that this story is not just Bagginshield.

The point of this story is not to be just about Thorin and Bilbo, it's also to go through how Bilbo got to know the rest of the company (and I guess Bard because he forcibly inserted himself). If this had only been about Thorin and Bilbo I'm sure it would be over by now. Now to be fair, I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing so I do apologize if it appeared to be strictly Thilbo to anybody. I have the end pretty much planned out but everything else I've just been making up as I go. When this started I thought it'd be like 50 pages max, it is now like 250 on word so I think we all know it sort of spun out of control. I do hope the Baggins/ridge pacing isn't too boring/slow, but I am warning you now, if you're expecting them to fall madly in love right now and start having wild dwarf/hobbit sex on a throne, while thoroughly enjoyable and fun to read, that shits not going to happen in the next chapter.

I really want to build these characters realistically so when stuff does actually happen, it means something because their relationship hasn't just been implied or inferred based on the fact that they went on a journey together, I want there to be experiences and instances that people can look back on and go 'oh that's when Thorin stopped being a huge dick' or 'that's when they started trusting each other.' That is what makes me really love stories, so I'm hoping to at least somewhat accomplish that in this one.

To me, Thorin hasn't really made a friend since his days in Erebor. He has been a leader first and doesn't really trust anyone outside of his dwarves on the chance that they could have betrayed him. So now that he has this relationship with Bilbo, he awkward and a lot of times doesn't really know what to say. He doesn't remember how to make or keep new friends because he's felt they were a luxury or a distraction from his rage and his goal to get back to Erebor. So for Thorin making anything into a friendship, let alone loving someone, to me, would have to take time and an immense amount of trust on his part, trust he is not used to giving. Bilbo on the other hand, if just kind look at his life, can assume he's never been in love. He's got friends and likes to do hobbit stuff, but based on his general nature, it seems like he likes to keep people mostly as acquaintances. Not that he abhors love or is an emotional scrooge, but I think he's just never really been bothered much, so knowing that someone meant more to him than a friend, well I'm not sure he'd even recognize or realize what was going on. Especially if that someone is Thorin 'holy shit what are feelings' Oakenshield.

So I know my summary skills are severely lacking and if you've been holding on just for some steamy action, I am sorry if I implied that was happening soon after the beginning.
I'm assuming if you're reading this and you've stuck with this story for 18 chapters, you're not too horribly opposed to format, but, once again, it is not just Thilbo happening all up in this bitch. This story is about Bilbo. About his thoughts and his feelings. About his interactions and friendships with the company. So, at least how I interpret it, friendship and love take time to build so this story will continue as it has been going so far. I hope you've been enjoying basically re-reading the hobbit with added dialogue and sass so far and also hope you continue to enjoy it!
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

A/N Thanks to everyone who wrote such awesome reviews :) It seems like we're all on the same page (HAH) re: me bullshitting this plot as I go along and I'm actually very happy/relieved the slowness of the burn has not forced any pre-mature ragequits :P I think I mentioned this before but in this fic verse Fili was born in Erebor and lived there for like a month or two before Smaug, which now that I think about it is most def not canonically correct but fuck it we're trench deep in this bitch now so no turning back. Hope you enjoy! :)

They set off early the next day as the sun was rising across the side of the Lonely Mountain. Despite the stillness of the autumn air, Bilbo thought he could feel an almost tangible buzzing in his ears. 'Excitement' he thought to himself as the hobbit looked the other members of the company, 'excitement to go home.'

Thorin had told them they would be at Erebor by nightfall. They would be at Erebor today. Bilbo Baggins could hardly believe it, could hardly even comprehend that they had even made it this far. Wrapping the wooden figures Bifur had given him last night gently into his blanket and placing them next to old book from Elrond's library in his pack, Bilbo felt oddly surreal.

He, a hobbit of the shire, resident of Hobbiton, and the current Baggins of Bag End was farther east than anyone he'd ever known had gone. He'd journeyed across mountains, through forests, and faced countless dangers. Bilbo had fought orcs, goblins, and spiders. He'd almost been starved, stabbed, and beaten to death. And yet, despite all that, the hobbit had seen the most fantastic things, more than he could have possibly imagined. He'd met dwarves, elves, and men, from the highest royalty to the lowest beggars.

And he was here. Bilbo was still alive and as he gazed at the pink sky, still and magnificently beautiful, he could scarcely believe it. Thorin and Dwalin led them down the road beside the river. Their leader's head was held high and his face stoic, but the hobbit could still see there was something stirring right beneath his friend's skin. Even Kili, who had been about as far east as Bilbo, was growing fidgety with excitement.

"Say, uncle," Kili began again for what was probably the twentieth time this morning, "will we be able to get in? Just like that?"

Thorin's eye twitched as Fili and Bilbo tried to muffle their laughter at their leader's expression.

"I do not know yet, Kili," Thorin grumbled with a sigh at being faced with yet another question.

"But there's a door, right? Fili said there would be a door because Master Gandalf gave you that key. There wouldn't be a key and no door, right uncle?"

Thorin slapped his hand to his face in exasperation as Fili chuckled and decided to take mercy on the two older dwarves. "Kili, why don't you come back here and talk to us, hm? Let Uncle and Master Dwalin have a moment of silence."
Kili glared back at his brother, "I only wanted to be prepared! How am I supposed to know what to expect if I've never been there?"

Fili stuck out a hand and grabbed the collar of his brother's coat and pulled him back until he was between Bilbo and himself. "We're not just going to run in, swords raised, brother," the blond dwarf said with a laugh, "there'll be time enough for you to explore."

Kili frowned as he crossed his arms with a huff, "I know that, I just..." the younger dwarf's words halted as he looked up at his uncle who was now quietly speaking with Dwalin, "I don't want to let anyone down."

Fili glanced between his brother and where their uncle walked in front of them, a small smile on his face, "You won't let anyone down, Kili."

Sighing as his shoulders slumped, Kili seemed to deflate a little. "I... just feel like this is the biggest moment of our lives, you know? Like we're supposed to be coming home, but I... I don't even know this place."

The younger dwarf glanced over at his brother, "You were born here at least, I've only heard stories..."

Fili slung his arm around Kili's shoulders, "I was here for a few moons at the most, brother, I know it as well as you do. Besides," he shoved the dark-haired dwarf playfully, "Master Baggins hasn't been here at all either!"

Bilbo nodded with a fake solemnity, "It is true, Kili, not even once."

Kili smiled at them for a moment before sinking back into his melancholy. "How am I supposed to help you rule if I don't even know what the kingdom looks like..."

Fili grew silent as he considered his brother. Bilbo glanced over at the dwarves and couldn't help but feel that the worries plaguing Kili were also nagging at Fili's mind, though the blond dwarf seemed to disguise his concerns with rather more skill.

Bilbo contemplated his friends for a silent moment. He had... well, of course he had no idea what they were truly feeling. The most he had inherited was a fine hobbit hole in the Shire and an inherent propensity for breaking ingrained hobbit attitudes regarding adventure. Bilbo was no prince. Nor was he a prince without a kingdom. Thorin at least had lived in Erebor, had been trained to rule Erebor... But his nephews... Fili and Kili were princes. They were princes of Erebor and yet they had seen no more of their supposed home than the hobbit had.

Bilbo thought of Fili, easy going Fili who always had a smile on his face and advice on his tongue. He thought of the young dwarf who thought his uncle saw his sister's dead husband in his face; a reminder of yet another failure. He thought of Thorin who spoke of Frerin and how he was still alive in the blond dwarf's kind face; how his love of adventure and the care for his family defined him. Bilbo couldn't even begin to imagine the burden of responsibility that lay on Fili's shoulders.

From what Thorin had told him while locked in the cells of Mirkwood, Bilbo knew his friend had every confidence in Fili's ability to look after the throne, but he didn't want his nephew to wither under the responsibility. Now that the hobbit thought on this, it seemed to him the reason Fili thought Thorin loved his brother more was because his uncle was trying to prepare him for a hard future. Not necessarily hard because of trials or difficult times, but because of Fili's nature, because of Thorin's fear that his nephew would be trapped in the responsibility of ruling from a throne. And because of that fear, Bilbo thought with sadness, he could only think that Fili had always been given the
responsibility of an adult and treated as such by Thorin, in the way Kili wanted to be treated so badly.

Kili would likely never be king unless something happened to his brother and so Thorin was easier on him, more lenient towards his younger nephew's impulsiveness. He had heard it from Thorin himself, that he still viewed Kili as young and naive to the world. Ready and eager to prove himself when all his uncle and brother wanted for him was to stay carefree and happy, away from the uncertainty and hardships that responsibility forced on them.

Bilbo glanced at Fili's face and in it he saw nothing of the worries that ever lingered in his thoughts. And he knew, Bilbo Baggins knew Fili would not have it any other way. His friend would always rather take the brunt of every burden, of every hurt and every worry rather than let his brother's smile falter even for a moment because Kili was the one who made Fili smile, who made Fili laugh and love as openly as he did despite the burdens of Durin's line.

Bilbo felt his heart swell with affection as he thought of the two brothers. It must be hard for them, he pondered, to have lived under the shadow of such a great mountain they couldn't even see, and yet… the hobbit knew that if they had each other, if Fili had Kili, and Kili had Fili, there was nothing they wouldn't be able to pull through together.

"I –" The hobbit began as he looked turned his face to look at the dwarves, "I, uh, don't think you should worry too much, either of you." Fili and Kili glanced over at him quickly, the younger dwarf's face looked hopeful while his older brother's was curious. "The Erebor that Thorin and all the other dwarves who lived here before is… well, it's gone."

Their faces fell and spurred Bilbo into hurriedly trying to clarify his words.

"What I meant was that it doesn't matter if you haven't been there before because the Erebor that Thorin will rebuild, the Erebor that you both will rebuild, is going to be different. It will be better." Bilbo smiled at his friends with warmth. "It will be your home because you will help put every stone in place, because you will be the ones to shape it how you want, because your family will be here, not just because your ancestors walked the same halls."

"Thorin and you both will rule with love and skill not because your name means you should. It will be because of the time and care you put in to making it the home your people deserve." Fili and Kili looked back at him with strange expressions on their faces, "I don't think it will be easy, my friends, but no good king was loved just because their predecessors were. They are adored because they love their people and their home and put every ounce of themselves into making life better."

Bilbo looked up at Thorin's back with a small smile, "I know no one cares for your people more than your family," The hobbit glanced over to Fili and Kili again, "So don't fret over it too much, Kili. I know both of you and Thorin will be everything your people deserve."

Kili's face broke into a wide grin as Fili smiled at him with a small amount of wonder. "Thank you, Master Boggins, sometimes I get so caught up in thinking about the future it seems like some daunting quest I'd never be able to complete."

Bilbo nodded with wink, feeling hopeful that at least they weren't so anxious anymore, "Someone has to keep you Durins from wallowing in despair."

Fili's gaze grew serious, "You do a very good job of it, Master Baggins." The young dwarf glanced over at his uncle, "I honestly don't know where we'd be without you here."

Bilbo felt his eyes widen a bit at the sudden sincerity from his friend, "I, uh… I'm sure you'd all be
Fili smiled at him like the hobbit had answered exactly how he thought he would, "We wouldn't, Master Baggins. We would be lost."

The hobbit flushed to his ears and he scratched the back of his head with nervous embarrassment, "You've all got, uh, plenty of maps, I'm sure you'd be alright."

The blond dwarf rolled his eyes as Kili chuckled, "Just take the compliment, Master Baggins. We wouldn't say it if we didn't mean it." Kili nodded in agreement, "He's right, Master Boggins, it's true."

Bilbo looked up to see Thorin had glanced over his shoulder. They held eye contact for a moment as the hobbit smiled brightly at his friend until the dwarf shook his head lightly and turned back to Dwalin who was still talking to him. Bilbo turned his head to face the brothers only to catch Kili swiftly elbowing his brother. Raising a brow, the hobbit looked at them questioningly.

"You two aren't fighting already, are you?"

"No, nope! Not us! Never Kili and I!" Fili smiled through gritted teeth as he glared at his brother.

The younger dwarf flushed red, but managed to fake a look of indignation, "What, us? Fight? It's like you've never even met us sometimes, Master Boggins…"

Bilbo rolled his eyes, he knew something unmentioned had passed between the two dwarves but they could pretend all they wanted, it didn't bother him, probably just some little joke he'd missed anyway.

They continued to chat amiably as the road wound along side the river and the sun grew higher and higher in the sky. It was late afternoon as the company approached the foothills of the Lonely Mountain. The talk that had been flowing though the company grew steadily more silent.

The once green grass of the path and trees that had scattered alongside their trail grew into a bleak and barren sort of earth. Greens faded into charred blacks and greys. Bilbo could see the where the dragon's fire had burned the earth and stone. How the blazing heat had cut angry swathes into the land, leaving nothing but death and destruction where no plants dared to reclaim.

Glancing up, Bilbo saw that Thorin's face had hardened as he pushed forward towards the mountain. The hobbit made a quick decision and sped up until he was walking next to Thorin on the side that Dwalin didn't occupy. Bilbo didn't say anything but walked close enough so his shoulder brushed Thorin's arm. He didn't know if his presence would help any, but he felt even stronger in his mind that if there were any time his friend would need comfort this day, it was right now.

Thorin looked down at the hobbit as he felt Bilbo slide into step next to him. The dwarf didn't smile but Bilbo could have sworn the furrow of his friend's brow lessened somewhat as the hobbit gave Thorin's arm a brief squeeze. Bilbo saw Dwalin glance over and one scarred eyebrow rose slightly but the burly dwarf simply shrugged slightly at the hobbit's presence and pressed forward in silence.

They approached what appeared to be the wreckage of a town. A town that was once beautiful and flourishing but was now a dusty shadow of ruined life. The once intricately carved gate was now half fallen down in a pile of rubble. Even the stones were not immune to the dragon fire. They looked to be… melted almost. Like where the flames had met with the rock, they ran down one another if only to flee the heat.

"Is this…” Bilbo trailed off as they entered into the ruin, carefully avoiding the rocks strewn about the ground.
"Dale," Thorin said sharply, his jaw locked and face set. The hobbit could see that this was not the time to ask questions. Their leader walked faster so he was at least a few yards in front of the rest of the company and the hobbit was now next to Dwalin.

Bilbo felt his eyes widen as he looked around at the sheer destruction. If Dale was this bad then… he didn't want to think about what awaited them within Erebor.

"Will he be… alright?" Bilbo asked Dwalin quietly, his gazed now locked onto Thorin's back. The dwarf beside him crossed his arms but remained silent for a few moments.

"Aye, laddie," Dwalin sighed gruffly, "he's gonna have to be. This is nothing compared to what's watin' for us inside."

Feeling his stomach clench with worry, Bilbo almost didn't see the shattered buildings on either side of him because his thoughts and eyes were still fixed on Thorin, on what he could do to help his friend prepare for whatever was inside Erebor.

Suddenly he thought of Legolas' words before they had escaped: 'A dragon is not the only enemy to Thorin Oakenshield that resides there.'

He still wasn't quite sure what the elf had meant but he also couldn't help but feel that the dragon wasn't quite so important anymore. That the sight of all the death and memories might be more lethal to Thorin than the razor sharp claws of some beast. And that thought frightened him more than anything.

Dale wasn't quite so large as Lake Town but it was, or rather had been as far as Bilbo could tell, tall. There were towers and parapets half gone but he could imagine the height they might have once reached. Flags that could have been brightly colored littered the streets, their burnt remains covering wagons, rubble, and… the hobbit shuddered as he tried not to look any closer at what appeared to be some sort of burnt skeletal arm sticking out from under it.

They made their way as quickly through the main street as they could, weaving around piles of rocks and other… things. The company was deathly silent; no one seemed to be able to find words appropriate for what they were seeing. Bilbo could only think that what awaited them at the end of this road, now that it was here and in sight, weighed down on them with the oppressive and suffocating strength of loss.

By the time they reached the other side of Dale, the sun was setting and bathing the ruins and Lonely Mountain in a blood red glow, the red of fire, the red of dragons. But now was not the time for fear, Bilbo scolded himself even though he couldn't stop the small gulp he took, he had to be strong for his friends, for Thorin. No matter what happened tomorrow, they still had to yet to get in today.

Their leader called the company to a halt at the base of the mountain. The great doors of Erebor now towered in front of them at the end of the path. Green and intricately carved but right at the seam where the two stones met, there rock turned black and melted. Six great lashes where the dragon's claws must have raked against the rock framed the burn mark as if the beast had marked his victory, his prize.

For some reason, Bilbo had thought that maybe the doors would have been… open? He had thought perhaps the dragon might have torn them away but, he supposed, then they wouldn't have needed a key. Though he was rather hoping the secret door had been some sort of back up plan just in case. The two great armored dwarves that framed the doors were half torn in two. One's head was ripped clean from its stone body and the other was missing it's top half entirely. Whatever could do this, well… It made his heart beat faster just thinking about it.
"So… do we just… go in?" Kili asked quietly from beside his brother, eyes wide with equal parts wonder and trepidation.

Thorin shook his head, "No. If the dragon is still there it would be far too dangerous. We must find the door from Thror's map."

Balin walked over to stand next to Thorin, "Durin's Day approaches, wherever it is, we must find it quickly, lads."

Their leader slung off his pack and removed the map from inside, "Elrond said the door will be on the west side, we will spread out and begin our search tonight." Thorin looked up at the gathered company with no small measure of determination on his face. "We do not know what this door looks like but we must find it if our quest is to continue. I have every confidence," he stood tall, shoulders back, "that we will, but it must be done with haste."

Each of the company nodded in agreement before starting to split off into smaller groups. Thorin and Dwalin headed out first to scout alongside the mountain. Normally Bilbo would have gone with Fili and Kili, but seeing as how they needed to cover as much ground as possible, they had divided into groups of two. Bilbo Baggins found himself walking alongside Balin towards one of the higher paths that led to one of several ridges that, according to the older dwarf, wrapped almost all the way around the mountain.

The path started next to one of the giant ruined statues that guarded either side of Erebor's main entrance. It was, mercifully, fairly free of rubble which made the ascent onto the path much easier than Bilbo had anticipated.

"Keep up, laddie," Balin called to him as the hobbit stopped to look back at the sight of the mountain. Bilbo glanced at this companion quickly and started after him, not wanting the dwarf to leave him behind.

Balin was one of the few of the company that had spoken to him from the beginning of their journey, despite any reservations the dwarf had about Bilbo. The hobbit had thought him kind and wise but also… There was something about the old dwarf that was distant, separate when he spoke to Bilbo. He knew Balin to be a dwarf of great learning and experience as well as a consummate warrior, someone who Bilbo couldn't help but respect.

And yet there always seemed to be something guarded in Balin's smile when he and the hobbit had spoken of tales or he had answered some of Bilbo's earlier questions about their journey. It hit him suddenly as they started to walk up the path, that he had spoken more in depth to Dwalin than he had to Balin. Bilbo almost laughed at the absurdity that the one brother to share his past was the one who has seemed to dislike him only second to Thorin in the beginning.

'Ah well,' he thought with bemusement, 'so it goes…'

Balin was… well, he had seen things. More than Bilbo could ever hope to in his life. And, as he looked at the dwarf's wizened face covered half by his large, white beard, more than the hobbit thought he ever wanted to see. Only someone who had seen death had that look in their eyes. Not just one death, but scores of loved ones and friends lost.

"So…" Bilbo began hesitantly, not wanting to distract Balin, "What, uh, exactly are we looking for?"

The dwarf looked over his shoulder with a small smile, "A pertinent question, laddie, but one I'm afraid I don't have the answer to."
The hobbit felt his stomach sink a bit in disappointment. They had no idea where the door was and no idea what the door even looked like. This would be... difficult. To say the least.

They continued down the path for a while in silence, both concentrating on every detail. Bilbo felt his face begin to ache as his brows had been furrowed in concentration for what felt like several hours. He had practically been walking sideways to get the best view of the rock face possible and yet he had seen nothing. Nothing but a bunch of rock and the occasional plant brave enough to grow there.

Not even the slightest hint of something, anything that looked like it had been or could be a door. Frustration was beginning to lace his every nerve as his eyes ached.

"Blasted dwarves," Bilbo hissed through clenched teeth, "keep everything secret, they said. Make sure no one ever can find it, they said. Well, good bloody job." He had been about to aim a probably harder than wise kick at the Lonely Mountain in a show of defiance when he heard Balin chuckle from beside him.

Bilbo glanced up startled; he had almost completely forgotten the dwarf's presence there.

"Aye, sometimes it does feel a bit foolish, keeping everything hidden, even from ourselves," Balin spoke softly as he turned to face the ledge.

The sun was all but set and they could hardly see anything anymore, which made the task, in Bilbo's most humble opinion, just about pointless. The dwarf stretched his back slightly before sitting down with more grace than anyone his age should have been able to and dangled his legs off the edge.

Bilbo glanced between Balin and the edge of the path. Since they had been walking for so long, there was now a very steep and altogether very dangerous looking drop between the path and the forest below. The dwarf looked over his shoulder with a raised brow and patted a spot on the rock next to him, "Well? You just going to stand there looking like a frightened little rabbit or will you sit down." The hobbit couldn't help but flush at being compared to a rabbit of all things before forcing his legs to move closer to the ledge.

Bilbo sat down next to the dwarf but refused to put his legs over, preferring to cross them instead. He had had enough unfortunate incidents with ledges on this journey and he was most certainly not going to tempt fate. Balin chuckled at his companion before reaching into what seemed like the very beard itself before pulling out a fine leather drinking skin. Popping off the cork, the old dwarf took a swig before passing it over to Bilbo.

The hobbit eyed it suspiciously; remember the fiery discomfort of the drink Dwalin had given him.

"It's only wine, laddie," Balin said with an exasperated sigh, "some of the Master's finest I'm told."

Bilbo took the skin gently and raised it to his lips then took a drink. It was... good. Surprisingly light and fruity and instantly made him feel slightly warmer despite the autumn winds that danced around them.

"Thank you," the hobbit said with a smile as he passed it back.

Balin nodded and took another drink, gazing out at the forest that lay on Erebor's doorstep. They were silent for a while, passing the wine between them and taking in the sight. Bilbo felt his limbs loosening and the frustration with their search start to leave him, they would just have to try again tomorrow he supposed. Balin seemed deep in thought and the hobbit couldn't blame him.

"It must be... strange to be back here after so many years..." Bilbo glanced over at his companion,
to the dwarf who knew this place better than probably any other in their company.

"Aye… it is good, laddie. But..." the dwarf’s words halted before he sighed, "I cannot shake the shadow of fear. Something about this mountain fills me with unease."

Bilbo's eyes widened as he considered Balin. He had never heard any of the company really express doubts on their journey. Well, doubts unrelated to his competency at least.

"Is it the dragon? Because I think that's a fairly good reason to be uneasy," the hobbit looked down towards the now distant green stone doors, the black mark of Smaug visible from even here.

Balin let out a small chuckle, "The dragon does worry me, yes, but I do not think the beast's presence is the only cause."

The hobbit looked back at this companion curiously but didn't push any further.

"I fear..." Balin looked off into the distance towards nothing at all, "this quest may not have been wise."

The hobbit wasn't shocked to hear this, but he would not lie and say he didn't feel surprised. Balin was one of Thorin's most trusted advisers, probably the wisest dwarf in their company and most certainly one of the most loyal to their leader. Bilbo remembered the night near the beginning of their journey when the old dwarf had told him of the battle of Moria, remembered the reverence with which he spoke of Thorin.

"Do you... Do you think we'll fail?" Bilbo asked quietly, almost not wanting to hear the answer.

Balin sighed and took another swig of wine, "I do not know, laddie. Thorin had planned to bring an army here. An entire army of ready swords and maces to take back the mountain from Smaug and yet here we are," the dwarf passed the skin over, "a company of fourteen attempting the same task that even the warriors of Erebor in their prime failed at."

The hobbit couldn't help but gulp with sudden nervousness.

"I have seen much death in my lifetime, laddie," Balin said with such exhaustion it made his heart clench, "I have no wish to see any more. I would not want any of this company to shed blood for..." The dwarf halted once again, he seemed to not want to speak ill of their journey but as he looked over at Bilbo, Balin gave him a sad smile, "I would not want any of these dwarves to die for a kingdom long lost. Not after all Thorin worked to earn back for us in the Blue Mountains."

"Don't you –" Bilbo started with a slight trepidation, not wanting to pry, "don't you want to get your home back?"

Balin leaned back onto his hands and looked up towards the night sky, "I have lived many years, Master Hobbit, and Mahal willing I will live a few more." The dwarf's eyes looked as distant to Bilbo as he knew Balin's thoughts to be, "One does not reach my age without realizing that home is not dug deep into the rock of a mountain."

It was unsettling for Bilbo to hear such an vastly different opinion from Thorin in one of the dwarves who had known their leader the longest, from the dwarf that had lived in Erebor the longest.

"Then, uh, where is your home, Mister Balin? The Blue Mountains?"

The dwarf looked over at him, the sad smile once more in place, "I have found, laddie, that my home is wherever I can find purpose. Nothing gets these old bones out of bed quite like having reason to
"Why did you go on the quest then? I mean—" Bilbo added quickly, hoping not to offend the dwarf, "if you think it will end with us all dying or that we won't succeed, then it seems… just…" he trailed off, having the distinct and rather unpleasant feeling that he'd just put his foot deeply and firmly into his own mouth.

"I have served Thorin's family for a great deal of my life, laddie, I know that boy better than most," Balin shifted so his arms rested on his cloth-clad legs, "I have fought beside him and given him my council, whatever good that has been." The dwarf chuckled lightly, "Never met any dwarf more stubborn than he. Well… maybe that sister of his but she's a class all of her own," Balin's face grew serious. "Thorin needs to do this, laddie, I think you know that well enough," the dwarf glanced over at his companion for a few moments before sitting up straight.

"I've never met a dwarf more a king than Thorin. Not even his grandfather could achieve half of what that lad did for our people after Erebor fell." Bilbo's eyes were drawn to the small fire he saw near the base of the mountain where the rest of the company must have set up camp, where Thorin was right now. "I… owe him my life, Dwalin owes him his life. Every dwarf who now lives in peace and prosperity in the Blue Mountains owe their lives to him. I have found no greater purpose, no higher honor in life than serving Thorin Oakenshield, laddie."

"If this is what my king needs, then I would gladly die to help him," Balin drank from the skin again, "He has given up everything, every personal gain, every happiness he could have found. Thorin has given everything for our people."

Bilbo nodded, feeling like he at least somewhat understood the dwarf, "So when he asked you to join him…"

Balin smiled at his companion, "Aye, laddie. When he asked me to join him, when he asked me for this one thing, the only thing he needed, of course I had to come even if I had doubts."

Bilbo couldn't help but smile back, seeing the great respect and love Balin had for their leader, for his king. "He… I think Thorin values you and your brother's friendship above all others, Mister Balin. I know he doesn't take either of you for granted, not even for a second."

The dwarf chuckled at that and winked at Bilbo "As well he should, laddie, be a fool not to."

The hobbit laughed with his companion for a few moments before the dwarf spoke again. "He values your friendship too, laddie. More than you know."

Bilbo looked over at the dwarf feeling slightly surprised, "I – uh, I hope so? I certainly think of him as a friend."

Balin sighed a little, as if Bilbo hadn't fully appreciated the weight of his words. "Thorin… Thorin does not easily trust, laddie. His loyalty is not easily won, especially since the fall."

Bilbo glanced at Balin, his brow raised slightly, "…Surely it is not that hard, I mean I did it…"

His words seemed to inspire another laugh from the old dwarf, "No, laddie, when I say it is not easy, I mean that it is nearly impossible. I'm not sure he has trusted anyone outside our people since the days of Erebor, except for you that is."

The hobbit flushed slightly, "I – I, uh…" he trailed off rather lamely. Bilbo Baggins was not used to such obvious praise from anyone let alone another member of their company and he was becoming less and less certain as to how he should respond. "Thank you?"
Balin rolled his eyes, "You are quite welcome. Though if you hurt him, I wouldn't count on leaving for your Shire with all your limbs in tact." The dwarf was still smiling, though this time there was a something… else in Balin's eyes.

Bilbo felt a small wave of indignation flood through him, "I would never hurt him! Or anyone for that matter. Not, uh, not on purpose anyway."

"You won't find a dwarf more loyal than Thorin once you've won his allegiance, nor will you find one who feels the hurt of betrayal more fiercely."

Bilbo narrowed his eyes slightly, "You think I would betray him?"

Balin shook his head slightly, "Nay, I don't think you would, laddie, or I would have made sure you never joined this company. But I would caution you to be careful; Thorin has had a… difficult life. I would not see it troubled any further than it has to be."

Bilbo's face set with determination to make Balin understand, "I only want… I only want Thorin to be happy again, to live again…" The hobbit paused, not sure his words were doing his thoughts justice, "And if being my friend helps him, then that is what I will be."

Bilbo stared at the old dwarf, refusing to look away, "I will help Thorin get back his home, Mister Balin, I will. Whatever it takes to make that hollowness full again, whatever he needs to be free of that burden I will see it done."

The hobbit didn't know exactly where these words were coming from, but as they poured from his mouth with righteous indignation, Bilbo Baggins knew them to be true. Thorin was now a dear friend to him; he wasn't sure which moment, which experience had moved the dwarf into being not just a new and awkwardly amiable acquaintance but one of the of the people he trusted most, trusted with his life.

But it had happened. It was happening. And as Bilbo thought of his friend, he knew how lucky he was to have somehow wormed his way under all that pain and hurt and anger. To be able to see Thorin's smile and hear Thorin's laugh. To know the dwarf's story, to be able to help those wounds long inflicted start to heal and damn it all, he would continue to be the dwarf's friend as long as Thorin wanted him to.

He had come so far from when they set out on this quest. He'd been treated as an annoyance, a nuisance, and a burden. To be fair this was mostly done by Thorin himself, but that is exactly why Bilbo valued their friendship so much now that it had changed, now that they were able to help each other. It seemed an age ago now that they had been near the High Pass and Thorin had told him to leave. He remembered very well the look of disgust on the dwarf's face, the feeling of hopeless despair, of not belonging, of being truly more scared than he had ever been in his life.

But Bilbo had stuck with this company of dwarves. He had told Thorin that he was staying, that he was going to help no matter how much the dwarf hated him or thought his presence a burden because in his heart, Bilbo knew he could. He hadn't quite known how he was going to do it then, but now the hobbit felt like nothing had ever been clearer in his entire life.

He was no burglar; he was no sneak or thief and could still barely wield his own sword. What Bilbo could do now was be a friend to Thorin. He could be the person that helped Thorin learn how to trust again, to teach him that not everything in this world had to be paid for or pledged because some king had more gold than another. He could teach Thorin that he was worth knowing, worth following, worth dying for not because he was a prince, but because he was a better and truer friend than Bilbo had ever had.
What Thorin needed from him was not his skills in battle or even his wits, though that was something Bilbo thought he might have at least, what the dwarf needed from him was hope. Hope that life could be different, that burdens could be laid down and hurts forgiven. Hope that he was worthy of these things and not just chasing after them in blind desperation.

Balin considered Bilbo for a few silent moments, "I believe you, laddie."

The hobbit nodded but knew in his heart that it wouldn't have mattered if Balin believed him; I wouldn't matter if no one believed him because Bilbo had a purpose here. A purpose that he would try with all his might to achieve.

The dwarf took one last swig of wine, tipping the skin back so the last few drops poured into his mouth, "Are all hobbits like you, laddie?"

Bilbo chuckled at the question. Sometimes he forgot how little of the Shire folk left their holes to interact with the rest of the world. "I..." he began, pondering the question, "I'm not sure, Mister Balin. I would guess more or less we all share at least a few qualities."

The old dwarf winked at him again, "Perhaps we should have recruited more of you while we were visiting Hobbiton, laddie, I'm thinking we could use a little but more of your fire in coming days."

Bilbo laughed loudly, "Fire, Mister Balin? I think we might have more than our fill if the dragon is still inside."

The dwarf joined in realizing his poor choice of words, "Aye, I suppose you're right. Won't stop me hoping you're wrong though."

They sat together in companionable silence for a good while before Balin reluctantly stretched and suggested they get back to camp since they would be having an early morning the next day. Bilbo couldn't help but feel certain affection for the old dwarf. For someone who had lived so long and seen countless things, both wonderful and terrible, to still find life and friends worth fighting for when he could easily have retired to the Blue Mountains and no one would have judged him even in the slightest... well, he knew there was a remarkable strength within Balin and the company was fortunate to have him along.
"Master Boggins!"

Bilbo looked up from where he was chopping a few potatoes for their supper next to Bofur.

"Master Boggins, come over here!" Kili's face popped out from above a shrub at the edge of the camp, leaves and sticks clinging to his hair as if he were one of the plants. Fili's hand came up and shoved his brother down, "Don't shout, Kili!"

The blond dwarf's face turned towards where the hobbit was looking at them with raised eyebrows, "Hurry, Master Baggins, before the sun sets too low."

Bilbo let out a little sigh but smiled as he put aside the knife and potatoes he had been cutting. They had spent another fruitless day looking for the secret door along the side of the Lonely Mountain and had come up with absolutely nothing. Bilbo and Balin had come back into camp as the sun set only to be met with the sight of Thorin stomping around muttering something about how he was going to find every thrush within fifty leagues of Erebor and 'knock' all of their heads against the rocks personally.

Their leader's mood was quickly degrading the longer it took them to find the door, but Dwalin had shaken his head when the hobbit had made to move towards his friend.

"Let him be a while, laddie," the dwarf had spoken to him softly, "he just needs some time to think."

And so Bilbo had nodded, feeling a bit unsure but trusting Dwalin's judgment regarding their leader and had started to make a large supper with Bofur.

Walking over to where the two brothers had disappeared behind a wall of thick shrubs, Bilbo pushed his way through tangled and altogether very pointy plants. When he broke through the other side, the hobbit saw Fili and Kili waiting for him beside what looked to be a narrow path in the dirt.

"Follow us! We have a surprise, Master Boggins!" Kili said eagerly as he grabbed Bilbo's arm and started to pull.

He followed the brothers through thickets of charred trees and some harder shrubs that had grown at the base of the mountain. "Where are we going?" he asked with slight suspicion, hoping this was not another of their pranks.

"You'll see," Fili looked back at him with a smile. They walked through the closely laid dead trees until Bilbo saw another cluster of bushes.

Grinning at him, Fili and Kili wedged themselves through. Bilbo stared at brush for a moment, eyeing the spiky things coming out with some trepidation; he didn't think he'd be able to get through with gouging himself accidentally in the eye repeatedly.

"What are you waiting for?" came Kili's voice from though the plants.

The hobbit grumbled but decided to push through. When he came out the other side he couldn't help but let out a gasp as he face broke out in a wide smile. There was a small clearing filled with the most wonderful flowers, reds and blues and yellows dusting the ground.

"Knew you would like it!" Kili grinned at him from where the dwarf was laying at the edge of the
patch of flowers.

Fili puffed a few clouds of smoke from his pipe with a smile, "We thought it looked a little like your garden in Bag End, Master Baggins, a little taste of home."

The hobbit knelt down to take a closer look at the small petals. They were… he thought they might even be the same kind he had planted in his garden oh so many years ago.

"They're called Winter's Kiss," Bilbo said softly, "they only bloom when the weather gets cold."

He had some planted in his garden for just that purpose. It made him sad, he supposed, to see the flowers die every autumn. To have all that beauty and life fade away, even though he knew they would be back the next spring. These flowers, though, these flowers only started to bloom when the others began to die. They were hardy and beautiful and stayed the hobbit's winter melancholy as long as they flowered.

Bilbo reached down and plucked up one of the deep blue ones, small white lines curving around the edges of the petals. Twirling it between two fingers, the hobbit smiled down at it before closing his eyes and bringing it up to his nose. Taking a deep breath in, Bilbo caught the small fragrance emanating from the flower. It smelled like home, like something familiar and soft but there was also… something wilder in the scent. As if the nature of the mountain itself had imbued some of its essence within the bloom.

"Do you like it, Master Boggins?"

Bilbo opened his eyes slowly and looked over at the brothers with a chuckle, "Yes, very much Kili, thank you both."

The younger dwarf grinned up at his brother, looking very pleased with himself. Fili patted the ground next to him and waved his pipe with a wiggle of his brows, "Join us, my friend, this may be the last time we have to relax until something very scaly and angry decides to make us its dinner."

The hobbit glared at Fili who simply laughed back as he walked over to where his friends were sitting. He took the pipe from Fili and drew on it for a long moment. They sat together in companionable silence as the light from the sunset started to fade from the sky. Despite the beautifully painted clouds, Bilbo couldn't take his eyes off of the flowers. It was… reassuring to see something alive and growing near the dragon's wreckage. Like the earth itself had sensed Thorin's return and wanted to show them that hope was still alive even in the face of such ruin.

The hobbit absently plucked a few of the yellow flowers and started to weave them together as he had some so many times as a child. He had almost forgotten how many days he and his mother had spent sitting in the grass making braids and crowns from the plants around them. After his father had passed away and he and his mother lived together alone in Bag End for a few years. His mother grew older and lonelier even though she never wept nor did she pine for her dead husband. They had lived many long, good, and happy years together. They had shared a lifetime of moments and happiness and love. But… after Bungo had passed on, his mother had missed her husband. She missed him like a limb, like something else so terribly essential had been taken from her.

She did not mourn him, for he had gone quietly and happily in his bed, but for the first time in what seemed like endless years of a happy summer, Belladonna Took Baggins was without her other, without her partner, without her best friend. Bilbo saw the spark of loneliness that crept into her eyes whenever she would go to make a witty comment over her shoulder where her husband used to linger. When Bilbo would bring her breakfast in the mornings, he would see his mother had slung an arm over space in her bed where Bungo used to sleep, like she was still holding him even in her
dreams.

His mother grew older and spent more of her time in bed, as all the older hobbits of Hobbiton were known to do, and Bilbo would pull up his chair, a basket of flowers placed on the small table, and they would weave their stems together. They weaved crowns for gallant kings, wands for mysterious old, grey wizards, and braids to place in Belladonna's silver hair. They weaved until her wizened hands could weave no more and then it would just be Bilbo, every day sitting beside his mother, making floral creations until the winter frost wilted his tools and his mother went to join her husband in the one place Bilbo couldn’t follow.

He didn't lament his parents. Bilbo Baggins knew it was natural and they had lived as good of lives as anyone he had ever known. But every spring and summer when the flowers he had planted over their resting place on the top of a nearby hill, Bilbo would pluck enough to make a wreath for his parents. To remind himself that a life well lived was not something to remember tinged with sorrow once it came to an end.

"What are you doing, Master Baggins?" Bilbo heard Fili ask him curiously as his hands worked almost unconsciously, intertwining the stems.

The hobbit smiled up at him, "Nothing really, it's just something my mother taught me when I was little."

The blond dwarf peered over to look at Bilbo's hands more closely, "What is it for?"

The hobbit laughed as he twisted the end of the last yellow flower, completing the circle, "For this!" He placed the flowers on his head as Fili's brows rose.

Kili looked up from where he was laying on the ground and took one glance at Bilbo before letting out a loud laugh, "Very fetching, Master Boggins, you make a fine maiden."

The hobbit rolled his eyes before removing the flowers, "I can practically smell your jealousy, Kili, it's rather unbecoming for a prince." Bilbo's face splint into a wicked grin, "But Fili… I think this color would go very well with that golden mane of yours."

Fili's eyes widened slightly as Bilbo's swiftly thrust the crown of blossoms on the dwarf's head. Kili started to practically cry with laughter at his brother's disgruntled face, "Oh, Master Boggins, you are a genius! Now everyone will have to respect our future king. Even if he is an elf."

The blond dwarf glared at his brother before appearing to decide that acting like he cared would be letting Kili win and he was most definitely not going to let that happen.

"I do not need the stone crown, brother. A true king needs no crown," Fili gestured to the flowers with a flourish, "Though I don't think anyone could deny that it is very becoming, perhaps the hobbits are on to something."

Bilbo grinned at the brothers and started to weave together another wreath with the red flowers, "Don't worry Kili, I'll make another. Erebor's princes should never be without crowns."

The younger dwarf laughed again. "Well, I wouldn't want everyone looking at Fili when I am clearly more handsome."

Bilbo tied the last red flower and stood up, putting on a mock somber face, "Sir Kili, Son of Dís, Nephew of Thorin Oakenshield, I crown you and Sir Fili princes of the mountain flowers." The hobbit placed the red flowers on Kili's head with a bow and backed away still bent over in exaggerated respect.
The younger dwarf pretended to wipe away a happy tear from his eye and stood up with his chest puffed out, a leather clad hand pressed over his heart. "I promise to serve my subjects," Kili gesuted with a wide, sweeping hand towards the cluster of flowers on the ground, "as a true king should."

Fili yanked his brother down with a laugh so the younger dwarf fell face first into the bed of flower, "Sit down, my king, be with your people."

Kili pushed himself up and spit out a mouthful of flowers and lunged for his brother with a laugh. There was a few minutes of elbows and knees thrown about until Fili had somehow flipped his brother over and was now sitting cross legged on his back, crown slightly askew but looking as regal as a dwarf wreathed with flowers could.

Bilbo simply rolled his eyes and started to absently make another one with the deep blue flowers. It soothed him to do something so familiar with a dragon lingering after ever thought. To let his fingers work and his mind wander away from pictures of stone doors and terrifying beasts. They heard Bofur distantly call them all to supper. Fili and Kili shot up eagerly and started towards the camp but looked back as they saw their hobbit wasn't following.

"You coming, Master Baggins?" Fili turned back towards his friend. "It'll be gone if you wait too long," Kili added with a sage nod.

"You two go ahead," Bilbo smiled at them, "I'll be there in a moment, I just want another minute."

Fili smiled back with his kind blue eyes and the hobbit knew he understood what Bilbo meant, "Of course, my friend, we'll make sure Bombur doesn't eat your share."

Bilbo sat alone amongst the flowers until the sun had all but set, thinking of home and of family. But also of friends, both new and old. It felt… strange to him that this quest would soon be over, one way or another. When they found the door, and he was sure they would, either they would find a dragon waiting for them or they wouldn't. And if the dragon was there, then they would either die or they would somehow defeat the beast.

He was frightened… of course he was. Terrified might even be a better description of the rapid thumping of his heart whenever his mind lingered over red scales and sharp teeth. But he was also determined. They were so close now, so close to getting Thorin his home back that even though he could all but feel another fainting spell coming on again, it was not something he could turn away from anymore.

Of course he was free to leave, free to go home any time he chose, but at the same time he really couldn't. Thorin needed him now more than ever and Bilbo Baggins was not a hobbit to abandon his friends. Bilbo glanced up as he heard Bofur's call once more and decided he should get back to camp before the sun set and he inevitably got lost and eaten by some mangy mountain wolf.

Bilbo stuck his hand through the blue wreath of flowers so it sat on his forearm and made his way towards the smell of stew and the sound of talking. As he walked into camp he saw most of the company was grouped around the fire. Though many of the dwarves were more subdued that they usually were given the prospect of food, he could only assume the weight of their quest was weighing down on more than a few shoulders.

The hobbit had been about to make his way over to the fire when he spotted Thorin sitting at the edge of the camp, his back facing the company and his eyes turned towards the towering mountain. Bilbo paused for a moment, not sure what to do. He was hungry and his mouth started to water at the scent wafting from the fire but… Even though Dwalin had told him to let Thorin think, he couldn't help but feel this tug at the back of his mind, pushing him towards his friend.
The hobbit turned abruptly and made his way over to where the dwarf was sitting on the ground. He… he wasn't sure what he would say to Thorin, what comfort he could offer but maybe what mattered most right now wasn't what he said, but what he did.

Walking up to the dwarf's side, Bilbo stood beside his friend for a moment, allowing Thorin time to tell him to leave or stay or whatever he needed right then. The dwarf looked up from the corner of his eye, saying nothing. He didn't smile, nor did his face lose its look of dark contemplation, but he also didn't send Bilbo away. As the hobbit looked into Thorin's face he saw something that made his stomach sink. He saw the same expression that he had seen the night in Mirkwood's cells, like something dark and savage was building inside the dwarf, eating away at any sense of peace that remained in Thorin.

But this time he didn't have a distraction. There was no urgent escape needed and their lives weren't in any danger… yet. Bilbo wanted to have the right words, the right anything to assuage the tumult of emotions he knew to be running through Thorin's mind. As he shifted his hand, he felt the light tough of leaves and petals scrape past his wrist, the forgotten wreath still hooked around him.

The hobbit eyed the flowers, debating for a moment. Glancing between the crown and Thorin's head, he knew that he shouldn't, but maybe… Maybe a little absurdity was exactly what his friend needed. Something to distract him for a small while at least. Bilbo unhooked the wreath and placed it gently on the dwarf's head before sitting down next to him. Thorin looked down at the hobbit, his face the picture of confusion and Bilbo couldn't help but grin back. At least his friend's face was no longer looking tortured, just very… perplexed.

"What…" The dwarf began gruffly, reaching up to pull off whatever Bilbo had placed on his head.

"Not so roughly!" the hobbit said with a laugh, waving his hands to stop Thorin's movement, "you'll break it."

Thorin made a face at him, his confusion seeming to have done nothing but grow more apparent.

"Here, I'll get it for you," Bilbo chuckled lightly and reached up to take of the blue flower crown and handed it to Thorin.

"It's… flowers," the dwarf spoke as if saying the words out loud would make them less odd.

Bilbo shrugged with a laugh, " An astute observation, my friend, you will make a wise king."

Thorin glared back at him but his eyes quickly turned back down to the wreath that sat delicately in his hands. "Why did you…" the dwarf trailed off again, turning the crown in his hand to examine each flower.

"I made your nephews one each," Bilbo grinned up at the dwarf, "Couldn't have the King of Erebor without a crown."

Thorin sat quietly, still gazing at the flowers in his hands for a while. "Is this how the hobbit's crown their kings?"

Bilbo laughed at the notion with a shake of his head, "There are no kings in the Shire, Thorin. Never have been, never will be."

The dwarf stared at him rather blankly as if Bilbo had just missed something. "I was joking."

The hobbit stared back at his friend for several silent moments, "What? Really?"
The dwarf rolled his eyes before placing the flowers back on his head, "Yes, really. I've been known to do so from time to time."

Bilbo laughed again as he patted Thorin's shoulder. "I suppose you could try, go to the Shire and declare yourself our king but don't go expecting anyone to listen to you."

The dwarf raised a brow, "Even with such a fine crown?"

The hobbit gave Thorin an impressive Baggin's eye roll of his own, "Even with such a fine crown."

"Thank you, Bilbo, it is a worthy gift." Thorin was facing the mountain again, his face looked tired and tinged with worry, but no longer did look as if the weight of all the stone inside rested on his shoulders.

"Oh come now, no need to make fun. You've had your one joke for the season, wouldn't want you to strain yourself," the hobbit gently shoved Thorin's arm with his own.

The dwarf gave him a small smile, "I am serious, it is a fine gift."

Bilbo looked at him for a few moments but saw nothing teasing in the dwarf's face. "Surely you've gotten better," he said with a slightly disbelieving chuckle, "your family is royalty after all."

Thorin gave a little shrug, "I have been given many gifts in my lifetime, yes, but they were… it is an obligation. Yours is given freely. There is no hidden motive I need to decipher and that is a relief."

Bilbo glanced up at the crown with raised brows, not having expected Thorin to do anything but throw it off again.

"Those gifts all had favors attached. This," he gestured up to the flowers, "I couldn't trade or sell for anything." Thorin looked down at the hobbit, his face the picture of earnest honesty, "And I wouldn't want to."

Bilbo looked back for a few moments, seeing something in his friend's eyes that he hadn't really before. Perhaps it was just the stress of the day. "We'll find the door, Thorin, I promise."

The dwarf nodded turning back to the destroyed statues that guarded Erebor even in their own ruins. "I know..." he trailed off, sounding like he had told himself the same thing over and over throughout the day.

Bilbo reached out and grabbed Thorin's hand swiftly and hard, but letting go almost immediately, "Tomorrow's the day, I can just about feel it." The dwarf's hand gave a slight twitch as soon as Bilbo's left it, but otherwise Thorin was completely still.

They sat together in silence as the moon started to creep across the sky. The hadn't talked in what Bilbo thought to be most of an hour when he moved to pull his jacket tighter around him to hold the shivers at bay. Thorin glanced down at him with a frown and Bilbo immediately felt the dwarf shift closer to him so they were sitting with their sides touching, Thorin's great coat almost on top of him. And they sat longer, not talking, but Bilbo could tell that his friend's thoughts had quieted from when he had seen him earlier in the evening.

The hobbit hoped that what Thorin needed right now was a friend, just someone to remind him that he would never have to be alone, even when thoughts turned dark and the future was a mysterious expanse of horrible unknowns. Bilbo felt the dwarf's breathing in a steady rhythm and in turn felt his own calm in a way it hadn't in moments of quiet when his thoughts usually turned to the dragon. They would do this together, whatever happened next, and that thought filled him with an unshakeable hope. Hope that this would all turn out for the best somehow. That in the end, if they
worked together, if they helped one another, then the future was bright as a summer day in the Shire.

"Master Baggins, your dinner's gettin' cold, are you eatin' or what?" Bofur called over to where they were sitting from the campfire. Bilbo hesitated, not sure if he should leave Thorin alone when he had just gotten his friend calm.

"Go on, Bilbo, you'll need strength for tomorrow," the dwarf said from beside him.

"Are you – are you sure? I can stay…" The hobbit's stomach took that moment to growl loudly and he felt a flush creep onto his face.

Thorin's face grew into a small smile as he let out a soft chuckle, "I am, go eat before your stomach draws all the wolves to our camp."

Bilbo glanced around the camp nervously as he stood up, "do you, uh, think that's possible?"

The dwarf rolled his eyes once again, "Let's not find out."

The hobbit gave Thorin's shoulder one last squeeze before he made his way over to the campfire. Bofur quickly dished him up the remaining stew, which he accepted gratefully.

"Why don't you join us over here?" Bilbo looked up to see Ori smiling at him, a quill in hand and his notebook open to what looked to be some sort of portrait.

"What are you doing?" he asked curiously, trying to see just what the young dwarf was up to.

Ori scratched at the back of his head as he smiled sheepishly back at the hobbit. "I'm drawing everyone's portrait. You know, so if we don't, uh… make it, then at least there will be a record of who the company was."

Bilbo felt his brows raise, "You mean if we get incinerated by the dragon then future foolhardy travelers can identify our charred corpses?"

Ori nodded vigorously, "Yes, exactly!"

Bilbo couldn't help but laugh at the dwarf's face as he sat down on a log.

"A dragon is no laughing matter, Ori, you would do well to remember that." Dori sniffed from a few feet away, sitting upright and rigid, as was his nature.

Ori smiled at his brother and resumed inking Dori's portrait, "I know… it's just… with something so terrible as a dragon, just about the only thing you can do is laugh."

Bilbo shoved a mouthful of stew into his mouth as he watched Ori draw and chewed quickly, "I think you're right, Mister Ori, no sense getting too worked up over it if we can help it."

Dori let out a snort, "I'm sure you'll both be just positively ecstatic when you see it's massive jaws, razor sharp teeth, and oh, did I mention the promise of a fiery and incredibly painful death?"

Bilbo swallowed his mouth of stew in a large, nervous gulp, "Well when you say it like that…"

Ori shook his head with an exasperated sigh, "Don't go frightening Master Baggins, Dori. You're being rude again."

The older dwarf glared at his brother with indignation, "Rude? I, dear brother, am simply being a realist. Not that anyone else in this foolhardy company would know anything about that."
Dori shifted so he sat up even straighter if that was possible, "I merely want everyone to be prepared for our certain, and most painful, impending deaths; what is rude about that?"

Ori glared at his brother, "Our deaths are not *impending*, Dori, you're just being dramatic. Anyway, I'm finished so why don't you let Master Baggins take your place and go make some tea or something."

Dori raised his nose in the air as he stood up to walk away, "It would be my *pleasure.*"

The older dwarf stalked off and Bilbo stared nervously between the brothers, "Is, uh, everything alright?"

Ori sighed as he motioned the hobbit over to where Dori had just been sitting, "Nothing to worry about, Dori's always been like that. He can be a bit prickly, Master Baggins, but he has a good heart." Bilbo sat down on the stump and tried to position himself so that the fire cast light on all his face. Ori flipped over the page with his brother's portrait on it and began to quickly lay down his ink in familiar strokes.

"Have you been working on these all day, Mister Ori?" Bilbo asked, trying to move his mouth as little as possible so as to not disturb Ori's work.

"Just since we got back to camp, you and Thorin are the last ones, though..." the young dwarf glanced over to where their leader was sitting, still facing the mountain in silence, "I wasn't sure if I should disturb Master Thorin so I think he'll just have to wait for another day..."

Bilbo nodded slightly in agreement, "Probably not a bad idea, he has a lot on his mind."

"It's too bad..." Ori muttered to himself quietly as he laid down more strokes of ink.

"What's too bad?" the hobbit prodded.

The young dwarf glanced up quickly as if he hadn't realized he'd been speaking out loud, "I... just that... well," there was a slight flush on the dwarf's cheeks now, "I got Master Fili and Master Kili with those flowers on their heads. I would never have thought Master Thorin would let anything like that anywhere near him, but when you came back to camp with those beautiful blue ones..." The dwarf trailed off slightly, his cheeks reddening even further before he added quietly, "I would've liked the set."

Bilbo let out a loud laugh at Ori's flustered expression, "Don't worry, Mister Ori, I can always make him another one when you draw his portrait."

The dwarf looked up quickly, "Oh really? Do you mean it?"

The hobbit chuckled again, "I do, though I would recommend not mentioning it to him, Thorin might get embarrassed."

Ori looked up at him, his face all earnest and wide-eyed, "Of course not! I wouldn't want Master Thorin to feel self-conscious!"

Bilbo stared at his friend until they both burst out laughing and he couldn't help but think the picture of Thorin decked out in flowers from head to toe with his token expression of gruff indignation on his face was also running through Ori's mind.

They sat together in amiable silence as Ori's hand worked deftly across the paper. Thankfully he had the warmth of the fire to keep him from shivering too badly. The late autumn winds had started to...
pick up since they had reached the mountain and Bilbo could just start to sense the biting hints of the winter frost.

"All done, Master Baggins," Ori spoke suddenly, finishing his last stroke with a flourish.

Bilbo glanced at his companion, blinking several times, "Already? You sure work quickly Mister Ori."

The dwarf chuckled from behind a knit clad hand, "Would you like to see it?"

The hobbit nodded eagerly, "Of course!"

Ori turned the book so the drawing now faced Bilbo and he saw… well, him looking back. But he looked… different from how he remembered. It wasn't like he hadn't seen a mirror since they had left Bag End, but it was as if Ori had captured the change in his state of mind, as well as how his face appeared. There was a slight quirk to his lips and a much easier confidence in his expression than he had ever thought to see before.

"Do, uh, do you like it?" Ori sounded slightly nervous and the hobbit realized he hadn't spoken for a good minute.

"Yes, yes, it is wonderful Mister Ori. Sorry, I was just thinking…"

The dwarf nodded and Bilbo knew that if any of them understood drifting off into thoughtful spells of silence it was Ori. "I'll just hang onto these then," the young dwarf started to pack away his things, "better keep them altogether so The Records won't miss anyone."

Bilbo shifted so he was closer to the fire and held out his hands to get some warmth from them, "The Records?"

Ori smiled at him as he stuff his leather sack with supplies, "It is an order of dwarves tasked with keeping the records of our people. They have grown… more and more sparse in the last age, but," the dwarf's face set in determination, "I believe their work is essential. And I have left instructions that if we fail and someone should, uh, find us, then all of my notes will go to the records." Ori slung his pack over his shoulder, "One way or another, Master Baggins, the world will know our tale, I'll make sure of that. Goodnight."

Bilbo waved his friend off to bed, "Goodnight, Mister Ori."

The hobbit sat by the fire alone, warming himself by the flames as the rest of the company went off to bed knowing they would be up early enough the next day. The moon had risen up to middle of the sky now and it hung large and full.

"Tea, Master Baggins?"

Bilbo jerked in surprise and looked over to see Dori staring imperiously down his large nose at him. "I, uh, I think I'm fine, thank you though Mister Dori."

The dwarf sat down next to him anyway and started to pour a second cup of tea, "Nonsense, of course you want tea."

The hobbit glanced between the cup and Dori's face, something in it told him not to argue, "I... alright. Thank you."

The dwarf handed the cup over to him and Bilbo took a whiff of the strongly scented tea. It wasn't
any kind he recognized from back home and smelled… earthy? Almost like the essence of a mountain was imbued in the leaves. "

It's my own blend," Dori added shortly as he watched Bilbo with narrowed eyes.

The hobbit realized he was probably waiting for him to take a drink and quickly sipped it. The tea was good, no not just good, very good. It was wild and woody but there was warmth to it. It tasted like home. The tea didn't remind him of Bag End, but it reminded him of something safe and familiar, but also slightly foreign; like it was someone else's home but a home nonetheless.

"It's very good, Mister Dori, you're quite adept at this tea business," Bilbo smiled up at the dwarf who almost visibly preened at the compliment. "You are too kind, Master Baggins, and a true compliment as I know hobbits also care for the more… refined things in life, unlike my kin," Dori glared over to where the rest of the dwarves were sleeping.

They sat next to the fire sipping tea for a while longer, their bodies warmed by the drink and the flames. Bilbo considered the dwarf next to him as they sat in silence. He seemed… well, as Dori had put it, refined. Bilbo remembered the night when all of the dwarves had come to Bag End and Dori had stuck out to him as being especially well dressed. At least compared to his brothers and the rest of the company. Not that that was saying much, but he was sure the only dwarf to look finer had been Thorin, with his great fur lined coat and fine mail shirt.

Bilbo could tell Dori thought himself something of a sophisticate, if only because the finest wine he had had in his cellars was gone faster than he could utter a protest. He knew from what Ori had told him of his brothers that Dori cared very deeply for them, had set aside the family business and his entire life to follow Ori and Nori on the quest, to keep them safe from harm. And he did protect them. Despite whatever Bilbo had thought based on Dori's general appearance, there was no denying the he was one of the strongest and fiercest fighters amongst the company.

He had seen Dori crack a warg's skull with a single blow. Though the dwarf had complained the loudest after every battle about getting blood and other unsavory bits on his person, Bilbo knew that even Mister Dwalin would have a fair fight if he ever went up against Dori. He hadn't really had much opportunity to talk with the dwarf and found his youngest brother's company a bit less pessimistic, but he supposed he would have liked Dori no matter what after the things Ori and Nori had said in favor of their elder brother. Bilbo couldn't help but like anyone who had such love and devotion towards their families.

"Ori said I should apologize."

Bilbo glanced up from the fire to look at Dori curiously. "For, uh, for what?"

Dori rolled his eyes and took another sip of tea, "For being rude earlier, he said that it was unbecoming of me and I should say sorry."

Bilbo chuckled into his cup of tea, "Not a problem, Mister Dori."

The dwarf nodded, his nose in the air, "That's what I told Ori, but he insisted."

Bilbo leaned forward so he was closer to the fire before turning his head to look at his companion, "You must care for him great deal, Mister Dori."

Dori raised a silver brow at him, "Of course I do, we're brothers. Though you'd never be able to tell given the lack of respect they show me."
Bilbo chuckled at the dwarf's indignant face, "I'm sure they don't mean to, Mister Dori."

The dwarf huffed and took a long drink, "And I'm sure they do, but it won't stop me from doing what's best for this family even if they try to undermine my efforts at every step."

Bilbo thought of kind Ori who tried his best to keep his family together, who wanted more than anything to make his own mark, a new mark on history. He thought of Nori who had given up most of his life to keep his family blissfully unaware of the troubles their parents' mistakes had caused. He thought of Dori who took up their family's mantle, who tried his best to be the parent that Ori needed when their own weren't enough.

"I think they know that... I mean, that you're doing what's best for your family, even if they don't say it much."

Dori considered him for a long moment, his face no longer in its usual pinched displeasure but instead one of cool contemplation. "Do you have any brothers, Master Baggins?"

The hobbit shook his head, "No, uh, just me. No siblings to speak of."

The dwarf continued to stare at him, "And your parents? Were they kind and caring?"

Bilbo nodded slowly not seeing exactly where this was going, "Yes, they were."

"Then I suppose there's no way you could understand what it's like to have parents that you saw once every moon and that was only to criticize how poorly you were at running their business," Dori face grew tight as he turned to face the fire, "there's no way you could understand what it's like to have one brother look at you with disdain and the other love him more no matter how hard you try."

Bilbo looked at his companion wide-eyed, "I'm sure that's not true, Ori and Nori love you very much, I've heard it from their own mouths."

Dori scoffed at him, "From their own mouths, have you? Then would you care to enlighten me as to your technique, Master Baggins? It would appear that I've been doing it incorrectly all these years." Dori shifted on his stump with agitation, "Perhaps Nori no longer looks at me like I sat by and did nothing while he save our family, but he certainly shows me little good will these days. And Ori... well I did the best I could to be something of a father to him but all I would ever hear is 'Nori taught me this,' and 'Nori said I could do that,' and he wasn't even around most of the time."

Bilbo narrowed his eyes at the fire, "I raised him but Nori was the only one he wanted around. And my brother would show up after months or even year away, laden with gifts like that would make everything fine again." The dwarf looked over at Bilbo, "And you know what the worst part is? It did. Ori has always been quick to love and forgive but one quick drop by our home from Nori and it was like nothing bad had ever happened before, like he had never been away."

The hobbit reached out hesitantly and patted Dori's shoulder, he wish he could just tell Dori what Nori had told him, but the dwarf had made him promise never to do so lest he receive a good knifing. "I'm, uh, sure Nori would have been around more if he could—"

Dori cut him off, "Oh, I know what Nori was doing, I know exactly and I know he told you about it. Who do you think kept the nobles off his gang for so long? Who do you think found the gold to pay them off and to make sure all his little rivals stayed clear?"

Bilbo couldn't help but gape at the dwarf who was clenching the cup with white knuckles, "I know better than anyone what Nori did to help our family. He may think he's smarter or subtler than me, but I've known him his whole life and there's not a thing Nori could hide from me if I really wanted
to know."

Dori looked over to where the hobbit was staring at him, "And I heard you both talking the night before we escaped from Mirkwood, I heard him spill all his secrets to some hobbit when he wouldn't even tell his own brother. I saw the relief on his face the next day, like some giant weight had been lifted from him. A weight I could have lifted if he trusted me enough."

"I'm – I'm sorry, Mister Dori, I had no idea…" Bilbo started, gripping his cup tightly.

"Oh, don't apologize, Master Baggins," Dori groaned the word as if it disgusted him, "I'm trying to rant here and you're ruining it."

The dwarf clutched his face with his hand and then pulled it down as if wiping his face would clear his troubled thoughts. "I know it's not your fault…" Dori trailed off, gazing into the fire, "It seems I owe you another apology, I didn't mean to take that out on you, Master Baggins."

The hobbit felt his heart clench a bit, knowing that if the brothers just sat down and talked to one another, then there wouldn't be this rift between them. "No harm done, Mister Dori, but I… I think maybe if you told them what you told me, everything would be a lot easier."

The dwarf looked over at him with a sad sort of grimace, "Don't you think I haven't thought of that? Nori, perhaps. But if I spoke to Ori about what happened, Nori would never forgive me. It's not my place to tell Ori about what Nori did for our family. I would never want to—"

The dwarf paused to take a large gulp of tea, "I wouldn't want to be the one to cause any mistrust between them."

"I think Ori already knows more than he lets on, Mister Dori," Bilbo began quietly, "and I know Nori would appreciate all you've done for him if only he knew…"

Dori let out a somber laugh, "You know, do you? And how long have you known us? A few moons? I've known them their entire lives, what makes you think you could possibly know any better than me?"

The hobbit raised his hands in placation, "Of course I don't, but I think if you let the things of the past fester and go unmentioned then the longer you wait, the harder it is to speak of."

"And despite whatever you think," Bilbo set down his cup and turned to face Dori fully, his mouth set with determination, "I know they both love you more than anything. You're brothers, you're family; and no matter what has happened in the past, you'd forgive them just as they'd forgive you. What would be worse is never taking the opportunity to talk about it, to give them the chance to know what you've done."

Bilbo crossed his arms, unwilling to give Dori the opportunity to interrupt him, "And I think that today would be the opportune time to do it, seeing as how if there actually is a dragon inside," the hobbit gestured up towards the mountain, "this might be the last chance you have."

Dori stared at him for several long moments, "You are a very impertinent hobbit, has anyone ever told you that?"

Bilbo stared back in silence until he saw the corner of the dwarf's mouth twitch and he started to laugh quietly, "Only about half my neighbors and distant relatives."

The dwarf sighed and looked over to where Ori and Nori were talking quietly at their bedrolls. "Perhaps you're right, Master Baggins. If we all die in a few days there's not much to lose anyway."

The hobbit patted Dori on the shoulder once more, "I think they would appreciate that very much, Mister Dori."
The dwarf picked up Bilbo's cup off the ground and gathered up his tea before resolutely making his way over to where his brothers were talking at the edge of camp. The hobbit watched long enough to see Dori sit down next to them and start to speak before he stood up himself, brushing off his pants. It didn't take him long to see where Fili and Kili had set up their bed rolls and, much to his pleasure, that had set up his too, right in the middle. Bilbo pulled out the blanket from his pack and just as he was about to lay down, saw that the brothers still had the flower crowns on their heads. The hobbit couldn't help the smile that grew across his face nor could he stifle the laugh that crept out. At that moment, he only wished he could draw as well as Ori so he could've captured the two princes of Erebor, asleep with their legs and arms sprawled out and flowers in their hair.
Hello lovely readers! Quick note, I think I posted about this before, but I wrote another story about how Frerin died (which is not canonically correct oops). It's not necessary to understand this chapter, but for all of you angstophiles out there, I think it's a nice additional punch to the feels. So if that sort of thing is your MO, then you can find it on my page. Hope you enjoy :)

They started off early the next day with dawn barely having broken atop the cross of the mountain. A nervous sort of energy permeated the air, for the company knew that if they did not find the secret door today, on the Day of Durin, then their quest would take a turn for the extremely dangerous and difficult. Not that it had been easy by any means so far, but Bilbo wasn't sure he wanted to find out what laid right behind the giant green doors of Erebor, if only because he knew the sight would probably do more damage to Thorin than he could even comprehend.

He and Balin set out on another of the paths that led along the side of the mountain. Despite the look of grim frustration that seemed to be present on every face, Bilbo was determined. Determined to make sure they hadn't come all this way to be stopped at the doors. No, he knew somewhere deep in his gut that they would find it today, they had to find it today.

Clambering up the stone steps carved into the side of the mountain, Bilbo and Balin made slow work. The other paths they had walked on the previous days had been more or less level as they wrapped alongside the hulking rock of the Lonely Mountain, but as the companions had stood at the point on the ground where the paths diverged, Bilbo had seen a small thrush flutter close past his face and fly above the narrowest and steepest path.

He wasn't much one for superstition, but as he saw the bird Thror's map spoke of, it filled Bilbo with a spark of hope. Plus, it wasn't like they had anything else to go on so when the hobbit had suggested to Balin that they take that path, the old dwarf did little but shrug and grumble about how his old bones weren't made for climbs like this anymore.

Bilbo took the lead, scrambling up loose rocks and sharp edges as the late autumn wind gusted past them. There were a few moments when the hobbit couldn't stop the memories of the High Pass when he had almost had a very long fall and met a gruesome, if quick, death; it didn't help either that he didn't have Fili's solid presence right behind him. Though he very much enjoyed Balin's company, he didn't think the dwarf would be entirely too pleased with him if he tried to hold his hand in comfort as he had Fili's.

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, Bilbo decided not to look over the ledge, in fact, he would be looking at nothing but at the side of the mountain in search of a door. As they climbed higher and higher up the pass, the same thrush that Bilbo had followed at the beginning of their climb dived and flapped above their heads. Though he had thought it a good sign earlier, Bilbo felt irritation grate at his nerves when he saw the ease with which the bird danced in the sky, untroubled with such trivial things at feet and sharp rocks.

'Taunting us,' the hobbit thought bitterly as he stumbled for what felt like the hundredth time that day, 'just flopping about in the sky while we suffer on this infernal mountain.' Bilbo shot the thrush a
glare when it took that exact moment to start singing its birdsong. "Oh good," he muttered, "a little
music to accompany our torment!" The hobbit raised his voice at the last word, shaking his fist as if
that would make the bird go away. To his complete lack of surprise and annoyance, the thrush dived
down and landed on his head, pecking away at his skull.

Flapping his arms around like a bird himself, the hobbit yelped as he waved the bird away. The
thrush continued to flutter around his head, it's chirps sounding entirely too similar to shrill laughter.

"Looks like you've made yourself a friend, laddie," Balin chuckled behind him.

Bilbo had finally shooed the bird to a safe distance when he twisted back to glare at the old dwarf.

"No friend of mine would peck me," the hobbit shot the bird a scathing look, pointing an accusatory
finger at it, "on the head. Now shoo! Shoo you demonic beast!"

The thrush dived down so quickly; Bilbo had only enough time to raise his arms to guard his
precious eyes. If the vermin wanted to peck his face, he would not be getting there so easily. Eyes
clenched shut, the hobbit waited a few moments for the sharp beak to start assaulting his person
again, but nothing happened. Lowering his arm hesitantly, Bilbo unclenched his eyes slowly but he
saw… nothing.

Letting out a sigh of relief, the hobbit simply hoped that the bird had grown bored and would finally
leave him alone.

"Master Baggins…" Balin started with a dubious sort of amusement in his gravelly voice.

"Yes, Mister –" Bilbo had started to turn his head to respond but as soon as he twisted his neck, his
eyes fell sharply on the small brown and white bird that had perched on his shoulder. Standing stalk
still, Bilbo stared wide-eyed at the bird who looked back at him with a slight tilt of its small head as if
considering the hobbit.

"Mister Balin, what do I do?" Bilbo hissed urgently, "it's on me!"

Balin took one long look at him and started to laugh, "I think you might as well accept it, laddie. The
bird is stayin' there you whether you like it or not."

"What if it's just waiting to strike? To lure me into –" Bilbo spluttered, the thrush still staring back at
him with round, black eyes, "— into complacency! Then the next thing I know, no eyes!"

The old dwarf shook his head with an exasperated but fond sigh, "Don't be dramatic, birds about as
big as your palm. Now let's get a move on, if we wait around until your friend leaves we'll get
nowhere."

Bilbo slowly turned his head to face forward but kept his eyes locked on the thrush. Taking a
tentative step forward, he waited for the bird to flutter off, but it simply chirped once and started to
preen its feathers as if it hadn't another care in the world. 'Which,' he thought to himself with no small
amount of acidity, 'it probably didn't. Having a brain the size of a pea.'

They climbed steadily for what felt like another hour or so, though the sun had still not reached
midday so Bilbo did not yet feel like they were quite running out of time. The stone of the mountain
remained the same as it had been, rough and jagged at parts, all hard and cold. Nothing, and he
meant nothing that looked like it could be a door. He hoped that somewhere, the other members of
the company were having better luck than them.

There was a steep step that Bilbo had to almost pull himself over. Grunting at he hauled his weight
up, as soon as the hobbit looked up from above the next step, he saw that the path curved into the mountain, a small archway and an even narrower path now in front of them. 'Well this is different…' he thought as he walked slowly over to where the dark passageway started.

The thrush suddenly took off from his shoulder and flew into the shadow. The hobbit heard Balin approach from behind him, "do you… do you think this is it?"

The old dwarf shook his head slowly, "This is not the door, laddie, dwarf doors are not simply a hole in the mountain, but I doubt someone would have made this for no reason…"

Bilbo took another step closer, trying to see as far inside as he could without actually going in, "Do you, uh, think its safe?"

Just as he spoke, they heard the thrush call from inside, its chirps echoing off he narrow walls. They exchanged a glance before Balin shrugged, "your friend has led us this far, perhaps we should follow."

The hobbit gulped nervously, he didn't think they were desperate enough to start taking directions from a bird of all things, but it was their only way forward… Taking a deep breath, Bilbo started forward, keeping a hand on either side of the passage as he plunged into darkness. Unable to see, the hobbit's progress was slow as he edged forward. The thrush continued to chirp in front of them and, he wouldn't lie, it did give him some comfort to hear the lilting song.

They edged their way through the passage cautiously until Bilbo saw a sliver of light in front of him, 'the exit! It had to be!' he thought excitedly, quickening his pace. "I think I see the end, Mister Balin!"

The old dwarf let out a small sigh of relief from behind him and they walked faster until the passage started to open up again. The shadows faded as they turned a corner and there, another opening much like the one they had entered. Bilbo all but scrambled out and saw the thrush swooping and diving above what appeared to be the end of the path, a small plateau carved out of the mountain and… there was something else.

Bilbo walked over to the side of the mountain near the edge. Instead of rough rock there was a portion smoothed out so finely he could almost see his own reflection in it.

"This…" he began slowly, turning to face Balin, "this is it isn't it?"

Balin walked slowly over to where Bilbo was standing, his eyes widening in awe. "Aye, laddie, I think it might be…"

The old dwarf reached out a hand and traced the smooth stone with reverent fingers. Turning sharply to face him, Balin spoke quickly, "I must go get Thorin and the rest of the company. You wait here, laddie."

"Are you sure, Mister Balin? I can go…” The hobbit knew Balin was probably more fit than him, but the dwarf wasn't exactly young anymore.

"No, you stay here and wait for the rest. Knowing some of them, they'd probably walk right off the edge of the path if someone wasn't here to tell them to stop.” Balin waved him off and started to walk back towards the tunnel before turning back to face him, "I'll send up anyone I find, we should all be here by late afternoon."

Bilbo nodded, still standing by the door as Balin left him alone on the ledge. Setting his pack down against the rock, the hobbit examined the door further. Balin certainly hadn't been exaggerating; it
looked *nothing* like any door he'd ever seen. He supposed the outline that the glassy gray rock sort of looked like the *shape* of a door but there was no seam and most certainly no keyhole.

The hobbit tried to remember the message on the map that Elrond had read to them so long ago in Rivendell. Something about the sunset on Durin's Day, a gray stone, and a thrush knocking… Well this was indeed a gray stone. And if Balin’s calendar keeping was to be trusted, they were fairly certain that *today* was Durin's Day. There wasn't much he could do about a making the sun set any faster.

The small bird flew down and landed on his shoulder again, it's head turning as if it was also examining the door. And he had the thrush. Which, he thought irritably, was not doing anything that resembled knocking.

"Maybe if I just throw you against the rock a few times that will count…" he grumbled, narrowing his eyes as he looked at the bird. The thrush leapt up to his head and started pecking at his skull angrily.

"Okay! Okay!" Bilbo pleaded as he tried to cover his head with his hands, "No throwing, got it! Just stop pecking!"

The thrush took one final peck at his skull before settling back down on his shoulder. Bilbo glared at it, rubbing at his throbbing scalp, "vicious little bugger," he mumbled. The thrush fluffed out its feathers irritably and nipped at his ear in retaliation.

"Sorry, sorry!" The hobbit covered his ear and decided that arguing with a bird was a task he just couldn't win.

Sighing, Bilbo couldn't think of anything useful to do but sit against the rock and wait for the others to join him. Thorin had the key after all, not that that was going to help him much right now seeing as how there was little by way of keyholes. Settling with his back against the gray rock, the hobbit sat and heard nothing but the wind and an occasional song from the bird perched on his shoulder.

The sun rose in the sky, creeping past the middle and now it's light shown fully on him. Despite the cool air, with the golden warmth basking on the western side of the Lonely Mountain, Bilbo felt pleasantly warm. And as he closed his eyes, the soft bird song in his ears, the hobbit felt some of the tension that had worried at his nerves over the past few days leave him in the face nature's beauty surrounding him. After all, it wasn't often that a hobbit of the Shire climbed up the side of a mountain.

'Not that hobbits are the climbing type of folk,' he thought ruefully. He'd like to see Lobelia's face if she could just see him now. It would go all pinched like it was want to do when he did something she thought wasn't very respectable. If she knew he was with a company of dwarves, scaling rocks, and perhaps about to face a *dragon*; well, he thought her head might just explode out of sheer rage. That was if she wasn't currently neck deep in his silver…

Bilbo felt his eyes start to stoop as the hours passed. With the sun on him, it was just so *warm* and with nothing to do… He might as well just… take a quick… nap.

"—oggins!" There was a gentle shake of his shoulder. "Master Boggins! No napping on the job!"

"No…” the hobbit said sluggishly, sleep still clouding his mind, "don't take… don't take my spoons…

"Why would I take your spoons?" the voice was laced with confusion, "he did just say spoons, didn't
Someone laughed, "perhaps Master Baggins is on to your thieving ways, brother, your life of crime is over."

"I don't thieve," the first voice hissed, "if anyone is taking spoons, it's Nori."

There was a pause until Bilbo's shoulder was shaken again, "C'mon Master Baggins, up you get."

The hobbit jerked up as shouted, "Not my spoons!" Glancing wide-eyed between the startled dwarf brother's, Bilbo saw that they were not, in fact, Lobelia pilfering his cupboards. 'Must've been a dream,' he thought with relief.

"Uh, sorry about that, was having a nasty dream," Bilbo said sheepishly as he rubbed the back of his head. Fili and Kili exchanged a glance before laughing in unison.

"You sure do like your spoons, Master Boggins," Kili grinned at him.

Bilbo snorted as he stood up, "I like my spoons being mine, not some godforsaken relative shoving them up her skirts when I'm not looking."

The thrush, who had been fluttering nervously above his head at the approach of the dwarves, flew back down to his shoulder. "What's that you've got there, Master Baggins?" Fili peered at the bird curiously. Backing up slightly and fluffing its feathers in agitation, the thrush started to chirp rapidly as Fili raised a hand towards it.

Turning to face the little bird, Bilbo let out a sigh, "oh they're harmless, you little demon, they won't hurt you; now stop making a fuss." The thrush pecked him in the ear again but quieted down.

The brother's exchanged another glance before turning to face Bilbo with identical looks of curiosity. The hobbit shrugged. "We followed it here, seems to think I'm an acceptable substitute for a tree."

Kili chuckled brightly, "Don't know how it managed that, best you could do is a shrub!"

Bilbo glared at the younger dwarf, "That is hilarious coming from you, Master Dwarf, you aren't much taller than me."

Kili stuck out his tongue playfully with a wink, "But so much more handsome."

Bilbo laughed as Fili tugged a chunk of his brother's hair causing the young dwarf to yelp shrilly. "Don't forget modest, brother, it is by far your best quality." The blond dwarf grinned at Kili.

"Are the rest of the company coming?" Bilbo glanced at the brothers, hoping that Balin had reached them all fine.

Fili nodded, "Master Balin found us first, I think the others should be along soon enough."

The blond dwarf turned to look at the sun that was high in the late afternoon sky. "They should hurry though, if Thorin isn't here by sunset we might miss our chance."

The three companions settled down on the ledge next to the door. It wasn't long before Bofur and Bifur came out of the tunnel and joined them. Soon after it was Ori and Dori, who, much to Bilbo's pleasure, looked to be talking amiably. Then Oin and Gloin ambled through, and after several hours all the company had assembled on the ledge save for Balin, Dwalin, and Thorin.

The sun was now setting, not quite near it's last light, but down far enough that Bilbo had begun to
feel a twinge of anxiety. He knew Thorin would get here in time, he had to, but that thought didn't abate the nagging thoughts of a nervous mind.

"Do you think he'll get here in time, Fili?" Kili glanced between the tunnel and his brother.

The blond dwarf nodded and gave Kili a reassuring smile. "Of course, he'll be along any—"

Fili stopped as he craned his neck as if trying to catch a small sound. Then Bilbo heard it, footsteps. Heavy and familiar, he knew Thorin was going to come through first even before he saw the dwarf's face appear in the sunlight a moment later.

Thorin walked through, followed closely by Dwalin and Balin. Looking at no one, eyes locked on the smooth stone, Thorin stepped towards it slowly, as if not quite believing he had actually made it here. The company parted allowing their leader to walk up to the smooth, gray rock. The dwarf reached up a hand and gently traced down the stone and closed his eyes.

"This is it…" he spoke softly to no one in particular, "our way in…"

The company remained silent as their leader stared at the door, a peculiar look on his face until he reached into his coat and pulled out his grandfather's map.

"What did Elrond say exactly, Balin?" Thorin turned to look at the old dwarf.

"Stand by the gray stone when the thrush knocks," Balin said with easy memory, "and the setting sun with the last light of Durin's Day will shine upon the key-hole."

Thorin reached into his coat again and took out the key Gandalf had given him, his eyes shifting between the door and the key. "So we must wait…"

Balin walked over to his king and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Aye, when the sun sets and the thrush knocks, we will know."

"Master Boggins has a thrush here!" Kili shot in eagerly, pushing Bilbo forward.

Thorin looked at him with abundant confusion. "You… have a thrush?"

The hobbit turned his shoulder so the small bird was facing his friend. "I think it led us up here."

Bilbo glanced at Balin for support. "Aye, Thorin, it's been hanging on Master Baggins all day."

Thorin stepped closer, eyeing the bird before looking at Bilbo. "Has it… knocked?"

The hobbit glared at the bird again, just for good measure. "Unless you count my head, no, there hasn't been so much as a tap."

"And you say it led you here, Bilbo?" Thorin asked him with a slightly incredulous tone.

"I mean… I know it sounds ridiculous, being a bird and all," he gestured towards the perched thrush, "but what wild animal sits on someone's shoulder? I think it might be… special? Like it wanted us to find the door."

Thorin continued to look dubious but after a moment simply shrugged. "Stranger things have happened on this journey, we should count ourselves lucky it chose to help you."

The dwarf gave him a small smile before turning back to the stone. The sun was still setting and if Elrond's words were correct, they couldn't do much until the last light hit the door and Bilbo's 'friend'
decided to contribute.

"We've got about an hour till nightfall, lads," Dwalin spoke gruffly from near the tunnel, "might as well rest while we're waiting."

It went unspoken, but Bilbo understood the underlying meaning of the dwarf's words. They could be facing a dragon soon, an actual dragon, which meant they would need all the strength they had. The company sat down, all except for Thorin who stood facing the door, looking as if he thought he would miss the opening if he turned away. Bilbo left the spot where he, Fili, and Kili had been sitting to stand next to their leader.

They stood for many long moments, only the soft chatter of the company and the thrush's occasional chirps accompanying the wind's gusts. The hobbit was close enough so that their arms were almost touching.

"So… we made it." Bilbo smiled up at his friend.

Thorin looked down at him, the grim determination he had worn since the dwarf had seen Durin's door still on his face. "Yes… I suppose we have."

The hobbit reached his fingers out until they clasped Thorin's larger hand. "Whatever's down there, Thorin, you're not alone, okay?"

The dwarf's hand remained limp, as he gave it a quick squeeze. "I am not afraid of the beast."

Bilbo felt a sad smile creep across his face, "I didn't just mean the dragon."

There was a city down there, there was a city full of bones and ash and gilded memories that no one could protect Thorin against. His brother's body lay deep within the mountain. A dark shade that resembled the dwarf's old life painted every corridor, every wall, every groove carved into the stone. And the hobbit knew if the dragon didn't kill them those dark, shattered mirrors of the past might be the end of his friend.

Bilbo felt the limp hand suddenly grasp his own, almost tightly enough to hurt. Looking up at Thorin, the hobbit could see the dwarf's jaw had clenched though he did not look away from the door.

They stood together as the sun began to slip beneath the trees. The sky was starting to lose its reddish hue in favor of a deep blue. Bilbo heard Thorin's breathing begin to quicken and lose its steady pace. The hobbit clutched his friend's hand with all his might. No matter what happened, he would be there, by Thorin's side and ready to help as best he could.

Suddenly the thrush flew off of Bilbo's shoulder and circled their head's for a few moments before disappearing down the mountain. The hobbit gazed shocked at where the bird had been only a second ago. "Did it just… leave?"

The hobbit spluttered with anger. "It spent all day, all day sitting on me only to leave just when we needed it? Oh you have got to be joking! I am going to pluck that little vermin and eat it myself!"

Bilbo had been about to turn, to… he didn't know, chase it down the mountain if he had to when he felt Thorin tug at his hand. "Look."

The thrush had flown back up in his fit of rage, something small and rather snail-like in its beak. The small bird flapped down until it was perched on one of the rocks that jutted out near the edge of the smooth stone. And it began to knock. It began to knock the snail against the mountain over and over
as the last light of day broke through the forest beyond hit the door.

Right where the bird was hitting the shell against the door, what looked to be a glowing line shot out from the spot. It curled on itself tracing invisible patterns until a keyhole shone out from the stone. But it didn’t stop there, the lines continued to climb and grow until an intricate design had formed all around the door.

Bilbo heard Thorin mutter something in dwarvish before he let go of the hobbit’s hand and grasped the key once more. Inserting the it into the spot on the door that glowed most brightly, Bilbo almost sighed with relief when he saw the small black stone sink into the door as if the stone was not even there. There was a tiny, almost inaudible ‘click’ as Thorin turned the key and the stone gave a great groan as it opened.

The mountain seemed to break itself apart as dust and bits of rock burst out. The company was completely silent while the door opened, too shocked that they had actually made it to even completely register what was happening. Then the groaning stopped and the door was open. They could go through, into the Lonely Mountain. The thrush dropped its snail and flew back up to Bilbo’s shoulder, giving the hobbit one last peck on the ear before it soared off him into the night. Absently, Bilbo reached up to rub his ear but he never looked away from the gaping hole that now rested in the mountain.

"Time to move," Thorin finally turned to face the company, "time to go home."

"Wait, Thorin," Bilbo started quickly, "I don't think we should all go in at once."

"I cannot just wait out here, Bilbo." The dwarf looked at him, his gaze reproachful that the hobbit would try to stop him now. Thorin turned to go through the door but Bilbo quickly shot out a hand and gripped the dwarf’s sleeve.

"Just hear me out, Thorin!" Bilbo pulled his friend as hard as he dared to stop the dwarf moving. Finally he halted and slowly turned to face the hobbit.

"The whole reason Gandalf said you lot needed me to come along was because Smaug won't be able to recognize my scent, whatever that means," Bilbo let go of Thorin’s sleeve, "if it can smell you all coming then wouldn't the whole company going down there alert the dragon?"

The dwarf continued to gaze at him. "If it is there, then we'll need every little advantage we can get, throwing away a surprise attack would be foolish, Thorin, you know it would be."

"Then what do you suggest?" Thorin asked, his words laced with trepidation.

"I'll go down first and check it out," Bilbo said with certainly more confidence than he was feeling at the moment. He didn't want to walk into a dragon's den alone by any means, but if the alternative was endangering the company, well… then the choice was obvious to him.

"No. Absolutely not." Thorin ground out, crossing his arms and looking none too pleased that Bilbo had the audacity to suggest such an idea.

"What—" the hobbit glared at Thorin. "What do you mean absolutely not? It's the best plan we have! Anyway," Bilbo stalked forwards towards the door, "you have no right to stop me!"

The dwarf grabbed a fistful of Bilbo’s coat and hauled him back. "I will not let you walk in there by yourself. It is far too dangerous."

The hobbit twisted until his coat and pack were almost half off his body so he could give Thorin the
full Baggins glare, "I know the risks, Thorin, but this is the best option!"

The dwarf looked ready to argue when Dwalin stepped in and unlatched his friend's fist from Bilbo's coat. "He's right, let the lad go."

Thorin looked over at Dwalin like the dwarf had burned him. "I will do no such thing!"

Balin walked over to stand beside his brother. "None of us wants Master Baggins to be in danger, Thorin, but he is right. This is why we brought along a hobbit, so the dragon wouldn't notice our arrival."

Their leader glanced between Dwalin and Balin, searching their faces for an answer he clearly wasn't going to get. The old dwarf stepped forward and placed a hand on each of Thorin's arms.

"We don't have an army, lad. We cannot take this mountain by force." Balin tightened his grip, "We need the element of surprise if you want us to have even a remote chance of success. Master Baggins has volunteered to go and you must let him."

"This is foolish," Thorin all but spat, "this is foolish and dangerous and not what I wanted."

"But it's what you need," Bilbo smiled at his friend. "Don't worry, I can be very quiet when I need to."

Balin let go of their leader, who shook out his arms with a glare at the rest of the company. Thorin's fists balled and he turned back towards the hobbit.

"Are you sure, Bilbo?"

Nodding, Bilbo hitched up his pack. "Of course, I'll just take a quick look, nothing dangerous."

The dwarf's fists unclenched and for a moment Bilbo thought he was going to reach out for his hands but they stayed firmly by Thorin's side except for a slight jerk. "Promise me, Bilbo, that you will be careful and do nothing foolhardy that will put yourself in harm's way."

Bilbo rolled his eyes with an exasperated smile as he started to turn towards the door again, "I won't do anything stupid, Thorin." He felt a hand reach out and grip his arm tightly.

"Promise," Thorin's jaw was clenched again and his brows were drawn low over his eyes.

Bilbo glanced from the dwarf's hand and the dark expression on his face. "I promise."

Their gazes locked together for several moments; the hobbit felt something in his stomach clench and he wasn't sure it was from nerves.

"Get him a torch," Thorin snapped to the company, still looking at Bilbo but letting his hand fall back to his side. Bofur came up to him moments later, a small torch in his hand and handed it to the hobbit. There was a chorus of 'good luck,' and 'stay safe' from the company as Bilbo turned his back to them and started down into the dark passage.

The passage was winding but thankfully not too narrow. It also seemed to be carved and therefore relatively smooth which did wonders for his aching feet. He walked and walked until he could no longer see hear the company talking nor could he hear the wind. Now there was nothing apart from his own soft footfalls and the occasional drip of water.

He continued until he walked into what appeared to be a cave that the passage continued on at the
opposite end. The shadows from his torch cast dancing images of rocks hanging from the ceiling and his own flickering shape. It was so quiet down here he almost wished he had the thrush from earlier still chirping on his shoulder. The further he had gone, the more rapidly his heart had started to beat.

There could be a dragon at the end of this passage. The beast that had ravaged Dale and Erebor in all but a few hours could be waiting for him. To tear his flesh from his bone in a single breath of fiery fury! If only he was a better fighter or a wizard like Gandalf! If only he was something rather more remarkable than a hobbit—

Wait.

He had the ring! How did he keep forgetting about that, 'stupid, stupid hobbit!' If the dragon couldn't see him and didn't recognize his smell, well then maybe he had a chance. Slipping it on his finger, Bilbo felt the slightly suffocating embrace of the ring's presence as it cloaked him with invisibility.

He wasn't confident, per say, but he couldn't help but feel slightly more assured than he had before. Steeling himself once more, Bilbo pushed forward to the end of the cave and walked through. The passage twisted and turned as it had before; but there was something different now. Something lighter.

There was a light somewhere and that meant the end of the tunnel. Bilbo took a few deep breaths as he set his torch against the wall, praying that it would not go out. Walking forward with more care than he had before, the hobbit followed the passage as it curved down and started to open up wider and wider. Suddenly he could see the end of tunnel and in front of him, almost blocking the exit, was a massive pile of gold.

'This must be the treasure room…' he thought to himself as he stepped lightly around the pile of gold, trying not to touch anything that looked too likely to fall.

That was when he saw it. Turning around the pile, Bilbo almost let out a yell of terror, but quickly slapped his hand over his mouth. Laying much too close to where he was standing, there was a dragon. The dragon.

Smaug the Terrible lay on his side, his stomach exposed, covered in jewels, his great chest heaving with every breath.

And it was terrible. Magnificent and terrible. Each scale glittered like they were made out of the very rubies he laid upon. And then there were claws. Massive, long claws shone like razor-sharp obsidian swords ready to cleave and tear. Bilbo could see two massive fangs jutting out from the dragon's upper jaw and knew somewhere deep in his heart that those teeth had claimed countless lives. That maybe the dragon's scales were red because they had been stained by the blood of all Smaug's victims.

He couldn't move, couldn't breath. Bilbo Baggins was staring at the face of death and he could not laugh. He couldn't even shake; the cacophony of terror that screamed in his head would not be calmed. He would die here. Thorin would die here. They would all die here in a blaze of searing malice.

'Promise me.'

He would be torn apart by furious claws. He would be split apart by cruel teeth, sharpened by all the bones of those who had died before him.

'Promise me, Bilbo.'
He would…

No, he would get back to Thorin. He would leave this place whole and healthy. He would not wake the sleeping dragon because he had promised Thorin that he would not do anything stupid and he was sure rousing the beast from its slumber would fall at the top of Thorin’s list of ‘stupid things Bilbo Baggins should not do.’

He would move his legs and he would walk right back up that passage and report back to his friend because this was Thorin’s home and they were here to take it back. ‘Move, move, move!’ He thought at his legs angrily. Bilbo clenched his eyes and thought of Thorin’s face after he had saved the dwarf from Azog. He thought of that smile and the look of peaceful relief, he thought of how much a king his friend had looked in that moment.

His foot moved back. One step. Then two steps. He was backing away from the dragon. He was going to get back to that passage and nothing was going to go wrong. Bilbo felt his elbow hit something that started to tumble. Twisting rapidly, Bilbo spun and shot out his hand, catching a golden cup before it went crashing to the floor.

The hobbit shut his eyes and took in a few shuddering breaths, waiting for something else to fall, to alert Smaug of his presence, but nothing happened. Silence rang in his ears apart from his own trembling breathing. ‘Okay. Okay.’ Bilbo chanted to himself, ‘Okay, Bilbo Baggins, you can do this. Almost there.’

He stepped very slowly around the mound, careful not to touch anything else and crept towards the passage. It felt like it took hours for him to reach the hole imbedded in the wall but as soon as he passed back into the stone tunnel, Bilbo all but collapsed onto the ground. Feeling something poke into his side, the hobbit looked down to see the golden cup was still in his hand.

‘Oops…’

Well, he was most certainly not going back in there to put back some stupid cup. Smaug would just have to make due with one less piece of treasure. Bilbo sat there for a few minutes simply calming his rattled nerves and shaking legs until he thought he could walk again. He almost cried with joy when he saw his torch had remained lit and slipped the ring back into his pocket.

Bilbo made his way back up the passage as quickly as he could without making an obscene amount of noise. Adrenaline was pumping through his veins from his encounter with the dragon and Bilbo didn’t feel even the least bit tired as he pumped his legs up the winding stone tunnels.

He ran back through the cave and up the passage at the opposite end. The moment he heard the soft talk of the company, he felt his heart lift with relief. He had made it back, alive and in one piece. Bursting through the door, the hobbit practically skidded onto the stone ledge where the company was sitting.

"Master Boggins!" Kili was closest to him and shot up, gathering him in a tight hug. Fili let out a happy laugh and wrapped his arms around both of them, lifting Bilbo and Kili until their feet were off the ground. "You’re alright, Master Baggins!"

Bilbo grinned at both of them, "Told you I’d be fine."

Fili set them down and Bilbo was quickly pulled around by a pair of strong hands. "Are you injured, Bilbo? Are you—" The hobbit gripped his friend’s forearms in his hands.

"Perfectly fine, Thorin, just like I promised." The dwarf let out a sigh of relief and Bilbo saw
Thorin's shoulder's slump as if some of their tense anxiety had been relieved.

"What did you find, Master Baggins?" Balin asked him calmly from behind their leader.

The hobbit couldn't help the grimace that crept onto his face. "Smaug is inside."

There was a collective groan from the company and Bilbo knew he had dashed the last bit of hope they had been clinging to that this quest would somehow just entail entering the mountain and claiming their gold.

"We all knew this was likely," Thorin said gruffly over their mutterings.

"The passage leads right into the treasure room," Bilbo continued. "Smaug was sleeping when I went inside." The hobbit held up the gold cup for Thorin to take, "On the bright side, there's more gold inside than there is dragon."

The dwarf reached out and grasped the cup, "So the dragon sleeps, we will have –"

There was a terrible roar that seemed to shake the entire mountain. Bilbo stumbled back into Fili at the force of the screech. The hobbit looked up at Thorin, his mouth agape, "What was—"

Another roar.

"I don't think the dragon is asleep anymore, Master Boggins." Kili said as he slotted an arrow into his bow. He knew the dwarf couldn't do anything against a dragon with something so paltry as an arrow, but it must have reassured Kili anyway.

There was a great groan from the distant green doors of Erebor and Smaug burst out in a flurry of fire and claws. Stretching out his great leathery black wings, the beast looked massive even from where the company stood. Letting out another fiery roar, Smaug's wings beat one, twice, and then he was in the air. The dragon started to lay waste to the already scorched land until it spotted where their ponies had been left to graze what little they could.

The shriek Smaug let out shook Bilbo to his very bone as he watched the dragon swoop down on the ponies in a storm of snapping jaws and deadly claws. They could hear the distant cries of their steeds before there was little left but smears on the ground. The dragon took off again back towards the mountain. Towards them.

"Into the passage!" Thorin shouted, starting to shove whoever was closest to him through the door, "hurry!"

The rest of the company except Thorin had pushed through when Bilbo felt each of his arms hooked around one of Fili and Kili's as they jointly lifted him. His weight did little to slow the brothers down at the hurtled into the dark passage and away from the dragon's horrible roars. They ran down the twisting tunnel in chaotic confusion. The hobbit could hear the shouts of the company and pounding feet but he could barely formulate his own thoughts. He knew Thorin should be just behind them and prayed that his friend had not been too late, that the dragon would not claim another of Durin's line this night.

Then there was a crash that forced them all hurtling forward until he was skidding on his stomach across the stone bottom of the passageway. The hobbit felt himself tumble around and around until his back hit one of the curved sides of the tunnel. Blinking a few times, Bilbo tried to steady his vision but he soon realized it wasn't his eyes that weren't working, it was a cloud of dust and debris hovering thickly in the air around them.
"Fili?" he shouted out into the dark, "Kili? Are you alright?" Bilbo heard two groans from behind him and he felt along the ground until his hand hit a body. The hobbit shook what felt like an arm furiously, "Fili, Fili wake up we need to move!"

There was another groan, "It's Kili, Master Boggins." Bilbo could see the outline of his friend sitting up.

"We don't even look alike," Kili coughed at the dust, "and you still can't tell us apart."

The hobbit raised the necktie to his mouth to try and keep the dirt out. "Very funny, now where is Fili?"

"Over here…" Kili and Bilbo scrambled over to where they saw the blond dwarf still laying on the ground, his leg trapped under a piece of stone that had been dislodged from the now crumbling wall. "Lift this off me, would you?"

Between the two of them they lifted the stone long enough for Fili to pull his leg out from underneath. Bilbo crouched down, "Are you hurt? Does anything feel broken?"

The dwarf shook his head as he stood up gingerly, "I don't think so."

"We need to find Thorin," Bilbo said urgently. "The damage will be worse the closer it is to the door."

Fili and Kili nodded in agreement and they set out back up the passageway, weaving around rocks and rubble. Kili led the way, one of his hands gripped firmly in Bilbo's while the hobbit held Fili's hand in his other hand. The dust still made it hard for them to see, let alone try and call out to Thorin.

"Thorin!" Bilbo coughed out as another piece of rock fell out from the ceiling.

"Uncle!" The brothers shouted with greater and greater urgency.

He couldn't be… No, he would not let himself even think that. Thorin was fine, they just had to find him.

They pressed forward until Kili suddenly halted, Bilbo stuttering to a stop behind him. "Do you see something?"

The young dwarf shook his head, "I think… I think I feel something." Kili bent down his free hand blindly sweeping the floor. "I did! It's… I think it's uncle's boot."

Bilbo and Fili quickly moved around him and what the hobbit saw made his heart clench. Thorin's legs were free but his upper half looked to be covered in stone. He couldn't make out if the dwarf was being crushed or they just couldn't see how the rocks had fallen.

"We need to pull him out," Fili grabbed one of his uncle's boots as Kili grabbed the other. They gave a great yank and Thorin's body slid out from under the rocks. Bilbo fell down to his knees and started to examine the dwarf as best he could. Pressing his ear to Thorin's chest and a hand just above the dwarf's mouth, Bilbo waited, prayed that there was still life in his friend's chest.

There was a moment; a single moment in which he could hear nothing and the hobbit felt the world to start crashing down around him. But there. There he felt the dwarf's chest move up so his cheek was resting on Thorin and a puff of air ghosted onto his hand. Bilbo let out a choked laugh as he allowed himself leave his face against the dwarf's chest and hear the pulse of pure life that pumped through Thorin.
"He's alive."

Fili and Kili let out twin noises of relieved happiness as the blonde dwarf gathered his younger brother into a fierce hug. "Uncle will be fine, Kili, have faith."

"There's a cave further down the passage, we need to get Thorin there so I can examine him," Bilbo said as he stood up shakily. The brothers hauled their uncle up so they each had an arm slung over one shoulder. The hobbit started to walk in front of them, trying to clear the way as best he could.

"Don't walk too far ahead, Master Baggins, I can hardly see you as it is," Fili called out through labored breaths. Then inspiration hit Bilbo, they couldn't see him, but they could hear him. The hobbit started to sing the notes of the lullaby he'd heard Bofur sing while making countless dinners and Kili had told him about on their first night in Mirkwood.

And so he led the dwarves through the wreckage of the passageway as the thrush had led him earlier. Not walking too far ahead, always singing and moving what rubble he could out of the way. Bilbo knew the passage way wasn't too long until the cave but they were making slow progress with Thorin unconscious and the debris littered everywhere. He could hear the grunts of effort Fili and Kili made as they hauled their uncle further and further down the passage.

The air started to clear the further down they went until there was little dust left in the air. "I think we're almost there," Bilbo called over his shoulder. And sure enough, they twisted around several more corners and he saw the tunnel opening up into the cave he'd seen before. The rest of the company was sprawled about on the floor in various states of haggard distress but as soon as the hobbit stepped into the cave, they shot up.

Dwalin stood up fast as lightening and practically leapt to where Fili and Kili were staggering a few feet behind Bilbo, taking Thorin from their tired shoulders gently as he could. The hobbit followed the dwarf over to a smooth portion of ground and Dwalin set their leader down.

"Is he alright, lad?" The dwarf looked up at him from under a scarred eyebrow.

"He's breathing, but I didn't have time to really check..." Bilbo hesitated as he looked down at Thorin's dirty face.

Dwalin moved aside, "Well then check him now."

The hobbit slung off his pack and rifled around inside until he felt the jar he had liberated from Oin. Pulling it out along with the cloth Bard had given him, Bilbo knelt down next to Thorin's face and began to wipe away what little of the dirt and grime he could. Reaching up to push some of Thorin's wild hair away, the hobbit felt his hands brush something wet, blood. Bilbo pushed his friend's hair behind him and examined the wound. It didn't look very deep, thankfully, and he hoped that Thorin had just been grazed by some spare piece of rubble.

Wiping away the rest of the blood, Bilbo dipped his fingers into some of the ointment and started to spread the balm on Thorin's head. He worked silently for a few moments when the dwarf suddenly jerked and his hand snapped up and gripped Bilbo's wrist with the strength of an iron trap. Letting out a stream of dry coughs, the dwarf heaved until he could cough no more.

"Wa—" he started but another hacking fit interrupted him, "...water."

Dwalin sprang up again and ran to his pack, pulling out a thick skin of water before sprinting back to kneel next to Thorin's face. Tilting it up until a stream of water poured out the end, Dwalin held it steady as their leader gulped down the liquid.
"My nephews…. Are they—" he coughed again, "are they well?"

Fili and Kili ran over as soon as their uncle started to move. Bilbo tried to shift over to let Thorin's nephews in closer but the dwarf still had a vice grip on his wrist. "We're fine, uncle," Fili smiled at their leader, "nothing wrong," Kili added from his brother's side.

Thorin nodded before letting his head fall back onto the stone, "Good."

Dwalin ushered Fili and Kili over to their packs to help the company unload what little they had brought with them, muttering something about foolish Durin royals who thought it amusing to flirt with death.

"Uh… Thorin?" Bilbo spoke quietly, "You've, uh, got my…" No answer. The hobbit gently poked his friend in the cheek with his free hand, "Thorin?"

The dwarf opened dusty eyelashes to glare at Bilbo, "What?"

"It's just, well, uh…" he lifted up the wrist the dwarf still clutched tightly. "I can't do my thing," he wiggled his fingers at the jar of ointment, "very well with only one hand."

Thorin glanced down at his hand like he hadn't even realized what he'd been doing, "Oh… of course."

The dwarf let go and started to sit up, pushing himself back until he hit the rock wall of the cave. Bilbo shoved his stuff after his friend and fished out his own flask of water, handing it to Thorin who took it gratefully.

"So, anywhere hurt aside from your head?"

The dwarf started to move separate parts of his body until he seemed satisfied that everything was in working order. "I don't think so."

Letting out a little sigh of relief, Bilbo dabbed his fingers into the balm once more. "Oh good, that makes this so much less… stressful." The hobbit tried to move Thorin's hair away again but found with the dwarf's head again the wall; he couldn't exactly just shove it behind him.

Bilbo simply shrugged a little and shoved his fingers into the mass of inky black hair and pushed his hand back until the offending chunk was out of his way and let it rest against the dwarf's head. Thorin looked up at him almost startled at the contact, eyes going wide.

Bilbo looked down at him unimpressed.

"No complaining, your highness, I'm healing," he wiggled his fingers that were covered in the green mixture again. Leaning in close to see the best he could in the relative darkness of the cave, Bilbo started to rub the balm gently into Thorin's wound.

He heard the dwarf's breath quicken and immediately halted his hand. "Sorry, does it hurt? I can try not to touch it as much but there's only so much I can do…"

"I…" Thorin looked away from his friend, "No, it is fine. Continue."

The hobbit nodded but tried his best not to poke the wound. "It isn't too deep, really looks worse than it is."

"I will be alright," Thorin spoke, still looking away from the hobbit.
Bilbo chuckled lightly, "And this time, I actually feel inclined to believe you."

Without the blood obscuring Thorin's head, Bilbo could see that the wound was less a blunt impact and more like something had just scraped away the skin. It would sting, but there wasn't any damage the balm wouldn't help fix. He continued to apply the paste until the raw skin was covered. Now all they would have to do is let it soak in and do its work. Bilbo gave the wound one last check and felt satisfied with his work. The hobbit pulled his hand out of Thorin's hair and reached down to grab the cloth, missing the slight jerk of the dwarf's head as if to follow.

He held up Bard's gift motioning for Thorin, "Pour some water on this, would you?"

The dwarf tilted the skin, dampening the cloth. Bilbo raised it to his friend's face and started to wipe away at the dirt. Shooting him a glare, Thorin tried to pull his face away, "You do not need to clean me. I am not some helpless dwarfling."

If Bilbo could have rolled his eyes all the way back into his head and just left them there, he was sure that would be the most expedient method of communicating his seemingly ever-present exasperation with Thorin Oakenshield. "You see that is so odd, because I was checking for more wounds."

"But if you want to be killed by some sort of infection from a silly cut," Bilbo narrowed his eyes, "then you are, of course, more than welcome to do so."

Thorin remained silent as they tried to out-glare each other. "I'm going to take your silence as the 'of course you're right, Bilbo, but I'm just too stubborn to admit it' variety."

The hobbit raised the cloth again with a challenging stare and resumed cleaning the dwarf's face. He wiped away all the dust and small bits of earth that still clung there, turning the dwarf's face this way and that to make sure he didn't miss anything.

Thorin had closed his eyes as the hobbit went about his work. Bilbo was sure the dwarf was tired. Not just physically from all the rummaging around the side of the mountain they'd been doing for the past few days, but emotionally. He had seen Thorin sitting at the edge of camp, staring at the doors of Erebor late into the night. Now that thought on it, he wasn't sure he actually seen Thorin sleep since they set out from Lake Town.

The hobbit finished wiping the last of the dirt from his friend's face and stuffed his supplies into his pack then shoved it over so he could sit next to Thorin against the wall. "How long has it been?"

The dwarf glanced over at him, "How long has it been…?"

Bilbo fished his blanket out of his pack and spread it over both of their legs. "Don't play dumb with me, Thorin. How long has it been since you slept?"

The dwarf stiffened beside him for a moment before Thorin seemed to deflate, his shoulder's slumping and arms going limp. "A few days."

The hobbit turned his head to look at his friend, "Thorin…"

The dwarf continued to look at some mysterious point in the corner of the cave Bilbo was sure his friend wasn't actually seeing. "Thorin look at me…" Thorin shifted his gaze slowly so he met the hobbit's gaze out of the corner of his eyes. "You need to rest. We need you to be strong and you can't do that without letting yourself get some sleep."

The dwarf's eyes looked… hollow now. None of the tortured pain he had seen the night before, instead there was a tired sort of emptiness. "I… cannot."
Bilbo held his friend's gaze, "Why can't you?"

Thorin finally looked away and brought a hand up to his face, the heel of his palm rubbing at his eyes. "I have… dreams."

The hobbit nodded, "What sort of dreams?"

His voice was calm and belayed none of the worry he felt squirming in his stomach.

The dwarf was silent for a long while before he sighed, "Nightmares. Of the day Erebor was attacked. Of my brother being… torn apart by the dragon. Of Thror's rage when he lost the Arkenstone…"

"And then I dream…" Thorin clenched his eyes shut, "of Fili and Kili burning alive. And of you," the dwarf hesitated for a moment, "being swallowed whole by the beast while I do nothing but stand by, consumed with greed for the golden horde."

"They're just dreams, Thorin." Bilbo spoke softly, "Nothing more."

"I do not think they are." The dwarf leaned his head back against the cold stone of the cave as if it could cool his thoughts, "I fear it is all going to happen and it will be my fault."

"You would never let anyone in this company die for gold, no matter how much it's worth," Bilbo shot in quickly. He would not let his friend spiral in a fit of agonizing self-loathing when they had finally made it in the mountain.

Thorin let out a bitter laugh, "Wouldn't I? It's in my blood, Bilbo. My grandfather almost got both of us killed because he wouldn't leave a stone behind. Frerin… died partially because of that. If I –" Thorin took a deep breath, "if I let my own brother die, what makes you think any of this company is safe?"

"That is ridiculous, Thorin, and you know it." Bilbo glared at his friend, "You did not let Frerin die, you were trying to save your grandfather. I have no idea what this Arkenstone business is, but I feel very confident in saying that if it came down to a member of this company and it, you would choose your friends."

Thorin's eyes remained shut. "The Arkenstone is… it is our greatest treasure. It is the very heart of this mountain and more ancient than any gem or metal ever found by our kind. To see it is to see the very nature of all the life that flows through this world manifested in a single shard."

The hobbit tried to picture the stone but found he didn't even know where to begin. "Whatever your grandfather's mistakes, you are not destined to make them simply because you share the same lineage." Bilbo's face was set with determination, "You are strong, Thorin. Whatever else you think of yourself, know that you are strong."

"A stone, however old or mystical or whatever, is not worth the life of a person." The hobbit sought Thorin's hand under the blanket and squeezed it as soon as his fingers made contact, "And I know you know that. Your grandfather didn't, or maybe he couldn't, but you do, Thorin, and you won't prove me wrong."

The dwarf sat in silence for many long moments, "What have I done to earn such confidence, Bilbo?"

The hobbit groaned quietly, "You've been yourself, that's what I've been trying to tell you this whole time! You don't need to do anything, just, uh, be, I suppose."
And then Thorin laughed, it was quiet and rough but it was genuine. And he laughed and laughed until the rest of the company started to look over at them with curious glances.

Bilbo felt his face begin to flush.

"What exactly did I say that was so funny?" He hissed at the dwarf who was starting to calm himself.

Thorin raised a brow with mock incredulity, "Nothing. You've just been yourself, Master Baggins."

"Oh, I see how it is," the hobbit pouted. "I try to cheer you up and you make fun of me."

The dwarf smiled at him, "I am not poking fun, Bilbo, just... appreciating how strange life can be."

Bilbo tried to hold his pout but couldn't help the grin that spread across his face. "Fine, fine. Do you think you can try to sleep now at least?"

Thorin nodded slowly, "I will try."

The dwarf closed his eyes leaning back against the stone and started to breath steadily. Bilbo tried to pull his hand out after a while, but just felt the fingers around his tighten in response.

He guessed maybe an hour had passed by when he felt Thorin's head start to drift sideways until the very top was leaning against Bilbo's. Smiling to himself and very lightly giving his back a little mental pat, he shifted his own head so it rested on the dwarf's shoulder and Thorin's was leaning a bit more comfortably on his own.

Bilbo woke to the sound of the company shifting restlessly around the cave. Moving his sore neck, he forgot Thorin's head was resting on his own and ended up jerking the dwarf awake rather suddenly.

"What—"

The dwarf grumbled before his eyes opened with sudden realization, "I slept."

Creaking his neck with a small pop, Bilbo grinned up at his friend, "Indeed you did!"

The hobbit glanced at Thorin's wound and was pleased to see it healing very nicely under the thick paste of Oin's balm. It wasn't of Beorn's quality, but he had to admit it was working quite well.

"Good, you're up," came Dwalin gruff voice from across the cave. "We need a plan Thorin."

The dwarf stood up and made his over to where Thorin and Bilbo were sitting followed closely by Balin, Fili, and Kili.

"There doesn't seem to be very many options..." Fili trailed off as he glanced back at the way they had come in through, "There's only one way out as far as I know."

Kili nodded in agreement gesturing to the remaining passage from the cave, "And it's through there."

"It seems pretty simple to me," Bilbo joined in, looking at his companions. "I'll go scout the cave again, see if Smaug is back."

Thorin turned quickly to face him but Balin cut in before their leader could argue, "Aye, laddie, I have to agree. We can't risk a frontal assault. Master Baggins can look for any weaknesses and report back, then we'll formulate a real strategy."
Their leader looked at Bilbo, searching his face for something he could argue with. "We're running out of options, Thorin, it'll be just like before; quick and quiet as I can."

Thorin nodded hesitantly, "if it's just like before, then your promise still stands, Bilbo. Don't do anything idiotic and come back."

"I promise," the hobbit stood up and stretched his legs. "Well, no time like the present, I suppose…"

Fili and Kili walked with him to the mouth of the passage, "Be careful, Master Boggins."

Fili thrust the hilt of one of his daggers into Bilbo's hand, "I know you have a sword, but this is faster." The blond dwarf smiled at him, "And rather more suits you I think."

Bilbo glanced down at the finely carved hilt, crested with the same pattern that Fili wore on his clothes, "I can't… I can't take this, Fili…"

The young dwarf simply waved him off, "Just borrowing it, Master Baggins, I'm going to want that back."

The hobbit understood then and hugged the dwarf brothers, pushing them tightly together so he could fit his arms at least somewhat around them.

"Thank you, I'll bring it back right away."

And with that the hobbit turned from them swiftly before he lost his nerve. Slipping the ring on, Bilbo vanished and made his way down the passageway towards the treasure room for the second time. Now that he had seen the dragon not just sleeping, but wreaking destructive havoc on the mountain, he knew the shaking in his hands was not going to stop anytime soon.

He was invisible. He was invisible and the dragon couldn't smell him, Bilbo told himself over and over again as he followed the dark passageway. 'Please be gone, please be gone, please be gone,' the hobbit prayed as he saw the gold mound that rested in front of the passage. Forcing his foot to step out onto the treasure room floor, the hobbit took a few steps around the mound to see…

Yes, that was indeed a dragon.

He had at least seen the beast before and so he didn't need to muffle another yell. However, that knowledge did nothing to quell the nervous bile rising in his throat or his fluttering heartbeat. 'Well it's… asleep at least," he thought to himself but felt no relief. The dragon was lying down much as it had been before but now there was…

One great eyelid blinked so quickly, Bilbo wasn't sure if his mind hadn't just invented the terror until he saw a flash of red that was dragon's eye. Like fire itself swirled within the beast. Smaug had been watching the entrance of the tunnel the entire time.

'And that' Bilbo started to scramble back towards the passage, 'is my cue to leave.'

"I smell you thief."

The hobbit shuddered to a halt at the low voice. It sounded rough and deep, like the dragon's voice was flints striking together; ready to make flames pour out at any moment.

"I feel you in the air. I can hear your breath."

Bilbo stood rigid, still facing the tunnel, unable to make himself move.
"Why don't you come back, little thief," Smaug growled with false humor, "there's plenty more to fill your pockets."

'Think, Bilbo, think,' he tried to push his brain into moving faster than it's current sluggish and terrified pace. Could he leave? Could he make it back to the tunnel? 'No,' he thought dejectedly, the dragon could burn him at anytime; there was no way he could make it out alive. What did he know about dragons! What had he read in his books...

Taking a deep breath, Bilbo forced himself to remember the tales written within the old tomes of Bag Eng.

You must never reveal your name; he could practically hear his mother's voice hushed with mystery. You don't want to make them mad; for they dearly love to watch things burn. You must never refuse them, for a dragon spurned is even more dangerous than a dragon scorned. And above all else, a dragon loves a challenge. But be warned, his mother's voiced floated in his ears, for they are vain and cunning creatures. Never ever challenge a dragon unless you know you can win because if you lose, you burn.

The question was becoming less of whether he thought he could win, and more of whether he had any choice. And it hit him in a very sudden and very anxious moment, a choice was the last thing he had. Turning around slowly, Bilbo tried to push all his terror, all his fear of a painful death and never leaving this mountain alive to the very back of his head. He may not be the smartest hobbit, or the wisest, but there was no doubt in the Shire who was the cleverest.

Walking forward several steps, Bilbo called up to the dragon with his most humble voice.

"No thank you, Oh Smaug the Mighty," the hobbit gave a curt bow knowing the dragon could not see him, but felt he might as well give it his all, "I did not come to gather trinkets or treasure."

"Oh good, it wants to play." The dragons mouth split open into what Bilbo thought might have been a smile, "I was afraid this was going to be boring. Very well, thief, why have you come if not for gold?"

"Ah," Bilbo took a step forward, "but all that is gold does not glitter. What I value here was to see you, to see if the tales of your greatness were true for I did not believe them."

Smaug let out a snort, a puff of smoke shooting out of his nostril, "Well then I find myself curious, thief, how do you find the truth of these tales now that you have seen?" The dragon sounded amused but rather like he was merely humoring a brief distraction and not actually believing a single word.

"They do you no justice, O Smaug the Chieftest and Greatest of Calamities," Bilbo replied. "The songs and tales speak nothing of your truly fearsome presence."

The dragon opened his eyes fully now and Bilbo finally thought he might have caught Smaug's interest. "You have pretty manners for a thief, shame you're a liar as well."

"Consider me reluctantly intrigued," Smaug raised his great, scaled head to fold two clawed feet in front of him, "And it is so dreadfully boring here. Your smell is unfamiliar to me, who are you and where do you come from?"

'Challenge him,' Bilbo thought to himself urgently, 'keep him interested.'

"I come from under the hill, and under the hills and over the hills my path led. And through the air, I am he that walks unseen."
The dragon sat up a little straighter, "And so the liar tells a truth, how delightfully unpredictable, but that is hardly your usual name."

"I am," Bilbo thought back on his journey, "the clue-finder, the web-cutter, the stinger in the night."

"Such lovely titles you have," Smaug let out a deep, sneering laugh that chilled Bilbo down his spine with prick after prick of fear.

"I am he that buries his friends alive and drowns them and draws them alive again from the water," Bilbo added quickly, "I came from the end of a bag, but no bag was drawn over me."

"And here I thought you had decided spin some truth into your tale," the dragon let a plume of smoke out of his mouth that Bilbo eyed feeling sweat start to run down his neck. Perhaps he should… reign it in a little before that smoke turned into something slightly hotter and much more lethal.

"I am the friend of bears and the guest of eagles. I am the ring-winner," the used his thumb to twist the golden ring around his finger in nervous anticipation, "and the barrel-rider."

"Hmm," Smaug let out a pleased purr from low in his throat, "that was much better, little liar, never let the tale lose its plausibility or you lose your audience as well."

And now he was getting lectured from the single most terrifying beast he'd ever seen about his storytelling. This day was certainly turning out to be a rather horrible mixture of the dreadful and the appallingly absurd.

"Very well, barrel-rider, since you provided me with such an excellent meal of fresh horse last night," the dragon raised one long claw to pick at a tooth, "and I'm feeling generous at the moment, I will offer you one piece of advice: abandon those fool dwarves."

'Oh bugger,' Bilbo felt his stomach sink. "What dwarves does your magnificence refer—"

Smaug let out a loud roar that drowned out the hobbit's voice, "Do not pretend to be an imbecile, little liar, when you are not. And I know the stench of dwarf. I can smell that vile stink all over you."

The dragon's wicked smile spread over his face again. "You'll come to a bad and, might I say, very painful end if you call such creatures your companions. You can run along and tell them I said so."

Bilbo couldn't believe his ears, was the dragon letting him go? The hobbit had just been about to sprint as far and as fast as his legs would take him when he heard the dragon begin to speak once more.

"I suppose that cup you stole came to a fair price, did it?"

Bilbo paused for a moment, not seeing where this was going and that frightened him immensely, "I... received no payment."

Smaug snorted again like Bilbo had answered exactly as he expected him to, "How tediously typical. And I suppose these dwarves are skulking just outside while you are sent in for the dangerous work?"

The dragon's laugh shook the piles of golden treasure, "I'll hazard a guess they offered you equal split of the spoils too. Don't believe it, little liar, you'll sooner end up dead before you prize your payment from their greedy hands."
Bilbo clenched his hands tightly; feeling the same righteous indignation flood his veins that always did whenever someone insulted his company. "You do not know everything, O Smaug the Mighty. It was not just gold that brought us here."

The dragon's tail flicked with amusement, "So you admit the 'us'? Why not just admit that you are a company of fourteen and be done with it. I enjoy your riddles but do not mistake me for a fool, I find the notion quite insulting."

"I am pleased it is not just my gold that brought you here, otherwise I'm afraid that your journey would have been altogether quite a monumental waste of time," the dragon resumed picking at his giant tooth. "For I find myself rather reluctant to give any up."

Bilbo felt anger rising within him. Danger he could take, not well, but he could take it. But to face a dragon, the most fearsome and mighty beast to fly the skies, only to have their motives mocked? 'Alright, that is it,' Bilbo clenched his teeth, 'if a fiery death awaits me then so be it!"

"Perhaps you will not need to give it up. The dead hardly have any say in the matter," Bilbo shot out, anger lacing every word. "Surely you must know that you have made many bitter enemies over the years? Many enemies that only wait for the right moment to take their revenge."

Then Smaug let out a laugh, but this one was far more terrible than anything Bilbo had ever heard before. His legs started to shake in fear as the mountains of gold around the room began to collapse at the force.

"Revenge!" the dragon hissed with a sneer, his eyes flashing red with the promise of a raging inferno for all who challenged him.

"The King under the Mountain is dead and where are his kin that dare seek revenge? The Lord of Dale is dead and I have eaten his people like a wolf among sheep, and where are his kin that dare approach me?"

Smaug's voice grew higher as if the even the notion of revenge was the finest joke he'd ever heard. "I kill where I wish. I eat where I wish and none resist. I tore apart the best warriors Erebor had to offer without even a fraction of my true strength and where are the armies to challenge me now?"

"I have grown older and stronger. My armor is tenfold of your petty shields. My teeth are shaper and stronger than any sword. My claws are deadlier than an entire army of spears. My wings are stronger than any hurricane and they say my breath brings naught but death. Tell me, little liar, what have I to fear?"

'Think, think think,' Bilbo cursed silently. Then he remembered something, something his mother had told him long ago that might just work.

"I've be told," the hobbit's voice was much shakier than he would have liked, "that dragons are weakest under their chests."

Smaug reared up so his stomach was exposed, "I have placed iron scales and the hardest gems there. No blade can pierce me!"

Bilbo scanned the dragon, looking for something, anything that could help them. And then he saw it; there was small patch on the upper left corner of the dragon's chest that was nothing more than flesh with no metal scale or jewel to cover it. It wasn't much, admittedly, but it was something. He eyes fell on a small fluttering something that lingered near one of the doors out of the treasure room. It looked almost like the thrush that had helped them earlier, but he didn't have time to consider the
bird's mysterious presence further.

"Maybe not a blade, but certainly an arrow," Bilbo saw the shift in Smaug's eyes and knew if he didn't get out right now, this could mean a very unfortunate end to his tale. Sprinting towards the door to the passageway as quickly as he could, the hobbit heard Smaug's terrible roar before he felt the heat of the flames.

'Bugger, bugger, bugger!' Bilbo ran as fast he could up the passageway but felt the suffocating heat chasing him all the way. If there was ever a time in his life when Bilbo cursed his small size, it had to be right then when he knew having longer legs would have certainly mean getting away from the dragon's flame much quicker and with significantly less of his person singed.

He shoved the ring into his pocket and ran until his lungs burned. He ran until he burst out of the tunnel into the cave to see thirteen shocked faces look at him. The hobbit bent over, his hands on his knees, and panted heavily.

"Um, Master Baggins…" He heard Fili speak up hesitantly.

"Wh—" Bilbo took another shuddering gasp of air, "what?"

"It's just, well…" Fili replied slowly, "your coat is sort of… on fire."

"What?!"

Bilbo had just thrown his coat on the ground and started to stamp on the flames when they heard another great roar echo through the mountain; which could only mean Smaug was leaving the mountain again. Sure enough, the sound of the distant gates being ripped opened followed soon the dragon's fearsome cry. They all stilled for several moments, no one making a sound until they could hear none of the dragon's fury.

"What did you do to it, Master Baggins?" Kili was eyeing him with a mixture of disbelief and awe.

"I didn't do anything," he shot back indignantly. The hobbit looked around at the group all with faces that said very plainly they did not believe him.

"Fine, I talked to him for a little while and he got…” Bilbo put his burnt coat back on "irritated."

"You spoke to the dragon?" Thorin's face was as furious as his tone.

The hobbit placed his hands on his hips in a show of defiance, "I hadn't intended to do anything but Smaug knew I was there the moment I walked in. I had to distract him and the only way I could do that, was to talk."

And so Bilbo regaled his tale to the company from the riddles he told the dragon to his perhaps less than wise taunting. "So he reared up," the hobbit raised his arms, imitating the beast, "and I was able to see his stomach.

"Most is covered by iron plates and jewels, but there was one spot on his upper chest," Bilbo pointed on his own body where it would have been, "that was bare. As far as I could tell, that may as well be the only way to kill him."

Bofur groaned with his face in his hand, "If I woulda' know you was foolish enough to taunt a dragon, I woulda' never let you go down there."
Bilbo glared at the dwarf, "I did what I had to and it all turned out for the best. We have information, the dragon is gone for the time being, and I'm not burned. Much."

Balin stood up, "Aye, but the question of what do we do now remains."

The company all looked to Thorin who sat in thought for a few moments. "We need to go in while the dragon is gone. We can do nothing sitting in this cave, there are plenty of places we can hide within the city."

There was a flurry of activity as the company dispersed to pack up their bags again. The nervous energy was almost palpable in the air as the dwarves prepared themselves for whatever was to come inside. For the final part of their journey, for better or worse. Bilbo grabbed his pack from the side of the cave and made his way over to where Thorin was standing, his jaw set and eyes dark.

The hobbit wanted to offer his friend another option, another way out than having to go through the destruction of his city but there were no other paths they could take now. The only way forward was through Erebor, so through Erebor they would have to go.

"Whatever you need, Thorin," Bilbo turned to their leader quietly, "I'm here."

The dwarf looked down at him for a few moments and gave him a stiff nod.

As soon as the company had assembled, they started down the passage, Bilbo and Thorin leading the way. Now familiar with these passages, the hobbit walked with surety around each bend that was now blackened with dragon's fire. Not one member of their group spoke as they journeyed deeper into the mountain until the darkness started to fade. The golden like of the treasure room started to fill passage and soon enough there was a collective gasp as they saw the first mound of gold.

There was a chaotic moment when it seemed to Bilbo that every dwarf surged forward simultaneously with shouts and whoops of glee at the sight of the golden horde, at the sight of their golden horde. There was a great deal of pushing and shoving to get through as Bilbo pushed himself to the back of the group, not wanting to get between a dwarf and his gold. As soon as they were through the door, the company started to fan out, examining as much as they could as fast as they could, all the while shouting at each priceless treasure they found.

Bilbo looked up to see that he was wrong, not every dwarf had run into the room. Thorin stood stalk still, his hand against the wall of the passage as if to support him. The hobbit padded up to his friend silently to stand beside him.

"Are you alright, Thorin?" The dwarf didn't respond, simply staring at the room unable to bring himself to move.

"I do not think I can..." Thorin trailed off, looking down at his feet as if they were foreign to him. Bilbo felt his heart clench at the sight, at his friend so paralyzed by whatever was running through his thoughts that the dwarf could do nothing but stare.

"You can Thorin, I know you can," the hobbit placed a hand on Thorin's arm. The dwarf looked at him blankly as if not really even seeing him.

"Shall we go together?" Bilbo asked, sticking out his hand for Thorin to take.

Blinking a few times, his friend shook his head and gave a small nod. As soon as the dwarf reached out slowly to clasp his hand, Bilbo took it firmly in his own and started to take small steps forward. Thorin followed behind him until they passed through end of the passageway and into the larger room.
He heard his friend let out a large breath of air he must have been holding and the dwarf started to walk more resolutely. The hobbit let go of Thorin's hand and watched as the dwarf pushed aside whatever poisonous thoughts were currently twisting in his mind and walked towards the center of the chamber where Smaug had slumbered.

The rest of the company was still scattered around the vast room, some partially hidden by the heaps of treasure. Bilbo started to walk around to the back of the room, examining the heaps of treasure until he was completely out of sight, hidden by gold. It must have been an hour at least until he heard Dwalin call out that he was taking the company further into Erebor to find a suitable place to camp.

Bilbo had been about to join them when something caught his eye. It looked to be some sort of tome, encased in a heavy sleeve of pure gold with rubies sticking out of the cover. He wondered what a book was doing here, regardless of the fine case, and so he pulled it out of the pile as gently as he could. On the cover there was an intricately carved dragon, its body arched and flames coming out of the golden mouth.

_**Fire Drake Lore**_ was written in the common script across the top and he couldn't help feel a mixture of amusement and irritation. On the one had, he could have really used it earlier when dealing with the actual dragon. On the other, he couldn't help but find it slightly entertaining that Smaug would have a book on himself. Not that it surprised the hobbit after having dealt with the beast. Bilbo turned open the first page to see painted there was a rather majestic portrait of what could only be Smaug himself. Snorting at the dragon's rather intense brand of narcissism, Bilbo made his way out from mounds of treasure in the back. Perhaps if he showed it to Thorin, that would cheer the dwarf up.

"Hey, Thorin, look at what I—" the hobbit had started to call out but halted as soon as he looked to where the dwarf had been standing but there was now nothing. 'Maybe he left with Dwalin…' Bilbo thought hesitantly, peering around the room. Then he heard what sounded to him like low wail and then a harrowing sob.

'What was that?' Bilbo walked to the center of the room and still saw nothing. He heard it again. The hobbit started to follow the noise towards the far corner of the room. From what he could tell around the mounds of treasure, there must have been a short set of stairs up the low balcony that circled the room. Several doors lined the way he walked towards, trying to find out where the noise was coming from.

He walked around several piles of gold until he saw something made his entire being go cold with dread. Thorin's body was hunched over something, his back a twisted arc of torment as sob after sob wracked his body. The dwarf's hands were hovering over something, not touching but shaking just above it. Bilbo took another step forward and saw what he thought might have been a bone.

'Oh no…' The hobbit thought with mounting panic, 'oh no, no, no.' Thorin let out another horrible wail as he rocked slowly back and forth on knees. Bilbo had never see his friend cry. He'd never seen Thorin even remotely near crying and to see him now, hunched over like some pitiful creature tore at his heart like no knife ever could. There was only one dwarf these… remains could belong to. Only one dwarf whose death ate away at Thorin's mind.

Frerin.

Bilbo knew Thorin had never seen the body, never had it actually confirmed with his own eyes that his brother was truly dead. There must have been some small part of Thorin that had clung to hope that Frerin had gotten away, had escaped the Lonely Mountain and was living somewhere safe and happy. And the hobbit was seeing that hope being torn out of him, ripped from Thorin's heart as his
impossible grief made claim to his soul.

He had to… he had to do something. But for the first time in his life, hand stretched out towards Thorin's shaking back, he felt completely and utterly lost. How could he comfort Thorin? How could he even begin to know what to do in the face of such horrible despair?

"Thorin…?" Bilbo spoke quietly.

The dwarf continued to sob, wild hair falling around his face, hands still hovering over the charred old bones of his brother. Bilbo stepped closer and saw that there wasn't just one body lying on the ground, but two, intertwined in one final embrace as blistering death swirled around them. Around one of the arms that held the second body, a half melted vambrace hung off the blackened bone. As Bilbo looked at it closer, he could see the same crest as the one on Fili's knife was etched into the metal.

The hobbit turned towards his friend and knelt beside him. Bilbo tried to gently turn Thorin's shoulders to face him but the dwarf let out another cry and shoved him away, face never leaving the bones in front of him. He had never seen such sorrow in another being before, never seen such despair, but he knew Thorin. He knew that the dwarf would sit here, slowly losing his mind, blaming himself for something that wasn't his fault if Bilbo let him.

But he wouldn't. He would not let Thorin fade away into pain when they had made it into Erebor. Not while Thorin still called him friend.

"Thorin you need to look at me."

And then he heard the quiet muttering between each shaking sob, "It's my fault. All my fault. He's dead, dead, dead because of me." The dwarf would let out a wail then repeat the quiet words.

"Thorin," Bilbo placed a hand on the dwarf's far cheek, "look at me."

Thorin jerked back at the touch, but the hobbit kept his hand firm. Placing his other hand of the dwarf's face, Bilbo turned his friend's head until it was partially facing him. "Look at me, Thorin," he repeated again, trying to pour every ounce of will he had into each word.

The dwarf's wild, bloodshot eyes stayed fixed on the bodies for several long moments until they slowly moved up to Bilbo's face.

"Good, very good, keep your eyes on me," he spoke as softly and gently as he knew how.

Thorin looked up at him, though Bilbo could tell the dwarf saw nothing that was in front of him. He had to pull Thorin back, back to the treasure room, back to him. The hobbit gently moved his face forward until his forehead rested on Thorin's, their noses almost touching, hands still firmly clasped on the dwarf's face.

"Thorin Oakenshield," Bilbo spoke, his eyes fixed on Thorin's bright blue ones, "this was not your fault, Frerin did not die because of you."

The dwarf's eyes flicked backed to the corpse.

"No," Bilbo spoke slowly and firmly as he gave his friend's face a small shake with his hands, "eyes on me."

They shifted back.
"None of this was your fault, Thorin, absolutely none of it." Bilbo's voice was determined now; he had to make his friend see, to understand. "You did everything you could to save your people and your family and you need to accept that."

The hobbit pressed his forehead harder into Thorin's, he was going to get his friend back and there was nothing that would stop him. "You are the bravest warrior I have ever seen, you are the truest friend I have ever had and I know you would never abandon your family even if there were a hundred dragons blocking your path. You are Thorin Oakenshield and you are king under this mountain now."

"I know this hurts you, I know this hurts more than I could ever possibly understand," Bilbo clenched his eyes shut, "but you cannot let your grief overcome you. Frerin loved you and he would never want his death to define you. I won't let it."

The hobbit was so absorbed in his desperation that he didn't even notice the sobbing had stopped.

"Your company needs you, Thorin. Fili and Kili need you. I –" Bilbo took a deep breath, "I need you. So come back to me, damn it, come back."

The hobbit felt Thorin's head shift beneath him and a gust of breath on his face. Then a pair of dry lips pushed forward onto his own, so gently he almost didn't feel it. The dwarf's hands reached up from their limp position at his side to clutch tightly at the back of his jacket as if Bilbo Baggins was the only thing keeping him from falling into some dark abyss.

The hobbit's eyes stayed shut as his mind went completely blank.

Thorin was… but he couldn't finish the thought.

'Oh my.'
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

The sap factor in the chapter is so far off the damn scale it's like wading through fucking syrup. I hope none of this seems sudden or out of character because I've been trying to lay this shit on like a ton of bricks. A ton of very slow and strategic bricks, but who even knows anymore so fuck it I tried :P Hope you enjoy!

Thorin's lips pressed harder into his own as Bilbo felt the dwarf's grip on his jacket tighten. But he couldn't bring himself to open his eyes, to look at what was going on because that would make it real. And in his experience, real things were seldom what the mind hoped they were. The hobbit felt warmth spread through his body as Thorin pulled him down so they were flush against each other. Mind still working sluggishly to make a coherent thought, Bilbo felt his arms move forwards almost of their own accord. His hands left Thorin's face and moved so they were behind the dwarf's head, twisted deeply in dark hair but still holding his friend tightly. Thorin was here, Thorin was here with him now. Not somewhere alone, dark and cold as he wept for the ghosts that haunted him. And he would pull his friend back, he would keep him grounded here until there was no doubt that he would never, ever be alone.

If Bilbo had considered just exactly what was currently happening, he might have had felt a deep sort of flustered that often led to a unique brand of shaky confusion; but in that moment, in that singular point in time, nothing mattered to him but Thorin. Not his thoughts, not the dragon that could return at any moment, not even the implications of what this meant. No, as the dwarf's lips pressed against his, Bilbo only knew that meant Thorin had turned away from his brother's corpse, that Thorin had turned towards him. Towards something alive and hopeful, and away from the pain and despair. To the future and away from the past.

Bilbo was gripping tight, holding together the shattering pieces that only repeated blows stricken by grief and loss could cause. And he wouldn't let go, not now, not ever.

Thorin pulled a hair's breadth away and inhaled shakily. The hobbit felt something wet and warm run down his own cheek. He thought for a moment it was Thorin, that the tears running down the dwarf's face had started run down his own. But as he blinked, he realized that they were his. It was sadness at seeing his friend torn apart by the cruel happenstances of life. More than that, however, what caused his tears was an aching sense of relief.

He looked down hesitantly, not sure what to expect. Thorin's face was tired. The hobbit didn't think he'd ever seen someone so weary in his life. The dwarf's eyes were red and bloodshot, his face splotchy from where the tears had run down. But what tugged at his heart most was the look of hollow sorrow there. Like Thorin could only hurt so much, could only take so much grief before there was nothing left in him. Like all the tears and the sadness and the pain had poured out from him in wave of misery and now... Now there was emptiness where all those feelings had once burrowed and festered over many long years.

He hoped with all his heart as he took in the sight of Thorin's expression that the void could now be filled with something warmer, something kinder than pain. The dwarf's head shifted to the side and his face fell against Bilbo's shoulder, hands still tightly twisted in the hobbit's jacket. His friend took
another rattling breath as his chest heaved. There were no more tears for Thorin Oakenshield to shed but his body still shook like it wanted nothing more than to do just that. Bilbo rested his cheek against the dwarf's head and hugged his neck tightly. Though his knees hurt from where they dug into the cold stone and even colder gold pieces, he barely felt a thing.

Bilbo rocked slowly, Thorin's face pressed into his neck, as the dwarf's breathing started to slow down. They began to sound less and less like the last one a dying man might take before welcoming the eternal embrace, but still the hobbit did not move. They were silent except for their breathing, Bilbo's slow and steady as he tried to get Thorin to match his own. It felt like a lifetime to him and also like no time at all. It was odd, feeling like he was right there, kneeling on the ground and holding his friend and yet somehow very distant, as if giving himself wholly over to one purpose had driven every other thought out of his mind.

Bilbo felt Thorin's face shift slightly as the dwarf's lips moved across his neck, "Bilbo, I…"

The dwarf's voice halted, raw and low, grief having ripped away any semblance of composure. Bilbo clutched tighter, moving one hand to the back of Thorin's head.

"Shh, it's fine Thorin, we'll talk later."

The dwarf's shoulders sagged as he slumped boneless against Bilbo. The hobbit could feel a little nod against his neck and knew that now was not the time to discuss them. The thought that there even was a 'them' almost made his stomach twist nervously, but right now what Thorin needed was rest. There was such exhaustion in the dwarf's voice that Bilbo almost wished it had been safe to camp right there so Thorin could just go to sleep.

Bilbo shut his eyes again and held Thorin tight against him. Though the dwarf had seemingly lost every ounce of strength needed to sit up, his friend's hands still clutched at his back and hadn't moved since Thorin had put them there.

"It's okay now, it's all okay," he spoke gently against Thorin's head over and over until his own voice started to sound just as rough. The dwarf's breaths slowed down until they were in complete unison.

In, out. In, out. In, out.

Bilbo pulled back until he could see Thorin's slumped head and moved his hands back to the dwarf's face. Placing them gently on either side, Bilbo lifted up as slowly as he could, not wanting to startle him.

"Thorin?" He said quietly enough that it might have just been a whisper on the wind.

The dwarf's eyes locked with his and there, Bilbo saw a small flash of what made Thorin, Thorin. He saw life. Yes, there was a hollow, empty lack of focus to those bright blue eyes but there was also Thorin in there somewhere, no matter how small it appeared. It broke his heart to see his friend like this but Bilbo was not without hope, he would make Thorin smile again, he would see the lines on the sides of the dwarf's eyes crease with happiness again even if it took him a lifetime.

"Thorin..." He began again slowly. "Can you walk? It's not safe here."

Bilbo knew the thought of Smaug should fill him with terror, should make him quake and shake at the thought that they could be turned to ash just as Frerin had but as he looked at Thorin, nothing else, no matter how great or terrible, seemed to truly matter.

The dwarf looked at him for several moments as if he couldn't find even a sliver of strength in him to
make his legs move again.

"I'll help you, Thorin. You don't have to do it alone," Bilbo's voice was determined as he spoke.

The hobbit stood up slowly, Thorin's arms moving with him as the dwarf's hands remained clutched to his jacket. Bilbo waited, still looking down at his friend, waiting for him to move. Thorin stared up at him but couldn't seem to be able to make his body shift. The hobbit placed his hands on the underside of Thorin's arms and squeezed them gently.

"You can let go, Thorin. I'm not going anywhere without you."

Slowly Bilbo felt the vice grip of the dwarf's finger's loosen until the hands were detached enough that the hobbit could move again. Bilbo leaned down and secured his arms around the dwarf's shoulder and started to pull up. He wasn't sure he could lift Thorin and all his armor but as he hauled up, the dwarf started to get unsteadily to his feet. Slinging Thorin's arm around his shoulder, one of his hands fitted securely against his friend's waist, Bilbo slowly turned them so they were facing away from Frerin's bones and towards one of the great archways along the adjacent wall.

He knew from all the tales he'd heard of Erebor that it was immensely vast and could only hope that wherever the rest of the company had gone wasn't too far or hard to find. Bilbo and Thorin walked slowly out of the treasure room. Much of the dwarf's weight rested on Bilbo's shoulders but even with his aching knees, the hobbit didn't notice the strain his body felt. The only thing he concentrated on was the next step. Then the next. And the one after that.

This infernal room was cursed, he was sure. Anything a dragon chose to call home, any place that reeked so strongly of death and greed could only lead to trouble. The sooner Bilbo got Thorin out of here, the better it would be for both of them. He knew there was no way he could keep the dwarf out of there forever, but there was no way he would let Thorin stay in there a second longer today.

As they passed under the archway, Bilbo could feel Thorin try to look back one more time. He squeezed the wrist on the arm that rested over his shoulders and looked up at the dwarf. Thorin's head stopped for a moment before he turned it back to face the hobbit.

"Don't look back, Thorin. Not yet." He moved his hand off the wrist forward and laced their fingers together, giving another firm squeeze.

There would be time for that later if they found a way to defeat the dragon. Hopefully there would be days, months, and years in the future for Thorin to look back, to remember his brother properly. Not to mourn the way Frerin had died, but to celebrate the way he had lived. But it was not today, not now. They had to get back to the company and rest, regain their strength so they could face the dragon to whatever end.

There was rubble and heaps of dust along the hallway. Half of the great green stone pillars seemed to have been torn from the high ceiling. Built into the side of the walls were what Bilbo could only assume to be houses of a sort. There were doors, small stairs that led to balconies jutting outwards, and windows uncovered by glass. On the ground there were old bones littered everywhere and great swathes of blackened rock where the dragon's fire had burned away any dwarves unlucky enough to had come across his path.

Thankfully Thorin seemed too absorbed in hollowness of his own mind to notice the destruction around him. Though Bilbo would have traded any of the possessions he had in Bag End, even Bag End itself to have spared Thorin that hurt, at least it was distracting him from the terrible empty silence of what once must have been a city full of life.
Even the sound of their footsteps was muffled by the dust. There was… nothing. If he closed his eyes, Bilbo could almost imagine the distant sounds of a marketplace, of children running and laughing, of the pure life that must have hummed inside this mountain. That was almost worse than the ringing silence that hung in his ears, settling deep into his bones. This was a place for ghosts, for shadows of memories to hide behind every corner, inside every building; to watch them with fogged, distant eyes that mirrored the past with each step they took.

Their progress was slow as their path weaved around the fallen pieces of Erebor, but as long as Thorin kept moving forward, he wasn't going to complain. Bilbo tried to keep his gaze on the ground, tried to make out the footprints that the rest of the company had left but the further away they moved from golden light of the treasure room, the murkier his vision became.

"Uncle! Bilbo! Is that you?"

The hobbit sighed in relief as he heard Kili's familiar voice call out from somewhere down the hallway, silently blessing the young dwarf's keen eyesight.

"Yes! It's us!" Bilbo called back, his voice sounding tired even to himself.

There was the sound of muffled footsteps and soon enough Fili and Kili swam into view, the dwarf brothers jogging towards him.

"Are you alright?" Kili shouted as he started to sprint, no doubt seeing his uncle leaning rather heavily against their hobbit.

Fili and Kili skidded to a halt they reached them. Their faces were stricken with concern, eyes fixed on their uncle.

"We're…" Bilbo started before the words caught in his throat. 'Fine' did not really seem to be the appropriate description for what had just happened.

"…Not injured," He finished rather lamely.

The younger dwarf's hands started to flutter nervously as he examined his uncle. Fili looked between Thorin and Bilbo, his blue eyes closely scrutinizing them, a worried frown creeping onto his face.

"Then why is he –" Kili said nervously. "Why can't uncle –"

The young dwarf couldn't seem to finish his thoughts without his words suddenly halting and biting his lip anxiously.

"Thorin needs rest, brother."

Fili placed a comforting hand on Kili's shoulder before walking over to his uncle's other side and gently placing their leader's other arm around his shoulders. Bilbo was quietly relieved Fili seemed to understand that any explanation would have to wait until they were somewhere a bit safer than Smaug's front hallway.

"Don't worry, Kili we just need –" Bilbo began before Thorin's rasp of a voice cut him off.

"I'm fine, boys, just very… tired."

It looked like Thorin was trying to give his nephews the reassuring smile that had graced his face a thousand times before, but the corners of his mouth barely turned and that look never left the dwarf's eyes.
Kili nodded, still chewing on his lip, but waved them to follow.

"You both were taking so long, Fili and I got worried. We're pretty close, c'mon." The young dwarf looked over his shoulder at them as he lead the way down the hall, "Dwalin says it's the royal alcove or something. Right by where your chambers used to be, uncle."

Bilbo almost winced. He didn't want to bring Thorin anywhere that would bring back even stronger memories, but as he looked around them once more, he realized that it probably didn't even matter. No place in Erebor was going to be good, so it might as well be somewhere familiar enough that they could more easily defend it.

They followed Kili down the great hall until Bilbo saw a large archway. It looked relatively unscathed compared to the floor, aged golden patterns tracing up to the ceiling. Well, it certainly looked royal enough. They turned and passed underneath it, following the narrower hallway now. It was... breathtaking, even in the low light. To be fair, he thought, all of Erebor was breathtaking but never before had he seen so many intricately carved stones inlayed with more jewels than Bilbo had ever seen in his life. Even the thick layer of dust couldn't diminish the beauty and care that gone into each cut of the rock.

It was a different sort of beauty than the elves seemed to favor. There were no subtle flowers or delicate odes to nature that had decorated Rivendell and Mirkwood. Instead everything was grand, as if each of the masons that had carved away at the Lonely Mountain poured every bit of pride that the noble dwarves of old inspired in the hearts of all their people into each piece.

As they walked down the hall, Bilbo noticed that between each of the arches that led into houses or other hallways there was a statue. 'Kings and queens,' he thought to himself silently with no small measure of awe, 'and great heroes...' Each of the stone dwarves was holding something.

Axes, swords, picks, and smithing hammers were the most common. But the further they walked, Bilbo saw one statue holding what appeared to be a golden book, it's stone hand raised above the pages as if it were pulling some intangible power from the runes written there. The next statue showed two dwarves, one leaning over a ledge, his massive stone beard hanging down to a dwarf maiden who gripped it tightly, her face an expression of fierce love. As he looked closer at the statue, Bilbo couldn't help but think that in the hands of the dwarves, the rock maiden might just have been real and alive if not for the stone heart in her chest.

They continued until Bilbo saw the hall open up to a vast, circular room. There was a wide set of stairs on the opposite end that lead up to a set of golden doors, no doubt the chambers of the king. Along the curved walls there were a number of golden doors similar to the ones at the top of the stairs that must lead to rooms for the rest of the royal family.

At the center of the room there was a massive statue. Though the body was made with rock, the figure wore a crown of gold inlayed with three giant rubies. He held a mighty hammer of polished obsidian and appeared to be in the middle of striking another blow to the matching anvil at his feet. From the point of the hammer's impact on the stone, there were small rock people leaping forth. No, not people... dwarves. As Bilbo gaped up at the figure, he thought of the book he had taken from Elrond's library. 'Aulë,' the hobbit's mind supplied helpfully, 'the great smith of the Valar.'

Grouped at the base of the statue, Thorin's company had set up a makeshift camp with the supplies they had left. They hadn't dared make a fire in case Smaug could see, or more likely smell it, but there were a fair number of their bed rolls set up along with a number of musty cushions that had been liberated from the adjoining rooms.

As soon as they saw their leader, the rest of the dwarves shot to their feet and rushed over to them.
There was a chaotic few minutes of shoving and shouting, mainly by Dwalin who furiously growled at Bilbo, demanding to know what had happened. Thorin could barely lift his eyes to meet their worried gazes. Bilbo glanced at his friend and could tell talking was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Thorin will be fine!" Bilbo shouted over the racket. "He just needs rest now so if you all will just –" The hobbit unlatched his hand from Thorin's and motioned for them to step aside, "We can let him sleep."

The company fell silent but could see from Bilbo's determined expression that he was tolerating absolutely none of their nonsense right now. They parted and Kili led Bilbo and his family through to the young dwarf's already set up sleeping mat that sat a little away from the rest of the group and against the base of Aulë's statue. Kili rushed over to his pack and pulled out his thick blanket as Fili and Bilbo lowered Thorin down as gently as they could.

The hobbit quickly sat down so his back rested against the statue and slowly pulled Thorin's head down until it rested in his lap. The dwarf's hollow eyes were unfocused as they pointed up towards the ceiling. The brothers settled Kili's blanket over Thorin and sat down on either side of their uncle, worried eyes only leaving him when they exchanged a glance with each other.

The rest of the company was silent expect for the occasional hushed whisper. Bilbo knew it was probably strange for them to see their leader so despondent, without the usual fire that always seemed to burn behind the dwarf's eyes. Thorin had been their drive, their infallible leader that never lost faith in the quest. That persevered and inspired hope in them no matter what. And now he looked… empty. Empty and exhausted. Bilbo prayed that he figured out whatever he needed to do to help his friend find that fire again or he feared not only what would happen to Thorin, but also what would become of the company whose confidence balanced on the edge of a knife.

Bilbo started to lightly trace circles against the dwarf's scalp, his fingers sinking deep into the wild, dark strands. His mother used to do the same for him when he was but a small hobbit. Belladonna soothed her son with gentle fingers to chase away the worried thoughts that sometimes plagued young Bilbo's mind when night fell. He… He didn't know what to do, what would soothe Thorin's thoughts, but he felt it was better than just sitting there and it gave his hands something to do as they fell into the familiar rhythmic motion.

He was only half listening for the distant crash that would signal Smaug's return as he concentrated everything he had on trying to force some comfort through his fingers into Thorin's mind. He had read stories of sorcerers and elves that could read people's thoughts and put their own into another's head, but even as he tried with all his might, Bilbo knew he didn't have even a grain of magic to speak of. If he did, well then Smaug would've had another thing coming.

The best Bilbo could do was keep his word. To make sure Thorin knew he wasn't going through this alone. He was here. Fili and Kili were here. Dwalin and Balin and the rest of the company were all here for him. Bilbo just needed to make sure his friend didn't lose sight of that. Slowly the dwarf's eyelids began to slip lower and lower over his eyes. The hobbit had no idea how much time had passed before he was sure Thorin had finally fallen asleep.

Most of the company had also taken the chance to rest, knowing that the next few days would mean success or failure, life or death, for all of them. Dwalin remained awake, no doubt listening for the dragon's return and quietly talking with his brother. Even Kili had eventually fallen asleep on Fili's mat, a hand reached out to rest on Thorin's chest as if to remind the young dwarf that the heart beneath his fingers still beat strong.

Unlike his brother, however, Fili remained upright, his eyes always fixed on Thorin and Kili's resting forms, though the hobbit could tell he was deep in thought. Once Bilbo's tired mind had accepted
that his friend was truly resting, he felt a small weight lift off his shoulders. But as he continued to trace circles against Thorin's head, the hobbit couldn't stop the thoughts that had been lingering at the back of his mind from worming their way forward.

Thorin had… Thorin had *kissed* him. It still felt strange to even think the word. Not because he was *adverse*, the warmth that had spread through him once he realized what Thorin was doing was certainly evidence that he wasn't, but rather more because he couldn't be quite sure why the dwarf had done it or even what it *meant*.

Thorin had been so thoroughly closed off, so absorbed in his bitter need for revenge and to reclaim his home. When Bilbo had first met him, he would have bet good coin the only emotion that ran through Thorin Oakenshield when the dwarf saw him was a healthy combination of hatred and annoyance. Bilbo knew that wasn't true now... but the thought that Thorin had come to care for him or see him as something *more* than a good friend... Well, he wasn't sure he would have seen that coming even if it hit him square in the face. Or kissed him on the lips.

This was *Thorin Oakenshield*, dwarf warrior and hero, the King of Erebor for goodness sake! That he, Bilbo Baggins, a *hobbit*, was someone that could inspire that in *anyone*, let alone a dwarven king, was almost absurd to him.

And yet, even though all those things described Thorin… that wasn't really how Bilbo knew his friend. The hobbit knew Thorin was so much *more*. He was passionate and kind. He was fierce and yet Bilbo had seen no one gentler on the very select *few* occasions when he'd been injured. The hobbit was sure there was no one in the world who cared more deeply for his friends and his people; who shouldered more burdens simply because it meant a lighter load for someone else.

The hobbit looked down at Thorin's sleeping face. He was… there was no denying Thorin was *handsome* in a stern, gruff sort of way. Bilbo felt a flush run up to the tips of his ears the longer he stared, but even so he couldn't seem to force his gaze away.

"Something the matter, Master Baggins?"

Bilbo forced his eyes up to see Fili was looking at him with a raised brow.

"I, uh –" The hobbit spluttered, his thoughts unhelpfully fleeing just as soon as he actually needed them. "I was just, uh… checking…"

The blond dwarf's eyebrow rose even further, "Checking…"

Bilbo gulped, feeling like he had been caught making *eyes* or something lewd. Which was most likely exactly what he'd been doing. 'Bugger…'

"Yes, just, uh, checking for… stuff…"

"Stuff…" Fili repeated again, amusement leaking into his voice.

Bilbo let out a sigh knowing that out of all of Durin's Folk, Fili was the only one he couldn't seem to fool.

"Why don't we go for a walk, Master Baggins? Your legs must be sore." Fili stood up with a stretch, looking down at his friend expectantly.

His legs *did* hurt, but he didn't want to risk Thorin waking up again…

"Thorin will be fine, he won't even notice you're gone."
The blond dwarf always seemed to know what was on his mind with disturbing accuracy. 'Maybe *Fili* is the sorcerer…' Bilbo thought as he glanced up at the dwarf but as he pictured him in Gandalf's robe and hat, waving a staff around and shouting in a deep voice, the hobbit almost laughed at the ridiculousness of it all.

Bilbo eased off his jacket and folded it up so the charred bit was turned inward. Gently lifting Thorin's head so he could move, the hobbit deftly shoved the jacket underneath as a makeshift pillow. Thorin made a small noise that had Bilbo just about cursing his stupidity when the dwarf simply turned his head so his face was half buried in the soft cloth and inhaled deeply before growing still once more.

Dwlin looked over at them suddenly with a small glare. "Don't do somethin' stupid like wander off, lads, it isn't safe."

Fili shot the dwarf an exasperated, albeit fond, smile. "No need to worry, Master Dwalin, we'll stay in here."

Bilbo followed Fili silently over to one of the golden doors that was to the left of the stairs. Fili touched the large ring that hung off it almost hesitantly, "Dwalin says this was my mother's room."

The hobbit glanced over at his friend, unsure if this was something good or bad. Dís was still alive at least… But he knew seeing all of this couldn't be easy for the young dwarf, to be reminded of the life he could have had but was taken from him in a flash of teeth and a burst of flame. Or the fact that Thorin had told him when Fili and Kili had snuck out of their home, they left only a note for their mother so she couldn't stop them.

'I wonder if he regrets that now…' Bilbo wondered as he looked at the dwarf's back.

Fili pulled the handle and the door creaked open, expelling a puff of dust from the seam. The hobbit covered his mouth with his handkerchief but followed the dwarf into the room.

Bilbo wasn't sure what he expected but it looked such like an ordinary room that the lack of golden ornament was surprising to him. Whereas everything he'd seen so far had been either stone or gold, Dís' room was an eclectic mishmash of styles. Where it had looked gaudy and forced on the Master's house, here the different styles and textures were warm and friendly.

It was like Dís couldn't decide on which culture she wanted to draw from so she had simply thrown up her hands and decided to have a little bit of them all. The bed was large enough that several of the tallest men from Bree he knew could have lain there comfortably. Though the cushions and blanket had been mostly eaten away by time or something else, he could see they were made with a caring hand. Certainly not with the all the skill or fine cloth gold could buy, but by someone who had crafted such things for many years.

The carving on the wooden bed frame almost looked *elvish* to him, though he supposed they had been allies at one point. Hanging above the bed were a pair of twin wooden swords that looked identical to the ones Fili wielded in battle, though being covered in dust and distinctly *not* polished steel made them seem slightly less lethal.

There was a fine wooden dresser in the corner of the room covered in with carvings of running horses. A large table rested against the wall, covered by decaying maps and along the far wall there was a massive bookshelf. There were many books, perhaps even more than Bilbo owned, but in between the clusters were carvings, both wood and stone that looked to have come from places Bilbo couldn't recognize.
Fili walked over to the table and picked up a stone box with golden runes laid across the top. He turned it over in his hands, blowing across the surface to remove the dust.

"My mother said there was no time to pack anything," the blond dwarf spoke absently. "It's like everything the dragon didn't touch was just…" Fili looked over at him, a curious expression on his face, "Frozen. In the very same spot and nothing has changed but a bit more dust."

Bilbo nodded not sure what to say, not sure if there was anything he could say. Nearly everything about Erebor left him feeling unsettled. Fili was right, everything was frozen and there was something about that Bilbo could only think was... unnatural. The destruction he'd seen was awful and terrible but it made sense. When a dragon attacked a city and that meant scorch marks and rubble; not this, not an echo of life so strong it felt like they had simply halted time for a single moment and in the next these halls would be filled again with dwarves like nothing had ever happened.

The hobbit walked around the edge of the bed and over to the shelf, his eyes drawn to a small, stiff leather ram. Fili walked over to him and plucked it off the shelf, rubbing it with his sleeve.

"My father must have given it to her." The young dwarf looked at it with a sad smile on his face.

"How do you know?" Bilbo looked up at his friend curiously.

"He worked leather, not a skill many dwarves bother to prefect," Fili wiggled the leather ram between his fingers. "And my mother said his clan rode great rams like this."

The dwarf's gaze swept slowly over the rest of the massive shelf, "She loves things from far away lands, still goes to the market near every day to find some rare little trinket or trade stories with the merchants."

Bilbo looked to his right and saw that the massive bed had obscured a small, metal cradle. He turned to walk towards it and ran a hand over the rail. As his fingers shifted the dust, he saw runes had been etched in. There was a small blanket on the floor that looked to have been thrown out in haste. As he reached down and started to pick it up, something small and stuffed fell out. Reaching out his other hand to grab it, Bilbo recognized the creature from a few of his books. 'Lion' he was fairly sure was the creature's name.

"That was…" The hobbit heard Fili's voice from behind him, "that was mine."

Bilbo held out the toy for the dwarf to take. Fili took the front two paws in his hands and twisted it back and forth as if the lion were dancing.

"My uncle Frerin made this for me. I can't remember him well but I... remember him giving me this and laughing."

Bilbo moved back so he sat lightly on the edge of the bed, his stomach clenching painfully at the name.

"Mother said Frerin used to call me his little lion because my hair's gold and apparently I used to bite him whenever he tried to but me down." Fili grinned at him, "She thinks I took after him more than Thorin…"

The dwarf's smiled stayed on his face but was tinged with a sad longing, "I wish I could've know him."

Bilbo gripped the blanket in his hands so tightly he thought he might tear the fabric. Fili's expression
grew serious as he saw the change in Bilbo's demeanor and quickly sat down next to him on the bed. "What's wrong, Master Baggins?" Fili placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

"We… earlier…" The hobbit had no idea how to begin.

"Thorin found Frerin's bones and he sort of… fell apart."

The blond dwarf looked at him for several long moments. "But you were with him?"

"Well, no, not when he first found them…" Bilbo started, twisting the blanket. "I was looking around the back of the treasure room but after you all had been gone for a while I thought I should go find you. When I went back to the center of the room, I heard… I heard wailing and I found him."

The hobbit glanced over at Fili, not wanting to grieve the dwarf about tales of his dead uncle or the terrible sorrow of his living one. But… as he searched Fili's blue eyes, so much like Thorin's, he realized that no one would understand better than Fili or Kili.

"He was… hunched over the bones, sobbing and muttering about how it was all his fault that Frerin had died. I've never seen anyone so…" But he couldn't find a word to describe the sight, "I was terrified, Fili."

"Not because of the dragon or anything," Bilbo shook his head, "I was terrified that I was going to lose him, that you and Kili were going to lose him. That he would stay there drowning in all the grief and the loss…"

Fili reached down and clutched Bilbo's hand his larger one. "What happened next?"

The hobbit glanced up at his friend, eyes slightly wide. Maybe Fili already knew what thoughts already engulfed his thoughts, maybe Fili could sense that something had changed.

"Well, I went over to him. I told Thorin that he needed to forgive himself, that what happened was never his fault," Bilbo paused for a moment, "that there were people who loved him and he needed to come back for them."

"I told him that the company needed him, that you and Kili needed him, that I – I… " He stuttered to a halt, "that I needed him."

Bilbo's eyes locked on the blanket in his hands and he couldn't seem to move them away as a flush started to creep across his face again. "I said he had to come back to me."

The hobbit wasn't sure why he was spilling every little word he'd said. He needed someone to tell him that this wasn't really that confusing and working himself up about it wouldn't make things any easier. That Thorin hadn't just been vulnerable and reached out to the closest person. "Then…" Bilbo's halted and he hated himself just a bit for making this so much more embarrassing than it had to be, "then he kissed me."

The hobbit was afraid to look up at his friend, not sure how Fili would take him sticking his tongue down the dwarf he pretty much considered a father's throat. Not that there was any tongue or sticking or anything like that but – damn it – why was he getting so flustered about this now? It had been fine in the room! He'd been composed and – and adult about this until a minute ago!

Fili's was silent for so long Bilbo was starting to consider taking the knife his friend had given him
earlier and trying to end his life swiftly if only so he could be spared the slow death, painful death that was no doubt awaiting him.

"And what do you think about that?" The dwarf asked quietly from beside him.

"What?" Bilbo glanced up nonplussed, not seeing anger on Fili's face but not seeing anything especially reassuring either.

"How do you feel about my uncle kissing you?"

It sounded so strange coming from Fili, so calm like he had asked the question a hundred times before. Maybe Thorin kissed everyone? Maybe – 'No' he stopped that line of thought with angry haste feeling suddenly foolish, 'Thorin isn't like that. I know Thorin isn't like that.'

"I… liked it?" Bilbo's flush grew even deeper, "I – I mean the circumstances weren't ideal, of course, I didn't like that he was in so much pain or that he – he…"

The hobbit wanted to cover his face and hide until he could figure out the tangled mess of thoughts and feelings racing through his head. This shouldn't be so hard, why did something that was supposed to be light and happy make him feel like no matter what he was doing something wrong? Like if he had… enjoyed it, he was diminishing the suffering Thorin had gone through in that blasted room but if he thought Thorin had just needed someone, anyone and he just happened to be there, his heart hurt more than it ever had before. Through the mess of thoughts, Bilbo remembered something Bard had said to him in Lake Town.

_Sometimes it's quiet, Mister Baggins. It builds and builds until one day you see them smile at you and you realize going one day without seeing that would be unbearable._

He certainly hadn't cared much for Thorin at the beginning of their journey. But after he had saved the dwarf from Azog they had grown closer. They had become good friends, the _best_ of friends. He trusted Thorin with his life and Thorin had trusted him with the secrets of his past, had trusted the hobbit enough that he let Bilbo see every wound life had torn into him. Thorin hadn't just trusted Bilbo to know, but also to help, to _heal_.

He had vowed to Balin that he would do whatever it took to help his friend reach Erebor, to get back his home. Bilbo had fought orcs and spiders for Thorin. He had broken out of an elvish dungeon for Thorin. He had faced a _dragon_ for Thorin. And he knew he would be right beside the dwarf when they fought Smaug with nothing more than their swords and wits to arm them. He would _die_ for Thorin.

And that thought should have terrified him, should have made him toss down Sting at Thorin's feet and run away as fast and far in the opposite direction as he could because he was the Baggins of Bag End who was a very respectable hobbit and before this journey had done nothing more life endangering than eat a particularly large piece of pork.

He remembered Thorin's face as he hunched over his brother. The wild eyes, the tears pouring down, the look of sheer and utter _loss_ and all he could think of was how to get Thorin back, how to make him _smile_ again. And he knew Bard was right, the thought of his friend never knowing happiness again, never smiling for _him_ again was unbearable. More unbearable than knowing he had simply been the nearest source of comfort in that room, rather than the one Thorin wanted. More unbearable than dragons and orcs and spiders. More than burning alive, more than being torn apart by Azog's great mace, more than being eaten.

Bilbo looked up at Fili slowly, his eyes wide. It was so _simple_, so very easy and altogether the single
most frightening notion that had ever been true in all his life.

"I, uh…" His eyes gazed at Fili without really seeing him there, "I think I might be in love with your uncle."

The dwarf let out a sigh of relief and started to laugh. And laugh and laugh until he was hunched over, holding his sides and gasping for breath. Bilbo was still staring wide-eyed at the place Fili's face been minutes ago.

He loved Thorin Oakenshield. He was in love with Thorin. He was nervous but there was an unfamiliar swelling in his heart. It felt like it was going to grow so big it might burst out of his chest. There was fear; fear that Thorin wouldn't feel the same or might be too distraught after seeing his brother to ever want to open his heart again, to ever risk that kind of hurt. But, as he looked at everything and nothing at all, Bilbo Baggins knew that it almost didn't even matter. He would love Thorin no matter what the dwarf said in return. And that was… liberating. He felt the lightness spread throughout his whole body. Thorin could love him back or simply care for him as a friend. Sure, there was definitely an option he preferred but what mattered most was that he helped Thorin to smile again. That he helped his friend remembered how to laugh and live and love.

Fili took a deep breath and sat up again, one hand still clutching at his stomach, the other half gripping the lion, half wiping a tear away from his eyes.

"Oh, thank Mahal." The blond dwarf sucked in more air, "And here I thought it was never going to happen. Kili is going to owe me a who new set of daggers."

Bilbo's eyes met Fili's, this was not quite the response he had been expecting. Punched in the face? Sure. Stabbed with every knife strapped to Fili's body? Absolutely. But… laughed at? He felt like he was missing a very crucial part of the joke.

"I just – what?"

"Thorin was so obvious, but you, my friend," Fili clapped a hand on Bilbo's shoulder and grinned brightly at him, "I couldn't be absolutely sure about you. I said Thorin would make the first move but Kili insisted you would. Amateur."

Bilbo's mouth hung open in a way that could only have made him look just slightly more stupid than he felt, "What?"

"Oh, this is such a relief," Fili ignored the hobbit's question as he quickly turned thoughtful, tapping one of the lion's paws on his chin. "Though if we all die tomorrow it won't have done anyone much good…"

Bilbo felt his irritation grow slightly, only Fili could be so infuriatingly flippant when he had just – just confessed his love for the dwarf's uncle. There was no way that was going to ever sound anything less than strange in his head.

"Fili, what do you mean Thorin was obvious?" The hobbit ground his teeth over the last word, feeling that absolutely nothing about Thorin had ever been 'obvious.'

The young dwarf tilted his head towards Bilbo, his blue eye's blinking at him with faked innocence. "Surely you can't be that dense, Master Baggins?"

Bilbo all but slapped his hand to his face in frustration. "Why don't you just pretend for a moment, Fili, that I am indeed that dense."
"I suppose you haven't know uncle as long as we have," The dwarf shrugged, his familiar grin back in place. "At least to Kili and I it was pretty obvious from the beginning."

"From the beginning?" Bilbo found it hard to believe Thorin had been harboring any sort of good will towards him in Bag End. And if he did, well then the dwarf was even more socially inept than Bilbo had given him credit for.

Fili waved his hand dismissively. "Since after Azog, once he realize that we'd been right about you the whole time."

The young dwarf's face suddenly grew more serious. "Perhaps I should explain… there's no way you could have really known."

"My uncle, he… he has been a father to Kili and I. He has shown us the love and care that he would a dwarfling of his own flesh. But in all the time I've know Thorin…" Fili trailed off for a moment, carefully choosing his words, "I've never seen him trust anyone he didn't know before the fall. I've never seen him the way he is with you, softer almost. Definitely more calm. And much less like he wants to tear off every stranger's head and place it on a pike."

The blond dwarf looked at him fully now. "He has never known love, Master Baggins, at least as far as my mother's told me. So when he… When he changed around you, when I saw him looking whenever he thought you weren't paying attention, looking at you like you were some mystery, something he shouldn't have but needed anyway…"

Bilbo's eyes had grown wide again. Had he missed this? He couldn't remember Thorin acting anything but more friendly towards him until today. Which made sense seeing as how they were friends.

Fili shrugged at the hobbit as he smiled wide and true. "I just knew! And Kili knew. And, well… probably everyone now, really. My uncle isn't exactly subtle."

"So you're telling me that everyone knew but me?" Bilbo said with slight indignation until he realized he had missed a very key part of what Fili had just said. "Wait, you're telling me that Thorin feels the same?"

The dwarf looked at him like he was being especially thick again and grinned. "You really are that dense, aren't you? Mahal help me, I was joking before, but seriously you're doing a rather splendid impression of an idiot."

Bilbo glared at him as he crossed his arms in a huff, that's what he got for baring his heart and soul to some dwarf. He was starting see why their race wasn't famed for their ballads or poetry, clearly affection and feelings were something they found amusing.

"But don't feel too bad," Fili elbowed him playfully. "I wasn't sure even Thorin knew what he was feeling until tonight. You two make quite the awkwardly adorable pair."

The hobbit sniffed at him, his nose turned up in distaste, "I am not adorable. And neither is Thorin. Nephew or no, he'd probably skin you if he'd heard that."

"Too true!" The young dwarf let out another laugh, "Let's just keep that between us, shall we? My invaluable advice in exchange for your silence."

Fili stuck out his hand to shake.

"Fine," Bilbo muttered as he gripped the dwarf's hand much harder than was necessary. "But no
more laughing or I'll skin you myself."

He'd never admit it now, but talking to Fili was almost always helpful while navigating his friendship with Thorin.

"Fair enough," Fili raised his hands in placation, the little lion still dangling from his curled fingers.

"So... Do you..." Bilbo felt the embarrassing return of the flush to his cheeks but figured he hurtled so far past the point of reasonable mortification in this conversation he might as well just plunge onward. "Do you really think Thorin might feel... something, uh, similar?"

Fili considered him for a moment. "I do, Master Baggins, but it's not really my place to say for sure."

Bilbo felt nervous excitement flood through him but also like he might be a bit sick, "I... Of course."

"I think these sorts of things," Fili stood up from the bed and turned to offer Bilbo his hand, "are best discussed between the people directly involved."

The hobbit put his hand in Fili's and the dwarf pulled him up so they were standing side-by-side in front of the crib again. "I know, Fili, I just... now doesn't really seem to be the best time, what with Frerin and the dragon."

The blond dwarf nodded in understanding. "All very valid concerns, Master Baggins, but should the dragon be a belly fuller tomorrow, I think you'll have wished you had."

He was right, Bilbo knew he was right but that didn't stop a twinge of anxiety coursing through his veins.

"Thorin deserves to be happy."

Bilbo looked up suddenly when he heard the dwarf speak up again quietly.

Fili smiled gently at him, "And so do you. I know the current circumstances aren't exactly ideal, but love should be a happy thing, it should make you both better."

'If only it were that easy...' Bilbo thought with a little sigh before looking up at the dwarf with a devious smirk.

"And you know much of love, do you?"

Fili gave him a mysterious smile and winked, "I'm not the type to kiss and tell, Master Baggins, but let's just say that many have loved me."

The hobbit let out an exasperated sigh and aimed a jab at Fili's arm. "You are incorrigible."

"That's what they tell me!" Fili turned with a chuckle and made his way around the bed towards the door. They walked out towards the company and Bilbo was feeling better despite all the awful things that had happened to them and probably would continue to befall them in the near future.

Thorin and Kili were still fast asleep when they walked back. Bilbo sat down and Fili helped him quickly remove the jacket and lift Thorin's head back on to his lap so the dwarf's sleep wasn't disturbed. Fili gave him one last smile before settling down on his uncle's other side and placing his hand on top of the one Kili still rested on Thorin's chest. Bilbo saw the blond dwarf give his brother's hand a little squeeze and Kili's hand unconsciously squeezing back in response.

Bilbo smiled as he rested his head back against the base of the statue. He was exhausted; there was
no denying it. He had climbed part of a mountain, ran up at down that blasted passage twice and nearly been turned into ash by a dragon that had been less than impressed by his wit. He could only hope that Smaug had enough decency left under all those scales to delay his return until Bilbo had at least a few hours rest.

Bilbo couldn't be sure but it felt like days had passed as they sat in the circle room. What little rations they had left were running short now but there was still no even so much as a roar to signal Smaug's return. Wherever the dragon had flown off to it was keeping him far more occupied than any of them had anticipated. They could do little but sleep and eat while the fear of Smaug's return hung over their heads, the anxiety of the company growing so thick it was almost a palpable cloud.

The only good thing about this whole mess was that Thorin had been able to sleep. The dwarf's eyes had been closed since they'd gotten to camp and Bilbo had stayed diligently beneath him serving as a pillow, only taking short breaks when Fili or Kili dragged him along on their walks.

Bilbo had been getting what could only very generously be called naps. He would doze off, falling asleep for a few hours but whenever Thorin so much as twitched, his eyes sprang back open. It didn't help either that his dreams had taken a turn for the less than pleasant.

He had only drifted off for a few hours when the hobbit woke with a start. He'd been dreaming of ghosts so cold they froze his flesh and fire so hot it melted his skin. There had been a pair of fearsome jaws just about to close around him when he had jerked away. The light was no better than it had been when Bilbo had gone to sleep but now there was... Thorin was gone even though his coat was now covering the hobbit. Fili lay on his back and Kili had rolled over to where Thorin had been, his arm thrown over his brother's face.

Bilbo glanced around quickly and saw that Bofur and Bifur had the watch. They sat there whittling away at pieces of wood they must have stowed away in their packs, talking softly to one another. The hobbit stood up and arched his aching back but keeping the coat huddled around him. He padded over to where the two dwarves were sitting as quietly as he could so he didn't wake the rest of the company. Bilbo had opened his mouth and had been about to ask where Thorin had gone but before he could ask Bofur just grinned at him and nodded towards the door just to the right of the stairs.

"He'll be through there, laddie."

Bilbo muttered a quick thanks, turning back towards the door. 'Does everyone know?' he thought feeling slightly miffed that apparently he was just as dense as Fili teasingly suggested. The hobbit walked over to the door and paused as he reached the handle. Should he speak to Thorin now? Should he wait until after? Would there even be an after? Questions flitted through his head faster than he could even comprehend.

The hobbit took a deep breath and trying to shove any thought that started to emerge back into whatever dark recess of his brain it crawled out from. He put a hand on the door handle and pulled. Bilbo stepped around the door and walked into the room.

It was much the same size as Dís', but unlike his sister's varied taste, what must be Thorin's old room could only be described as dwarvish. Everything that still held color was the same shade of deep blue that Thorin's coat was made from. Where Dís' furniture had been wood and stone, a collection drawn from around across many distant kingdoms, Thorin's was all stone and metal. There was a plain but finely made closet in the corner and the bed was the same obsidian stone that resided on Aulë's statue. There was sharpness in the patterning on his friend's possessions, but Bilbo thought it was just as beautiful as the curved designs the elves favored.
Thorin had a bookshelf like his sister, but instead of trinkets and collected treasures, the dwarf had scrolls and weapons barely clinging on to each shelf. Everything about the room said 'future king' to Bilbo. From the maps that lined the walls to the stacks of old tomes that rested haphazardly across Thorin's desk.

The dwarf stood with his back to Bilbo, examining something that lay on his desk. Thorin looked… smaller without his coat and the slump of his shoulders did nothing to make Bilbo think the dwarf had gotten magically better. Clutching the coat closer to him, the hobbit slowly made his way forward. He was nervous, but not the same kind of nervous that he felt before going into strange tunnels or facing dragons. He hadn't really talked with Thorin since the treasure room and, despite his confident assurances to his friend at the time, well… he felt like so much was riding on this conversation.

Bilbo was almost level with Thorin when the dwarf turned to him. The hollow look was mostly gone from his eyes, replaced with some that looked like… a tired sort of relief. Like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders and they mostly remained hunched because they had been stuck like that for so long. And then Thorin smiled at him, it wasn't wide, it wasn't even really happy, but it felt like coming home.

All the nervousness flooded out of him when he saw the dwarf's face. Every question, every doubt slid away in a wash of relief. Thorin wasn't broken. Thorin was strong. He would face this new trial as he did every other in his life; teeth gritted, sword drawn, and willing to take on the world if it meant something better. But this time is wasn't something better for his people, his sister, or even his nephews. This time Thorin was fighting for himself and the sight filled Bilbo with so much hope he felt like he might laugh.

"I have something for you."

Bilbo titled his head with curiosity, wondering what it could possibly be. Thorin reached down into a stone chest that stood next to the table. The dwarf pulled out something the shone even without light upon it. Thorin stood back up and held it out for the hobbit to take. Bilbo reached out a tentative hand and grasped it gently. It was a mail shirt, but as he took it from Thorin, he found that it was surprisingly light as air. And beautiful. The collar and cuffs were decorated with silver so thin it looked like it might snap at the lightest touch. But as he gazed in awe at the shirt somehow he knew it wouldn't.

"It was mine when I was younger and smaller," Thorin's voice hadn't quite lost the raw rasp from the treasure room.

Bilbo gaped between the shirt and his friend, "It's – It's wonderful and… looks very expensive, Thorin I can't take this…"

He tried to hand the shirt back at the dwarf but Thorin simply pushed it back into the hobbit's chest.

"I insist, Bilbo."

The hobbit was about ready to argue when he saw the expression on Thorin's face and felt the words dry up on his tongue.

"It is mithril. Harder than tempered steel and light as cloth. It will…" The dwarf paused for a moment, "keep you safe when I cannot."

Bilbo stared at Thorin, at the pleading look in his eyes and nodded. He tucked it under Thorin's coat and clutched it to his chest tightly. "Thank you, Thorin. I will treasure it always." And he meant it
with all his heart.

The hobbit slowly reached out a hand and placed it gently on Thorin's arm. "How are you doing?"

One look at Thorin and he knew that had been a stupid question. A very stupid question. "Sorry, I just meant…"

The dwarf reached up and placed a hand over his with a small smile. "I know what you meant, Bilbo. I am… better, I suppose. I never expected to find –" Thorin's words halted again but the dwarf swallowed and forged on, "to find Frerin. I knew he was down here but I… wasn't prepared."

Bilbo nodded. "No one could be prepared for that Thorin, no one."

Thorin met his eyes with an intensity that Bilbo was he had never had focused on him before. "I lost myself. I felt like he had somehow been alive this whole time only to be torn away from me again the second I stepped foot in that room."

"I felt the grief and despair start to drag me away. Everything seemed to fade away, I can hardly even remember anything but the… pain of it all."

Bilbo felt like everything inside him had clenched painfully. If Thorin didn't remember anything, then he… he didn't remember kissing him. He didn't remember the hobbit pulling him back; he didn't remember anything Bilbo had said. Well, he… Bilbo would be fine. Once his heart stopped beating painfully. The hobbit looked away quickly because he couldn't bear the knowledge quite yet. But he was son of Belladonna Took, he would be fine. He had to be fine. Eventually… Possibly… When he got eaten and died or something equally distracting.

"But I remember you, Bilbo."

The hobbit's eyes shot back up just as quickly as he'd forced them away. A small, shining seed of hope starting to grow within him.

Thorin turned so he was facing the hobbit and pulled him into his arms so the side of Bilbo's face was pressed against the dwarf's hard chest. He felt Thorin lowering his head until he was level with the hobbit's ear.

"I remember your voice." The dwarf spoke so softly he almost couldn't hear him. "I remember your words." Bilbo flushed because he knew. And Thorin knew that he knew.

"I remember your eyes." Thorin pulled him tighter and closer. "I remember you pulling me away from myself, away from the doubt and the blame."

"I would be… lost without you, Bilbo Baggins," Thorin's hand came up to past his neck and rested gently in his hair. "I would have been lost a hundred times on this journey if you hadn't been foolish enough to save me."

Thorin pulled away slightly so Bilbo's face was no longer pressed against him. The hobbit tilted his head up so he could look at Thorin only to find the dwarf's head still bowed so their lips were barely an inch apart.

"And if you'd allow it," Thorin took a deep breath as if steeling himself, "I would very much like to kiss you without being half mad or sounding like an mourning widower."

This was happening. This was happening. This was happening.
And as Thorin looked at him with the most nervously sincere expression he'd ever seen on the dwarf's face, Bilbo let out a bright laugh. It wasn't the loud or malicious but it was enough for Thorin to pull back, looking like the hobbit had just slapped him. He didn't mean to laugh, it was just... they really were quite the pair. All awkward and nervous and fumbling. The anxiety he had felt flood back a moment ago left him when he realized that, really, their friendship hadn't even changed all that much. There was something new and unknown in front of them, yes, but they were still themselves. Thorin would still mutter and grunt and do something awkward but mean well and Bilbo would still laugh inappropriately and apologize if he could force the grin off his face. Suddenly he couldn't remember what had made him so nervous in the first place.

"No, don't back away you idiot."

Bilbo put the mithril shirt on the table and reached up, grabbing one of Thorin's braids in each of his hands.

"But you –" Thorin spluttered, wearing the face that generally meant Bilbo had done something that in equal parts infuriated and confused him. Which made the hobbit laugh even harder with happy relief. Thorin had a long road ahead of him, but if he could still make that face after everything that had happened over the last few days, well, Bilbo would count it as a victory.

"I wasn't laughing at you, dolt, I was laughing at us," Bilbo pulled the braids down until Thorin's face was a breath away from his own. The hobbit grinned up at him.

"You really should know better by now." This time he pushed forward, closing the gap even though it meant he had to stand on the balls of his feet.

It felt different this time, better. So very much better. Thorin's lips started to move against his unlike before when they had just pressed. He felt a delightful warmth spread through his body as Thorin moved slowly but deepened the kiss when he realized Bilbo was no longer laughing or going to run out of the room screaming or whatever ridiculous notion the dwarf had running through his thick skull.

He felt happy. Bilbo Baggins wasn't sure he'd ever felt so happy in his life. Thorin was back. Thorin had smiled at him and spoken a coherent sentence that wasn't laced with so much grief Bilbo thought his heart might have shattered. Thorin was home and Bilbo was going to make him just as happy as he felt in that moment. He was going to – oh, the dwarf did something spectacular with his tongue that made his knees feel just a bit wobbly.

Then he remembered very suddenly that he had a gift for Thorin as well. It had been so long ago, but it belonged to the dwarf and if they died tomorrow he didn't want to never have given it back.

Bilbo pulled himself away, his eyes bright. "I've got to go get something!"

Thorin looked bewildered as he his gaze shifted between the empty spot in his arms where the hobbit used to be and where he was now, dashing towards the door.

"But we – what?"

"Back in a tick!" Bilbo called over his shoulder and waved a hand.

He ran over to his pack and rummaged around until he felt the paper that had been there since they had stayed in Beorn's house. "Aha!" he muttered, relieved that it was still there and hadn't been destroyed or crumpled. Ignoring Bofur and Bifur's questioning glances, Bilbo ran back into the room where Thorin was still standing and looking, if possible, more confused than he had before.
"This is for you." The hobbit held out the small paper envelope for his friend to take.

"What…" Thorin glanced at it, his brows slightly drawn, "what is it?"

Bilbo shrugged, Gandalf hadn't told him so he assumed it wasn't his business to know. "Gandalf gave it to me, I guess it belonged to your father. He told me to give it to you when I thought you were ready, but seeing as how things might, uh, go poorly in the near future, I think it's best you have it now."

Thorin eyes had shot up at the mention of his father. "Why would the wizard," he ground out the word with irritation, "have kept something of my father's from me?"

The hobbit frowned slightly. "I'm, uh… not sure? He told me not to let you put it on, whatever that means. It must be something dangerous."

Bilbo peered down at the envelope, but aside from a bump, it didn't look very ominous to him.

"He kept something of my father from me and commanded that you not allow me to wear it?" Thorin's voice had grown angry. Bilbo knew he and Gandalf had never been on the best of terms, this… this probably just confirmed the ill thoughts Thorin had of the wizard.

"Why don't you, uh, just open it. See what it is, then we'll know what we're dealing with."

Bilbo didn't want Thorin to be angry; he just wanted to… give him something, something that was his and his alone. The dwarf ripped open the top of the envelope and tipped it until a ring tumbled out followed by letter. Thorin shifted his hand so the letter slipped down to the desk and put the crumpled envelope on top of it, his eyes fixed only on the ring.

"This was…" The dwarf's voice had gone raspy and quiet again, his eyes wide. "This was my grandfather's ring. Thror's ring…"

Bilbo couldn't help but feel that a ring had been somewhat anti-climatic. He had been expecting… he didn't know what, but a ring? What was so dangerous about a ring? Maybe it was magic like the gold one in his pocket, but he thought Thorin probably would have noticed if his grandfather was invisible.

The ring was finely made to be sure. It looked much like everything in Thorin's room did: distinctly dwarfish and yet… there was some hint of elvish in it. The band was polished silver, rigid patterns carved into the metal and atop it was the most beautiful gem Bilbo had ever seen. It was a shining azure, faceted in such a delicate manner, he thought he could've have been looking at a sliver of the sky. As Thorin shifted it in his fingers, the hobbit thought the stone looked almost alive even though no light shone up it.

The dwarf's eyes were fixed on the ring, as if in a trance. He started to make a motion like he was going to place it on his finger when Bilbo slapped his hand over the ring, forcing Thorin's fingers to close around it, hiding the gem from sight.

"Don't!" The hobbit hissed.

"Why should I not—" Thorin looked angry again.

"Because!" Bilbo glared back at the dwarf. "Whatever you think of Gandalf, he wouldn't have told me not to let you put it on for no reason!"

"The wizard knows nothing of my family—"
The hobbit pressed his hand tighter over the ring. "Please, Thorin, if you won't do it for him, do it for me."

The dwarf still glared at him but let out a weary sigh a moment later. "I apologize, Bilbo. I am tired and everything that old man does, it seems he does deliberately to aggravate me."

Bilbo watched until Thorin slipped the ring into a small pouch that hung from his belt. "I had nothing left to honor my grandfather, I thought everything he had on him had been lost in Moria but… you have given me a great gift."

The hobbit smiled up at Thorin. "I really didn't do anything, just delivering messages."

The dwarf's eyes were sad again as Bilbo saw something shift; saw a decision being made as the ghosts of the past whispered cold sorrow in Thorin's ear. The dwarf reached down hesitantly and took Bilbo's hand in his own.

"I… care for you Bilbo," Thorin's words sounded foreign to him, like the dwarf had never utter the like before. "But I cannot right now… not with…"

"I understand."

And he really did. Bilbo knew as long as Smaug held Erebor, as long as the dwarf's home still belonged to another, Thorin could never let go of his final burden. The dwarf had spent countless years dreaming of home, holding tight to his burning need for revenge and the rage that drove him forward. No matter what Bilbo did, he knew Thorin could never be free of that shadow until Erebor was returned to him or they died trying.

"You do…?"

The dwarf's voice sounded so heart wrenchingly hopeful and weary it almost made him want to weep. Thorin had been denied so much, had given up so much that he no longer trusted anything that was good to last.

"I do."

Bilbo meant it when he said he'd be whatever Thorin needed. What Thorin needed now was a friend, a comrade that would fight beside him, walk beside him even when their path was dark with danger. Then, if somehow they made it out of this alive, well then perhaps Thorin would be ready to let go of that bitter rage, to finally put his ghosts to rest.

Thorin had to do this for his family. For Thrór whose head had been torn from his body by the pale orc and Thrain who had been driven mad with grief. For Dís who had lost her great love and Frerin who had died in dragons fire searching for his beloved brother. For Fili and Kili who had never known their kingdom as more than a dream. For the dwarves that loved him and the dwarves he had fought for his entire life with all his being. There was no separation, there was no way to split Thorin from his need because Erebor was Thorin and Thorin was Erebor. Bilbo knew without his city, Thorin would never be whole and the dwarf would never truly be his.

But Bilbo was patient.

He would wait until their quest was done. It… hurt. Of course it did to step away from Thorin. But that was love, he supposed. It was a force so great and terrible that it hurt so badly when you were apart but the feeling of when they were together… There was nothing on this earth that could compare. So he would wait for the dwarf, wait until he could have Thorin, all of Thorin, instead of shattered fragments. He would help his friend heal and he would teach Thorin to trust, because that's
what Bilbo Baggins was good at. He was good at being a friend.

The hobbit put his hands on Thorin's face and pulled him down so Bilbo could press their lips together one last time before all of this was done. He poured every ounce of emotion he felt into the kiss so Thorin would never have to wonder if he'd ever been loved again. They moved together, Thorin's hand snaking back up to clench at his hair, pushing him forward with such focused intensity Bilbo felt his mind go pleasantly blank except for the pleased thrum that sang through his blood. All too soon, Thorin pulled away, panting slightly as he stared at Bilbo.

"You are a singularly remarkable hobbit, Bilbo Baggins." Thorin breathed out heavily as he rested his forehead against Bilbo's.

"And you best not forget that fact, Master Dwarf." The hobbit tugged at one of Thorin's braid.

The stayed connected for so long Bilbo wasn't sure if it was minutes or hours that had passed. Neither of them wanted to step away so they simply stood, silent except for soft gusts of breath.

"Master Boggins get out here!"

He heard Kili shout from somewhere outside, the noise startling them apart. Bilbo clutched his rapidly beating heart and rolled his eyes the dwarf as if saying 'he's your nephew.'

"Master Boggins, right now would be good!"

Thorin and Bilbo exchanged nervous glances but made their way out of the room. What he saw surprised him, but that didn't stop the nasty glee spreading through him that it finally wasn't happening to him.

The vile sky rat he reluctantly called a thrush was swooping and diving over the young dwarf's head as he flailed his arms. Bilbo let out a dark chuckle, but the bird seemed to hear him and stopped mid-swoop to... stare at him? Did birds stare?

Bilbo's eyes opened widely as he started to back away. "Oh no, no, no! Not this time you little vermin! Go bother someone else!"

The thrush dived away from Kili and straight towards him. The hobbit raised his arms quickly to protect his face from those vicious pecks but felt nothing. Nothing except a slight tugging against his sleeve.

Bilbo slowly lowered his arms to see the thrush as pulling against the cloth as if it was trying to get him to pay attention. The tiny bird let go and started chirping wildly, darting in front of his face this way and that until the hobbit started to feel dizzy.

"Alright, alright! What is it?" Bilbo asked rather lamely. Why he was trying to speak to birds all of a sudden, he had no idea.

The thrush chirped so swiftly it almost sounded like it was talking... But that couldn't be right. When the bird stopped Bilbo simply looked at it blankly, not sure what he was supposed to be doing.

The thrush swooped forward and pecked at his head, it's noises irritated and angry. "Go away, you little devil! I can't understand you!"

The pecking stopped and the thrush suddenly flew away, back out the hallway as Bilbo gaped at it.

"What – what was that about?" He shouted after the bird, shaking his fist in air.
The rest of the company started to rise at the noise, Glóin even jumping up and yelling something about the dragon having to go through him first.

Bilbo turned to Thorin, still feeling utterly perplexed and his head throbbing uncomfortably. "How did it even get in here?"

The dwarf shrugged at him. "If Smaug tore through the front gates again, perhaps they were left open…"

Just as suddenly as the thrush had departed, they heard it chirping as it hurtled back down the hallway. Except this time there was the sound of wings, much larger wings along with all the bird's chatter. Behind the speckled songbird, there flew a large, jet-black raven, though it looked to Bilbo as if it were very old somehow.

The thrush dived down and landed on his shoulder and began to hop up and down excitedly. The raven swooped down and landed atop Bilbo's head, causing him to stiffen automatically and he thought he’d had just about enough of these bloody birds. He was not a tree, he was not even a stoop, he was a hobbit, damn it all, and certainly not that comfortable!

"Thorin Oakenshield." The raven croaked.

And Thorin, Thorin had the nerve to smile at the creature like some long lost old friend. While it was sitting on his head!

"Roäc," Thorin bent into a small bow, "I thought the ravens had deserted this place."

"Many did," Bilbo could feel its talon claws shuffling now, "but I do not forget my allegiances."

The thrush started to chirp wildly again until the raven turned towards it and let out a shrill cry that silenced the smaller bird. Bilbo saw out of the corner of his eye that the little songbird had shrunk away and he almost, almost felt indignant on its behalf.

"I have news, Thorin Oakenshield, the thrush bade me tell you immediately."

"What news?" The dwarf asked, his voice had an air of command in it again.

"Smaug the Dragon flew to Lake Town and set the houses ablaze."

Bilbo felt his stomach twist tightly. That explained why the dragon had been gone so long but there were people in that town, good people. Bard was there and now he was…

"But the men of the lake rallied under one they call Bard the Bowman, kin of Lord Grion; King of Dale."

The hobbit clenched his eyes shut; he didn't want to trust the speck of hope within him, not when he was probably…

"The battle was all but lost when the thrush flew down to Bard the Bowman and told him what the hobbit Bilbo Baggins discovered, a single weak spot on the dragon's chest."

'Oh please, please, please let Bard be alive…'

"Drawing the Black Arrow, Bard the Bowman took aim and his shot was true."

"Just tell us what happened, already!" Bilbo practically shouted but he couldn't take much more of the raven's dramatics, feeling the large bird ruffle it's feathers with irritation.
"Smaug the Great and Terrible; Smaug of Durin's Bane and the Fire of the Western Skies has been slain by an arrow. The dragon is dead, my king."
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Whhhhhooops this really wasn’t supposed to take that long to get out but life just went BAM and everything got super busy :O Sorry about the delay and I hope you enjoy!

After the raven finished speaking there was a moment of utter silence. Bilbo could hardly believe his own ears as he felt the breath of his lungs leave him in a shocked gasp. 'Smaug was…' But he couldn't even finish the thought, it was too… easy.

Fili seemed to collect himself first and moved forward so he was standing right in front of Bilbo, his blue eyes fixed on the dark bird.

"What did you just say?" The dwarf's face was drawn with disbelief.

Bilbo felt the raven shuffle irritably on his head, claws scraping at his scalp before it croaked out a reply. "The dragon Smaug is dead, Master Dwarf."

As the raspy words poured out from Roäc's beak, what it had said finally seemed to sink in. The hobbit's eyes were wide as saucers when they sought out Thorin's. Their leader's face was blank. Apart from his mouth being slightly agape, Bilbo would've thought that Thorin was feeling nothing at all. But that wasn't completely right… The hobbit could feel his thoughts start lurching back to a normal speed when he noticed that Thorin's skin was a white as parchment. The dwarf blinked once before he seemed to fall to his knees, his body collapsing into itself.

"Thorin!" Bilbo cried out, rushing forward and causing the raven to take flight with a startled screech as its perch stumbled away.

The hobbit was almost sure he'd heard Fili and Kili shout as well but his eyes and his mind were focused solely on Thorin, on making sure his friend was all right. Bilbo caught their leader under his arm before Thorin could slump all the way to the ground. Pulling up with all the strength he had, Bilbo righted Thorin until the dwarf's nephews appeared on either side, supporting their uncle with matching faces of concern.

Bilbo knelt in front of his friend and placed a hand on either side of Thorin's face. "Thorin," the hobbit hissed urgently, "Thorin are you alright?"

The dwarf's blue eyes blinked once more before they slowly moved down to focus on Bilbo. "The dragon is…" but he trailed off in a daze.

"Dead," Bilbo gave his friend's head a little shake, hoping that no one in the general vicinity was about to faint, "Smaug is dead, Thorin." The hobbit smiled, feeling hope well up inside him with glorious warmth, "Erebor is yours."

Then all at once, Thorin looked as if he finally saw Bilbo and the color rushed back, "Erebor is mine…"

Thorin's face broke out into the brightest smile Bilbo had ever seen, like all the weight of the mountain had finally been born off his shoulders, and it took his breath away. This was the dwarf
Bilbo had seen that day he'd saved Thorin from the pale orc. *This* was the king under the mountain. *This* was the man he loved.

"Erebor is mine."

Bilbo nodded feeling the hope inside him unfurl into something so much warmer and infinitely more amazing.

Something final shifted in Thorin's eyes and the darkness that had been clouding them since the moment Bilbo had met him seemed to drain away and it felt like it was the first time he had truly seen Thorin's true face unburned by years of guilt and anger.

The dwarf stood up suddenly, shoving his arms under Bilbo's and gripping him in the tightest hug the hobbit had ever received, "Erebor is mine!"

Bilbo let out a yelp as he felt his feet lift off the ground and suddenly he was spinning as a noise escaped from his friend. It was deep and rough and… no, it *couldn't* be… But as he feet finally connected with the stone again, Bilbo realized that it most definitely was. Thorin was *laughing*. Not just an amused grunt or the small chuckles he'd heard before. This was a true laugh, bright and free and as the sound entered his ears and swam through his head, he might have fallen in love all over again.

On some level Bilbo registered that the company was cheering and letting out whoops filled with relief as they amassed on each other in celebration, but all his mind seemed to be able to concentrate on was Thorin tightly gripping him in his arms as the dwarf laughed and laughed. The hobbit's face was buried in Thorin's chest and he felt joyous sounds start to pour out of his mouth as well.

Smaug was *dead*! And they hadn't even gotten so much as a burnt hair to get it done! Well, his coat had been scorched a bit, but in that moment Bilbo would have gladly let every coat he'd ever owned be turned to a crisp without a second thought. No one… no one was *dead* and that was all that mattered. The hobbit had known if they'd faced the dragon with just fourteen, it… well, it would not have ended anywhere near well. But Thorin was here, he was *here* and they were all alive and whole and healthy.

Thorin had his home back, the home they had journeyed so long for. The home that had haunted his friend's dreams, the home Thorin had missed like some sort of phantom limb that had been cut away in his youth.

Bilbo felt two other pairs of arms circle them and knew that it was Fili and Kili by their twin laughs, one slightly lower and one slightly higher but each one half of a whole. Then he heard Dwalin and Balin and Bofur and soon the whole company had gathered around them. The hobbit craned his neck up to see that Thorin was beaming down at him, a grin plastered on his face and so much *life* in his eyes that Bilbo couldn't help but clench his own shut. He tried to sear that image of Thorin, that *exact* moment into his mind because it was, in every possible way, perfect.

Despite the loud cheers around them, Bilbo still heard Thorin's quiet whisper in his ear, "open your eyes."

The hobbit did as he was bade and opened them, satisfied that he would never in his life forget. Thorin grinned down at him with a happy abandon Bilbo would have scarcely hoped to ever see on his friend's face.

"Glad to see you're finally listening to me, I *am* your king now."
"You're the king of Erebor, not the Shire." Bilbo chuckled as he hit Thorin lightly in the shoulder, "don't get a big head."

"Erebor could be your home now," Thorin lowered his face so their lips were barely apart, "…I could be your king."

Bilbo's eyes widened slightly as he tried to pull away slightly. Him?… Live in Erebor? The hobbit hadn't thought about after. Well of course he had, but it was always so abstract that a part of him, a large part, had accepted the fact that he probably wouldn't be going home to Bag End at all. Being a pile of ash on a far away stone floor and all that. But never because he chose not to go home. Could he… could he really leave everything behind and just stay? He wanted to be with Thorin, he wanted that more than anything but…

"Think about it," the dwarf spoke quietly as if sensing why Bilbo had hesitated.

Thorin moved forward and claimed the hobbit's lips for a moment in a gentle kiss before pulling back slightly, "we have time enough now."

"Oh, Mahal damn it!"

Bilbo's face turned suddenly to see Kili glaring at him.

"Do you know how many blasted daggers I owe Fili now, Master Boggins?"

The hobbit couldn't help but laugh at Kili's pout, "A whole set?"

"Yes that's right, a whole set – wait, how did you know that?" Kili's glare shifted to where Fili was grinning wickedly at his brother from Bilbo and Thorin's other side, "you already knew, you little prat!"

The young dwarf reached out so his arms were resting across Thorin's so he could grab Fili's braids and yank his brother closer even though there was little room to move, "And just when were you going to tell me?"

Fili reached up to his brother's hands and did something so quickly Bilbo only caught Kili's indignant yelp as his let go swiftly and glared. "And ruin all my fun, brother dear," the blonde dwarf winked, "not a chance!"

Thorin's face had gone from confused to what could only be described as severely unimpressed as he frowned at his nephews, "you boys weren't betting again, were you?"

Fili and Kili gave each other one quick glance before they turned sickly sweet and very practiced smiles towards their uncle, "of course not, uncle, we wouldn't even dream of it," Fili spoke as Kili nodded in agreement.

"Good. You know how your mother hates that." Thorin finally let go of Bilbo as the rest of the company started to pull away from their group hug.

"She hates it when she isn't involved," Bilbo heard Kili whisper in his ear just as a forgotten Roäc screeched loudly above them.

The company looked up at the bird, startled by the noise. "If you all are quite done," Roäc croaked before landing back on Bilbo's head, "I was not finished."

"The thrush tells me a host of men from the town on the lake are journeying towards the Lonely
"What for?" Dwalin cut in gruffly, his familiar scowl back in place. Bilbo wasn't sure that birds even could sigh with irritation, but he was almost positive at that moment the raven probably wanted to.

"Let him finish, Dwalin," Thorin said as the smile on his face grew serious, clearly not pleased that there was more news other than the dragon's demise.

"Thank you my king," Roäc ruffled his feathers, "As I was saying, men are journeying towards the Lonely Mountain with the elves of the Mirkwood —"

"What?" Thorin's eyes widened as he his expression grew instantly dar and furious, "why are the elves coming —"

When the raven's claws dug much deeper into Bilbo's skull than he was altogether comfortable with, the hobbit shouted over the rising voices of thirteen dwarves, "Enough! Just let the raven finish!" Bilbo placed his hands on his hips as he glared at the company, "so it can get off my head," the hobbit could help but mutter angrily at yet another painful pick of talons on his skin.

The dwarves fell silent as Roäc spoke up again though sounding none too happy about it, "King Thranduil led his people to aid the men of Laketown against the dragon.

Bilbo glanced over to Thorin knowing this was going to do nothing but infuriate his friend. The dwarf's hands were tightly fisted and his eyes held the same furious anger they had when Bilbo had found him in the cells of Mirkwood. That Thranduil had led the elves to help Laketown against the same dragon that had destroyed Erebor was not going to sit well with Thorin, not at all.

"The Elf-king thinks the mountain is abandoned and the dragon's gold —"

"My gold," Thorin snarled, acid dripping off every word.

"Your gold," Roäc corrected, "unprotected. The thrush tells me Bard the Bowman still believes the hobbit Bilbo Baggins to be alive and so sent it to inform him that should he receive this message, the men of Laketown wish to treat upon their arrival on morrow's morn. Bard desires gold to repair damages caused by the dragon's wrath."

"I will speak with Bard," Thorin's voice was almost shaking with barely contained fury, "but tell him —" the dwarf took a deep breath as if trying to calm himself but doing a rather poor job of it, "tell him if the elvish scum thinks about trying to lay claim on even one piece of gold, he will find Erebor's doors closed to them for as long as the line of Durin rules within these great halls."

"Uncle," Fili gently placed a hand on Thorin's arm, his face tight with concern, "are you sure it's wise—"

Thorin pulled away from the touch, his furious eyes shooting down to his nephew's face but seemingly seeing nothing there to change his mind before fixing his gaze on the raven once more.

"I would sooner see the elves make war on our gates than let them even look at my gold. Bard comes alone or he doesn't come at all. Go, Roäc," the dwarf ground out between clenched teeth, "tell them of my wisdom."

"As you wish, my king." And with that Roäc flew off down the dark hallway from whence he came. The thrush hopped once on Bilbo's shoulder, nipping him lightly on the ear one last time before
following the raven down the twisting stone halls of Erebor.

Bilbo and the rest of the company stood in stiff silence, though the hobbit's eyes were fixed on Thorin, watching his friend take deep breath after deep breath.

"Thorin…" Bilbo stepped in closer hesitantly, "I'm sure we could all reach some sort of agreement. Without any, uh, violence." If what Bilbo thought was true, then there was little chance of Thranduil listening to Thorin. If the elves thought a portion of the Erebor's wealth entitled to them, he doubted that learning of the company's survival was going to do anything to stop them. Bilbo could only hope that the raven would be tactful enough to modify Thorin's words instead of repeating them directly.

Thorin glared down at him, fury still etched in every line on his face, "you would have me treat with the elves? You would have me give up my gold, my grandfather's gold to the very king that let our people burn?"

Bilbo felt his gut clench as nervous worry flooded through his body, "well no, of course not but –"

"You would have me treat," Thorin's voice had started to rise in anger, "with the very same elf that let abandoned his oath of friendship to Erebor, but apparently has no qualms about helping men to whom he has no ties?"

The dwarf's rage had hunched his shoulders as he bared his teeth with a feral grimace. Bilbo reached out a hand cautiously; he hadn't meant… he would never try to…

"No, Bilbo, the elves lost their right to enter these halls ever again when they refused to do as I watched the dragon's wrath consume my people, my brother –" Thorin's voice halted and he turned away from the company, from Bilbo.

The hobbit's eyes widened as he heard his friend take deep, shuddering breaths. "I… I need to think. Dwalin, Balin" their leader straightened up but still refused to face them, "we need to speak."

Thorin stalked to his room without a second glance back. Bilbo saw Dwalin and Balin exchange a look before following. Fili stood there for a moment as well before letting out a small breath and walking towards where the other dwarves had gone. The hobbit realized his hand was still outstretched and quickly lowered it back to his side. He made a half step forward to… he didn't really know what but a hand on his arm just as quickly stopped him.

"Don't worry, Master Boggins, he'll be alright, just needs time is all." Though Kili spoke with confidence, Bilbo could tell even the young dwarf didn't fully believe his own words.

Bilbo clenched the inside of Thorin's coat but nodded stiffly in agreement. If they needed to make battle plans or treaty agreements, he certainly would be of little use.

"Shouldn't you go too?" the hobbit looked up at Kili, unsure as to why the dwarf was still here.

"Fili's the heir," Kili shrugged with a practiced indifference, "he's better at all that stuff anyway and I'm sure he'll tell me anything important later."

Bilbo continued to gaze at the young dwarf but decided not to pursue the topic. His brain was too frazzled from a lack of proper sleep and how fast the mood had gone from positively elated to bitter anger.

"Somehow I thought Smaug's death would…" Bilbo trailed off not sure exactly what he was trying to say.
"Solve everything?" Kili added quietly as the rest of the company seemed to shrug off Thorin's outburst and got back to celebrating one less very large, very angry monster trying to kill them.

The hobbit nodded with a sigh, "...yes, I suppose I never really considered what would happen after if we succeeded. I never thought there would be something other than Smaug..."

Kili and Bilbo walked slowly away from the general revelry of the company towards the foot of Aulë's statue before sitting down at its base. "I know what you mean, Master Boggins," the young dwarf nodded in agreement, "from the way uncle always described the elves, I thought they'd never leave their forest for anything."

Bilbo let out a sigh as he looked down at his hands and realized how small they were, how useless. Glancing up slowly at Kili, the hobbit felt his face fall into a frown, "How can I help him, Kili? What can I do?"

Kili considered him for a moment, "Just... be there for him. Show him that you aren't going anywhere, that you'll..." the young dwarf trailed off for a moment, "that you'll support him even when things aren't going so well."

"I do..." The hobbit started but Kili cut him off with a wave, "I know. I guess what I meant was right now he's got Fili and Dwalin and Balin to advise him, to tell him when he's wrong."

"That's why you and me," Kili smiled at him warmly, "have to be the ones who support him no matter what. He needs us for different reasons than he needs them. He needs you to be his strength."

Bilbo stared at the dwarf for a few moments, "I..." but before he could finish, Kili's smile turned into a glower.

"Speaking of you and my dear uncle," Kili's eyes narrowed as he crossed his arms with a pout, "when were you going to tell me, hm? I thought we were supposed to be friends and what do you do? Go and tell Fili and let me find out by myself!"

Bilbo felt his heart lift with familiar affection as he rolled his eyes while Kili continued. "My heart just about stopped with the shock! It's like not one of you has even the slightest concern for my health!"

"Oh please," the hobbit shoved Kili playfully with his arm, "your brother told me about how you have two have been gossiping like old women this whole journey. And about your little bet."

Kili grinned as he let out a bright laugh, "Jig's up! No thanks to you I'm going to have to live with Fili's smug face for the next age."

Bilbo sniffed indignantly, "You deserve it. Though if it's any consolation, it, uh, just sort of happened yesterday."

"So..." Kili began with a sly smile on his face, "should I be calling you uncle now too?"

The hobbit scowled at his friend with every bit of Baggins ire he could muster, "If you even think about it, I will slice up your bow into little bits for a fire and only put it out when I've collected enough of your tears to douse the flames."

The dwarf let out a mock gasp of surprise as he clutched his heart, "You wouldn't dare!"

Bilbo couldn't help his scowl turning in to a grin, "Oh, I would dare, I can be very... creative when pressed."
Kili stuck out his tongue before leaning back against the statue and pulling his legs to his chest. "Fine, fine I won't call you Uncle Bilbo. At least not yet."

The hobbit laughed as he pulled Thorin's coat around him and set it over himself and Kili. The young dwarf was silent for a moment as he watched the rest of the company starting to break out into various songs and dances. Now that it was safe, Bilbo heard Bofur speaking to Bombur about trying to get to their old home while Ori was speaking to his brothers rapidly about trying to locate Erebor's ancient library.

"Was it Frerin?"

Bilbo shifted his gaze from the rest of the company to Kili. "What?"

"Was it Frerin that finally pushed you two together?"

The hobbit thought for a moment before answering quietly. "Yes… yes, I suppose it was in a way."

"I think he would have liked that," Kili put his chin on his knees, "Mother doesn't speak of him that often but he sounds like the type of dwarf who would've wanted his family to be happy more than anything."

Bilbo watched Kili and suddenly it occurred him how young the dwarf was. Which was a strange thought considering he was fairly certain Fili and Kili were both older than him by at least several decades but as he looked at the dwarf's face, unlined by worry or time, Kili seemed just barely to have reached adulthood, his beard still nothing more than patchy stubble.

"I'm happy for you, Master Boggins," Kili looked over at him from the corner of his eyes, a small smile on his lips, "and uncle. He always acts less troubled when you're around."

"Thank you, Kili. That… that means a great deal," Bilbo smiled back at his friend before letting out a little sigh, "I just hope this business with the elves doesn't lead to anything… unpleasant."

The dwarf nodded, "Me too… But they have no claim to Erebor's gold, not after what they did." Kili looked up with determination, "Uncle has every right to keep them out."

Bilbo gazed out absently into the large room. He had no idea what it felt like to have hatred and betrayal run that deep. To feel bitter satisfaction at the thought of revenge. And he hoped he never would, but he couldn't fight the sinking feeling that reasoning with Thorin on the issue was going to be near impossible.

"Why can't everyone just, oh I don't know, start fresh?" The hobbit rubbed at an aching temple with his fingers, "What's the… what's the point of all this hatred? All it leads to is more blood spilled."

He supposed he could somewhat understand what Thorin was feeling, but it seemed to him that hobbits just weren't made for emotions that dark and consuming. Sure, he'd known families to hold grudges for a few generations, but he'd never seen anyone get killed over it. 'I just hope Thranduil stays away,' Bilbo thought to himself bitterly, 'we'd all be better off.'

"Because…" Kili started slowly, "we just can't, Master Boggins. Uncle can't. He's seen too much death. He's been hurt too many times to trust in forgiveness."

Bilbo closed his eyes as he felt the same sort of dread that had filled him in Mirkwood's dungeons seep back into his veins.

"Or at least I thought he had until he met you." Bilbo felt Kili's hand squeeze his arm gently, "he's
different with you, Master Boggins, that's why you've got to be strong. I think you can show him that letting himself be happy doesn't mean he's going to be hurt again."

"I'll..." Bilbo leaned back against the statue and pictured Thorin's face when he had realized Smaug was dead. That's what he was fighting for, to see that smile every day and know that Thorin was happy. He had thought the dragon was the last obstacle before them but even now that he knew it wasn't true, Bilbo Baggins felt determination well up within him again.

"I'll be strong. We'll all get through this."

Bilbo felt Kili give his arm one last squeeze. "I know you will, Master Boggins."

They sat in comfortable silence as the rest of the company went out to explore the city. Bilbo was far too exhausted from too many nights with only a few hours sleep and little food to do anything but wait for Thorin to finish his council. Even though he tried to fight the sleep that seemed to be pulling his eyelids down an iron grip, he soon felt his head slip over to rest on Kili's shoulder as he slept.

Bilbo woke with a groggy blink of his eyes as he felt the world shift around him. There was a strong pair of arms lifting him and then he was on a sleeping mat.

"Wha—" he started, his voice scratchy with sleep and utterly confused.

The hobbit felt someone lay down beside him as a blanket was thrown over them. Bilbo rolled over and his face hit a solid chest beside him and as he breathed in he knew who it was. 'Is it odd that I know Thorin by *scent*?'

"It's not odd."

'Wait... Did I just say that out loud?'

"I'm terribly afraid you did, now go back to sleep."

Thorin's arm reached out under the blanket and rested over Bilbo's side. The hobbit felt his friend pull him closer until they were almost against each other. A small flush crept up to the tips of his ears as Thorin buried his face in Bilbo's hair. They were close enough that the hobbit could hear every beat of Thorin's heart over the soft snores of the rest of the company.

"How..." The hobbit began quietly, "how are you feeling?"

"Tired. Go to sleep Bilbo."

"Are you *sure*, Thorin?"

Bilbo felt his friend shift slightly as a cool hand slipped under his shirt to rest against his bare back, "I am sure."

The hobbit's eyes shot open, now fully awake. Well this was certainly a... development. Thorin's fingers traced small patterns on his back and cold metal on one of the fingers left small bumps in its wake. The dwarf's blunt nails scraped lightly against his skin and Bilbo almost let out little gasp.

"Shh," Thorin hushed and he pulled the hobbit even closer.

"Thorin, what—"

"Sleep," the dwarf grumbled from above him and Bilbo grew silent.
He wanted to speak with Thorin, to know that he wasn't going to throw everything away. That he wasn't going to endanger his hold on Erebor so soon after the dwarf had gotten it back. But it was very hard to keep his thoughts working towards a coherent and convincing end when he was so close and Thorin kept doing... well, whatever he was doing with his left hand.

The hobbit let out a small sigh as he shut his eyes again. Bilbo wasn't altogether sure he would be able to get back to sleep easily but it was also clear Thorin wasn't going to talk to him until they woke. Bilbo's thoughts waited until he felt the dwarf's hand stilled and he knew Thorin was asleep before they clawed their way to the front of his mind.

There was worry for the elves and anxiety for how Thorin would react if Thranduil showed up. But there was also a different sort of nervousness prodding his thoughts. Thoughts about what he was going to do after, what he should do. There had never been a time in his life when he hadn't called Bag End his home... When he hadn't thought of Hobbiton's rolling hills with familiar comfort. And yet, he knew that Thorin could never live there. Thorin was a king and kings had kingdoms.

His friend had asked him to stay in Erebor. Could he really leave everything he had known behind? The question had given him pause earlier so he knew the answer couldn't be that simple but as he thought of Thorin's shining face he remembered what he'd told his friend on their last night in Rivendell.

Home wasn't about where his bed was or where he came back every night. It was who. Bilbo had told Thorin he thought home was with the people you loved and cared for most and he had meant every word. And then the answer seemed so easy. Thorin was home to him now. Thorin was the thing he wanted to see the first thing in the morning and the last thing he wanted to see at night. Of course he would miss Bag End and everyone in the Shire but it's not like he could never visit them again. Bilbo needed Thorin just as Thorin needed him. But Thorin also needed Erebor so that's where he would stay; after all, it really was just another hole in the ground. A much larger hole to be fair, but one he hoped would someday be as dear to him as it was to Thorin.

"—one get up, we will make our way to the gates."

Bilbo rolled over, pulling up the blanket over his face to get just a few more minutes sleep. Despite the worry Bilbo had gone to sleep with, it had been the best rest he'd had since Laketown. Which wasn't saying much, but the hobbit was willing to count anything more than a few hours as a victory.

"Up you get, Master Baggins," Bilbo groaned as he heard Fili's familiar voice and felt a hand shake his arm gently.

"I don't want to," the hobbit tried so say through the tired haze swimming through his mind but it really might have just come out as an incoherent string of mumbles.

"You hobbits sure do enjoy your sleep," Fili's chuckled from above him.

"And you dwarves," Bilbo sat up slowly and rubbed his eyes, "sure do enjoy waking me from it."

The hobbit blinked several times and saw that the rest of the company had packed up what little possessions they had. Thorin and Dwalin were standing at the far archway, waiting for the rest of their group and talking. Bilbo peered closer and saw that Thorin's face was... different? The hobbit had gotten use to his friend's familiar expression of grim determination and even a few smiles but he'd never seen this wicked smirk. Thorin looked somehow the same as he did when Bilbo found him in the cells of Mirkwood and also entirely different.
That air of bloodlust and brutal desire for revenge seemed to hang over the dwarf like a thick cloud. But on his face wasn't the hurt or the ache Bilbo had seen before; this time Thorin's expression was a razor sharp smirk, teeth bared and ready, eyes fiery as if the only thing he wanted in that moment was to pull his sword and revel in the sensation of steel tearing through flesh.

Bilbo felt his stomach drop at the sight, fear filling him. He looked around at the company, trying to see if anyone else had noticed this change in demeanor, but everyone looked... more or less the same as they had yesterday; smiles wide and drunk off the news of Smaug's death. The hobbit glanced up at Fili who was staring at him curiously.

"Are you alright, Master Baggins?" A blonde brow rose in question.

"I... Is Thorin alright?" Bilbo stuttered, still shocked that no one else was concerned by what he was seeing.

"Uncle?" Fili turned his gaze to the archway, eyeing Thorin and Dwalin before flicking his eyes back to Bilbo, "I believe so, should he not be?"

The hobbit stood up quickly, his eyes still locked on Thorin's face, "He doesn't seem... different to you?"

Then Thorin looked over, his bright blue eyes fixed on Bilbo. The dwarf shot him the same smirk he'd seen a moment ago and for a split second, Thorin's eyes seemed to go dark and dangerous, a promise for something more written in his gaze. Bilbo felt a shiver run down his spine but as soon as he blinked, just to make sure he wasn't imagining anything, Thorin had looked away again, his eyes back on Dwalin.

"Did you just see..." Bilbo trailed off as he turned his face slowly towards Fili.

"Did I just see my uncle looking at you?" The young dwarf stared at him curiously, "Yes, I did, Master Baggins, he does that quite a lot..."

"But..." The hobbit shook his head, he hadn't imagined that, had he...?

"Are you feeling alright, my friend?" Fili stepped closer and put a hand on Bilbo's chin, tilting the hobbit's face up while placing his other hand on Bilbo's forehead, "a fever perhaps—"

"Fili," they heard Thorin growl, low and dangerous, both of their heads twisting to the side to face their leader's dark expression. The blonde dwarf's eyes were stuck on his uncle before they flicked down to Bilbo and back again.

"Fili," Thorin snarled again.

The blonde dwarf stood stock still for a moment before suddenly letting go and stepping away as if Bilbo had burned him. Thorin glared at his nephew for a moment before turning back to Dwalin who had watched the exchange with brows drawn but seemed to quickly shrug it off.

"Well, no fever, Master Baggins," Fili's voice had an unfamiliar quiver to it that made him seem so much younger, almost as if he'd never heard his uncle address him in that voice before.

Bilbo couldn't help but gape slightly, "What was that about?"

Fili shrugged and made to turn away from him before the hobbit reached out and grabbed the sleeve of his friend's coat, "we are not going to pretend like that didn't just happen or that it was even remotely normal!"
The young dwarf glanced at his uncle again, "I'm sure he's just… nervous about today. On edge about negotiations."

Bilbo looked over at Thorin and decided that nothing about his friend looked nervous. If anything there was a reckless sort of confidence to his stance now, "Fili…” the hobbit began slowly, his voice laced with concern, "if you've noticed something too, I need to know. We can't – we can't go into these meetings if Thorin isn't in the right… I don't know," Bilbo let out a frustrated sigh, "mindset for being diplomatic!"

The hobbit felt that a rug had suddenly been pulled out from underneath his feet, like something vastly important had changed while he’d been asleep but now he was the only one noticing the shift.

"Did something happen while you all were talking last night?" Bilbo looked at Fili with pleading eyes, he needed to know.

"I… no, nothing changed…” Fili's voice was oddly stuttered and he looked just about as confused as the hobbit felt.

"Fili…"

"Well…” the dwarf started hesitantly, "he was angry. Of course he was, Master Baggins, you know how much he hates the elves. Balin had calmed him down and we seemed to be getting somewhere in terms of strategy…”

Fili glanced over to the door of Thorin's room, "he was standing near his desk, thinking quietly while we were looking at maps and then… I don't know, Master Baggins, I've never seen him so furious."

Bilbo felt his hand grip Fili's sleeve even harder.

"He just sort of exploded, yelling about how the elf-king was trying to steal his gold, his birthright and how Thranduil always coveted the Arkenstone, wanted to take it from Thror as a symbol of their superiority over the dwarves…" Fili's hand clenched into a fist, "And then he was calm again, couldn't even remember what he'd said a moment ago…”

"He… forgot?" Bilbo was feeling nothing but more confused than he had been a minute ago.

The young dwarf nodded, "I thought it was just nerves or… None of this had been easy for Thorin, especially the elves getting involved, it's only natural that he would act out occasionally, right?"

Bilbo could see in his friend's eyes there was something scared and pleading there, something that Fili didn't want to acknowledge. That there was something going on that none of them understood yet.

"I think we – "

"Fili, Kili, up here now," they heard Thorin call out over the group.

The blonde dwarf glanced between Bilbo and his uncle before shaking his head slightly and giving the hobbit a falsely bright smile, "I'm sure it's nothing, Master Baggins."

"Now Fili."

The young dwarf sent him one last smile before joining his uncle and brother near the archway. Bilbo stood there for a moment completely still and feeling utterly disoriented. 'What is going on?,' he thought desperately. The hobbit felt a frustration course through him as he finally willed his legs
to move and stuff his pack with slightly shaking hands. Something felt terribly wrong in his mind but he couldn't tell even remotely what it was… If only he could talk to Thorin, to ask him.

"We move out towards the gates," Thorin's voice rose above the excited chatter of the group, "if the raven spoke true, Bard's envoy should arrive this morning."

Their leader stood with his back straight but his head was tilted with an aggressive confidence, "and if the elvish scum tries to take my treasure," Thorin's face twisted into a dark smirk, "we'll show him that the dwarves of Erebor," the company cheered, "will not give up what is ours to liars and thieves!"

Thorin turned and started down the hallway, he rest of the group following with excited chatter. Bilbo slung his pack on his back and trailed after the rest of the company. Maybe he was just imagining it… Maybe Fili was right and Thorin was just worked up about the elves, that made sense, didn't it? That explained why his friend seemed to flit between the dwarf he knew and a complete stranger… right?

Bilbo watched Thorin's back from between the shoulders of the company. He wanted to speak with Thorin, to reassure himself that this was all some trick of the mind but his friend was deep in conversation with Balin, probably still working on important things that he knew nothing about, things like treaties and city maps.

"You alright there, laddie?" Bilbo heard Bofur fall into step next to him and looked up to see the dwarf looking at him with concern.

"I… I'm not sure, Mister Bofur."

The dwarf smiled brightly at him before giving his shoulder a friendly slap, "Not sure, are ya? Mister Big, Red, an' Roasty is dead, the city is ours!" Bofur waggled his eyebrows, "an' you got your chosen! What's the long hobbit face for?"

Bilbo flushed slightly at the dwarf's face, "What? How do you know that?"

Bofur shook his head fondly, "Got eyes, don't I laddie? Remember yesterday? Big ol' dwarf hug? Some royal slobber in your mouth? Soundin' familiar yet…?"

'Oh… yes that had been in front of the whole company hadn't it…' Bilbo narrowed his eyes at Bofur but felt the burn on his face grow just ever so slightly. He wasn't embarrassed per say, it was more the inevitable teasing he just knew he was going to be the unwilling subject of.

The dwarf chuckled as he slapped Bilbo's back again, "Ahh, and there it is!"

"Yes, yes, have your fun Mister Bofur," the hobbit rolled his eyes with a huff.

"No fun bein' had, Master Baggins! Just baskin' in the glow of young love!" Bofur winked at him looked far too pleased with himself than he had any right to be.

Bilbo snorted as he looked up at the dwarf in disbelief, "young?"

"Missin' the point, laddie!" Bofur smiled at him before his face grew slightly more serious, "there ain't nothin' to be worried about, Master Baggins, we'll figure out this gold business then we can finally get back to rebuildin' our home."

Bilbo gazed at his friend for a moment and couldn't help but trust in the earnest grin on Bofur's face, "I suppose you're right…"
"It's been known to happen," Bofur shot him a wink, "so no more frownin', you'll be bringin' down the whole company."

The hobbit took a deep breath and nodded slowly. Maybe he did need to stop worrying so much. Smaug was dead, Erebor was theirs, and he would be able to talk with Thorin after the negotiations with Bard were done. Then they could finally sit down and discuss whatever it was they were going to do now. Bilbo felt his heart swell at the thought, a whole future with Thorin, full of possibility and hope, and they would build it together. Build it day by day until they were old and tired from living with a whole lifetime of fond memories to look back on.

They walked down the passage with the statues until they came out into the great hall filled with the rubble of Smaug's destruction. Bilbo had no idea which way was out or how far away they were from the gates so he simply followed alongside Bofur and couldn't help but marvel at the sheer height of it all. Somehow the same halls that had almost frightened him before with the constant shadow of Smaug's return now seemed a bit brighter. Well, perhaps not brighter, the hall was undeniably one of the darkest places Bilbo had ever been, but now he could almost picture what it was going to look like instead of how it might have looked in an age long past.

The hobbit thought he could still feel the lingering ghosts of so many lives taken by fire but there was more of a relief to them now that the dragon was dead. They walked and walked, weaving around piles of stone and the broken remnants of life until Bilbo noticed that the darkness had begun to fade, at the end of the hall there was a bright hole of light that looked to be torn out from the mountain itself. The closer they got, the better Bilbo could see that it was a great set of doors made out of the same green stone that the outside had been. There were deep gouges on edge of either side where Smaug must have torn them open when he left.

Bilbo suddenly felt a wash of cool air and gulped it down greedily. The breeze danced inside and pushed the stale air back and it was the most wonderful thing he'd ever felt. There was sunlight and fresh wind! Thorin pushed forward towards the doors and in what seemed like no time at all, they were through them and on the charred black road that led out of Erebor and towards the ruins of Dale. The hobbit closed his eyes and let the sun bathe him in its light. The air was chilly and he could just about smell the brittle hints of winter approaching but even with his half burnt coat, Bilbo found it hard to care.

When he opened his eyes Bilbo looked down the winding road to see that on the great empty field, beside the ruins of Dale that bordered on the trees of Mirkwood, there were countless tents erected. Flags fluttered in the breeze, some green with a great tree emblazoned on them and others, much rougher looking, with what might have been a black arrow. At the center of what Bilbo could only assume was the elvish camp there was the largest tent he'd ever seen. And yet it almost wasn't a tent at all. It looked like it could have been a large tree that had curved its branches down to the ground in an arc and its leaves had stretched wide to shield the occupants from view.

Sudden movement caught his eye and he saw what appeared to be a small group of men making their way up the road toward the gates of Erebor, only the white flag with the black arrow fluttering above them. Bilbo thought he might have seen figures clad in the dark green and browns of the elves but he hoped with all his might his eyes had been mistaken. The presence of the Mirkwood's folk wouldn't make this easy. The hobbit could only pray that Thranduil didn't send up his men when it would undoubtedly provoke Thorin's fury.

The company fell silent as they awaited the envoy to reach them, forming a half circle around Thorin as a show of solidarity. Bilbo felt the sudden urge to move forward and stand as close to his friend as he could, he needed Thorin to know he wouldn't have to face this alone. Fili glanced over his shoulder as he heard Bilbo shuffle through the dwarves and moved over slightly so there was room
between himself and Thorin's right. The hobbit gave him a strained smile and edged his way so he was standing next to Thorin.

Bilbo looked up and expected to see the same expression of grim determination that Thorin always had on when he was facing something difficult. What he saw instead made his stomach clench nervously. The dwarf's face was blank except for a slight quirk to his lip, a challenging curve of his mouth that promised blood before compromised. Bilbo saw Thorin's eyes flick to his face and for a moment he saw his friend, familiar and kind and resolute. But then it was gone again, replaced by the angry, thirsty fire of before.

"Thorin…" Bilbo could only manage a whisper as the envoy grew closer and closer.

"Don't worry," Thorin turned to face the envoy that was almost upon them now, "I won't let them get a single piece of Erebor's wealth."

The hobbit frowned, "I'm not worried about—" but he was cut off by the sound of horn.

The envoy was led by Bard, his longbow strapped to his back, boiled leather armor that looked like it had seen much better days strapped to his body. There were cuts on his face and a very small limp to his walk but other than that, Bard looked to be healthy. Bilbo let out a sigh of relief at the sight of his friend alive and well. But there was also something different about him now. Bard looked stronger and more… regal, like a true leader of men, not the scruffy outlaw Bilbo had seen not even a moon's turn ago. The group of men halted and Bard stepped forward.

"Thorin Oakenshield," he began in his gruff voice and bent his head in respect, "King under the Mountain."

"Bard the Bowman," Thorin took a step forward as well, a small sneer on his face as he glanced down to the tents in the valley below, "you seem to be doing better than last we met."

Bilbo's eyes widened, 'why is he being so rude?' Thorin and Bard hadn't seemed to get on all that well the last time they met, but surely that was no way to speak to a potential ally!

Bard stared coolly back at Thorin for a moment before his eyes turned to Bilbo and his lips lifted into a small smile, "Mister Baggins, I'm relieved to see you unharmed. I was worried the dragon might have gotten you, but when the thrush told me what you discovered, I knew you must have made it out alive."

Bard stepped closer so now he was in front of the hobbit and bowed far deeper than he had for Thorin, "I owe you my life Mister Baggins, if you had not found the dragon's weakness, we would all be dead."

Bilbo blinked several times before an embarrassed flush crept on his cheeks as he waved his hands, "Oh no, no, I really didn't do anything important. You were the one that killed the dragon!"

The bowman smiled at him again, "Not alone. The people of Laketown rallied together and the Master fled, we are free now," Bard looked over as Thorin let out a low snarl, stepping forward to place himself between them, "but at great cost."

"I thought you were here to treat with me," Thorin said low and dangerous as Bard glanced between the dwarf and Bilbo with a curious stare, "not Master Baggins."

"I mean to take my place as Lord of Dale, as my great-grandfather did before he was killed in Smaug's first attack."
Thorin looked at Bard with narrowed eyes as he scoffed, "you mean to tell me you are kin to Lord Girion?"

The bowman looked as though he was trying with great effort not to show his irritation but couldn't help some slip out, "I am. And I mean to rebuild Dale for any of Laketown that wish for a new life. I believe," Bard and Thorin locked eyes, neither blinking even once, "it is fair we are compensated for killing the dragon that held your kingdom hostage. Dale and Erebor were once allies, Thorin Oakenshield, I would like for us to be so again."

Thorin's eyes narrowed even further but before he could answer Bard spoke up again, "But we were not alone, the elves of Mirkwood came to our defense and should be compensated as well for their losses."

Bilbo felt his stomach sink. Even if Thorin had been about to agree to terms with Bard, the bowman had just mentioned the one thing that Bilbo had been dreading. The one thing that could cause more bloodshed.

Another voice spoke up as someone moved out from behind the raggedy group of guards that had been standing behind Bard, "We do not ask for much, King under the Mountain, only to repair our losses and a token of friendship between our people."

A tall, lithe elf with white-blond hair moved forward with the ethereal grace of his kind followed closely by the auburn-haired female Bilbo had seen in the spider's clearing. It was...

"You—" Thorin snarled with such raw loathing the hobbit had never heard.

"Legolas?" Bilbo gasped at the same time. What was he doing here?

Thorin turned sharply towards the hobbit, his face a frightening mixture of rage and confusion, "How do you know the filth's name?"

Bilbo gaped between Thorin and Legolas, and not for the first time that day, feeling completely and utterly lost.

"Well, I—" the hobbit spluttered feeling the horrible sensation that he was backing into a corner and there was no way out that didn't end in his unfortunate disembowelment, "I just – we –"

"Bilbo and I met while I was taking a tour of the dungeons," Legolas spoke up calmly, looking at the hobbit with an apologetic glance, as though this conversation was going exactly as poorly as he expected.

Thorin grabbed the edge of Bilbo's coat and shook it fiercely, his eyes blazing with an almost maddened rage, "What did you tell him?"

The hobbit felt cold and dizzy all at once, every thought in his mind instantly gone except for one. For the first time in since he'd met Thorin, he was afraid.

"He told me nothing, Thorin Oakenshield. And I would strongly advise," Legolas' face looked ancient in that moment, all the power and knowledge of a thousand years flashing behind his eyes, "you let go."

Fili and Kili jumped forward, Kili grabbing his uncle's arm and Fili pulling Bilbo away. "Uncle!" Kili pleaded and the voice of his nephew seemed to send a jolt through Thorin. His hand snapped opened and he looked down at it for a split second like it was foreign to him. The dwarf's eyes met Bilbo's and for the briefest moment, the hobbit saw fear. And then it was gone again and he was
shoving Kili off before turning to face the elves.

The female elf had reached back for one of curved handles strapped to her back but Legolas quickly raised a hand, halting her movements, "No, Tauriel. We did not come here to fight."

"But he’s clearly mad," Tauriel hissed at her companion, her stance still only a second away from battle-ready though her hand slowly lowered back to her side.

"Mad? Mad?" Thorin growled with a sharp laugh, "what is mad, is that the son of the elf who betrayed my people was sent here for my treasure!"

"Uncle, please—," Fili took a step towards Thorin but halted when their leader shot his nephew a glare so full of rage, Bilbo thought the young dwarf might have cowered away.

"So what else does your lord father wish to take from me?" Thorin rounded on Legolas and in that moment Bilbo could only think Tauriel was right, he looked mad.

"Was the death of my people and my family not enough? Was the entire destruction of our home not enough?"

Legolas looked suddenly sad and exhausted, "You know that is not true, Thorin Oakenshield, we never wished harm upon you and yours."

The dwarf let out an incredulous snort, his eyes flashing wildly, "Lies! Thranduil never wanted to pay us fealty, he hated my grandfather! I saw it in his eyes whenever he looked upon the Arkenstone —"

Thorin's eyes grew wide with realization, his voice quiet but all the more dangerous, "That's what you want isn't it?"

The elf looked perplexed, "We do not—"

But Thorin cut him off as if he hadn't even heard Legolas start to speak, "Of course, how could I have been so blind? You want the Arkenstone as some sort of – of trophy, so Thranduil can flaunt my grandfather's defeat to all your kind!"

Legolas' face was drawn and his brows furrowed, "I have said before, we do not—"

"You want my grandfather's greatest treasure, my greatest treasure," raised his right hand, an accusatory finger pointed towards the elf, "you were the reason my father was driven to madness, you were the reason Thror died."

The hobbit found his voice again, though it was shakier and much more quiet than he would have liked, "Thorin, no, Legolas was the one that helped us escape! He – He isn't like that!" But the dwarf ignored him, lost in his own enraged tangent.

"Well let me tell you something, Legolas son of Thranduil, I will find the Arkenstone and I will mount it above the throne where it was meant to be and will always remain. You will all," Thorin gestured to the envoy and the camps beyond, "kneel before me and the might of Erebor."

The dwarf turned to walk away, his shoulders shaking with anger, but halted after a few steps to look over his shoulder, "And if any of you, any of you, so much as mentions the word 'payment' I will personally send you back to whatever rotten tree you sprang from in bloody pieces."

Bard took another step forward so he was level with Legolas. "Then you leave us no choice, Thorin
Oakenshield, we will take what we need by force," the bowman's voice softened somewhat as his glance flicked toward Bilbo, "you cannot win with fourteen."

Thorin sneered at the man and elf standing side by side, "I will send word to my cousin, Dáin of the Ironhills, if you choose to make war, Master Bowman, I suggest you think long and hard about who you will be fighting against."

This was wrong, this was all so horribly, *horribly* wrong! Bard and Legolas had helped him, why would they fight now? What could possibly be so important about some rock or a few pieces of gold when it meant people were going to *die*? He had to—he had to *stop* this before it was too late.

"Thorin, *please*, can't you just give them some gold? They only—" Bilbo gulped as the dwarf's gaze turned on him, "They only want to *rebuild*, surely that isn't unreasonable?"

"You would side with them?" Thorin asked dangerously quiet, like the calm just before a storm.

"No! I—" Bilbo's gaze flickered towards Bard and Legolas who were watching him, resigned looks on their faces. "Of course not, Thorin, but there's plenty inside! If you won't give it to them, just—just let them have my cut! I don't *care* about the gold, just don't fight—"

"*Silence*," Thorin hissed at him, his voice somehow both quiet and impossibly loud at the same time, "If you are not with *them*, then you with *me*." Thorin stalked past him back towards the gates, "I think this concludes negotiations. Roäc!" Thorin shouted out to the air and a moment later the old raven landed on his arm in a flurry of wings, "send word to Dáin," the dwarf glared over his shoulder, "that Erebor is mine, and his armies are needed."

"*Yes, my king,*," the raven croaked out before taking flight again.

Thorin set off towards the gates, the rest of the company following him until soon it was just Bilbo, limbs frozen and unable to move. This… This could not be happening. The dragon was dead, everything was supposed to be *fine* and now they were getting ready for *war*? Against Legolas? Against Bard?

The hobbit turned wide eyes towards his two friends, his mouth open but no sound coming out. Everything was spinning out of control and he couldn't do anything to stop it. Helplessness despair filled him until there was nothing else. They were… they were supposed to be *happy* now, so why, *why* did he feel like the whole world was crashing down around him?

"You must speak with him," Legolas' voice swam into his ear but it sounded like it was coming from a great distance, "You have to make him see reason, Bilbo."

The hobbit looked up at Legolas and felt angry tears start to prick at his eyes. "Why didn't you…" Bilbo choked on his words, "why didn't you tell me who you were?"

The elf let out a sigh and made to place a hand on his shoulder but after one glance at the company's retreating backs, seemed to think better of it, "Would you have trusted me if I did?"

"I…" Bilbo started but then it didn't even seem to matter, Legolas had helped them but none of that seemed to make a difference to Thorin. There was something wrong with his friend, something that Bilbo had no idea where to even begin trying to help. There was something *inside* Thorin making him act this way, making him act like Bilbo had never seen and he wasn't sure it would listen to reason.

"Go after them Bilbo, you can help stop this escalating further, I know you can," Legolas gave him a small, sad smile.
"You have to try, Mister Baggins," Bard looked at him with a focused intensity, "I have no desire for war, but neither can I let my people live in squalor."

Bilbo gazed at them trying to find the words, to ask or help, advice, anything but nothing came out.

"Go on, little one," Legolas gently pushed him around towards the gates of Erebor, "we shall put our faith in you."

Though Legolas was trying to move him, Bilbo couldn't bring himself to make either of his legs make a step forward. He didn't know what he was going back to inside the mountain. He didn't know what was happening to Thorin. All he knew was that he was frightened. Frightened for Thorin, for Fili and Kili, for the rest of the company, for Bard and Legolas. They had barely escaped the dragon, what were the chances of them all getting out of a war alive?

The hobbit saw Fili stop and glance over his shoulder, realizing Bilbo hadn't been walking with them. The blonde dwarf grabbed his brother's arm and they spoke to each other for a brief moment before both turning around and heading back towards him.

"C'mon Master Boggins, we've got to go back in," Kili said quietly as he grasped one of Bilbo's arms and started to tug gently. Bilbo took a hesitant step forward, still feeling like he was somehow outside his own body, looking down at himself with no control over his limbs.

"That's right, Master Baggins, we'll be right here." Fili glanced up at Bard and Legolas, his mouth a tight line but his face showed none of the anger that Thorin's had, only regret.

He took one step, then another, then another and soon enough they were back inside the Lonely Mountain, standing amidst the rubble and dust.

"Shut the gates," Thorin called to the company, motioning to two large wheels on either side of the door, "I'm going to the treasure room."

Their leader started to walk away and Bilbo knew he had to speak with him now, "Thorin!" The dwarf didn't turn, only kept walking down the massive hallway.

Bilbo shook loose of Fili and Kili's hands, running after the only person he'd ever grown to love. "Thorin! Please, wait up!"

The hobbit caught up with his friend and took a sleeve in his hand, yanking it until Thorin stopped, "Thorin, talk to me," he pleaded, "tell me what's going on, this – this isn't like you."

"When were you going to tell me you were in league with the traitor's son?" Thorin looked down at him with a mixture of anger and… hurt? It must have been. The expression seemed so much more familiar to him than what he'd seen outside that it gave him hope.

"I didn't know who he was!" Bilbo let go of the dwarf's sleeve and reached down so he was holding Thorin's right hand with the lightest touch he could manage, "and it… it didn't seem to matter, we got out didn't we?"

"Didn't seem to matter?" Thorin's hand balled into a fist, "I would never have accepted help from the likes of him, never."

The dwarf's eyes started to grow dark, started to close off again and somehow Bilbo knew he needed to act quickly. "I know that, but don't you think it's time to consider the future? … Please don't throw it all away now."
"You have your family, Thorin. You have your city," Bilbo squeezed his hand tightly, "you have me."

"Do I?" Thorin spat out bitterly.

"Of course you do!" the hobbit stepped in closer, looking straight into Thorin's eyes so the dwarf wouldn't doubt his words, "and you always will. Just don't... don't fight with them, not when they can be your allies."

Thorin's face had softened for a brief moment as Bilbo spoke and for just a second he thought he might have broken through to the man he loved inside that cloud of bitter fury; but as soon as he'd finished, the darkness and the stranger were back.

"Allies? The elves were my allies until the day they betrayed my family," Thorin pulled his hand free with no hint of gentleness, "and Bard is just as greedy as those he chooses to fight with. They will have none of my gold."

"Thorin, please," Bilbo almost groaned in despair, seeing that wall go up again; knowing that he was stranded on the other side completely alone.

"Not another word, I have more important matters to attend to," Thorin turned his back and started to walk away.

The hobbit clenched his fists, the angry tears back in his eyes as he called out to Thorin's retreating form, "More important matters? More important than your life? Than the lives of your nephews and your company?"

The dwarf said nothing as he walked away, away from him, away from reason. "No stone," Bilbo blinked through the hot tears now clouding his eyes and picked up a small rock from the ground. He clenched his eyes shut and threw the stone, letting it sail out of his fingers. He felt anger and sadness, desperation and hopelessness crash around him, "is worth a life!"

Bilbo opened his eyes just in time to see the rock connect with Thorin's back, but it bounced off his friend like every word he'd spoken that day. The dwarf didn't even stop, didn't even look back, just continued off down the hallway towards the treasure room, towards the Arkenstone.

The hobbit stood there, teeth clenched and wishing that he'd wake up any minute now from this awful nightmare. That was it then, Thorin wouldn't listen to him. The dwarf would look for his lost stone, thoughts consumed with nothing but faded grander and revenge while the rest of them prepared for what mockery of a war fourteen could wage against a thousand. Bilbo angrily rubbed the tears from his eyes and kicked a stone that lay near his foot, almost relishing in the distraction of pain.

"Master Baggins?" Bilbo turned sharply to see Fili now standing a few feet away, watching him with a blank look on his face, "what did he say?"

"Oh, only that he doesn't want to listen," Bilbo let out a manic laugh, "and that some stupid rock is more important to him than our lives."

"I tried, I tried," his laugh turned into a choked sob, "I tried, but..." Bilbo looked up at his friend, "I don't think he can hear me anymore."

He wiped away the tears again and shook his head, "I think he wants war."

Fili pulled him into a hug and they stood there for a moment, Bilbo's face buried in the fur of his
collar. The young dwarf rubbed comforting circles on his back as Bilbo's breathing calmed down. He certainly didn't feel any better, but he also didn't feel quite so alone.

"We'll be alright, Master Baggins," Fili pulled away slightly and smiled down at him, "we always are."

Bilbo looked up at his friend and wanted to believe, wanted to believe that more than anything but all he saw were corpses. "You're an idiot if you think that," the hobbit leaned his forehead against Fili's chest.

The dwarf let out a small chuckle, "An idiot that hasn't died yet."

"Don't lose heart, my friend. There isn't a dwarf here that wouldn't follow my uncle to the end, as long as we stick together we'll be fine."

Bilbo closed his eyes and listened to Fili's heart, "and you think some treasure is worth starting a war? Worth dying for?"

The dwarf was quiet for a moment before he spoke quietly, "I think my uncle is worth dying for. I think my brother is worth dying for and he'll follow Thorin no matter what."

Fili stepped back slowly and looked him in the eyes, "If it comes to war, no one would make you fight, my friend. You can come and go as you please."

Bilbo glared at him in indignation, "How can you even say that? I wouldn't – wouldn't just leave you all, I… I can't leave him, you know that."

The young dwarf nodded with a small smile, "I know."

Fili put his arm around Bilbo's shoulder, "So we'll stick together, you, me, and Kili. And we'll protect uncle and each other no matter what happens next."

It was hard to tell how much time had passed since they had spoken to Bard and Legolas. All he knew was that by the time the thrush had flown into the throne room, he'd gone to sleep twice. Thorin had reappeared only at their camp for mealtimes but otherwise spent his days feverishly searching the throne room for the Arkenstone, yelling at anyone who tried to help, telling them to leave him alone and that this was a task only for him.

Luckily Bombur and Bofur had found a store of dried meats and half a dozen kegs of ale, which they had dragged up to the royal chambers. When Bilbo had asked how the meat hadn't gone bad yet, Bofur had merely tapped his nose with a wink and chuckled something about 'dwarvish secrets.'

Bilbo had thought about going to find Thorin but every time he tried to muster up the courage, he remembered their last conversation and became too angry and sad to do anything other than sit next to which ever of the dwarves was on 'cheering up the hobbit' duty. He couldn't understand why it seemed like none of the others weren't too bothered by the fact that their leader had invited an entire host of men and elves to attack them. Most seemed to think that the gates of Erebor would keep out any invading force until Dáin arrived and forced their foes to surrender.

He had had just finished forcing down his dinner on what he thought was probably their third night at camp since speaking with Bard when he heard familiar chirping echoing down the hallway. Only he, Kili, Dwalin, and Thorin were at the camp, the rest of the company having gone off to explore. The hobbit forced his gaze away from Thorin who was speaking with Dwalin and eating with such fervor, he thought the dwarf might have been starved. Bilbo's eyes widened in surprise as he saw the
thrush fluttering about until it dived straight down and landed on his head. The songbird hopped several times then dropped a small roll of paper into his hand.

The thrush fluttered down to his knee and chirped excitedly, pecking at Bilbo's fingers, "Alright, alright! Give me a moment, will you?" the hobbit muttered at the bird. At least it wasn't trying to communicate just with nips anymore.

The hobbit opened up the small scroll to reveal a sprawling script, aware of everyone's eyes on him, of Thorin's eyes on him.

_Bilbo Baggins,_

_I wish I could bring this matter to your attention in person, but I needed this message to reach you swiftly. Word has reached us that a host of goblins and orcs that march under Azog the Defiler's banner is moving towards Erebor. They seek the wealth that lies inside the mountain and I'm afraid they will stop at nothing to get it. Bard and I have started to make preparations but I must urge you to speak on our behalf to Thorin Oakenshield. My father refuses to risk our people for the sake of a dwarf that will not even treat with us and without our aid, Bard will have no choice but to pull his men back to Laketown, leaving you to face this threat with only the power of the Iron Hills. Though it pains me to write this, without our forces working together, the battle will be a slaughter. You must convince Thorin Oakenshield to offer my father something to show that we can have an alliance. I beg you Bilbo Baggins, please make him see reason or the dwarves will lose their home a second time._

_-Legolas_

Bilbo felt the edges of the paper tear as his fists clenched unconsciously. Why thought things could never get any worse he had no idea. Mainly because things almost always seemed to do just that. Now the pale orc was moving against them as well and at the rate Thorin was going, he'd have no allies left to help defend the mountain apart from the dwarves sent from the Iron Hills, which, if Legolas was correct, would not be enough to stop the horde crashing against the mountain like the seething waters of an angry sea until they broke through or the company starved.

"Master Boggins what is it?" Bilbo saw Kili's face fill his vision as the young dwarf bent his head to try and peer at the letter.

The hobbit looked up, his eyes meeting Thorin's, "Azog is coming. He brings an army of orcs and goblins to take Erebor."

Their leader stared back but after a moment scoffed and went back to his meal, "Let them come, the wretch won't break through."

Bilbo stared at Thorin in disbelief, rejecting Bard and the elves was one thing, but to be so flippant about the orcs? The hobbit shot up to his feet, feeling anger coursing through him, his teeth clenched with frustration as he glared at Thorin.

"You –" Bilbo spluttered, he was just so _angry_ at Thorin the words caught in his in his throat, "You _cannot_ sit here and do nothing, Thorin!"

The hobbit brought his fist up, shaking the letter at Thorin, "Legolas says the elves and Bard are going to pull back –"

Thorin stood up opposite him, "Oh, _Legolas_ says, does he?"

Bilbo was about ready to tear out his hair, why couldn't Thorin just _understand_? "Yes, Legolas, the
elf who helped us escape from his own father! He says they will pull back unless you meet with Thranduil and show him you're serious about an alliance!"

Thorin stepped closer, his face in an ugly sneer, "I suppose he wants the Arkenstone in exchange for help?"

"No, he didn't say –"

"They will have to pry it from my dead hands first," the dwarf snarled as if Bilbo had been the one to suggest it.

"Thorin, for pity's sake, your cousin and his men will die! We'll die and Erebor will be lost to you again, is your pride really worth that?" Bilbo gestured wildly to the air, praying to anyone who would listen to help his friend see sense.

The dwarf raised his left hand and for a moment Bilbo thought he was going to be hit, but the fist grabbed at his shirt and yanked him forward.

"Pride has nothing to do with it," Thorin snarled as Kili jumped up looking utterly lost at what to do.

Bilbo knew if they fought, he would lose. Not because he was a poor fighter or weaker than Thorin, though that certainly didn't help, it was because no matter what the dwarf did, Bilbo would never hurt his friend. Not even when said friend was clearly losing his mind.

"Pride has everything to do with it," the hobbit snarled right back, "you would rather let everyone you know die than give up some shiny pieces of metal just because they belong to you."

"You know nothing, Bilbo Baggins, nothing," Thorin pulled him up further until his toes were barely touching the ground.

"Let go of me, Thorin," Bilbo brought his hand up to Thorin's and tried to remove the fist from his shirt.

"Or you'll do what? Go run off to the elves?"

"Uncle!" Kili said desperately, his eyes wide as his gazed shifted rapidly between Bilbo and Thorin.

"I said let go, Thorin."

Something in the dwarf's eyes flickered and his hand snapped open, Thorin looked down at the appendage almost as if in shock for the briefest moment. Bilbo's gazed followed Thorin's and that's when he saw it, the sky blue gem resting snugly atop his friend's finger. It was... it was the ring, Thrór's ring! The one Gandalf had expressly told him never to let Thorin wear.

'Oh no, no, no…'"

"You put it on?" Bilbo tried to make a grab for the hand, to pull the ring off, but the dwarf jerked his hand away.

"Thorin! You weren't supposed to put it on! Gandalf said it was dangerous!" Bilbo made another grab for the ring but missed a second time, "You have to take it off right now!"

"I have to do nothing," the dwarf spat at him, "it was my grandfathers ring, it is the only thing I have left of him and I will wear it if I so choose!"

"Gandalf said it was dangerous! He told me never to let you put it on, Thorin!" Bilbo's eyes were
stuck on the glittering gem, "He wouldn't have said that for no reason!"

"First you would have me give up the Arkenstone," Thorin's words dripped with acid, "and now you would have me give up my only heirloom? I wonder whose side you're on."

Bilbo felt as if he had been slapped and the anger left him, "I'm on your side, Thorin! I just want – I just want to help you!"

"I don't need your help," Thorin turned to stalk out of the room, "and I never have."

It was that blasted ring! He knew it was! It had to be! Thorin must have – must have put it on the night they'd heard of Smaug's demise. That was the only way he could account for Thorin's change in behavior, why his friend had had seemed so dark and aggressive, if the ring was that dangerous, maybe it… maybe it could cause changes in a person. If only he knew about… the note! Maybe it was still in Thorin's room.

Bilbo wheeled around and ran to the door that led to his friend's old room, ignoring Kili's shout behind him. He yanked open the handle and barreled inside, he sprinted towards the desk and started to shove off the maps and books, frantically searched for the letter that had come with the ring. He hadn't thought much of it at the time; he never thought that Thorin would put it on if he said it was dangerous.

The hobbit threw everything off the table until there was nothing left but nothing had been the right size or the right paper to be what he searched for. He started on the shelves and the cabinet but still found nothing. He'd slumped to the floor, about ready to give up when he spotted something under the table. Crawling forward, Bilbo reached under until his fingers grasped the parchment and he pulled it out.

It was… yes! This was it! Bilbo quickly unfolded the letter and started to read Gandalf's messy scrawl.

Thorin

*I have left this in the possession of Mister Baggins to give to you when he feels you are ready to possess it. I know you will take this only as affirmation of what you perceive to be my meddling, so I hope you will trust enough in Mister Baggins to at least heed his words if you will not heed my own. This was the ring of your grandfather Thror. I had thought the ring had been destroyed but when I found your father in the fortress of Dol Goldur and he bequeathed unto me the map and key, he also gave me this to keep safe. The ring, as you know, was one of the Seven given to your people under the guise of a gift but they were corrupted by a dark lord. The ring will twist your thoughts, turning friend to foe, it will make your greed insatiable and poison your mind until it is filled with nothing but dark deeds. Your grandfather was particularly resistant to its power, but even you must remember the gold lust that began to fill his thoughts when the ring was passed to him. You are not weak, Thorin Oakenshield, but your mind is vulnerable from the losses you have suffered. I fear that should you put the ring on, it will find your thoughts easy to manipulate. It is your birthright to own the ring, but not to wear it. You must guard it, from yourself and others, or its influence will corrupt the line of Durin until there is nothing left.*

-Gandalf

Bilbo stared at the letter for what felt like hours. If Thorin had read this, and he almost doubted the dwarf had, it would have done nothing but infuriate him. Thorin would have read this as a challenge, not a warning, and put the ring on just to prove something to himself or Gandalf. And he'd given it to Thorin. He'd put that infernal thing right into Thorin's hands and just walked away like it was
nothing. The hobbit clutched the letter tightly as dread flooded through him. At least he knew that it wasn't Thorin's fault, that his friend hadn't suddenly gone mad. That the dwarf he loved was still somewhere inside.

The hobbit stood up, running out of the room again. He had to get that ring off Thorin or he might lose him forever. Bilbo ran past very confused looking members of the company who had just started to filter back to camp. He turned down the great passage towards the treasure room. He knew Thorin would be searching for the Arkenstone there. He ran and ran, dodging some piles of rubble and hitting others but he wouldn't slow, not now that he knew what to do.

His breathing was labored as he reached the archway to the treasure room, Smaug's torches still lit, casting the gold to reflect glittering dots across the ceiling like some sort of shimmering night sky.

"Thorin!" He called out as he skidded into the room. He saw nothing but could hear the faint 'thunk' of metal hitting metal from deep inside the room. Somehow he knew, no matter how much the ring had corrupted Thorin's mind, his friend wouldn't be by Frerin's bones. Bilbo walked around mounds and mounds of treasure until he was near the opposite corner of the room. He rounded another pile of gold when he saw Thorin hunched over a massive pile and appeared to be throwing every piece this way and that so he could search deeper within.

"Thorin..." Bilbo approached his friend's back, determined that he would get that damn thing off; but the dwarf didn't seem to hear him, too absorbed in his task.

"Thorin," the hobbit repeated as he stepped closer, reaching out until his finger lightly tapped one of the dwarf's shoulders.

Thorin jerked away at the touch. "What do you want?" his voice sounded cold and foreign in Bilbo's ears.

The hobbit pushed his hand forward and gripped his friend's sleeve, pulling the fabric until Thorin was facing him. The dwarf looked up at him from under his furrowed brows, his teeth bared. Bilbo took a deep breath steadying himself for whatever came next. All he knew was that whoever was looking at him now wasn't the same man who he had journeyed with, who he had befriended, who he had come to love.

"Thorin you need to take off the ring." Though his confidence felt like it was hanging on the edge of a knife, Bilbo looked his friend straight in the eyes, refusing to blink.

The dwarf shoved him away again and resumed his task, throwing piece after piece of treasure out of his path and leaving Bilbo's hand holding nothing but empty air.

"Please, please just take it off," the hobbit moved so he was on his friend's other side now, trying his best to make Thorin look at him.

Silence.

"I read the letter, Thorin, that thing —" Bilbo's eyes fixed on the gem. He wanted to take it off him, to tear it away and throw it to the ground, to shatter the false innocence it had the audacity to glint with, as if it were just another common jewel. "That thing is poisoning you! Can't you feel it? Can't you see what it's done to you?"

The dwarf remained silent for so long Bilbo thought he was being completely ignored but then Thorin spoke again, a harsh edge to his voice. "You think I'm weak, is that it? You think me some fool that believes the words of an old man simply because he professes to be wise?"
"No, of course I don't!" Bilbo felt the frustration, the sadness start to leak back in his voice, "but Gandalf is right, it's – it's evil, Thorin!"

Thorin let out a cold laugh, "Evil? It's a ring, nothing more."

"Then take it off!" Bilbo pleaded, his voice starting to shake with some mixture of desperation and helpless panic, "if it's just a ring, then why can't you just take it off damn it!"

"Because," the dwarf his, finally turning to face Bilbo, "it is symbol, just as the Arkenstone is a symbol. It proves that I am the rightful heir, that Erebor is mine, that I am strong!"

The hobbit backed away instinctually, trying to get away from Thorin's rage, "You don't need a ring for that—"

Thorin brandished his left hand in Bilbo's face, waving it angrily, "It proves that I have survived and I will do what my grandfather and father could not! You could never understand."

Bilbo felt the frustrated tears coming back to his eyes even though he tried with all his might to keep them at bay. His gaze left Thorin's eyes and locked on the ring. Anger washed over him like a great wave. It was the ring's fault. It was the ring's fault he was losing Thorin and Thorin was about to lose Erebor.

But it was his fault most of all. His fault for putting the damn thing in his friend's hands. For giving him something he should have known Thorin wouldn't be able to resist. And that fact cut him deeper than any sword ever could. Hurt his heart more than Smaug's flames could ever hope to.

Bilbo lunged for Thorin's hand.

He would get it off even if he had to wrestle it off his friend's hand. He would fix this because it he didn't, that would mean the dwarves would be massacred, cut to pieces by cruel orc blades. But that wasn't entirely true. A small, selfish part of his mind whispered as he reached out a hand. What he feared most of all, more than the deaths of a thousand soldiers from the Iron Hills, was the death of Thorin. The deaths of Fili and Kili. The deaths of all the friends he'd made on this journey.

For one glorious moment his fingers connected with the cool metal of the ring, his body colliding with Thorin's as the dwarf grunted in surprise. They fell over in a tangle of limbs on top of side of the nearest pile of treasure and rolled down to the stone ground. Bilbo closed his hand around the ring and pulled, pulled harder than he had anything in his life, but as he yanked the jewel, he could have sworn the metal band tightened somehow.

Thorin tried to pull his hand away but succeeded in only pulling the hobbit up slightly off the ground. He let out a furious snarl and Bilbo couldn't help his eyes snapping to Thorin's face as he pulled. They weren't blue anymore. They were black. Blacker than night, blacker than the dead hallways of Erebor. Fear shot through him and Bilbo couldn't breath, he couldn't breath –

And then he felt the fingers around his neck. Thorin's right hand had come down and gripped Bilbo's throat like a vice. He tried to take a breath in but all he could manage was a light rasp. He let go of the ring, bringing both his hands to the dwarf's wrist, scrabbling against the skin but nothing he did loosened Thorin's fist.

Black dots started to fill his vision as his head began to swim. "Thor…" he choked out as his hands lost their strength, his fingers no longer able to claw at the dwarf's wrist.

"Please…"
This wasn't Thorin. The dwarf he knew was gone, the ring had twisted his mind and all that was left was the worst in him. The pride, the greed, the anger. There was no gentleness left, only a dark obsession.

The hobbit's hands slide down and rested gently the dwarf's hand as he felt the last of his air leave him. Bilbo had done this. Thorin hadn't been ready to withstand whatever dark influence this ring had on him and Bilbo had practically forced it on him. He had torn out all the goodness in Thorin and left his friend a cruel stranger. He had done this to the man he loved.

"I'm…" one last hot tear slid down his face, "s—" he tried to take one last breath but nothing came in as the world grew dark, "…sorry."

Then the fingers were gone and beautiful, sweet air flooded into his lungs as he gasped. He saw Thorin's eyes bleed blue just before he rolled over taking shuddering breaths. Bilbo closed his eyes, hands reaching up shakily to his neck. He lay there for a minute just trying to breathe, trying to think, but the only thing he seemed capable of was getting just one more breath in until its pace started to steady.

"Leave me," Bilbo heard Thorin's rough voice from behind him.

He finally opened his eyes and saw his friend was hunched around himself, limbs as sharp and jagged as a knife. The hobbit sat up slowly, eyes fixed on Thorin's back but he didn't stand to leave, he couldn't bring himself to go.

"Leave me, you fool!" The dwarf shouted and threw a piece of treasure behind him, the goblet grazing just past Bilbo's check.

"Thorin…" Bilbo's voice as unrecognizable even to him, a faint rasp that hurt with each syllable.

The sound of his name seemed to only enrage Thorin further who let out a sound like some wounded animal, "I said leave!" The dwarf whirled around and began to pelt golden objects at Bilbo.

The hobbit sprang up as fast as he could trying to avoid the rain of metal. He stumbled back but he couldn't look away from Thorin. The opportunity to save his friend was shrinking so rapidly he started to doubt there had been any hope in the first place.

"Go!" the dwarf yelled as he threw a small locket. It sailed through the air and scraped Bilbo's face as he flew past. The pain of tearing skin, the shock of the impact sent a jolt through him. The hobbit turned around and ran, ran away from the storm of golden objects, away from Thorin. Bilbo stumbled around piles of gold, trying to shut out the dwarf's pained shouts from behind him.

The hobbit felt as if something infinitely large and wholly essential had been ripped out of him and all that was left was an empty, bleeding gash. He felt sad and angry and lost. So completely and utterly lost. He had failed the company, he'd doomed them all to an impossible war, but what was like death's cold claws ripping away at his insides was feeling like he'd lost Thorin.

He'd lost the one thing that mattered most to him in this world and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He wasn't strong enough or smart enough. He would die, the company would die, Thorin would die and for what? Some gold? A pretty stone? What was it all even for if it ended like this? If only he could just get his share of the treasure to Thranduil then maybe he could've bought time, time to find some other way, to – to free Thorin of whatever dark spell was upon him. But there was no way he could all that treasure by himself, there was no way he could convince enough of the dwarves to betray Thorin's direct orders. If only there was something small enough, something light enough that he…
Bilbo stumbled around a sharp turn between two mounds of gold near the entrance of the room. His foot fell on a stray platter resting on the ground and felt himself slipping right before he crashed into the pile. Bilbo clenched his eyes shut as a cascade of treasure fell down around him, pouring around him in a matter of seconds. The hobbit waited until the cacophony stopped and slowly opening his eyes. But what filled his vision wasn’t darkness or gold. It was a bright, iridescent blue light.

The hobbit blinked several times and looked down. In his lap was the single most beautiful stone he’d ever seen. It made the jewel on Thror’s ring seem like some common pebble in comparison. Life itself seemed to shine out of the center, a soft white light curling out from the center, swirling around the blue as if the stone itself were alive. It was stunning. It was breathtaking. It was…

No. No it couldn’t be.

But as he started at it transfixed, he knew deep in his heart that it was. Bilbo cupped it in both hands, feeling his mouth fall open in shock.

It was the Arkenstone.
Chapter 24

Bilbo felt the weight of the stone in his hands. The surface was as smooth as any silk he'd ever felt. The Arkenstone was somehow simultaneously cool to the touch and impossibly warm. The light that radiated from inside the stone swam and shimmered before his eyes and it was captivating. He felt like he could have stared into it's depths for a thousand lifetimes and still not have the words to describe what it was about the Arkenstone that made it so beautiful, so powerful.

The hobbit continued to stare, his mouth starting to go dry but the longer he looked, the more absurd his fascination with it seemed to grow. Yes it was wonderful, it was ethereal, it had an unearthly impossibility that made his heart pause but for all its magnificence, it was, in the end, just a stone.

'And so small…' he thought as he held it in his hands, 'is this really it? Is this what Thrór almost died for? What we might die for?'

Then a flash of sky blue flooded his mind, and he felt the cold metal of Thorin's ring against his throat for a split second. Bilbo's hands clenched around the stone as his mouth snapped shut.

'No,' the hobbit thought bitterly, 'it's because of that ring that we might die.'

Thorin would never sacrifice the lives of his nephews or his company for a stone. The dwarf hated Thranduil, hated the elves, but he wouldn't have thrown Bard's offer back in his face if not for the damn ring. Thorin would have listened to reason, listened to him. No matter how much his friend wanted the treasure, Bilbo knew no amount of gold would be worth Fili and Kili's lives. If only there was some way he could get his share out of the mountain to Thranduil, to convince the Elvenking that he should help the dwarves…

Bilbo's eyes focused back on the stone in his hands and realization dawned on him with a sick sense of anticipation and dread. The hobbit couldn't sneak the gold out, but he could carry the Arkenstone…

'No,' Bilbo shook his head, 'I can't, I can't…'

The hobbit heard a crash behind him and jolted back up to his feet. Almost without thinking, Bilbo shoved the stone into his jacket pocket as panic clouded his mind. He had to leave before Thorin found him again and did something worse while the ring's influence poisoned his mind.

Bilbo started to sprint out of the room, his feet pounding across stone and gold until he reached the giant hallway. Each time his feet connected with the ground, his jacket swung and he could feel the Arkenstone hitting his side like some strange second heartbeat.
The hobbit ran and ran, sweat starting to run down his temples and air burning in his lungs but he refused to slow. It felt good, felt alive, and if he concentrated on the next step, and the one after that, he didn't think about Thorin's hands closing around his neck. He didn't think about what it meant to look into someone's eyes and not see them staring back at you. He didn't think about what it meant to love someone so completely and be the one responsible for hurting them.

Bilbo ran until his was well out of the treasure room. He sprinted down the massive hallway, away from Thorin and away from the rest of the company. He just needed time to think, time to turn all of the whirling ideas in his mind into some semblance of coherent thought. The hobbit's foot connected with a piece of rubble and he tripped, crashing to the floor and tumbling over and over until his back smashed into a chunk of the ceiling that had fallen to the floor oh so long ago.

He felt the knees of his pants tear along with the skin underneath. His cheek felt raw as it scraped against the rubble on the ground and all the breath knocked out of his lungs when his back connected with rock. Bilbo lay there stunned for a few moments and suddenly, without the distraction of pumping limbs; everything seemed to collapse around him.

His body hurt, his head hurt, but most of all his heart ached in a way that he'd never felt before. Bilbo clenched his eyes shut as he lay there, refusing to let the tears escape from his eyes. The hobbit let out a small wail as if he could let out some of the desperate sadness that tore into his veins. He felt sick, sick, sick. Bile started to rise in his throat and he heaved but nothing came out.

Bilbo could feel the pulse Arkenstone against his side and reached a shaking hand into his pocket, pulling the stone out. It shimmered innocently in his hand and for a moment Bilbo's misery left him in a flash of hot, seething anger. None of this was fair, none of this was right and why could he do nothing to stop it? Bilbo flung the stone from his grasp and it clattered down the hall until it stopped in a pile of dust, causing a thick cloud to rise and for a brief moment, Bilbo could no longer see the blue-white light pouring out from inside.

The hobbit sat up slowly and leaned his back against the chunk of stone, pulling his legs up to his chest and burying his face in his arms. The anger had left him and now all he felt was sick again. He felt almost separate… not from the horrible thoughts and feelings coursing through his mind, but from reality. Like he was some hapless pawn being pushed around on his mother's old chess board, a giant, invisible hand shoving him towards some horrible end he could see flashing before his eyes but could do nothing to stop its inevitable outcome.

Bilbo had never felt truly powerless before, like his choices and decisions only mattered when they hurt someone, like he was some instrument fate had placed within the company to destroy all Thorin had worked for, but only after the dwarf had opened up enough to trust him, to… to love him.

He was truly a monster now. Worse than any of the awful creatures in his storybooks. At least those monsters' appearances reflected their intentions, their dark, malicious thoughts. There was no guile to those villains, they were evil and looked evil. They didn't make the hero trust them only to wait for their opportunity to sink traitorous claws in deep and tear, to destroy. At least those monsters had the decency to be plain in their desires. He had ingratiated himself within the company, had gotten them all to trust him, gotten Thorin to trust him.

And for what?

So he could give Thorin the tool of his own destruction and say 'oh just don't put it on!' Like Thorin could have resisted the dark intent of the ring, like Thorin was invincible and nothing could hurt them so long as they were in love.

"Stupid," Bilbo hissed through clenched teeth as he tried to ignore the wetness running down his
face, "stupid, stupid, stupid!"

How could he have been so naïve? So completely and utterly moronic to think that love was some sort of mystical shield, some sort of unconquerable force of pure happiness that would ensure he and Thorin lived together for the rest of their lives and worry only of what idiotic schemes Fili and Kili were hatching. To think that he had been worrying about whether or not he would miss Bag End only a day ago. It all seemed so small now; so incredibly irrelevant he couldn't help but let out a wild laugh.

He laughed and laughed until he realized that he hadn't been laughing at all.

He had been crying for his friends. He had been crying for Fili and Kili. He had been crying for himself. But most of all, he had been crying for Thorin. For the man he loved, for the man that was gone, nothing but a faint shadow in the back of those blue eyes.

An army was going to march on their walls and the dwarves of the Iron Hills would paint the ground red with their blood. Azog would tear deep, bloody gouges in the land until he came upon Erebor's gates and then they would die screaming.

Thorin would lose Erebor for a second time. Thorin would be torn from his home. He would never see his city restored to its former glory. He would never see his people milling about these halls, alive and well and prospering. He would never grow old. Never see his sister again. Never see Fili become King under the Mountain, a stone crown rested atop his golden head. Never see Kili finally grow out his beard and perhaps start a family of his own if he ever decided to leave his brother's side long enough.

Bilbo looked up to see the light of the Arkenstone glowing from within a pile of dust on the floor.

The thought had filled him with a certain terror earlier, but now it seemed almost… inevitable. The Arkenstone was the only thing in that room he could carry out that would be worth enough to make Thranduil even consider listening to him. It was Erebor's greatest treasure, symbol of the Lonely Mountain, symbol of the line of Durin. He was sure the Elvenking would not be pleased that Thorin himself wouldn't reach out, but perhaps with Legolas there…

He had a chance now to get the elves and men on their side. To make sure they had a chance in the coming battle against Azog. And all he had to do… All he had to do was betray Thorin. All he had to do was take the one thing his friend wanted more than anything and hand it over to his mortal enemy. Bilbo buried his face once more, fighting the urge to be sick again.

Thorin would hate him, of that Bilbo was sure. Thorin would spit on him, curse him, despise him, but what choice did he have? Without aid, they would die. It wouldn't matter that Thorin hated him if they were cut down in the battle.

The hobbit gripped his arms so tightly he thought the fabric might tear.

Because even though he knew the alternative was so much worse than hatred, than betraying the man he loved, somehow it did matter. He'd already betrayed Thorin once by giving him that damn ring and now he was considering it a second time. The difference was that this time he knew what he was doing. Bilbo knew he wouldn't be able to try and rationalize away the look of pure loathing he knew would be on Thorin's face once he realized what Bilbo had done.

Even though he knew what he had to do, Bilbo hesitated. Was he strong enough to bear Thorin's hatred? Was he strong enough to sacrifice his own happiness, sacrifice any love Thorin might have for him?
Bilbo thought of Thorin's smile, of his laugh and his kindness. Of his deep and resolute love for his family and his people and his home. He thought of Thorin's face when he had found Frerin. He thought of holding on as tightly as Thorin held onto him. Of the glorious feeling of knowing that the man he loved for the first time since the fall had a bright future in front of him.

And then he knew that it wasn't about strength. The question wasn't if he was strong enough to bear his friend's hatred, but whether he was selfish enough to put his own feelings before Thorin's wellbeing.

Bilbo thought for a moment before raising his head slowly. He still felt a twinge of nausea, the light head and blurred vision of panic, but he... he knew what he had to do. He would take the Arkenstone to Thranduil. He would secure an alliance of men and elves for Thorin, he would make sure that when Azog was upon them and the war horns started to sound, that they would have a fighting chance.

The man he knew was gone from Thorin's body, the ring had twisted his thoughts and poisoned his mind. Bilbo had trusted Thorin with his life and the moment the dwarf's hands had closed around his neck, he knew his friend was gone. He would be strong for Thorin, but not in the way Kili had said. He would be strong enough to take the stone out of these halls, place it in the elf's hands, and face whatever punishment Thorin gave him as penance for giving his friend the ring in the first place.

Because that's what love meant, wasn't it? And in his heart Bilbo Baggins knew it to be true.

The hobbit stood up on shaking legs and walked slowly over to where the Arkenstone lay and gently picked it up. He rubbed off the dust with his sleeve and placed it back into his pocket. Bilbo turned slowly and started to walk down the hall towards the massive doors at its end.

The hobbit's fingers were still curled around the stone as he walked, almost like if he let go then the one thing that might save their lives would disappear. The hallway was completely still as he put one foot in front of the other, the dust muffling his footsteps so he could hear nothing but silence ringing through his ears. It was haunting in the dark and the stillness. It was lonely, achingly lonely as he walked.

It felt like days had passed when he finally saw the doors of Erebor. And they were... shut. Of course they were shut, how could he have forgotten? Thorin had ordered them closed after they had met with Bard and Legolas; a dwarf to each wheel that forced the hulking, stone doors closed. Bilbo felt his stomach sink as he craned his neck to look up; there was no way he could get this open by himself.

"Master Baggins?"

Bilbo clutched at his heart as he spun around in fright to see Fili standing a bit further down the hallway, looking at him curiously.

"What are you doing all the way down here?"

Bilbo tried to steady his breathing but panic seemed to fill his lungs, leaving no room for air. He hadn't planned on running into anyone before he left. The hobbit tried to reply but all he seemed to be able to do was choke on his own tongue.

Fili's look grew steadily more confused as he waited for the hobbit to reply.

"Are you alright, Master Baggins? Kili said you ran off after that letter arrived," the blonde dwarf walked forward to stand in front of him, "we were worried when you didn't come back so we went
"I…" Bilbo spoke so quietly he wasn't sure he'd actually said anything out loud, "I'm… fine."

Fili raised a brow, "You don't look fine, my friend…" 

Bilbo couldn't meet the dwarf's gaze, his hand clutched tightly on the Arkenstone and mind very unhelpfully blank as he struggled to think of a way out. 

Fili's eyes moved from the scrape on the hobbit's cheek to his neck and widened in shock, "what happened?"

The dwarf crouched so he could better examine Bilbo's neck, looking at the bruises that were no doubt starting to form there. "What happened?" Fili hissed angrily, tilting Bilbo's chin. 

The hobbit reached up and gripping Fili's wrist gently and pulled it away. The dwarf's eyes searched his face for an answer, staring with such intensity it seemed like he was trying to read Bilbo's mind. 

Bilbo was silent for a moment. He wanted to tell Fili everything and for a second the words felt like they might come pouring from his mouth like some uncontrollable stream. But as his gaze locked with Fili's bright blue eyes, so earnestly worried for his friend, for the hobbit that had doomed them all, Bilbo knew he couldn't. He couldn't ask Fili to betray his uncle, betray the man who had become a father to him and his brother. 

"Fili…" Bilbo began slowly, "I need to leave."

The dwarf's eyes widened in shock, "What? But before you said –"

"I know what I said before."

Fili's brow furrowed as he started at Bilbo, his face growing dark, "It was Thorin, wasn't it?"

The young dwarf spun on his heel as if he meant to go running down the hall. 

"Fili," Bilbo all but yelled as he grabbed onto the dwarf's sleeve and pulled him around. "Fili I need you to –"

"No," Fili spat. "There is something wrong with him! He would never –" the dwarf glanced down to Bilbo's neck, "he would never do that."

Bilbo grabbed Fili's other sleeve and held onto him tightly so the dwarf wouldn't turn away again. 

"Fili! Just – just listen to me, please," Bilbo pleaded. 

The dwarf stilled, some of the anger on his face slipping away revealing the same helpless sort of confusion Bilbo was feeling in droves. 

"I need to go—"

"But why? We – we need you here if something is wrong with Thorin!" Fili looked so young and exposed in that moment Bilbo couldn't help but step forward and place his arms around his friend. The Arkenstone fit between them like some horrible secret and the hobbit prayed Fili wouldn't feel the rock. 

"Because I'm going to fix this mess…" Bilbo said with infinitely more confidence than he was feeling at that moment.
Fili gripped back tightly and Bilbo could feel his friend shaking slightly. None of the easy confidence or assured cockiness the hobbit was used to seeing in Fili showed.

"But how? I can help you, I know I can! Just – just tell me what you're planning," Fili said into Bilbo's shoulder.

"Do you trust me?" The hobbit said softly.

There was a pause before Fili stepped back slightly and looked him at him, "of course I do, you know that Master Baggins."

"Then help me get out of here."

"But…" Fili started hesitantly, "can't you just tell me what you're planning?"

"Please, Fili," Bilbo felt guilt pooling in his stomach, "just… just trust me."

The young dwarf stared at him for a long while, his face drawn as if he were debating some internal conflict with himself. The hobbit waited for an answer and prayed that Fili would help him open the door and leave it at that. He would go down to the camp by himself, he would make Thanduil see and then… well, then he would figure out some way to save Thorin.

"What do you need me to do?" Fili's voice had lost its hesitation; the dwarf's face was still tight with worry but Bilbo knew his friend would help without further question.

"Help me open the door," Bilbo walked over to the stone wheel, examining the thick spokes sticking out, "just enough for me to slip out."

The young dwarf nodded slowly as he joined Bilbo by the wheel, "These doors were designed to be able to be closed by just a few if there was an emergency but even so…" Fili eyed the giant stone slabs, "I'm not sure how far we'll get with just the two of us."

The hobbit felt a twinge of worry in his stomach but quickly shoved it aside; he wasn't going to turn back now. He couldn't. "We'll do it."

Fili placed himself between on set of the stone spokes and gave it an experimental push. The wheel let out a small grinding noise but barely budged for all the dwarf pushed.

"Going to need some help here," the dwarf grunted.

"Oh, yes, sorry," Bilbo muttered as he ran to the next set of spokes and positioned himself there.

"Ready?" he heard the dwarf's voice from behind him.

The hobbit looked over his shoulder briefly and gave his friend a firm nod, "ready."

As soon as he heard Fili let out a strained grunt Bilbo began to push. As the minutes passed, his toes dug into the rubble strewn across the ground and he felt the prick of sharp rocks digging into his feet. His arms shook with the effort and he bent his head, breathing hard. A groan of stone scraping against stone filled the hobbit's ears as he pushed and pushed and pushed.

"Just a little –" Fili let out a labored breath, "bit—" another grunt, "more—"

Sweat started to drip down his neck and Bilbo's felt his arms give way.

"C'mon, Master Baggins, we're almost there!"
The hobbit twisted so the back of his shoulder was pressed against the spoke and started to push again, his teeth clenched with the effort. He was not going to be stopped here, not by some stupid piece of rock! He had the Arkenstone, he had the one bargaining chip that might make Thranduil listen, that might save all their lives, and he would be damned if the blasted door wasn’t going to let him through! Bilbo heard Fili let out a rasping groan of effort and there!

They heard the let out a great creaking noise as the rocks scrapped against each other and fresh, night air poured through the crack. Bilbo slipped down to the ground breathing heavily and looked over to the door. It was barely open, not wide enough for a man to pass through but… Yes, it was just the right size for a hobbit.

Fili was leaning over his knees and wiped a bead of sweat off his brow, "We… we did it?"

Despite the how absurdly wrong his life had been going over the past day or so, Bilbo couldn't help but let out a small chuckle at the dwarf's face, "Always the tone of surprise."

The young dwarf stood back up to his full height and shook out his hands, "It is a very large door, Master Baggins."

The hobbit grinned at his friend for a moment, savoring the small flare of happiness in his chest but as soon as the feeling had come, it was gone again. Bilbo scrambled up to his feet, he needed to go now before his resolve wavered. Reaching into the pocket on his trousers, the hobbit pulled out the small dagger Fili had given him before he had gone into Smaug's lair. He wasn't quite sure why, but it seemed important to give it back.

Bilbo held it out in the palm of his hand as he tried to give his friend a strained smile, "Thank you for lending it to me."

Fili eyed the knife for a moment before glancing back up to the hobbit's face with a small frown. "Keep it, Master Baggins."

"No, Fili, I—" Bilbo tried to shove it back into the dwarf's chest, "I can't."

Fili brought a hand up to grip the hobbit's wrist, placing the other under the hand that held the knife before curling Bilbo's fingers so they covered the black hilt. "Keep it for now, Master Baggins. You'll still need to return it," the dwarf gave him a small grin, "and in pristine condition might I add. Just not now."

Bilbo nodded slowly, hoping with all his heart Fili would understand why he needed to do this when the time came. Hoping that maybe, maybe of all of the dwarves in the company, Fili, levelheaded, amiable Fili wouldn't see his actions as a betrayal. Bilbo knew he shouldn't trust this solitary speck of hope, but something inside him just couldn't bear to think of a future where the young dwarf looked at him with anything less than warm friendship.

Fili pulled him into a tight hug, "I know you wouldn't leave unless you had to Master Baggins. You don't need to tell me why."

"I—" Bilbo started but the dwarf interrupted him, "I trust you, Master Baggins. You're my friend and I trust you."

Fili squeezed him tighter, "Just stay safe, alright?"

The hobbit nodded again.

"If you promise to come back in one piece, I'll promise we'll be waiting for you."
Bilbo squeezed back just as tightly and for a moment allowed his mind to go blank except for one
single, powerful thought. Thís was why he was giving the stone up. He was doing it for his friends,
so that they would have a home to come back to, so that they would have a life to live.

"I promise."

Maybe they wouldn’t want him back after this; maybe they would never want to see him again, but
even so, Bilbo would try to keep any promise he made. The hobbit let go and turned to walk out the
crack in the door but just as he reached it, Bilbo felt an overwhelming urge to look back one last
time.

"Thank you, Fili. I… Well –" Bilbo shook his head trying to think of the right words to say but as
with most people in important moments where one wishes to depart on some profound piece of
wisdom, the hobbit couldn’t think of anything. "… Thank you."

Fili gave him a small smile.

"You stay safe too, okay?" Bilbo’s hand clenched unconsciously, "and Kili. Tell him that and the rest
of the company too. And…"

'Thorin…’ but the name died in his throat. But as the dwarf’s face softened, Bilbo knew his friend
had understood.

"I will, Master Baggins."

"Promise?" It was only fair after all, that Fili should promise to stay safe if he did.

"Promise."

Bilbo had squeezed out of the crack and into the night air. It was cool and stale with the hint of
winter approaching. He could smell a hint of mustiness that meant the leaves were already starting to
fall off of their high homes. Though the sun was far past the horizon, outside Erebor seemed so much
brighter than inside the mountain. In the sky, the hobbit saw stars for what felt like the first time in
ages and on the ground, the lights of a hundred fires glittered between distant tents.

The hobbit started down the winding road that led to the valley at the base of the mountain and
towards the remnants of Dale. His eyes were fixed on the large tree-tent and knew that it had to be
Thranduil. Bilbo gulped, feeling his nerves begin to fray again, anxiety pooling in his stomach the
closer he got to the camps.

Feeling around in his pocket, Bilbo felt the familiar cool metal of his golden ring and slipped it on.
He was sure Bard wouldn’t harm him, but he wasn’t sure where the bowman even was. Legolas, he
very much hoped, was with his father. The elf had been the one to write him a letter, urging some
form of alliance, so at least… Well, he prayed that there would be at least one of the Woodland folk
willing to listen to him.

As the hobbit entered the edge of the camp, he saw that many of the tents and supplies were in a
half-finished state of being packed up. ‘They’re getting ready to leave,’ Bilbo’s gut clenched. Most of
the soldiers, both man and elf, seemed to have retired for the night. Though he did not know the lay
of the of camp, the one thing that could be seen from almost every angle was Elvenking’s tent, whose
branches rose up to the sky before curling back down again, the massive leaves going from a deep
green at the top, down to a bright yellow, and a fiery red at the bottom.

Bilbo wound his way around tents and the occasional soldier. The smell of cooking food wafted
from some of the nearby fires, but even without a proper meal in many days, the hobbit found whatever was left of his appetite currently overwhelmed by worry. He was sure he was close now; only a few tents lay between him and the giant one. Bilbo felt his heart start to pound, blood rushing in his ears and –

He was on the ground, his mouth full of dirt and feeling slightly dazed.

"Who's there?" A voice hissed above him.

Bilbo looked up as saw a furious expression on the face of the auburn haired elf he'd seen with Legolas. 'Tauriel,' he thought as the elf's pale green eyes scanned the area around her.

The hobbit gulped and tried to shuffle away on his elbows. He knew she couldn't see him, but with the tents all around them, there was little room to maneuver. Tauriel stilled suddenly and Bilbo could've sword he saw her ears twitch. The hobbit couldn't help but hold his breath, trying not to make a sound. Then the elf closed her eyes and neither of them made a sound until Bilbo felt his lungs start to burn. He clenched his eyes shut trying to hold it in but felt some of the air escape him involuntarily.

Tauriel's eyes snapped open and her hand shot forward like a snake striking its prey. Though she had grabbed blindly, the elf caught the edge of his coat in her fist and yanked him up as if he weighed nothing.

"Who are you?" Tauriel hissed again, "or rather, what are you?"

Bilbo grabbed her wrist and tried to struggle free but the elf's grip was like a vice, strong and unyielding.

"Undo this spell," Tauriel reached up and grasped one of the curved handles strapped to her back, "and I may let you live."

While Bilbo was furiously trying to think of a way out when he saw her draw the blade, sharp and shining in the moonlight. Tauriel brought the knife down slowly, "my patience is wearing thin…"

The hobbit stopped struggling and let go of her arm. He didn't really have much choice but hoped that the elf might recognize him and allowing him to speak to her king. Bilbo slipped his hand into his pocket and pushed the ring off of his finger.

"You!" Tauriel yanked him up further, knife to his throat now.

"Easy, easy!" Bilbo gasped, his feet dangling in the air, "I just want to—"

"I don't care what you want," Tauriel growled, "you will tell me why you're here."

"I – I need to speak with Thranduil –" Bilbo spluttered.

"King Thranduil," the elf corrected, acid dripping from her voice, "and just why should I bother him with the incessant squeaking of a dwarvish pet?"

The hobbit felt a spark of anger; he was here trying to help the elves! And he did not squeak!

"Because," he glowered at her, "I have come to offer an alliance."

"An alliance?" Tauriel scoffed, rolling her eyes, "do you seriously expect me to believe that? Your leader offered us a sword, not his hand."
"Just –" Bilbo felt frustration starting to build, "Just let me *talk* to him! *Please!*"

"Oh, you'll *talk,*" the elf's face fell into a wicked smirk, "whether you wish it or no."

Tauriel grabbed him by the back of his coat and started to pull him unceremoniously towards the massive tent. Bilbo stumbled as he tried to keep from falling forward while keeping pace with her long strides.

"I can walk by myself," Bilbo glowered at the elf as he tried to pull away. Tauriel simply pulled him harder with an unimpressed glare, her auburn hair swishing behind her back.

As they reached the tent, Tauriel snapped something at the two guards in their fluid tongue and they swiftly stepped aside. There was a flurry of movement as the elf pushed aside a curtain of leaves and Bilbo felt himself being thrown towards the ground and all he saw for several seconds was the plush carpet his face was pressed against. The hobbit blinked several times, feeling utterly disoriented in the low light of the tent.

"And what have I told you about barging in here unannounced, Tauriel?"

Bilbo pushed himself up slowly and raised his eyes to the opposite side of the tent. Lounging casually on a long wooden chair covered with cushions was the most beautiful being the hobbit had ever seen in his entire life. The elf looked like Legolas but where he was somehow softer, this elf was like shard of ice, his voice like silver on the wind.

"But I –" Tauriel flushed, "I caught him sneaking, *Aran!* He could have been spying on us or—"

The elf waved his hand dismissively and stood up in a single fluid motion. The same white-blond hair of his son flowed around his body, but where Legolas had cut it mid-chest, Thranduil's was long enough to touch his waist. Bilbo saw the elf's bright blue eyes flick down to him as a lazy dark brow rose almost infinitesimally.

"What do we have here…" Thranduil stepped forward though his footsteps made no noise, "a halfling, so far away from home."

Bilbo scrambled to his feet, something about this elf made him want to sit up straighter, smooth out his clothes, and do some manner of courtly bow. The elf was a few feet from him now, the silver of his robes shimmering like frost on a winter's morning.

"This one," Tauriel spoke up again, the flush finally starting to recede from her cheeks, "says he wants an alliance."

Thranduil's gaze rested on him and after a few moments Bilbo realized that the elf wasn't blinking. It was… unsettling. He felt as if he the elf could see through him, like all his secrets and his soul lay open and bare for the king to examine at his leisure.

"He's with the dwarves, *Aran,*" Tauriel said with no small measure of disgust in her words, "he was with them when we went to treat—"

There was the sound of hurried footsteps outside and the curtain of leaves being pushed open again. "*Ada,*" came a familiar voice from behind him, "there's word of an intruder—"

The hobbit spun around and saw Legolas standing in the doorway. The elf's face went from concerned to shocked in a heartbeat, "Bilbo?"

"So this," Thranduil spoke again, his voice sounding slightly more interested now, "is who you helped
in the dungeons."

Bilbo's eyes widened as he glanced back towards the Elvenking, "how did you…"

Thranduil stared at him again, "though you may have found my guards less than competent, halfling, I assure you nothing happens in my realm without my knowledge."

"Then why would you…" Bilbo felt his face scrunch in confusion.

"My intention was never to detain your company permanently," the Elvenking gave a small shrug, "and I find it difficult to deny my son."

Legolas stepped forward and placed a gentle hand on Bilbo's shoulder before going to his father's side. "When I found your group," the prince started in his calm voice, "we were on patrol. There had been a string of… incidents in our forest, little one. There has been a malevolent power spreading from the fortress of Dol Goldur poisons our wood."

"I could not take the chance that your company might harm our people, so I brought them to my father for questioning."

"The dwarves were kept in their cells," Thranduil turned back to his chair and motioned for them to follow with a wave of his hand, "because they refused to be honest with me. I would not risk the safety of my people further when there are daily attacks by orcs and spiders."

"That isn't…" Bilbo looked between Legolas and Thranduil, "you had Thorin beaten! Don't pretend —" He remembered healing Thorin's back, remembered how his friend had barely been able to move.

"Thorin Oakenshield is a fool," the Elvenking narrowed his eyes slightly, something glinted in them that made Bilbo stand on edge but not enough to quell the sudden and indignant fury that welled up within him. He was not about to let the elf that had – had left Thorin's people to die talk about his friend like that! Like Thorin was some petulant child holding onto a petty grudge. He knew the pain his friend had suffered, he'd seen the need for bloody revenge almost overcome Thorin. That was real, how Thorin felt was real and Bilbo felt all his frustration, all his sadness, all his helplessness bubble up until it exploded out of him.

"You were the one that let his people die!" Bilbo shouted, his fist clenching as he took a step closer, "you were the one that let Erebor burn!" The hobbit felt Tauriel's fist close on his coat again and start to drag him back but he ignored her. He ignored the sad look on Legolas's face and he ignored the feeling that deep down, he knew he had no right to be angry at Thranduil, that he had no part in this conflict, that he had only ever heard half the story.

"Don't you dare," Bilbo raised a shaking fist, "say that he is a fool! Thorin has been – has been hurt by the elves more than you could ever possibly understand! So don't just sit there and —"

"You presume too much," Thranduil rose from his chair, his face as still and hard as stone.

"Oh I presume, do I?" Bilbo let out a dark laugh, feeling that for the first time in days he had an outlet for every single horrible thing that had gone wrong in his life since he'd given the ring to Thorin.

The Elvenking's eyes flashed dangerously, the light in the room flickered, and suddenly Bilbo felt incredibly small. Thranduil looked instantly old, like the power of thousands of long years on this earth pulsed beneath his fair skin.
"The dwarves betrayed my people long before Thorin Oakenshield's imagined slight," his voice was as cold as ice, "but you must already know all about that, don't you."

"I –" the hobbit spluttered, not sure of what to say. Legolas placed a hand on his father's arm and opened his mouth but Thranduil raised a hand to silence his son.

"You must already know of Thingol, great king of my people and my friend," the Elvenking continued, "of how he invited the dwarves into his realm, into his home so that they might work together on the greatest treasure of this world, a single piece of craftsmanship to unite our two peoples."

Bilbo tried to take a step back but Tauriel's hand held him firm.

"You must know of how when Thingol went to place our gem on the dwarvish necklace, they were so overcome with greed that they slew him so they might take it for themselves."

"We had been allies, halfling, but it was the dwarves that drew first blood, that betrayed our trust," Thranduil's voice was deathly quiet now.

"But I did not keep this grudge close to my heart, I did not refuse Erebor their alliance when their kingdom came to be."

"And yet you say that I betrayed them? That I was the one to let the mountain burn?" Thranduil gave him a sharp, frozen smile, "For all Thorin Oakenshield's experience with dragons, he apparently still cannot tell the difference between a drake and an elf. I destroyed nothing, I burned nothing."

A frigid silence filled the tent.

"Have you fought in battle, halfling?"

"No…" Bilbo whispered, wanting more than anything to avert his eyes.

"Have you felt the taste of blood in your mouth? Have you cut through so much flesh and bone that you no longer feel disgust? Seen so much death that the only thing you feel or want to feel ever again is numb? Have you seen your comrades, your friends, your father slaughtered around you by foes that know nothing of mercy?"

"N-no…" but he wasn't sure any noise came out.

"Then you know nothing of me," Thranduil's ancient eyes bore through him.

"I have seen more than enough bloodshed in my life, halfling. I had no desire to place my people in the dragon's path when nothing would have been achieved but more death. I regret what happened to Thrór's kin, but I am a king, halfling, and my duty is to my own people."

Bilbo wanted to shrink away, wanted to back out of the tent and run away. Away from that unblinking blue gaze, away from feeling horribly exposed and sad and wrong.

"Then…" the hobbit started, his voice shaking like a leaf in the wind, "then why are you here?"

Thranduil considered him for a moment before sliding back down into his chair, "Beucase my son has a softer heart than I."

"Ada…" Legolas looked at his father, concern turning his mouth into a slight frown.

"I grow tired of trying to justify myself, speak of your purpose, halfling, or leave now," the
Elvenking's face betrayed nothing but Bilbo couldn't help but think there was a weariness in his eyes.

"I…" the hobbit began but he couldn't seem to find the words anymore.

"Go on, little one," Legolas gave him a small smile. Well, at least he had *one* ally here. He just wished Bard was in the tent with them as well.

"I've come to – to make an alliance. For the battle," Bilbo started to ring his hands nervously, feeling hopelessly out of depth.

"You're here on behalf of Thorin Oakenshield?" Legolas looked surprised but hopeful that his letter had perhaps forced the dwarf to reconsider.

"Not… not exactly…" Bilbo's glance shifted between the two elves.

"You are not here on his behalf, but you wish us to make an alliance with him? You can see why I might find that insulting," Thranduil's eyes narrowed slightly.

Bilbo started to feel panicked, this was… this was not going how he wanted, "Legolas said you needed a token of friendship before you would help."

Thranduil glanced at his son before shifting his eyes back to the hobbit, "you are grossly simplifying matters but yes, I require something slightly more substantial than his scorn."

Bilbo closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. 'No turning back now…' The hobbit reached into his pocket and pulled out the shining blue stone from its depths. Bilbo held it out slowly and opened his eyes.

"That is the Arkenstone," Thranduil looked… well, shocked he supposed was the best way to describe the elf's face, though on anyone else it might have looked blank.

"Thorin Oakenshield would never give up the Mountain's Heart willingly," the elf considered him for a moment before his eyes fell back to his palm.

"He didn't give it up," Bilbo spoke quietly.

"You stole it?" Legolas sounded surprised.

"I took it as the share of the treasure owed me," the hobbit tried to sound like it was simply a matter of convenience rather than show the guilt he felt gnawing at his mind.

"And you would give it to me freely?" The Elvenking sat forward now.

"In exchange for an alliance with Erebor," Bilbo forced his voice to sound firm, "and aid in the coming battle."

Thranduil blinked once.

"I know this battle is for Erebor," Bilbo pushed forward, feeling like the elf was finally listening to him, "but where do you think Azog will go once he claims the mountain? Your forest is right there," the hobbit pointed to where Mirkwood's borders began at the edge of the valley, "war is upon your people whether you choose to fight now or later."

"All I ask," Bilbo stepped forward, a look of fierce determination on his face, "is that you make your stand here and now rather than later. If we all work together, there will be fewer causalities for everyone involved."
"Even if you have no love for the dwarves or Thorin," Bilbo stared right back into those light blue eyes, "I know you have love for your people, King Thranduil, for their sake we all need to work together."

"And if all that takes is me giving up my share of the treasure," the hobbit clenched his fist around the stone, "then I will do so gladly."

The Elvenking stared at him for what felt like a lifetime, his head tilted slightly and Bilbo felt once again like all his heart was exposed for Thranduil to peruse at his leisure. "If you give me that stone, Bilbo Baggins, you relinquish far more than your share of the treasure."

The hobbit's heart clenched painfully as he thought of Thorin, "I know."

"He will despise you for this."

Bilbo clenched his eyes shut for a moment. He thought of Thorin laughing and smiling, he thought of Thorin's arms around him and he thought of love. The hobbit looked up with a sad smile on his face.

"I know."

"You have a true heart, halfling," Thranduil reached up a long-fingered hand and Bilbo stepped forward. He took one last look at the Arkenstone before dropping it into the elf's hand and stepping back again.

"The alliance is yours, Bilbo Baggins, the Elves of the Great Forest will fight for Erebor."

Legolas let out a little sigh of relief and smiled at Bilbo before glancing up at the auburn-haired elf, "Tauriel, go find Bard. We have much to speak of."

"Of course," she gave a little bow before swiftly departing the tent.

"We must send word to the mountain, Ada," Legolas turned to his father, "I fear Daín will not listen without Thorin Oakenshield."

Thranduil nodded in agreement as Tauriel reappeared with Bard on her heels. The bowman looked like he had just been woken from sleep but his green eyes were as sharp as ever.

"What's going on at this time of –" Bard's eyes locked on to Bilbo's, "Mister Baggins? What are you doing here?"

"The halfling sought an alliance with us on behalf of Erebor," the Elvenking held up the Arkenstone, "and we have come to an agreement."

Bard looked from the stone to Bilbo and nodded slowly, "so I take it we're making our stand here?"

Legolas walked over to where Bard was standing and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, "yes, my friend, should we succeed you have your family's home again."

The bowman glanced at Legolas and his face split into a smile that was somehow still it's usual grim but also… softer. "I don't want to fight at all but if we can do it with the dwarves instead of against them, I suppose our chances can only go up."

Bard looked down at the hobbit, "I should thank you, Mister Baggins, I didn't think we'd gotten through to Thorin but I hoped you might be able to talk some sense into him."
Bilbo shifted his gaze uncomfortably and he suddenly felt weary. He had stolen the Arkenstone, snuck out of Erebor, secured the alliance and now… He had no idea what to do. Where should he go? He couldn't get back into Erebor. He knew a total of two people out of the army of men and elves. He didn't belong here and Bilbo wasn't sure he would ever belong in Erebor again.

"You look tired, little one," Legolas had crouched down, looking at him with concern.

"I…” the hobbit feel his usual compulsion to assure everyone that he was fine and that nothing was wrong but suddenly he wasn't sure he could say another word without weary tears coming down his face.

"You can rest in my tent," Bard's face almost perfectly matched the elf's, "if we have a war to plan, I'm sure I won't need it again tonight."

Bilbo nodded and tried to smile at them but his face refused to change.

"Follow me," Tauriel jerked her head toward the entrance of the tent and started to walk out, not waiting to see if the hobbit followed.

Bilbo scrambled after the elf without a glance back and then he was out in the night air again. He followed Tauriel past several tents before they reached a modest white canvas structure with the black arrow flag fluttering from the top. The elf paused outside the tent flap and just as Bilbo was going to pass her, a hand shot out and caught his arm.

The hobbit glanced up at her with tired curiosity.

"I apologize for grabbing you earlier," Tauriel said gruffly.

"Grab is a rather gentle word, don't you think? 'Manhandled' is the one I believe you're looking for," Bilbo just wanted to go to bed and forget for a few hours what the future might have in store for Thorin and his friends.

"I did not—" Tauriel took a deep breath in to calm herself, "Fine. I apologize for manhandling you, halfling."

Bilbo stared at her for a moment, "uh… Thanks, I suppose."

A flash of frustration crossed her face as if she always had trouble saying sorry and this most recent attempt was not showing any signs of improvement. "You are…" she began again, looking as though choosing her words carefully was costing her a great deal of effort, "you are brave. And a good friend, even if the dwarves don't understand."

The hobbit shook his head with a bitter smile on his face, "it's a shame they won't see it that way."

"Then they are fools!" Tauriel growled forcefully, "they are lucky to have such a friend!"

Bilbo didn't feel any better, but he could appreciate what she was trying to do, "thank you, really, it means…" It didn't mean much, not when he knew the man he loved was likely to want his head removed from his body,"…something," he finished lamely, hoping that he didn't offend her.

Tauriel nodded and Bilbo saw something in her eyes, the same kind he had seen in Ori. The look of someone who had fought all their life against what others expected of them, who wanted the respect and admiration of their peers but for whatever reason, they had to fight every single day for it.

"Good night, halfling," Tauriel said with a small wave as she walked away, "rest well."
Bilbo opened the flap of the tent, spotted a makeshift cot with blankets piled on it. The hobbit walked over and collapsed in a mess of tired limbs, sleep washing over him in a matter of seconds.

There was no light around him. Bilbo walked down endless hallways, his hand brushing the side of the stone passage. He felt his feet turn around a curve and suddenly he recognized where he was. The darkness faded and he felt a hand on his shoulder. Spinning around, Bilbo saw Thorin looking at him with a pleasant grin on his face.

"What are you doing up so late?" Thorin pulled his arm until the hobbit stumbled into his chest.

"I was just…" Bilbo trailed off, what was he doing here? He couldn't… He couldn't remember…

"Mmm," the dwarf hummed low in his throat and put his arms around Bilbo, "you weren't planning on distracting me from my kingly duties were you?"

The hobbit looked up and saw an unfamiliar stone crown on Thorin's head, "your… duties?" His mind felt sluggish as he tried to think.

The dwarf lowered his face to rest in the curve of Bilbo's neck and he could feel his friend's mouth melt into a grin, "yes, my duties. You have no idea how many scrolls I have to go through every day."

Lips moved against his skin.

"And I find it so—"

The barest hint of teeth on his neck.

"dreadfully—"

Bilbo let out a small gasp as Thorin lightly bit down.

"boring."

The hobbit felt heat start to flood his body as his hands came up to grip at Thorin's back. "Boring?"

The dwarf licked a stripe up his neck and he started to nip lightly at Bilbo's jaw.

"Yes. So very, very, boring."

"Well, I wouldn't want my king—" the hobbit's breath quickened as he felt his heart started to pound delightfully fast, "to be bored."

"Of course you wouldn't," Thorin raised his face to grin at him, eyes dark and excited, "that's why you're here, isn't it? To rescue me from boredom?"

Bilbo nodded as he brought his hands up to tangle in the dwarf's inky black hair. The hobbit tilted his head so Thorin had a better angle of his neck and grinned back wickedly, "Are you going just stand there and gawk? Or do I have to do all the work."

The dwarf let out a little groan as he reached down and grabbed under Bilbo's legs, hoisting him up and walking back until the hobbit felt his back hit the stone wall. "You have no idea what you do to me, do you?"

Bilbo ground his hips down lightly, "I could hazard a guess."
Thorin growled and pressed his mouth forward. The hobbit let out a little chuckle but Thorin shoved his tongue in further, drowning out the sound until his body was taut with longing. He could feel the dwarf's warm body pressing into him, he could feel the dwarf's hands digging into the bottom of his thighs. He could feel Thorin's tongue mapping the inside of his mouth with practiced familiarity.

Thorin kissed with the same intensity he applied to every aspect of his life. He was passionate and he demanded just as much passion back. He was thorough and claiming, kissing hard enough to bruise.

Bilbo closed his eyes and felt the heat wash through his limbs. He dug his hands into Thorin's hair and pulled until he could see the dwarf's face. The hobbit searched his friend's eyes and knew that for all the years he might live, there was no one else on this earth that could ever make him feel this way again.

"I love you, Thorin."

"Do you?" the dwarf murmured as he gently placed Bilbo back down on the ground. His hands came up to rest of either side of the hobbit's face and held him as he rested his forehead against Bilbo's.

The hobbit pressed his face up and placed a gentle kiss on Thorin's mouth, "I do."

He felt Thorin's hands move down his face to cup the bottom of his cheeks, "do you?"

Bilbo kissed the dwarf again, "I do."

Hands moved down to the sides of his neck, "do you?"

Before Bilbo could answer, Thorin's hands started to squeeze. "Thorin, what —" Bilbo choked out.

The grip grew tighter and tighter as he saw Thorin's eyes bleed black, his face twisting into a deep, furious rage. "You did this, Bilbo. This is your fault!" The dwarf growled, his fingernails starting to tear into Bilbo's flesh.

"Thorin—" Air was leaving his lungs, his vision was starting to fade, he was — he was dying.

"Your fault," Thorin snarled and blood started to pour from his mouth and eyes.

"Your fault, your fault, your fault!" The dwarf chanted like some hideous mantra, the words sounded wet and thick with red, red, red.

"N- no!" Bilbo choked, tears pricking at his eyes, "no, I—I didn't…"

Something was shaking him. "—ilbo! Bilbo wake up!"

"No!" he groaned out, trying to claw away at the hands on his neck, "I didn't mean for this…"

"Bilbo Baggins! Wake —" a hard shake, "up!"

The hobbit shot up as his eyes flew open. He was choking, he couldn't breath, he was dying! But as he felt his neck there were no hands there. He blinked and realized that he was in a cot, sweaty blankets pooled around him and a very perplexed looking Tauriel staring at him.

"You were shouting, halfling. Are you well?"

Bilbo clutched at his heart, trying to calm the rapid beating. It was only a dream. Only a dream.
Thorin wasn't here, wasn't trying to kill him. He took a deep, shaking breath.

"I- I'm fine…" The hobbit managed to mutter, trying to calm the crashing, terrible thoughts that haunted his mind.

Tauriel blinked at him suspiciously, clearly not believing a word the hobbit said. "You have slept for a long while, halfling, the dwarves of the Iron Hills arrived this morning and we are on our way to treat with Thorin Oakenshield –"

"What?" Bilbo yelped as he scrambled out of the pile of blankets. They were meeting with Thorin and no one had gotten him! "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"The human and Prince Legolas insisted that it would be better for you to not be present," Tauriel stood up and crossed her arms, "I told them you wouldn't care what was better for you and would want to go."

His feet touched the cool floor of the tent and the hobbit tried his best to straighten out his crumpled, burned clothes, "How long ago did they leave? Can we catch up?"

The elf nodded briskly, "that's why I snuck away to fetch you. If we make haste, we won't be too late."

"Why are you helping me?" Bilbo looked up the elf earnestly. He wasn't going to complain, but she hadn't seemed overly fond of him or the dwarves.

"Bard and the prince have good hearts. They only want to spare you," she flipped a section of red hair over her leather-clad shoulder, "but they underestimate your strength, halfling."

The hobbit's gaze turned curious, "and you don't?"

Tauriel shrugged, "there are many kinds of strength. And I know that look," she raised a brow slightly, "matters of the heart are best not left to fester."

The elf spun on her heel and started to make her way out of the tent, "follow me, halfling. And keep up."

Bilbo had to run to keep up with her long strides but he found it was better to concentrate on maintaining his pace rather than his destination. Though the camp had seemed almost deserted and half-packed last night, in the daylight the atmosphere couldn't have been more different. Soldiers were no getting ready to leave this time; they were getting ready to fight.

Shouting and loud voices rang around him. Elves and men bustled through the narrow pathways between the rows of tents. The elves and many of the men seemed to recognize Tauriel and moved out of her way with little bows or waves of greeting. If he had been walking alone, Bilbo was sure he would have been trampled several times over, but he found that as long as he stuck close to the elf's legs, he was only jostled a few times.

Tauriel led them to a circular opening in the field where dozens of horses were tethered to poles stuck periodically in the ground. The elf walked over to a steel gray mare with white speckles dotting her side. Whispering gently in her own tongue, she patted the horse lightly on it's nose before vaulting into the saddle in a single fluid motion. Bilbo eyed the horse warily. The mare was about twice as big as Mertyl had been and had none of the gentle calm of his pony.

"Are you sure…"
Tauriel glared at him before slipping almost halfway off the horse and reaching out her arm, "if we walk, we'll be too late. Grab on or go back, halfling, the choice is yours."

The hobbit took a deep breath and grabbed onto her arm. She gave a great yank, righting herself in the saddle and settling Bilbo onto the hard leather in front of her. The hobbit took one look at the now distant ground and tightened his grip on the edge of the saddle until his knuckles were parchment white.

Tauriel placed an arm on either side, grabbing the reigns and wheeling the mare around. "Don't do anything stupid like sliding off."

Bilbo twisted his neck so he could glare at her, "Well it's not exactly as if I would be trying to slip, would I? Sometimes these things just happen!"

"I won't let you fall," Tauriel's voice was dry as she kicked the mare into a canter. They pushed their way out to the edge of the camp. As soon as hooves stepped onto the road to Erebor, the elf urged the horse into a gallop, "hold on!"

The hobbit clung onto the saddle for dear life. Though he was finding the experience of riding atop a full sized horse to be not only severely overrated, but also extremely uncomfortable; Bilbo couldn't tear his eyes away from the distant figures that stood outside Erebor's great doors.

Where Thranduil and Bard's forces had grouped on the left side of the road on the side of the valley that bordered the great forest, Dáin's army of dwarves had settled on the right, their black tents mottled the grass like many small mountains had sprouted out of the earth.

Three flags fluttered from just outside the great green doors. Thranduil's green and silver tree, Bard's white with a black arrow, and what Bilbo could only assume was Dáin's black with twin crossed red axes.

The horse's hooves beat a steady rhythm into the ground, going faster than he had gone in his life, but Bilbo still feared that they might be too late. For what, he did not know. His deed was done, the elves and men were willing to fight in defense of Erebor, and all they needed now was to convince Thorin to tell Dáin that they needed to fight together. What he would do here, Bilbo hadn't even the faintest notion. All he knew was that he needed to talk to Thorin, at least try to get that blasted ring of his hand.

As they galloped up the curved path, Bilbo could see that Thranduil himself had chosen to meet with the dwarves. Legolas stood next to his father and Bard next to him with a tall, cloaked figure looming slightly behind them. Thorin, he saw, faced them with crossed arms Fili and Kili on one side, Dwalin and Balin on the other, but the rest of the dwarves except for one unfamiliar face were absent.

Tauriel wheeled the horse off the path to where a few others were grazing absently on the yellowing grass. She pulled the reigns until the mare slowed to a stop and swung herself off the saddle. The elf pulled Bilbo down without ceremony, hooking her hands under his arms and lifting him like a child. On any other day, the hobbit might have made a comment or glared but his heart was beating too face, panic clouding his mind too much for anything but the now familiar sick sensation to flood his stomach.

Thorin was right here, right now and he couldn't do this. He couldn't do this. Bilbo felt his breath quicken, his limbs refusing to move. Tauriel looked down at him, her face softening slightly.

The hobbit forced his gaze from his partial view of Thorin up to her face. Strong? How could he be
strong now? What strength was there in knowing you did the right thing if everyone you loved, every one of your friends hated you for it?

A hand reached down and squeezed his shoulder. "Strength, halfling." Tauriel moved so she stood next to him, "I will not leave your side."

Bilbo nodded and took a step forward. It wasn't so hard, really. Once he put that first foot forward. He knew that was a lie, but somehow it made him feel slightly better to repeat it in his head anyway. As they approached to group, Bilbo realized he had no idea where to stand. He wanted to go to Thorin's side, to show him that he still... still supported him no matter what, that everything he did, he did to keep the dwarf safe, but once Thranduil revealed he had the Arkenstone, the hobbit wasn't sure that would be at all wise or safe, not with the ring on Thorin's hand.

Bilbo and Tauriel stopped next to the tall, cloaked stranger, just behind Bard and Legolas. He was sure Thorin had seem them arrive, but the dwarf refused to turn his furious glare away from the Elvenking's face. Thranduil, for his part, looked back with an almost cool indifference.

Dáin, Bilbo saw, had the look of Durin about him. Dark hair hung in a heavy braid behind his back. The dwarf's beard was large, two smaller braids hanging from his chin that rested atop the black mass with beads of iron glinting in the afternoon sunlight. His eyes were a darker blue than Thorin's but their noses were so similar, the hobbit might have mistaken the two for brothers.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Fili and Kili's eyes widen in surprised confusion. He wanted to wave or gesture or something, but in that moment, Bilbo Baggins had never felt so horribly out of depth in his life.

"I thought I made myself clear the last time," Thorin snarled with malice, "there will be no alliance and certainly no gold.

Dáin eyed his kin, his mouth set in a thin line. "I will stand with you cousin, you know that, but if what the elf says is true, a host of orcs will be at our doorstep on the morrow."

"And we will meet them," Thorin hissed, tearing his eyes off of Thranduil, "alone."

"Thorin," Dáin's voice was calm but firm, "our family knows the taste of Azog's fury better than most. He killed your grandfather —"

"You think I have forgotten?" Thorin rounded on his cousin.

"And he killed my father," Dáin spoke louder, "I would not think you so ready to face him again without aid..."

"Ready or not, they," Thorin let out a cold laugh, "are not here to offer aid. Not without a price. Not without my treasure."

"On the contrary," Thranduil's voice rose up, "we have already come to an agreement."

"What?" Thorin spat, "how—"

"The orcs are upon you, Aulë's Children," the Elvenking tilted his head, eyes never blinking, "we will fight with you in defense of Erebor and our own lands. Neither my people, nor the men of the lake, wish to see your forces slaughtered," Thranduil turned his gaze to Dáin, "if you will honor this alliance, we may yet find victory."

Thorin took a step forward, his fists clenched tightly, "And why would you help us now? Surely you
would see Erebor burn a second time," the dwarf's face twisted into a horrible smile.

"Uncle –" Fili spoke up but he was quickly silenced with a venomous look.

"You are a fool, Thorin Oakenshield," Thranduil's voice was like shards of ice, "grief and hatred have twisted your memories if you believe that is truly what happened."

The dwarf bristled and his stance shifted from angry to aggressive, "a fool? A fool?"

"Yes," the Elvenking reached a pale hand into one of his silver sleeves, "you should be thankful not all of your friends are so full of bitterness and greed that they would rather meet the sword than ask an elf for help."

'Oh no,' Bilbo felt his vision starting to swim, 'oh no, no, no.'

This was it, this was the moment he had been dreading. Part of him wanted to run away or shout at the elf not to reveal what he had given away. He wanted to disappear, he wanted to fade away into the shadows, he would rather not be at all than watch Thorin's face as the dwarf realized what he'd done. He'd rather face a hundred thousand orcs with his bare hands than be the one to shatter Thorin's trust in people for a second time, to prove the dwarf right. That love was just another knife with a prettier sheath waiting to sink into his back.

"What?" Thorin's face was dark now, his eyes cold and distant and so very, horribly empty.

Thranduil pulled out his hand, the Arkenstone resting on his palm, "a token of trust between our people."

Thorin let out a snarl that tore into Bilbo's heart. It sounded like a thousand deaths, like sorrow and misery and betrayal, it sounded like whatever part of the man he loved left inside Thorin had been shattered into jagged pieces then swallowed whole by an angry mouth, dripping red with the blood of every hurt, every wrong done to the dwarf in his life.

Bilbo was rooted to the spot, he couldn't breath, couldn't move, couldn't speak.

Thorin's eyes shifted slowly from the stone held in Thranduil's hand to the hobbit. When the dwarf's black eyes met his, Bilbo felt like he sharp claws buried deep into his chest, pulling and tearing and ripping.

There was no love there, there was no warmth, no affection. All Bilbo saw was rage. White hot and blinding, infinitely worse than Smaug's fire.

"You!" Thorin shouted, pulling Orcrist from the sheath on his back. The dwarf moved forward with such speed, all Legolas or Bard or anyone could do was be pushed aside.

Bilbo saw the fist closing on the front of his shirt before he felt his body being yanked forward, before he felt the cold steel pressing to his throat.

"You betrayed me!" Thorin pressed the blade harder into his throat, a trickle of blood sliding down it's curved edge, "you knew what the Arkenstone meant to me and you –" the dwarf was incoherent with rage, "you just gave it to the elvish scum!"

There was shouting behind them, telling Thorin to let go.

"Enough!" he bellowed, "or I will cut the traitor's throat!"
Bilbo felt the blade sink in deeper but felt none of what he knew should have been stinging pain at the contact.

The hobbit could almost see three bows drawn and pointed at Thorin. Bard, Legolas and Tauriel were all ready to let loose a shaft at the blink of an eye but their hands stilled at the dwarf's words. The rest of the dwarves had drawn as well, all looking glancing between the elves and Thorin and Bilbo, clearly not at all sure who they should be fighting.

Nothing else mattered but Thorin, but the dwarf he loved and the dwarf that was currently threatening to kill him. He knew he had to be strong. He had to be strong, strong, strong… But as he looked into Thorin's eyes and saw nothing but the shattered remnants of his own betrayal, Bilbo felt a hideous ache fill his heart and he was sure that nothing else could have been so terribly unbearable. Any strength he might have mustered was gone, a mocking shadow of determination flickered in his mind and then died. He closed his eyes and tried to picture Thorin's smile one last time but it was gone.

"Why?" Thorin howled, shaking the hobbit, forcing the blade deeper into his neck.

How could he answer? How could he possibly make this right? He wanted to say that if he could have done it all again, he would have made the same choice. That no matter what he would have given up the Arkenstone to save all their lives, but now… Now that he knew what it cost, now that he knew the price and tasted broken, bitter love on his tongue, he wasn't sure he could even think the words.

"Because…” Bilbo rasped, the cut slicing deeper as his throat moved, "I love you."

It was true. It was the truest thing Bilbo had spoken or would ever speak again. He did what he did for love and it was love that had torn out his heart with a bloody fist. And what was worse, what so much worse, was that in the end, it made not difference at all.

Thorin laughed. It was bitter, it was horrible, it was like knives burying deep in Bilbo's ears.

"How dare you," the dwarf snarled, "you are a liar and a thief and a traitor."

Thorin pulled his sword back an inch and suddenly a wooden staff swung out of nowhere, knocking hard against the dwarf and forcing him stumble back, Bilbo crumpling to the ground.

The cloaked stranger pulled back his hood and Gandalf glared at Thorin through narrowed eyes, the end of his staff resting between Bilbo and the dwarf.

"Stand back, Thorin," Gandalf spoke in his gruff voice.

The wizard'd blue eyes flicked to Thorin's hand where Thrór's ring glittered and he let out a weary sigh, "I see not even Bilbo could stay your hand. I had thought you stronger than this."

"I am strong!" the dwarf shouted with fury, "I am stronger than my grandfather and my father and I will restore Erebor to its former glory! I will do it! Me, me!"

"Gandalf," Bilbo's voice was worn and broken as he pleaded, "take it off him, please Gandalf, please!"

Old eyes turned to him and the hobbit saw sadness and remorse there, "I cannot, Bilbo, the ring can only be removed by its wearer."

Thorin's breathing was labored as he seethed, "The ring is mine, the Arkenstone is mine, and I will
not give either of them over to traitors and oath-breakers!"

Thranduil looked down at Thorin with tedious dislike, "I will return the stone to you if you swear to
give Bard and my people the payment needed to rebuild. I will return the stone to you if your
people," the Elvenking looked over to Dáin, whose face was a mixture of confusion and shock at
what had just happened, "honor our alliance."

Thorin's eyes rested on the Arkenstone and a dark greed washed over his face, "and why should I
believe you? Why should I trust your word?"

Thranduil smiled at him, though the hobbit could have sworn he felt the air around them grow
suddenly chill, "you have little choice in the matter, Thorin Oakenshield, I ask out of respect for the
halfling and the future of our alliance."

Thorin glared back at him and for a several silent, very tense moments, nothing happened. The dwarf
let out a growl and shoved his sword back into the scabbard. "Thorin," Dáin finally spoke, "we need
help."

"Fine," the dwarf growled. "fine, but know," he raised a shaking finger to point at the Elvenking,
"that I will not suffer betrayal a second time."

Thorin turned his gazed to rest where Bilbo still sat on the ground where the dwarf had shoved him
down.

"You are no longer welcome in Erebor, traitor," Thorin spat at him, hitting Bilbo on the cheek, "the
line of Durin will forever curse the name of Baggins as a liar and a thief."

"And if I ever see you in my lands again," Thorin turned to walk back to the doors Erebor before
stopping to glare over his shoulder one last time, "I will kill you."

"Uncle," Fili and Kili let out strangled cries.

"You can't!" Kili stepped forward, his hands clenched as he glanced between the hobbit and Thorin.
Fili grabbed his brother's shoulder and pulled him back, placing himself between Kili and Thorin.
"You don't mean that," Fili said desperately.

"I do not have time for traitors," Thorin stormed past his nephews, ignoring their words, "we have a
war to fight."

Fili and Kili stood stalk still, their eyes wide and helpless. They looked towards Bilbo as if for some
direction, some hint of what to do but the hobbit couldn't help them any more than he could help
himself.

"Fili, Kili! Now!" Thorin yelled over his shoulder, "or do wish to stay in the company of oath-
breakers?"

The young brothers looked at him, brown and blue eyes full of confusion and the inevitable sadness
he had grown to know so well.

"Go," Bilbo whispered, his voice was quiet but they seemed to hear him, "he needs you."

They remained still for a moment before Fili nodded once and pulled his brother around and they ran
after Thorin.
The hobbit reached up a shaky hand to wipe the spit from his face and felt a firm hand rest on his shoulder. He looked up and saw Gandalf staring at him with that sad look on his face and for a moment Bilbo felt a surge of anger.

"Don't touch me," he knocked the wizard's hand away.

"I am sorry Bilbo," Gandalf's words were tired.

"Why did you give me that ring?" Bilbo rounded on the old man, "do you have any idea what it's done to him? Do you have any idea?"

The wizard crouched low and pulled Bilbo into his arms though the hobbit tried to fight his way free.

"Why, Gandalf?" he hit against the wizard's chest, "why, why, why?" He hit until the anger was gone and nothing but that horrible ache was back where his heart should have been.

"Because the dwarven rings have been touched by a dark power, Bilbo," he spoke softly, "if it had remained in my possession, I would have been drawn too greatly to its power and through me…"

Gandalf trailed off but his meaning was clear.

"But why?" Bilbo said, a dry sob wracking his chest, "why would you give it to me?"

"You are strong," Gandalf stood up, pulling Bilbo to his feet, "stronger than you know. I had hoped Thorin would heed my words, that he would guard the ring from others and that you would be his strength to resist its influence."

Bilbo let out a bitter laugh. Gandalf was wrong. So very, very wrong. He wasn't strong or good enough for Thorin. The dwarf had needed him and he had just thrown some evil gem into his hands and left him to ruin.

"I am truly sorry, Bilbo," the wizard squeezed his shoulder, "I never intended for this…"

"I know."

Bilbo felt tired. He was weary and he hurt. He wanted to claw at his chest and tear it open if only to let this – this feeling pour out of him. He waited, almost wished, that numbness would take the place of this ache; he wanted to curl into a tight ball, go to sleep and wake up in his bed, back in Bag End, back in his home, and realize this was all some terrible nightmare.

But he knew… he knew that even if Thorin despised him, even if the dwarf never wanted to see him ever again, his home wasn't in the Shire anymore. It was at Thorin's side, at the one place he couldn't be. He couldn't leave, he couldn't stay. Bilbo was lost and alone and he had no idea what he was going to do.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

So this chapter was a huge bitch to write which is why it took sooooooo loooooonnnnggggggg. Sorry for the wait and I hope you guys enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bilbo felt as if there were a heavy cloud surrounding his head. Every sound was muffled, the objects he knew to be in front of his eyes seemed like nothing more than smudges. He heard but didn't hear. He saw but didn't see. All the hobbit knew was that he hurt.

He thought he might've been led towards a horse. He thought he might have been lifted onto a saddle and that they had started off back towards camp. But he really couldn't be sure. It was like he was in some strange, terrible limbo. Not awake and yet neither was he asleep. He was conscious but absent, like the Bilbo Baggins riding in front of the flame-haired elf was separate from him. Like his mind found the splitting sensation in his chest so horribly unbearable that it had shut down, divorcing itself from reality.

Bilbo just wanted to be done. He was tired, so very tired. He wanted the sun burst out of existence, he wanted the birds silenced, he wanted the man, wizard, and elves riding beside him to go far, far away. He wanted to be alone. The hobbit wanted to press his fingers against his throat, feel the cut on his skin as his blood rained down his wrist. He wanted to see the red coat his hands if only to remind himself that he was still alive, that maybe if the wound was split open then he could concentrate on something other than what he felt in his heart.

Thorin was gone, gone, gone.

The ring had devoured Thorin. The ring Bilbo had given him. Why… why should he be allowed to walk away from the man he loved, from the man he killed, with nothing more than a scratch. All that was left of his friend was an angry husk, filled with rage and greed and so much pride.

Where was the smile Bilbo had grown to love?

Where was the begrudging kindness, the gruff laughter, the dwarf that cared so deeply for the troubles of others?

'Gone;' a voice whispered in his ear, 'down to the deep and the dark. Lost to the abyss, drowning…'

The hobbit clenched his eyes shut.

'Dead;' it hissed, 'killed by trust, slain by love. He never even saw you coming, traitor. He saw betrayal in everyone. Everyone but you…'

'No,' Bilbo thought desperately, 'no, no, I didn't…'

'Oh but you did,' it purred with dark malice, 'a knife in the dark, a knife in the back. Little Bilbo Baggins who stole the king's heart and stole the king's life.'

'No…' The hobbit's fists clenched on the edge of the saddle, feeling a dry sob wrack though his
The voice let out a laugh like rusted metal.

‘Little Bilbo Baggins who only wanted to help when all he did was hurt. The man who lived while his lover died, a fair trade don't you think, thief?’

Then the hobbit had to laugh. Live? Was this living? In all he years he had never known living to hurt so much. But dying….

This was exactly how he imagined dying might feel. Slow and painful. Alone and cold. Unfair and unwanted. Like winter without a sun, a summer without warmth. It felt wrong.

Bilbo felt a pair of hands lift him down onto the ground and opened his eyes. Tauriel was staring at him, her brows drawn in concern as her mouth moved. Moved and yet the hobbit couldn't hear a word she said, unable to do anything more than look back at her blankly.

He saw Bard dismount his horse and walk over to them. He and the elf exchanged a quick word before he knelt down so his eyes were level with Bilbo's. The bowman's deep voice sounded like it was whispering from miles away. Bard reached up and placed a hand on the side of the hobbit's face. Bilbo jerked back at the contact but felt sound and color crashing back around him like an angry storm.

"Bilbo…"

He blinked. Once, twice.

"Yes?" he replied softly, wincing as his throat moved and sharp pain flooded his mind. Bilbo raised his hand with a jerking motion to cover his neck.

"Why don't you come back to my tent? I can take a look at your neck."

The hobbit eyed Bard wearily, "No… no, I don't want….

He didn't want it to be looked at. He didn't want it to be healed. He deserved every moment of sharp pain from the cut Thorin had given him. And it was… it was the only thing even slightly distracting him from the sickly soft voice whispering dark thoughts in his mind.

Bard's face softened slightly, "You can't just leave that untreated."

"Don't be an idiot, halfling," Tauriel snapped from above them, her eyes narrowing.

The bowman shot her a small glare before glancing back towards Bilbo, "Do you remember when you treated me, Bilbo?"

"Of course I do." The hobbit's voice was a low rasp, "it wasn't… wasn't so long ago."

"Allow me to return the favor then," Bard placed a hand on his shoulder.

Bilbo was about to take a step back and… run maybe. Leave this place, leave these people if only for a little while. Bard seemed to sense the hobbit's thoughts and tightened his grip.

"Let me help you, Bilbo," his dark green eyes flashed with determination before softening, "please."

The hobbit stared back at Bard for a few silent moments. He was weary and knew his legs wouldn't carry him that far or fast. Bilbo's shoulders slumped as he gave his friend a small nod. Bard stood up,
keeping his hand on the hobbit, and started to guide him towards the shabby tent Bilbo had slept in
the night before. He saw Tauriel had crossed her arms and followed just a step behind them.

"Shouldn't you be guarding your king?" Bard glanced at her with a dark brow raised slightly.

"Yes. But I told the halfling I would not leave his side." She raised her chin in defiance at the
bowman.

Bilbo let out a sigh, "I'm no longer in danger, Miss Tauriel, you don't need to babysit me."

The elf's hard blue eyes flicked down to his face as Bard muttered something that sounded like a
grunf chuckle and 'Miss Tauriel…'

"Just because you no longer have a sword pointed at you doesn't mean you're no longer in danger." She frowned at him, "You're a fool if you think I don't know that look."

Bard turned his heard to look back at her, "I will stay with him."

Tauriel shot him an acidic smile, "and so will I. You are not my king or my prince, you have no
authority to command me."

The bowman raised a hand in defeat, "I wasn't looking for a fight. I just don't want Legolas
complaining to me later about how I stole his best guard."

"That is Prince Legolas to you, human," the elf sneered.

Bard rolled his eyes as he followed the winding patches of grass between tents, "He doesn't seem to
mind how I address him."

Tauriel's face flushed as she shot the bowman another angry glare, "That is because he is both kind
and generous." Her tone said those qualities were of the 'to a fault' variety, "Even to those who don't
deserve such respect."

"Whatever you say, Miss Tauriel," Bard turned his face forward again as they reached the tent. He
held the flap open and ushered Bilbo inside, Tauriel pushing past him, chin still raised high.

Bilbo stepped into the tent and made for a rickety wooden chair that rested in the corner. He sat
down in a boneless slump and closed his eyes, shutting out the sound of Tauriel rather inexpertly
trying to a pick a fight with Bard. He stared at the canvas blankly, trying to think nothing at all and
failing miserably. He wasn't sure what was worse, listening to these people who had no idea
the pain

The hobbit suddenly glanced up at Bard who was trying to find some healing supplies while Tauriel
glared at him, her arms crossed defensively. He recalled something the bowman had told him back in
Lake Town… Bard had told him his wife had died, his wife had been killed, hadn't he? Maybe…
maybe he would understand.

Bard seemed to find what he was looking for and walked over to the hobbit, bandages and some
potted mixture in his hand. Crouching down to kneel in front of him, Bard took off the lid of the jar,
dipping his fingers into the mixture then bringing them up to the hobbit's neck. Green eyes widened
slightly as he examined Bilbo's throat.

"There's… there's bruising here as well," Bard's gaze shot up to meet Bilbo's. "What happened to
you?"
The hobbit knew what his friend must have been seeing. The now dark hand prints that rested on his skin like some horrible necklace, but he… he couldn't bring himself to recall his encounter with Thorin in the treasure room on top of what happened today.

"How did you feel when your wife died?"

Bilbo's voice was so quiet it might have just been a whisper caught on a breeze, but he could tell Bard had heard him, the man looked as if he had just been slapped. Normally the hobbit would have tried to be considerate, normally he never would have even thought to ask, but he had to know.

The bowman considered him for a moment. His mouth was set in a hard line as he started to apply the balm to the hobbit's neck.

"She didn't just die, she was killed." Bard began slowly, his voice had a stained quality to it now, "why do you ask?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Tauriel stepped further into the tent, her footsteps making no sound even as she walked.

Bards eyes shifted to her face briefly before coming back to rest on Bilbo. His face was mostly blank except for the telling lines between his brows that had grown more severe.

The silence stretched further until Tauriel let out a huff. "The halfling just lost his love. Look at his face—"

"Enough," Bilbo choked out, his face blanching and a sudden eruption of fresh pain that seemed to spread from his neck throughout his whole body. The ache in his chest split open all over again and it was all he could do not curl in on himself, away from their eyes.

Bard shot the elf a glare, "Be quiet or leave, Tauriel."

She looked between them, her face reddening, "I… didn't mean…" The elf opened and closed her mouth several times before lowering her eyes. "Sorry," she muttered and went to sit in silence on one of the other wooden chairs.

Bard brought his hand back up to resume rubbing the balm on the hobbit's neck. Bilbo flinched away again, shutting his eyes, shutting his ears, shutting his mind.

"Bilbo," he heard the bowman's gruff voice say gently, "may I finish?"

The hobbit kept his eyes and mouth closed but didn't feel Bard's fingers.

"I'm not sure I can describe how I felt when she… when she died."

Bilbo's eyes snapped open and he saw Bard was looking at him with understanding and pity in his face.

"It was… I felt like a hand had reached in my chest," he brought his fingers to touch at his leather-clad chest, tapping lightly where he heart lay beating within, "and ripped it out."

"I… hurt, more than any sword wound or arrow. All the happy days I had pictured in our future turned to ash and all I could taste was my own bitter rage, my guilt. Her death was my fault," Bard's hand clenched into a fist over his heart, "and I live with that every day. In the beginning there was not an hour that went by where I didn't see her in my mind, torn and broken. Twisted and mutilated."
"I lost myself to rage and grief," Bilbo's mind leapt immediately to Thorin.

"I felt guilt, Bilbo, so much guilt and no amount of ale or blood made me feel any less. It… broke me. I couldn't understand why she had died and I, worthless and tainted, had survived."

"I wished for death every day, every single day, until… until I didn't, I suppose."

Bard lowered his hand down to rest on his knee.

"I started to think that… that she wouldn't have wanted me to die, Liana would have wanted me to live, but not as I had before. She would want me to be better. So I started to help people, help Lake Town and in my work I… I certainly didn't find forgiveness but I found purpose, I found my penance."

"Each morning when I woke I would feel my pain start to try and take me again, but each evening when I went to sleep, I could look back on that day, on how I made life better for someone else and it was…. easier."

The bowman looked at him, no smile on his face, no reassurance in his eyes, but there was honesty. And that was all Bilbo wanted.

"Some days are worse than others, but you learn to live again, Bilbo. You learn to move forward because it's the only thing you really can do. And one day… if you're fortunate, you may find someone else that becomes not just a reason to move on, but a reason to be happy again."

Bard's gaze was steady as he spoke, "but my story is not yours, Bilbo Baggins."

"Thorin is still alive. You are still alive," the bowman said softly, "don't give up yet."

The hobbit found his voice, though it sounded broken even to his ears. "He said… he said he would kill me if I came back."

"The dwarf does not deserve you," Tauriel appeared to be able to hold her tongue no longer, "he is cruel and greedy."

Bilbo felt as if he had been punched in the gut, "he isn't."

The hobbit looked up at Bard, at the only person who might understand, "I did that to him, I gave him a cursed ring and it – it twisted his mind."

Bilbo's eyes fell down to his shaking hands, "I killed everything good in him."

"No," Bard said shortly, "I don't believe you knowingly gave him the curse. It was not your fault, Bilbo."

The hobbit let out a bitter laugh, "Does it matter if I gave it to him knowingly? I gave it to him."

"There are powers at work here much greater than any one of us," the bowman's voice was firm, "the dwarven rings are ancient, their magic is ancient. If even the wizard couldn't resist its will, it was no fault of yours that Thorin wasn't able to either."

"So we were doomed from the start? Some dark magic lurking in a ring was pulling our stings, controlling us?"

Bard didn't seem to have an answer to that.
"That is a nice thought," Bilbo grimaced, "that none of the blame lies with me."

He let out that cold laugh again.

"Nice, but false. I made my choices. I gave Thorin the ring and I gave the Arkenstone away," the hobbit wanted to tear out of his skin, "everything Thorin said was true. I betrayed him and I paid for it. Am paying for it."

The bowman let out a small sigh before shifting his gaze down to Bilbo's neck, "May I?"

Bilbo just shrugged.

"I know how you feel," Bard started rubbing the balm in again, "and I know that guilt. I know just how useless it is to try and convince you not to feel this way right now. Nothing I say or anyone else says will really make a bit of difference."

Bard started to wrap fresh linens around his neck, covering the cut and the bruise.

"But in the end," he tied the ends of the bandage together, "everyone is responsible for their own actions. What do we have if not our choices? You made yours and Thorin made his. You might have given him the ring but he chose to put it on, you cannot blame yourself for that."

'But I do,' Bilbo thought bitterly as he tentatively touched the bandage, 'I do.'

Bard stood up and placed a hand on Bilbo's shoulder. "You should get some rest. Use the cot again. I know it's not much, but it'll have to do."

He made to walk out of the tent before he looked back over his shoulder, "Are you coming Tauriel? It is evening and war will be upon us tomorrow, we have plans to make."

"I..." the elf glanced between Bard and where Bilbo still sat in silence looking at his hands. The hobbit looked up and saw that she wanted to stay. Why, he had no idea, but he seemed to have inspired some strange sense of loyalty in the elf.

"Go," Bilbo jerked his head towards the door, "I will... rest..."

"Are you sure, halfling?" Tauriel said as she stood.

The hobbit nodded, not wishing to use his scratchy, quavering voice anymore than he had to. Tauriel gave him one last look before walking over towards where Bard held the flap of the tent open.

"We'll be back later tonight, Bilbo," Bard said as he ducked out of the small opening. Bilbo caught a flash of the red setting sun before the flap swung down again and he was in darkness.

He got up slowly and moved over to the small cot, laying down atop the brown scratchy blanket. He was finally alone now and it was somehow both better and worse than before. Bilbo no longer felt like he had to hold anything back, to hide the feeling tearing away at his mind, but there was also no barriers now. Nothing between him and the tumult of dark, twisting thoughts that had grown steadily more and more terrifying.

There was a small candle in the corner of the tent, flickering and sending shadows curving along the floor. In Bag End, Bilbo had always thought the shadows cast from his candles look like little dancing figures, merrily playing against the walls. Now he couldn't help but think they looked haunting. Sinister almost, like dark claws reaching out to take him.
He shut his eyes, but all he could see now was darkness. Behind his eyelids there were no shadows, but there was not even the small light of the candle. Bilbo's eyes snapped open, trying to shove his thoughts back into the deep of his consciousness. He wanted… he wanted to go. To just – just run somewhere, feel the beating of his heart and concentrate only on the rhythm of his breathing. But where would he go?

The camp was full of strangers that were preparing for war. He could hear their shouts and the sound of an army worth of footsteps right beyond the walls of the tent. Bilbo was sure he had never been around so many folks in all his life, but he was equally sure that he had never felt more alone.

Thoughts of Thorin filled his mind. He thought of the knife against his neck, the future he had the audacity to imagine for them. He heard that voice in his head whisper admissions of his guilt and accusations of his betrayal over and over again. What was left for him now? Bilbo felt helpless and weak, like all the warmth had seeped from his body and all that was left were shards of ice scraping against the inside of his skin.

The hobbit lay there, waiting for something to occur to him, waiting for some miracle, some solution to make itself known. That's what happened in all his stories. The hero would always have a low point, a point where he could choose to go back. What made them heroes was that they always chose to keep moving forward, to do what was best.

But… he wasn't in a story. This was reality, not some page in a book, meant to entertain or teach. This was life and in life bad things happened for no reason at all. People make mistakes, people love and lose, people betray one another and there's no mystical force that punishes the wicked and rewards the worthy.

But even if this were some tale from an old book, Bilbo wouldn't be the hero. Thorin was the hero. An exiled dwarf king who had seen his home and his people destroyed but did all he could to protect those who remained. He was a father with no sons or wife, only nephews and a sister, but he loved them just as fiercely. Thorin had bled, had suffered, had gone through trial after trial simply because he wanted his family, his people, to live in peace and happiness.

Bilbo was… he must be the villain then. What other role could he play in Thorin's life now? Where did thieves and traitors fit in between the thin pages of those fantastic tales that lay in his library? Where did those who poisoned the one they love fit?

His hands curled into fists.

Bilbo knew he deserved to feel like this, to feel as this despair weighing down his limbs and his mind. All the villains in his story suffered at the hands of the hero in the end, forced to pay for their wicked deeds. But in all the books he'd read, in all the tomes that had filled his nights since he'd been old enough to make sense of the words, he'd never read a tale where the villain had done what they'd done for love. The hobbit couldn't recall a single tale where the hero had been brought down by a friend who had never had never harbored any ill will.

He lay there for hours, unable to move, only to sink further and further into his own thoughts. Bilbo ceased to hear anything from outside the tent, from outside his own mind. All he could do was stare listlessly at the dark canvas top of the tent while guilt and helpless sadness tangled in his mind like think, thorn-covered vines.

When the flap of the tent opened slowly he didn't even register the noise until he heard someone address him.

"Halfling," Tauriel's voice swam into his ears.
Bilbo didn't turn to acknowledge her. He wasn't even sure if she was real, maybe just a figment of his churning imagination. The elf walked closer until she had stopped beside the cot, her fair face now in view.

"I came to bring you word," she looked down at him, her face calm but there was a somber quality to it.

The hobbit sat up slowly, raising a hand to clutch at his pounding head, "what is it?"

"The orcs will be here at dawn, they make their way north along the river."

Tauriel crossed her arms in a way that Bilbo was starting to feel almost familiar. "There isn't much longer to wait, the soldiers are preparing for battle. We will make our stand with the dwarves of the Iron Hills on the south end of the valley."

"Why are you telling me this?" The hobbit looked up at her, his face twisted into a grimace that reflected the turmoil in his heart.

"I just thought…" Tauriel glanced away for a moment, "that you would want to know. I know… I know how hard it is to watch and feel unable to help."

"I think I've done enough helping," Bilbo let out a bitter laugh, "will you be fighting Miss Tauriel?"

The elf sat down lightly beside him and gave him a small nod, "I am the head of the King's Guard, it is my place to protect Thranduil and his son, to give my life for theirs if necessary."

"Do you think that's like to happen?" His voice was almost a whisper.

He hoped she picked up on what he had tried to say but couldn't bring himself to voice out loud. He wanted to know if they had a chance, if there was any hope that they – that Thorin – might make it out of this alive.

She gazed at him silently for a moment, "There are dangers in every battle, halfling. One stray arrow, one too many opponents… many things can go wrong."

Bilbo felt his stomach twist uncomfortably, "but can we… can we win?"

"The orcs, they fight…" She trailed off as she started at her pale hands, "they fight with ferocity and without mercy."

Tauriel's eyes shifted to meet his and Bilbo saw the same fire in those bright blue orbs that he had seen every day in Thorin's, "They are driven by hate and malice. A love for blood and battle."

The hobbit thought of Azog's white face, his sharp teeth, and felt fear course through his veins. What hope did they have against such a foe? Everything he had done, he had done to make sure the elves and dwarves and men fought together. But what did it matter when their foe knew no fear, knew nothing but where to place the next killing blow?

"But we fight for our homes, halfling. We fight for our lives and the chance to see the next dawn come. We fight for our future on this earth. No matter how many of those beasts arrive on the field tomorrow, we will show them the true meaning of courage. Our will to survive is stronger and we will die to protect what is ours."

Bilbo stared at her, wondering how someone could be so calm talking about dying. How someone could sound so ready. "That doesn't bother you? That you might… might not make it?"
Tauriel let out a small laugh, "Of course it does, halfling, don't be stupid."

"But you—" he started before she raised a hand to cut him off.

"I don't want to die," the elf stared back at him, "but some things are worth dying for."

"Your king? And Legolas?" Bilbo felt something shift in him and he… he felt like he understood her a little bit more.

Tauriel nodded, "Especially them. He is—" she paused for a moment, "they are worth everything to me."

"Do you love Legolas?" Bilbo almost raised a hand to cover his mouth; he hadn't meant to be so forward and was about to apologize when he heard her start laughing again.

"You aren't the first to wonder, halfling," Tauriel raised an auburn brow, "but no… Not in the sense you mean."

"I – sorry, I didn't mean to…" The hobbit trailed off.

"I suppose I did once, a long time ago. How could I not?" She gave a little shrug, "He is beautiful and kind and a prince. I think half the court was madly in love with the king's son but he… he has never really reciprocated the advances to my knowledge."

"We were raised together, he and I. But," Tauriel leaned back on her hands, "Legolas is a Sindarin prince, I am Silvan. It would have been… frowned upon."

Bilbo frowned, "There are different kinds of elves?"

"There are many types of dwarves and men." Tauriel rolled her eyes, "why would there not be of my kin?"

"I don't know," the hobbit shrugged, not even sure himself why he found the notion odd, "I always thought that your people were… better, I suppose. Above such notions."

The elf smiled at him, "Well, you certainly won't find any of my kin living in squalor as you might with other races. There is not such disparity to be found amongst the elves, but you would be a fool to think we are above prejudice."

"Is it…" Bilbo didn't want to pry but he found it near impossible to not cling to anything that might distract him, even if it was only for a moment, from the terrible feeling inside him, "is it hard for you?"

Tauriel shrugged again, "it is not without its difficulties. In the beginning of my time among the King's Guard, there were some who did not agree with my appointment, but I have fought every day since to prove them wrong. King Thranduil would not trust his protection to me if I were not the best."

The hobbit felt a spark of envy underneath all of his misery; she seemed to have a confidence, a sense of self that he wished he might posses too. Tauriel certainly wasn't the… friendliest person he'd ever met, but she knew who she was.

The flap of the door suddenly swung back and Gandalf walked through, the strap of a leather pack held in his hand. Tauriel had automatically reached back for one of the swords strapped to her back, but stopped suddenly when she realized who it was. Bilbo… Bilbo wouldn't lie to himself. Some
deep, dark part of him still wanted to blame Gandalf for everything that had happened and the sight of the wizard made a flash of anger course through him.

"Bilbo," the wizard began in his low voice before his eyes flicked over to the elf, "and Tauriel. So this is where you have been hiding, Thranduil was asking for you."

The elf shot up at once and Bilbo half expected her to correct Gandalf on using the Elvenking's proper title, but Tauriel gave him a respectful bow instead.

"Mithrandir," her face betrayed no emotion, but her tone was one of deference, "I came to see the halfling before the battle."

Gandalf nodded to her, "Good. Since you're here already, you'll do nicely."

She raised a brow in question.

"Azog has made better time than we were anticipating," the wizard stepped further into the tent, "the orc host will be here within a few hours."

"What?" the elf took a sudden step forward, her eyes widening, "have they called the march?"

"Within the hour," Gandalf looked solemn. "The dwarves have already started towards the edge of the valley."

"Bilbo," the wizard turned his gaze toward the hobbit and he saw regret there, "you will not be safe here." Gandalf's eyes lowered towards his bandaged neck, "I have already put you in enough danger, I will not let you face this battle."

"But I—" Bilbo had no idea, no idea, what he was going to say or even why he felt the sudden overwhelming urge to stay and fight when he knew he would most likely perish if he did.

"I have your pack and sword," Gandalf held up the leather bag.

"How?" the hobbit knew the last time he'd seen it was at the camp they had made within Erebor.

Gandalf raised a bushy, gray eyebrow as if to say 'Wizard, remember?'

"Tauriel will take you to the edge of the forest. The northern pass should be well guarded and much safer than the one you took before. I will find you a horse, but you must make haste before the orcs arrive."

The elf's eyes widened, "I cannot leave now! I need to be with my king—"

Gandalf raised a hand and Tauriel's voice seemed to die in her throat, "If you leave now, you will be back in time. I will tell Thranduil of your task, but it must be now."

The elf stared for a moment, but conceded a small nod before turning her face down towards Bilbo. "Grab your things, halfling, we must go."

The hobbit couldn't move his legs. He – he couldn't just go, not now. He… could he leave without seeing Thorin again? Could he just leave without seeing Fili or Kili or the rest of the company? Could he leave without seeing his friends ever again? He hadn't known what he was going to do, but he never imagined that he'd have to decide so soon.

The wizard seemed to guess why Bilbo hesitated. Gandalf knelt in front of him, his voice earnest and pleading, "I know why you would stay, Bilbo. But I have done you enough harm. It would give an
old man peace to know despite every wrong I have dealt you, I was not the one to lead you to your death."

The hobbit stared back at him. He… he should go. He knew he should go. Thorin said he would kill him if he ever saw Bilbo again. Fili and Kili and the rest of the company probably thought him a traitor anyway. His friends hated him, Thorin hated him. He was no warrior, no tactician. He wasn't even all that brave. Bilbo knew the only thing he would do once the fighting started was get in the way. The hobbit felt the pain in his chest roil in guilty sorrow.

Bilbo Baggins didn't belong here. He didn't belong in the company of heroes and great warriors. He didn't belong with such brave, good people as Bard and Legolas and Tauriel. He didn't deserve the friends he'd made on the way to Erebor, all he deserved was to return back to Bag End with a broken heart.

He nodded and Gandalf let out a sigh of relief.

Bilbo slung on his pack and strapped the sword belt around his waist, quickly following Tauriel and the old wizard out of the tent. The night was dark but all around him he saw soldiers sprinting from place to place. There was a palpable nervous energy that made the air seem to almost quiver before his eyes. He thought he might've even smelt the fear, but then again, it might just have been the expressions on every face he saw. Few had the determined calm of Tauriel, but the elves at least seemed disciplined enough not to let their feelings show. Bard's men, however, were not seasoned fighters as far as he knew. They were traders and townsfolk, farmers and hunters.

'They're all dead,' Bilbo thought almost numbly as they dodged their way around the rushing soldiers.

Gandalf led them to the same horse pen as before. Tauriel quickly mounted her dappled gray steed as the wizard disappeared for a moment only to return with a sturdy brown pony. Gandalf helped him onto the saddle, handing Bilbo the reins before turning to face Tauriel.

"Ride hard and ride fast, you do not have much time."

The wizard looked back at Bilbo, "Follow the northern pass through the forest. If the battle goes well, I will find you when I can. If not, you will be at Thranduil's court in a few days, they will give you aid."

As the hobbit looked at the old man who used to sell him the most fantastic fireworks, looked at the man who had befriended his mother and given him such joy as a child, Bilbo suddenly felt all the anger he'd harbored towards Gandalf leave him. The wizard looked so very weary and he wasn't… he wasn't made to hold onto anger. He'd already lost enough friends in the last few days; he didn't want to lose another.

Bilbo leaned forward and gave Gandalf a fierce hug, "Stay safe."

The wizard stilled for a moment before raising his arms to grasp Bilbo back, "you as well my friend."

There was a tired sort of relief in Gandalf's voice.

"We need to go now," Tauriel said urgently, wheeling her horse around.

Gandalf let go of him and pulled away. Bilbo gave him one last smile though it was more reflex than any sort of happiness before they made their way out of the camp. He wasn't sure he'd ever feel happy again.

Half the tents already seemed to be packed up so they didn't need to ride long before their horses
reached the boundary of camp. Bilbo looked over and saw that dwarves had already started marching down the great road that ran towards Dale. Their plate armor made them look like stars littering the earth as the low moon reflected off the metal. In the distance, far past Dale he could see small dots of light.

'Torches,' he thought, 'orc torches…'

They rode in silence away from the camps, over the valley hills and towards the borders of the great forest. Bilbo could tell his companion was eager to return to her king as Tauriel urged her horse forward. The hobbit's pony had much shorter legs than her mare but Bilbo did his best to keep up. He had no desire to keep the elf from where she was needed most.

As they made their way away from the Lonely Mountain and away from danger, Bilbo could see the hints of dawn start to peek over the trees. The orb illuminated rolling storm clouds on the opposite horizon, but for the moment, the red sun rose.

Tauriel kept looking over her shoulder as if to monitor when the battle was going to begin, but they had passed over a particularly large hill near the start of their ride that obscured most of the valley; though it didn't stop her from trying. Bilbo felt another pang of guilt when he saw her face had lost its calm blankness, her jaw was clenched tightly with worry.

'Even when I'm trying to leave,' the hobbit thought to himself with scorn, 'I'm still hurting someone.'

The forest curved away from them in a great arc but he could see even from a distance that there was a break in the trees where a path might start. The beginning of the end of Bilbo Baggins' marvelously atrocious adventure. Another page turned, another day past.

The sun was beginning to rise higher now, just above the trees and Tauriel pushed her mare into a swift gallop. The gap grew closer and closer and Bilbo thought he could hear the sound of a horn somewhere off in the distance. The storm clouds that had seemed far away an hour ago were close now, so close that he could smell the dampness on the air; a slight tingle racing across his skin that meant thunder was coming soon.

It had started to rain when they reached the trees and Tauriel pulled her reins, whispering something to her horse that made it go still. The elf turned to look at him with an odd expression on her face.

"I…" she began awkwardly, "am not well-versed in goodbyes, halfling."

Bilbo gave her all the smile he could manage and knew it must've looked just as weak as he felt. "You hardly know me, Miss Tauriel, no need for dramatics."

Her mare stamped on the ground with nervous anticipation, "This path will guide you to my city. It is well guarded and safe as you'll get in the forest."

"Thank you," he murmured, "really, you have been far more kind than I deserve."

The rain dripped down her face, curving down the side and over the frown set firmly on her lips, "You will stay safe, halfling. I'll be most displeased if I learn you met your end falling off your pony or something equally idiotic."

Bilbo looked at her for a moment and decided that he liked the elf. For all her fiery temper and unique way with words, Tauriel had a good heart and it would sadden him if he learned she got hurt in the battle to come.

"You as well, Miss Tauriel. Watch out for those stray arrows." Bilbo heard a crack of thunder from
somewhere over the hills, "you should go back to your king."

Her worried frown momentarily broke into a smile. "Good luck, Bilbo Baggins, may we meet again under better circumstances."

The auburn-haired elf pulled her steed around and with a low whisper into the mare's ear; she was off again, a gray blur racing away from him.

Bilbo sat in the rain, the water drizzling down onto him. The darkness of night started to fade but now the clouds were obscuring the light of the early dawn sun. His pony shifted beneath him, clearly unsettled by the low thunder and flashes of lightning. He turned his pony around and started into the depths of the forest.

As he plodded down the path, Bilbo was grateful that while the trees above blocked the rain, they were still mercifully thin enough that the gloom he had known from his previous journey through this forest was absent. There was an almost eerie stillness as he rode forward and the hobbit felt the creeping cold of complete isolation start to build in his mind.

For the first time since he had set out from the Shire, Bilbo was well and truly alone. There were no dwarf brothers on either side of him, yelling at each other and taunting their uncle from far enough down the line to avoid his wrath. There was no Bofur whistling as he rolled a blade of grass over his teeth. No Ori trying to sketch the landscape as he tried his best to stay on top of his pony. No Glóin shouting praises about his lovely wife or Balin patiently explaining some oddity of dwarvish customs.

What cut him deepest, what tore away at any semblance of being 'okay' Bilbo had managed to feebly construct over the last day, was that there was no Thorin. There was no familiar fur-trimmed blue coat swaying slightly in front of him. There was no opportunity to spur his pony forward and ride beside his friend.

He would never again look over to see those dark blue eyes gazing back at him. He would never hear Thorin's deep, gruff voice or see his look of shocked indignation when Bilbo did something absurdly un-dwarflike. He would never feel Thorin's arms around him or look at the dwarf's smile and know that meant his friend was one step closer towards finally being able to live again, to be free of his burdens and his sorrows.

The hobbit leaned forward until his forehead resting against his pony's warm neck as it cantered forward, not seeming to even notice the lack of direction anymore. He felt his chest wrack with shattered breathing. Bilbo's face was wet but not from tears. He had used them up already. All the hobbit felt was the now familiar and horrible ache spread through his body again. Bilbo let go of the reins and brought his hands to his chest. He knew he couldn't claw the feeling out; he'd tried that already. Bilbo's fingertips pressed into his chest as if the pressure could somehow relieve the pain but he knew on some level the only thing he was doing was adding a fresh set of bruises to his body.

His friends were out there right now. Fili and Kili and Thorin were out on the battlefield fighting for their lives and their homes and their futures while he rode away to safety.

He was a coward, a coward of the worst sort.

'But he said he would kill you,' a voice whispered in his mind, 'Thorin will finish the job, finish cutting your traitor throat if you go back.'

Bilbo's fingers dug in deeper.
He wasn't needed there. Every single dwarf in Thorin's company was a consummate fighter, perfectly capable of defending themselves. The last thing they needed was some bumbling hobbit that they probably hated stumbling over himself.

'All it takes is a stray arrow,' Tauriel's voice swam through his head.

'Or one too many opponents.'

Bilbo thought back to the night Thorin had faced Azog. He thought of the gashes that ran deep and red across the dwarf's back, of the purple marks that marred his friend's flesh.

Azog would be there; he could be facing Thorin right now.

His friend was probably the best fighter Bilbo knew and he had still almost died that night. The only reason Thorin was even alive was because…

…Was because some foolhardy, stupid hobbit hadn't taken a moment to think about how woefully untrained he was and ran sword first into an orc.

'He doesn't need you,' the voice said dripping with malice, 'he never needed you.'

Bilbo sat up slowly.

But… Thorin did need him. He had needed him since that night the company had come knocking on his door. Of course how Thorin needed him had changed the longer they journeyed together, but even with all his flaws, even though Bilbo had failed him in the end, he knew Thorin needed him just the same as he needed Thorin.

'He'll kill you.'

'He'll slice you open, let you bleed out on the ground and laugh as your corpse turns cold.'

Bilbo felt that ache, that awful, gnawing, biting ache start to change. Start to grow warm, grow hot like dragon's fire.

'And so what if he did?' Bilbo felt the burn of determination, of purpose start build, 'so what?'

He had saved Thorin's life once. He had been ready to die facing Azog when the dwarf had been barely more than a friend to him. In that moment Bilbo knew he had to go back. He would go back and find Thorin, he would protect him in this battle the way he protected him on that hill as the fires blazed around them, death waiting eagerly to swallow them whole.

And if Thorin… if Thorin still wanted to kill him when all this was done, then he would gladly accept his fate. At least that would mean that his friend was still alive. What would be worse, what would be unbearable would be walking away now, would be not knowing if he might have even made a small difference in protecting his friends.

Surely if one stray arrow could take a life, then one untrained hobbit could save one.

This was a bad idea. Probably one of the most foolish and dangerous ideas that had ever had the misfortune of entering his brain, and yet… it was seemed so obvious to him now. He couldn't live with himself if he left Thorin, if he left his friends. He couldn't just – just go back again, back to Bag End like nothing had ever happened. He couldn't go back to gardening and reading his old books as if he had never left. Not now that he knew what it meant to truly, irrevocably, and wholly love another person.
Bilbo pulled the reins of his pony, steering it around quickly and pushed his heels in hard. The pony took off back down the tree-lined path, hooves beating a steady rhythm into the ground.

"Go faster!" He almost shouted at the pony over the sound of rolling thunder, "faster!"

His heart had picked up speed, Bilbo's nerves on edge but for the first time in what felt like forever, that ache had started to recede. He still felt the guilt, that terrible feeling of knowing that he had betrayed Thorin, but instead of making him limp, instead of paralyzing him, pulling him deeper and deeper into despair, Bilbo Baggins felt it pushing him forward now.

He would protect Thorin with everything he had. Bilbo wouldn't make up for his wrongs by running away, by never showing his face again. The hobbit would fight. He would fight for Fili and Kili. He would fight for the company. But most of all, more than anything else in this world, Bilbo would fight for the man he loved. Thorin had Erebor, had his family, had the future he had longed for right in front of him. What would hurt Bilbo infinitely more than seeing the look of hatred on Thorin's face, than dying by Thorin's blade, was knowing that the dwarf had been so close and Bilbo had done nothing to protect that hope of redemption.

When he finally broke out of the edge of the forest again, it was morning. Though the dark clouds had done their best to obstruct the sun, there was enough light for it to be past dawn.

What hit him first were the sounds. Though they were distant, the hobbit could hear the sounds of battle horns blaring in the distance. The rain was coming down in sheets all around him, making it hard to see anything more than a few yards in front of him with any great detail. A shiver ran up his spine as cold wind rushed down the hill, over his now wet clothing and skin.

Bilbo urged his pony up the steep slope of the large hill that blocked most of the valley from view. Unless the fighting had moved significantly father north, he would still be far above the thick of the battle. His mount's hooves slipped on the muddy ground as it struggled to move forward. Once he reached the top of the hill his view of the valley was unimpeded.

And what he saw filled him terror.

He couldn't see well due to the pelting rain, but where he expected to see the green, iron, and brown of their forces, he saw only black. He prayed, prayed that it was simply his distance and the weather preventing him from making out any other color, but he couldn't fight fear welling inside him that this fight might be distinctly in their foe's favor.

Urgency and panic washed over him in a sudden wave. What if Thorin had already… What if…

'No,' Bilbo shoved the thought to the back of his mind, 'I can't think like that, not now.'

He kicked the sides of his pony and took off at a gallop towards the sounds of battle, the sounds of death.

When he had ridden in the night with Tauriel it seemed to him that a whole lifetime passed while they made their way from the camp, but now as he pushed his pony faster and faster, the mass of bodies didn't seem quite so far away. The closer he got, the more he could make out through the rain. The battle had spread out from what must have been in the beginning.

From what he could tell, their forces had been pushed back and fought in pockets against the steady onslaught of orcs and goblins. There were wargs too; he could see their hulking forms standing taller than the rest of their kin. Where the borders of Mirkwood jutted out in a great curve looked to be where the fighting was thickest, though there was no absence of soldiers from the trees, over the
great road, and to the edges of where Bilbo knew the Celduin flowed.

How he was going to find Thorin in this, he… he hadn’t even the faintest idea, all he knew was that he needed to go. He needed to push faster, faster, faster or he might not get there in time.

Bilbo stayed as close to the trees as he could manage, following their border. He squinted through the rain, finding that following the sounds and the smells were more reliable than his eyes. And they were horrible. He could hear shrieks and shouting now. Who was making them the hobbit couldn’t tell, but he imagined that if the terrible stench of death and blood was anything to go by, the wails and fierce cries were emanating from both sides.

Suddenly a cloud shifted above him and the rain stopped. For a short moment, Bilbo could see unimpaired. The ground was dark, so very dark and so very red. Though he wasn’t level with the closest pile of bodies, the hobbit could see that the rain had washed the red and black blood together, swirling it into a thick coating that covered the ground.

Bilbo was close enough now that if he kept riding, he would have been on the nearest elf archer in less than a minute. He needed to find Thorin but the fighting was too thick for him to get a pony through, much less a pony unarmored and untrained to withstand the terror of battle. The hobbit made a split-second decision and hopped off, his feet slipping in some grotesque combination of mud and blood.

Bilbo pulled the pony's reins so it faced away from the battle then elbowed it in the side. It took off, startled, and galloped away towards Erebor. He had ridden the pony for only a few hours, but as he watched it fade into the rain, he hoped that it knew enough to stay far away and safe.

There was a whistling in the air and something whooshed past his ear, barely missing him by an inch. A black, crudely made arrow stuck in the dirt a few feet away from him with a wet thump. Bilbo spun around but took no time to look where it might have come from; his only thought to sprint towards the cover of the trees. If he stayed just inside the border, he could still see the battle and hopefully remain out of the worst part. He knew Thorin would be where the fighting was fiercest and so that was where he would go.

Bilbo barreled through the brush, praying that no one would follow him and made his way as quietly as he could through the trees. If the hobbit had truly taken the time to absorb what was happening just barely to his left, he most likely would have done something highly counterproductive like faint or start retching violently on some poor shrub, but all that filled his mind was Thorin.

Bilbo sprinted through the trees, the sounds of battle raging all around him. Metal cried out as it slammed together, grinding and scraping like many teeth of some large beast. Shouting and cursing and wailing all rose up to the sky like a cacophonous prayer, answered only by the deep thunder. The hobbit hardly even looked at the ground, too focused on trying to catch a glimpse of someone familiar to him, someone who might know where to find Thorin.

Bilbo ran and ran until he saw one of Bard's men fall back through the trees, two vicious looking orcs forcing him to leap away from their violent slashes. The hobbit skidded to a halt, slipping on the wet leaves and mud.

The man ripped off his helm and the hobbit could see there was blood pouring from a cut on his forehead, obscuring one eye as he tried to dodge strike after strike. One of the orcs let out a sneering laugh as it swung wide and high, casing the man to stumble back, his foot catching on a root and sending him down into the mud with a muffled crash.

The other orc cackled and they advanced, raising their crude blades. Bilbo saw the man's good eye
open wide but just as one of the orcs was about to bring down its sword, the man rolled out of the way and brought his own steel up to catch his foe right in the center of its chest. The orc let out a shriek and stumbled away, the sword still imbedded deep in its torso.

For one shining moment, Bilbo could see the man thought that he had won, thought that he would survive if only for a little while longer. What Bard's soldier didn't see was the other orc about to stick him through and he now had no means of defense.

"Watch out!" Bilbo cried in terror but it was too late.

The orc's rusted blade shot forward and buried itself deep into his back. The man's brown eyes widened as he looked back at Bilbo. For a second he only looked surprised until his eyes flicked down and saw the point sticking out of his chest. He let out a weak cough, blood spilling from his mouth.

The hobbit covered his own with shaking hands, bile rising in his throat.

The man coughed once more, but as soon as the orc pulled out its blade, he just slumped forward. Completely still, steadily leaking more red onto the ground. The orc turned to face Bilbo, its black lips pulled back to reveal jagged brown teeth. It raised the sword to its mouth and licked a long strip along the flat edge, tasting the blood.

The hobbit stumbled back and feebly drew Sting from its scabbard. He tried to remember the stance Dwalin had taught him, tried to remember anything at all useful, but he couldn't seem to take his eyes off of the dead soldier.

"You'll make a tasty snack," the orc sneered at him, advancing on him slowly. Bilbo wrenched his eyes up and raised his sword in both hands, "Go back!" He tried to shout but his voice sounded weak even to him, "Go back or I'll – I'll cut you! I swear I will!"

The orc let out a dark laugh as it eyed Sting incredulously, "With that little thing? I'm not so sure ya will."

Bilbo tried an experimental jab but the orc just laughed again as it swept his sword aside. It swung in a wide arc and the hobbit could do nothing more than try and jump back. His foot landed in a wet patch and he felt the ground leave him.

The hobbit struggled to get back to his feet but the orc kicked his legs out from underneath him. His foe sneered at him and Bilbo realized that he was being toyed with. A flare of anger filled him and he swung out wildly from his position on the ground. It wasn't a skilled strike by any measure but the orc hadn't been expecting it. Bilbo felt sting slice through the edge of the orc's leg as it let out a snarl and limped back a step.

"I'm goin' to skin ya alive for that," the orc growled with the man's blood leaking down the side of its mouth, "and then I'm going to take you apart limb by limb."

Bilbo tried to sit up and land another strike but the orc was expecting him this time. Even with an injured leg, his foe was much faster and much better trained than him. The orc's blade met Sting and it knocked away the hobbit's elvish steel with ease and placed a hard kick at Bilbo's hand. His hand released at the sudden pain of the orc's steel toe jamming into his fingers and Sting went sailing in the air, landing a few feet away and out of reach.

The hobbit made to scramble after his sword but the orc kicked out again, this time connecting with the edge of his face. Bilbo felt his lip split open as his neck jerked back. For a moment his vision
went black as the hobbit landed face first in mud. He pushed himself up on shaky hands.

"Good," the orc's voice was dark and violent, "I like it when they fight back."

Bilbo felt a boot on his back and push him down into the mud again with a sharp kick. "Makes everythin' much more excitin' and –" another boot to his stomach, "it makes me starvin'!"

The hobbit thought he might have swallowed an entire mouthful of mud at this point. He reached a hand underneath his body and felt Fili's dagger there. It wasn't very large but he knew the blade was sharp. Bilbo tried to pull it out as slowly as he could; not wanting to alert the orc that he had any more means of defending himself.

He felt a clawed hand grab his arm and flip him onto his back roughly. The orc had crouched down next to him and Bilbo felt the edge of its bloody sword press into the bandages on his neck. The orc had a disgusting smirk on its ugly face and Bilbo could smell a horrible stench emanating from its mouth.

"Ya done fightin' vermin?" The orc pressed the blade in harder and Bilbo felt whatever scabbing that had formed there break under the force.

Bilbo felt anger course through him. He was not going to die here. He was not going to die in the mud, on his back, killed by some nameless orc. The hobbit glared at it as he yanked the dagger out of its black sheath.

"Never," he hissed and was about to plunge the unseen dagger into its ribs when there was a thunderous growl from behind them and something big and clawed slammed into the orc, sending it flying into a tree.

Bilbo lay there stunned, knife in hand and staring at where the orc had just been looming over him. But now there was no orc, there was a massive bear, rearing up onto its hind legs before letting out another roar and swiping at his fallen foe. In one swift motion the clawed paw separated the orc's head from its body with a horrible tearing sound.

Bilbo would have felt bad at meeting such a painful end if it had been anyone, anything, else. But at the moment he was finding it rather difficult to feel anything but stunned relief that the orc was dead. That was until the bear rounded on him. The hobbit scrambled back, raising the pitifully small dagger in a shaking hand.

The bear ambled forward until its blood covered face was inches from him and sniffed. Bilbo clenched his eyes, his heart thumping painfully in his chest, and prayed that his end would be quick.

There was a dreadful moment of silence as Bilbo imagined the multitude of ways that those sharp claws and teeth could kill him when he heard a familiar voice.

"Hobbit?"

Bilbo's eyes snapped open and in front of him now was a very dirty, very nude Beorn. His yellow eyes shown from his face but otherwise the man was covered in all manner of mud and orc bits. His hands dripped black blood as he held one out to help Bilbo to his feet.

"I thought you smelled familiar," Beorn grumbled in his low, gravelly voice.

"Beorn?" Bilbo's eyes went wide in shock. There had been a bear there a moment ago. He was sure he hadn't imagined its hulking form or furious roar. "How did you…" the hobbit trailed off weakly.
Beorn raised a brow and Bilbo thought he might just throw up when he realized a piece of orc flesh was dangling from it.

"Skin-changer." He said like it wasn't at all abnormal that he could turn into a bear, "I thought the wizard had told you."

Bilbo shook his head, still trying to absorb the fact that this man was not just here at the battle, but could change into another form entirely.

"I wondered where you were." Beorn walked over to where Sting lay in the mud and grabbed it by the hilt, before turning back and holding it out to Bilbo.

"Didn't seem much of a fighter last we met," Bilbo shoved the dagger back into his belt then took Sting lightly into his hands, "but you didn't seem smart enough to let that stop you neither."

The hobbit stuck his sword back into its sheath, his mind finally starting to think at a less sluggish pace. "Have you seen Thorin?" Bilbo asked his thick voice with desperation.

"That stubborn dwarf, what didn't know to hold his tongue?" Beorn wiped a bloody hand on his bare leg.

"Yes!" Bilbo couldn't keep the spark of hope from swelling within his chest.

"Wizard told me to watch his back." Beorn pushed his wet, wild black hair out of his face, "he sprinted off searching for the pale orc as soon as the battle started with a few other dwarves. I tried to stay with them but the fighting was too thick."

Bilbo felt his heart clench nervously.

"I think I might've seen that white orc down the field somewhat, most like that's where your dwarf will be."

"Can you take me there?" The hobbit said with sudden urgency. He had to get to Thorin as quick as he could.

"You want to go there?" Beorn said incredulously as he eyed Bilbo's neck and small sword.

"I need to find Thorin! Please, Mister Beorn, I wouldn't ask if it weren't important."

"I respect the fact you want to fight," the yellow-eyed man looked down at him with a frown, "but you won't last long out there, hobbit. Courage will get you only so far, I can't protect you with that many orcs around."

"I'm not asking that you protect me," Bilbo's mouth was a thin line now, his face set with determination, "I only need you to get me to Thorin, I can take care of myself after that."

He knew Beorn heard the lie. Bilbo could spout all the brave words he wanted, he was likely going to die if he went out there with no more armor than his singed coat and nothing but Sting to protect him.

But then a thought hit him. He didn't just have his sword. He had his ring. Bilbo was reluctant to use it now that he'd seen the damage these magic bands could do, but being unseen was just about his only defense at the moment.

Beorn stared at him for a moment, sizing him up with those eerie eyes of his. Bilbo's eyes were firm,
his voice determined. He wouldn’t not be stopped here, not when he was so close.

"If you won't take me," the hobbit's hands clenched into fists, "I will go by myself."

Bilbo started to walk past the large man when he felt a hand shoot out and grasp his arm.

"Slow down, you idiot," Beorn grumbled from beside him, "I'll take you, just…"

Bilbo glanced up at him from the corner of his eyes.

"Make sure you don't do anything foolish," Beorn let his arm go, "I can't guarantee that you or I will make it to your dwarf alive. I promise you I'll try, but this is war, hobbit."

Bilbo nodded stiffly.

"People die, there's nothing either of us can do about that."

Bilbo nodded again trying not to think about just who Beorn might be referring to, them or Thorin.

Beorn turned to face the edge of the trees, shaking out his limbs and cracking the bones in his neck.

"When I shift, get onto my back."

The hobbit saw the air start to shimmer around the man's muddy skin. Beorn let out a feral growl as black fur started to spurt out of his arms, his fingers turning into sharp claws. Bilbo watched the transformation with stunned amazement. Beorn fell to his hands and knees, his back arching and growing until there was no longer a man beside Bilbo, but a massive black bear.

The bear swung his massive head towards Bilbo and made a jerking motion towards his back as Beorn lay as low to the ground as possible. The hobbit scrambled forward and grabbed onto the thick fur on the bear's neck. He hauled himself up rather unceremoniously and soon enough was sitting with his legs straddling either side of the thick neck right at the juncture of Beorn's shoulders. Bilbo dug his hands deep into the fur and laid down flat against the bear's neck as Beorn started to run forward, breaking through the trees into the battle raging beyond.

If Bilbo thought riding horses and eagles to be a discomfort, those experiences were nothing so terrifying as riding on the back of a bear. With no saddle, Bilbo could only cling on for dear life as the bear's weight shifted from paw to massive paw.

The hobbit peeked over Beorn's head and the sight made his stomach roil. There were bodies, hundreds of bodies littered across the ground, almost like a second layer of grass on the valley's floor. There was barely room to maneuver with all of their forces combined. Soldiers on both sides stepped on their brothers and foes alike, the dead serving as little more than a soft layer of flesh that they fought upon and died upon.

The smell hit him next. However strong it was when the hobbit had been running in the forest, it was infinitely worse now. The rank stench of death coupled with the sounds of screeching steel and the wounded would haunt his nightmares for the rest of his life.

Beorn shot forward, carving a path through the fighting along the edge of the trees. The men, elves, and dwarves quickly ran out of the charging bear's path while Beorn tore through orc after orc with flashing teeth and claws. Bilbo wanted to draw Sting to help fend off their foes on either side but his hold on Beron's back was precarious already so all he could do was cling on tighter and hope he didn't fall.
A large orc with an even larger spear let out a shout in its guttural tongue and jabbed wildly. Beorn roared and reared back onto his hind legs. Bilbo yelped as felt the bear shift beneath him. The shifter dodged the second stab of the spear to his face, twisting his neck as the blade passed and grabbed the shaft in his teeth. With on swift crunch, the spear was broken.

Bilbo was now half facing the rest of the battle and in the split second before the bear lowered back down to his front paws, the hobbit saw a flash of pale white further down the field. It was Azog, it _had_ to be!

Beorn's neck lunged forward, his jaws snapping around the orc's neck and with one shake, Bilbo heard the sounds of bones snapping before a limp body was tossed aside.

"Beorn!" the hobbit cried out over the din, "he's down there!" Bilbo pointed down the field where he'd seen the pale orc fighting near the edge of the trees.

The great bear's yellow eye shifted back to see where the hobbit was pointing. Beorn nodded in understanding and pushed forward to where Azog was. Where _Thorin_ would be fighting.

They continued on, barreling through and fighting those that were foolish enough to stay in their way. Bilbo had a few close calls with arrows whizzing past his head, but for the most part, the orcs seemed rather more concerned with the giant black bear mauling his way through their forces and rather less with the small hobbit hanging on to his back.

Beorn tore and bit with such ferocity, Bilbo thought that the orcs might have started fleeing from just the sight of him. They fought and fought for what felt like hours. Bilbo's eyes were fixed on the brief flashes he caught of Azog atop his white warg. He was going to make it to Thorin. He was _going_ to make it and nothing could –

The bear let out a blood-curdling roar and Bilbo was flying through the air.

The hobbit looked up from the ground, dazed. The world seemed to be spinning around him. Beorn had an arrow sticking out of his shoulder and another slightly further down. Bilbo's eyes widened in horror as he saw three goblin archers start to circle around the bear.

"Beorn!" Bilbo called out, he needed to warn his friend!

One of the goblins let loose a black arrow and it hit the bear in his other shoulder. Beorn let out another roar and ran forward, mauling his foe with raking claws. The other two goblins took the bear's distraction to shoot two more arrows. One narrowly missed but the other buried itself deep into one of the bear's back legs.

Another archer ran into the circle and then another.

"Beorn! There's too many –" Bilbo shouted, panic and dread making his blood run cold.

The bear turned to back him and growled, jerking his head towards where Azog fought not far from them.

'Go!' he knew Beorn was trying to tell him, 'Go now!'

But he couldn't… He couldn't just _leave_.

Bilbo stood up shakily and pulled Sting from its scabbard again. Beorn saw the sword and let out another roar that shook the hobbit to his very bones.
He saw the bear tear through two of the archers, before growling at him again.

Bilbo glanced between the archers and at Beorn. He clenched his eyes shut for a moment then forced them open. Blue eyes met yellow, and then Bilbo nodded.

He spun on his foot and hoped with all his heart that the roar he heard behind him was not because of another arrow.

The hobbit started to push forward through the armored clad legs of soldiers. He was short, short enough that he seemed no even to register Bilbo slipping and dodging past their feet. He felt armored knees and sharp boots pushing into him and more than once was pushed down into the bloody dirt. But he was close now, so close to Thorin he could practically feel it.

The hobbit heard a fierce cry echo out over the sounds of battle. Bilbo felt his face blanche and his veins run cold. In his heart he knew it was Thorin. He elbowed and shoved his way forward now, not caring if he hit friend or foe. That didn't matter, nothing mattered but Thorin.

Above the heads of the fighters all around him, Bilbo saw a great white warg leap and then crash down, he saw the flash of a bloody mace swinging down.

"No, no, no!" Bilbo cried out desperately.

The hobbit broke through just in time to see the spiked mace connect with Thorin's chest, sending the dwarf to the ground in a heap.

"Thorin!" he shouted, dread clawing its way deep into his chest, and he saw two very familiar dwarves let out twin cries and run towards their uncle.

Something heavy connected with the side of his head and for a moment Bilbo saw nothing but black, Sting falling limply from his hand. Staggering forward, the hobbit brought a shaking hand up to his skull and felt blood starting to pour from his temple. Bilbo spun around just as an armored hand gripped his coat and dragged him up so his feet were dangling over the ground.

"I remember you," the orc snarled through bloody teeth. It rode atop a dark brown warg that growled furiously at any man, elf, or dwarf that might've dared to approach.

Bilbo blinked as he struggled against the grip. His feet kicked uselessly against the orc's leg and the side of the warg. His eyes grew wide when he recognized the familiar spiked neck armor. It was Azog's second in command.

"Let me go!" Bilbo struggled again, trying to turn around so he could see what was happening to his friends.

"An' why would I be doin' that? Do I look stupid to you?" The grip around Bilbo's collar tightened.

"Azog will be wantin' your head, half-man," the orc brought a wickedly curved blade over the warg's neck and up to the hobbit's, "I'm going to rip it from your neck."

Bilbo felt fear coursing through him but then he heard another shout from behind him.

"Kili! Kili get up!"

His friends needed him, Fili and Kili needed him. Thorin need him, damn it!
Bilbo kicked out with his leg and dug his foot into the side of the warg. It snapped its head backwards, body twisting to get at whatever was causing the pain. The orc jerked sideways, still holding tight to Bilbo, but distracted enough that the hobbit could reach his belt and pull out the black dagger.

He brought it up in one swift motion and buried the steel deep into the orc's chest. It cried out and let its arm fall a foot before gripping even tighter. Bilbo yanked the dagger out and plunged it into the side of the warg. The creature let out a yowl and twisted again but the blade had sunk deep through its ribs and lung. The hobbit pulled out the dagger then sunk it in over and over.

The warg staggered sideways then let out one last howl. Bilbo felt the orcs arm start to slump as it died but before he could free himself from the grip, the warg teetered for a moment then fell. The hobbit felt the rush of air around him and for a second he thought he might be able to roll away before the creature crushed him. He was only half right.

Bilbo felt the ground rush up to meet him and he hit hard. All the air in his lungs whooshed out as both warg and rider collapsed almost on top of him. One of his legs was caught firmly underneath the immense weight of the beast. He kicked and kicked, trying to free his limb but it was too heavy. He tried to wrench it out but could only let out a cry of pain when he felt the armored thigh of the orc dig into his ankle, digging deep through his skin.

"Kili!"

Bilbo rolled onto his stomach so he could see, twisting his covered leg at a painful angle but what greeted his eyes was infinitely worse than any pain he could imagine.

The dwarf brothers were standing in front of Thorin's still body, shielding it from sight. Azog sat casually atop his warg only a few feet in front of Bilbo, staring at them with his ice blue eyes as if he weren't even all that interested in what was going on. Three goblin archers had positioned themselves in front of their leader and let loose another bolt.

Fili swung up, his swords knocking one of the arrows out of the air, his face was slack with horror as he watched his brother fall down to one knee, three arrows sticking out of his body. One buried deep in his thigh, two more in his chest. Kili let out a little cough, blood starting to leak down his chin. The young dwarf quickly fired two shots from his own bow, hitting two of the orcs right in the center of their foreheads.

Fili moved in front of his brother, raising his twin swords. Bilbo could see he was bleeding from his arm the right side of his face, turning the dwarf's golden hair to a deep, shining red. He saw the last goblin start to pull back another arrow, but Fili let out a an angry shout and in a flurry of movement had somehow reached down to his boot and let a dagger fly, the small knife buried itself deep into the goblin's neck and the wretch fell to the ground in a slump.

Azog took one look at them and laughed his low, cold laugh.

"I knew Durin's blood ran weak, but I did not think you would offer up such a pitiful challenge."

Fili threw another dagger, but Azog simply knocked it out of the air with a sneer.

"You cannot win little dwarf," the pale orc brought his enormous mace up to rest against his shoulder, "I will tear your apart. I will sink my teeth into your bones. I will bathe in the blood of Thorin Oakenshield and take his head for my prize."

"You will never," Fili growled, his teeth bared in fury, "touch my family again."
The young dwarf pulled another dagger from his sleeve but this time he didn't aim at Azog, he aimed at the warg. Fili's steel flew fast and true through the air and hit the creature right in the face. The warg died instantly, slipping sideways onto the dirt but Azog merely jumped off with more grace than Bilbo had ever seen in its kind.

The orc eyed his mount distastefully as if the weakness of death offended him.

"You will die slowly for that, dwarf scum." Azog's voice was cold and calm. The pale orc tilted his head back and his blue eyes flicked to something over Fili's shoulder.

"Fire."

Bilbo saw it a split second too late. Another goblin archer had been positioning itself behind them, an arrow trained on the back of Fili's head.

"Fili!" he shouted in warning, his body going cold, cold, cold as ice.

But he wasn't the only one to shout his friend's name. Kili had shot up in an instant and pushed his brother aside. The air seemed to go completely still as Fili stumbled forward and Kili fell into the mud. The arrow had hit him in the back, deep enough so Bilbo could see the sharp head pointing out of his chest.

"Kili!" His brother cried out with such pain in his voice Bilbo thought he heart might have shattered right there.

"Kili," Fili seemed to forget there was even a battle waging around them, "no, no, Kili."

"I'm —" Kili let out a wet cough, Bilbo could hear the rattle in his breathing. "I'm fine, Fili."

Fili sank down to his knees, his swords falling from his hands with a soft thump into the mud. He reached out a shaky hand and touched his brother's face.

"Kili, no —" Fili's face was almost blank, like the horror and pain tearing through his mind and body was too much, far too much than could even be expressed.

"Protect Uncle, okay?" Kili coughed again, "and mother. When you —" blood dyed his chin red, "— when you see her again…"

"No, no, you're —" Fili pulled his brother's head up into his arms, "you're going to be fine you idiot, we're going to get out of here, we're going to see mother again, we're going to say sorry for just leaving a bloody note, but we're going to do it together."

Kili brought up a pale, shaking hand to grip his brother's, "Okay."

"You and I, Kili" Fili's body started to shake, "you and I. I won't —" he wiped away the blood, "I won't let you go running off without me. Not now, not ever."

Kili smiled up at Fili, his teeth stained red, "Okay."

The young dwarf's eyes started to flutter shut.

"No!" Fili wailed, pulling his brother tighter, "no, no, Kili not now. Kili don't leave me, please don't leave me, no, no, no…"

"I'm not…" another cough, "I'm not going anywhere, stupid. Just got to… to sleep for a second."
"I – I swore to protect you, you're my little brother, I need you Kili," Fili started to rock gently, "I won't let you get hurt anymore I promise, I promise, just – just give me another chance. Please, please don't leave me."

Kili brought his hand up to touch Fili's face. "You've always protected me," another rattling breath, "it was time… time that I protected you, huh?"

"Kili," he groaned, "Kili. Fight it, fight it please. I can't – I can't live without you."

Kili smiled at his brother again and this time it was sad. Sad because Bilbo knew in his heart that was the only truth they had ever really known. Fili couldn't live without Kili anymore than Kili could without Fili. They were one, mind and soul. In every single moment of their lives that had been a blessing, but right now, as Kili lay dying in the mud, his blood pouring out of him in small rivers, it was tragedy.

"I know."

Kili's voice was so soft, Bilbo almost didn't even hear it. The younger dwarf's hand slipped down from Fili's face and fell limp to rest on top of his chest. Kili's face was stuck in that sad smile but his eyes… his eyes were empty now.

"Kili?" Fili shook his brother gently, "Kili?"

But there was no answer now, only silence.

Fili let out another wail as he pulled Kili into his lap, curling around him as if to protect his little brother just one last time.

"No, no, no…" Fili moaned in a terrible chant as he rocked back and forth, "no, no, Mahal please, no… Give him back, Mahal, give him back to me."

Bilbo felt blank. Felt hollow as if this was a dream and he was floating over some dark, impossible abyss. Kili was… no, he couldn't be, he couldn't. Kili with his bright smiles and so much life. Kili who just wanted to grow a beard, Kili who wanted more than anything to be like his uncle and to be worthy of his brother. Kili…

"Disgusting…" Azog purred as he stepped forward, "Ending your line will be a mercy."

Fili didn't hear him though, or if he did, he didn't respond. All the dwarf did was continue rocking his brother's head, chanting a string of quiet prayers. "No, no, no, give him back to me, give him back…" The dwarf seemed past crying now, past getting up, past anything except holding his brother.

Bilbo saw Azog start to raise the giant mace and he seemed to jolt awake again.

"Fili, Fili!" The hobbit shouted, "get up Fili! He's right behind you!"

The dwarf made no motion, didn't even look up, just continued his doomed prayer.

The first blow slammed against Fili's back with a dull thud. The dwarf didn't yell, didn't scream in pain, didn't even move. Fili slumped for a moment, but then continued to gently hold his brother's head.

"No!" Bilbo cried out in desperation, "No, Fili get up! Get up! You have to fight!"
The hobbit started to claw his way out, twisting his leg, pulling it as hard as he could and ignoring
the pain shooting up to his knee.

Azog raised the mace again and brought it down in the same place. Fili curled over his brother,
coughing out thick, red blood. Bilbo knew his ribs were broken, his back was broken, the spikes on
the mace had punctured deep holes that were now seeping blood.

"You have to fight him, Fili!" Bilbo cried out, half sob, half shout, "You have to fight back!"

But Fili couldn't hear him, no more than he could feel the mace crushing his back again and again.

He gave one last, great pull and the hobbit felt something snap as his foot came free. He clenched his
teeth as burning pain lanced through his ankle.

"Weak." Azog sneered, hitting Fili again.

"Weak, weak, weak!" Blow after blow rained down on the dwarf but all he did was cough again and
resume his rocking.

Bilbo staggered up to one foot, grabbing Sting as he fell forward. The hobbit spat out a mouth full of
mud. He clawed at the ground, pulling himself closer and closer. There was pain, agony and fire
twisting all around his ankle and in his throbbing head. But all he could see was Azog's broad back,
nothing more upon it than scars.

Anger filled him, so much anger and pain that Bilbo couldn't see straight. This beast would die; this
beast would die in a blaze of pain for all he had done. For everything he had done to Thorin and
now… for what he had done to… to Kili, to his friend.

The mace rose and fell, rose and fell, each time forcing Fili to slump just a little father forward.

Bilbo crawled in the mud and the blood and the rain. He could see the white back in front of him,
glowing like a beacon amidst all the black. The hobbit reached Azog and stood up shakily on one
leg, pointing Sting right where he wanted his blade to go, right to the heart. Though he wasn't even
sure if the beast had one beating under all that malice and hate.

Steel tore through flesh, past bone, past lungs, and sunk in deep. Bilbo might've have yelled as he
buried the sword up through the pale orc's lower back and through its chest. He might've twisted
Sting, might've relished in the surprised grunt Azog let out as he looked down at the red point
sticking from his chest. He might've even laughed as the orc stumbled to the side, fell down into the
mud and looked up at him.

The pale orc looked up at the hobbit and said, "You…" before the grip on his great mace loosened
and Azog the Deflier fell dead onto the ground.

He might've done any number of things but everything rushed out of him when he opened his eyes
again. Fili, Kili and Thorin were in front of him. None of them smiling, none of them laughing, none
of them angry for betraying them. Just still.

Fili's back was almost bare now, bloody and torn from the mace. He was covering Kili's face with
his body, arms caged around his brother.

"Fili?" Bilbo choked out, "are you…"

But he couldn't finish. He couldn't…. 
Fili was fine, of course he was, just… just resting was all.

Bilbo reached out and gently touched the dwarf's shoulder, careful that his fingers not brush any of the gashes there. Bilbo tried to step forward, forgetting his ankle and fell when he felt white-hot pain lance through him again. The hobbit stumbled forward and crashed back down into the mud.

When he wiped the fresh wave of blood from his temple out of his eye and the mud from his face, Bilbo felt his heart break.

Fili's chin was covered in blood, twin to his brother's in its red, wet shine. Bilbo pulled himself up onto the side of his leg and reached out a shaking hand to push the now crimson hair out of the dwarf's face. His blue eyes, his friendly blue eyes that had smiled at him for so many months now were hollow. There was no spark, no… anything. All they did was point down at Kili.

"Fili…?" Bilbo felt the tears start to run down his face. He knew the dwarf wouldn't answer him, couldn't answer him anymore.

"Fili… please…" Bilbo choked, he couldn't… couldn't do this alone…

"Kili…" he looked down at the younger dwarf, his vision blurring as he tried to blink away the tears. But all Kili did was smile up at his brother, his hand resting on Fili's leather-clad one.

They were silent. They were still. They were… they were…

A groan came from the body not a foot from him.

Thorin. Thorin was alive.

The hobbit looked up and saw they were close to the edge of the forest. He could get them all to safety, he could do it. Then he would get Gandalf and the wizard would help Fili and Kili. Gandalf had magic, he could – he could heal these wounds.

Bilbo tried to stand but his broken ankle and head wound made him fall back down as soon as he even gotten to one foot. The hobbit crawled over to Thorin and looked at his face. It was covered in cuts, and there was blood leaking out of the mail on his chest. Bilbo pressed his face to the dwarf's chest and…

There, there was faint thrum of life. Thorin's heart beat weak and slow but he was alive. He had to get them to safety. Bilbo slumped against the dwarf's chest for a moment and just listened. Despite the battle still raging around them, despite the death, the destruction, a heart still beat deep inside Thorin.

Bilbo tried to sit up again but his vision started to grow black, his head pounding worse with every moment that passed.

'No… no, I can't… not yet…'

He gripped the front of Thorin's coat and started to pull. The hobbit shook his head, trying to clear it, to get to his damn feet and save them all, but his body wouldn't respond. Not anymore.

He pulled and yanked, but Thorin was too heavy, too much weight for him to bear. Bilbo slumped down against the dwarf, sobs wracking his chest. He had tried, tried so hard…
The hobbit felt the black start to swirl around him again, his ankle burning and throbbing.

He reached out with fumbling fingers, and found where Fili and Kili's hands lay against each other. He pushed his fingers underneath Fili's so his lay on top of both of theirs and squeezed them in comfort as he had so many times before. Bilbo brought his other hand to touch Thorin's face.

The black was almost all around him, he couldn't see… couldn't…

Bilbo felt his head fall forward onto Thorin's chest. If he died, well… that was the plan wasn't it? If not here then it would have been after the battle at Thorin's own hand. Maybe this was… Maybe this was better, in it's own sick way. At least he was going to die protecting his friends, protecting Thorin. He'd messed that up though, like he had messed up everything lately but… he was paying for it now, wasn't he? At least he'd taken Azog down with him, tore a hole right through the orc's chest.

Thump… Thump… Thump…

Bilbo moved his ear so he could hear Thorin's heart better. It was beautiful to him, the best song he'd ever heard. It was selfish he knew, to covet the sound as he died. He didn't deserve this one last comfort as the world went dark.

Thump… Thump… Thump…

But he couldn't help it. No more than he could help loving Thorin with all his heart. No more than he could stop the pain of Fili and Kili, of betraying his friend. If he was dead then… dead men didn't feel this horrible ache, did they? Dead men didn't feel as if there was a gaping, raw, mess of a hole where their heart should be, did they?

Bilbo fought the black for one last moment so he could look up at Thorin's face.

"I love you," he rasped in a whisper.

Bilbo squeezed Fili and Kili's hands as he turned his ear back to Thorin's chest.

Thump… Thump… Thump…

"I love you and… and I'm… I'm sorry…"

The world went dark.

His head hurt, his body hurt, *everything* hurt.

Bilbo heard voices around him, though they swam through his ears and he couldn't make out any of the words.

He blinked once. Twice.

He was on a bed, he thought. There was a soft light in the corner of the room… no, not room, a tent.

'The battle!'

Bilbo shot up and immediately regretted that decision, his vision going black once more as he hissed with pain, falling back onto the cushions.

"Bilbo! You're awake!" the voice sounded relieved.
"He's awake!" The voice called, "go get the wizard."

The hobbit let out a groan and tried to sit up more slowly this time. A hand placed itself gently on his chest and pushed him back down.

"Don't be doin' that so quick, you hear?"

Bilbo looked up and saw Bofur staring down at him with a kind, slightly exasperated smile.

"Bofur?" Bilbo cried out, happy to see his friend with little more than a sling on his right arm, "Bofur what happened? Did we – did we…"

Bofur smiled at him again, "Aye, laddie, we won."

The hobbit felt relief wash over him. They had won; somehow, someway they had won.

"And the… the rest of the company?"

Bofur's smile turned sad as he looked away.

"We were losin' for a while there. I don't think anyone expected their forces to be so… numerous. But after you killed Azog they sort of… were losin' their center, I'm thinkin'. There was no direction so they got all sorts of disorganized and we were able to push 'em back, laddie. But…"

Then it all came back to him. Tauriel, Beorn, Thorin, Azog, and then… Fili and Kili…

"The lads are… are…" Bofur trailed off, his voice tight and Bilbo knew.

He nodded stiffly and looked away, trying to hide the hot tears that were coming down his face. The ache was back, the ache that made him want to claw inside his own chest and rip out his heart, rip it out and throw it away so that he would never have to feel anything so horrible ever again.

His friends were dead. Fili and Kili were dead, gone from the world just like that.

"The rest of the company is mostly all right, dependin' on who you ask, but Master Thorin is…"

Bilbo didn't think he had any heart left to break, didn't think he could take any more of this pain.

"He's alive, laddie, but he'd not doin' too well. Master Gandalf thought he might be gettin' a bit better but when he learned about his nephews he just sort of… went all quiet. Dwalin was sayin' he's… he's lost the will to live."

"I need to see him, Bofur." Bilbo sat up and swung his legs off the bed. He almost fell forward as his vision went gray but Bofur leapt up to catch him.

"Aye, I know, laddie. Just let me go get the wizard and –"

"No," Bilbo hissed as he stepped down, forgetting that his ankle had broken. "No, Bofur please, I need to go now."

"He ain't goin' to be happy 'bout this…" Bofur muttered but nodded just the same. The dwarf stuck out his arm and Bilbo took it. They made their way out of the tent slowly, the hobbit having to hop on one leg even with Bofur's assistance.

"He might be restin' now, laddie," Bofur glanced at him from the corner of his eyes.
"I don't care." Bilbo was just trying not to think. Trying not to think of Fili and Kili, trying not to think that Thorin was dying at this very moment.

They made their way down several tents into a slightly larger one than he'd been in. The canvas that adorned all of them was a pale, starched white and he knew they must be in the healing tents.

Bofur pulled the flap aside and they hobbled through. Bilbo came to a sudden halt when he saw Thorin in the bed. The dwarf's eyes were shut and his breathing was shallow and had a wet quality to it. His chest was wrapped tightly in linen bandages, red starting to seep through in some places. Like Bilbo he had a more wrappings around his head and one of his arms was in a sling much like Bofur's. The hobbit's eyes fell on Thorin's left hand which lay against the sheet and there was nothing there. No ring, no evil gem glinting back at him wickedly.

Bilbo felt a bitter relief race through his veins. It was gone, gone from Thorin. Though he couldn't help but think it was all too little, too late.

Bofur helped him limp to one of the makeshift wooden chairs that sat beside the bed and as soon as the hobbit was seated, excused himself from the tent.

There was no noise now except for the sound of Thorin's breathing. The hobbit scooted his chair forward until he could rest his arms upon the side of the bed. Bilbo hesitantly reached out and grasped the hand that was no longer ensnared by the ring.

He didn't… He didn't know how Thorin would react. If he would still be mad or – or worse but that didn't even seem to matter to him anymore.

"Thorin?" Bilbo spoke gently, giving the hand a small squeeze.

Fingers twitched and the dwarf's eyes fluttered open.

Thorin's blue eyes were bloodshot and looked about as hollow as the hobbit felt.

Their eyes locked and for a moment there was nothing at all. Thorin took in a shallow, rattling breath and exhaled a sob. His looked away from Bilbo, tears starting to run down his face into his beard. Thorin tried to turn away, turn his head away from Bilbo's gaze.

"Thorin…" the hobbit gripped the hand in his tighter.

"No…" Thorin moaned out still trying to twist his head away, "no, don't look at me…"

"Thorin, stop it, please," Bilbo stood up as best he could, resting most of his weight on the edge of the bed. "Do you… do you want me to leave?"

He thought the answer might kill him as surely as any sword. If Thorin said yes then… that was it.

"No," Thorin turned his eyes on Bilbo and for a moment they flashed bright, "No, I… can't bear to see you…"

Bilbo felt his stomach twist violently.

"I can't bear to see the hatred on your face…" Thorin's voice was quiet and raspy with injury.

The hobbit reached up and placed a hand on Thorin's cheek as the dwarf winced away from the touch, clenching his eyes shut. He had… he had not been expecting that.

"Why would I hate you, Thorin?"
The dwarf let out a bitter laugh.

"Shall I count the reasons? I almost killed you, Master Baggins. I wanted to kill you, I named you traitor, I… cursed you, scorned you, sent you away because I was too weak to resist a ring. How could you not hate me?"

"Bilbo," he replied shortly.

The dwarf's eyes snapped open, but they stayed trained on the adjacent wall, "I do not deserve to use your name."

"Yes you do. Look at me, Thorin," Bilbo gently twisted the dwarf's face, almost too aware of his friend's injuries. Blue eyes slowly moved until they rested on his face.

"I was the one who gave you the ring, I was the one who ruined everything. I was the one—"

"No," Thorin shot out again, trying to sit up and starting a chain of painful coughs.

Bilbo scooted forward and placed a hand on the dwarf's chest, trying to calm him. The heart beneath his fingers felt so weak now.

"No," he whispered, "none of this was your fault, none of it. I did it, all of it, it was me. I betrayed you, I abandoned you. I am the reason my nephews… my nephews…"

"Thorin—" Bilbo tried to speak again but was cut off once more.

"I have already lost your love, Bilbo. Please, I cannot take you thinking…"

Thorin's face clenched as he arched his back in pain.

"You have never lost my love, Thorin," Bilbo whispered as he stared at his friend, "and you never will."

"How—" the dwarf moaned, desolation written all over his face, "how can you even look at me after all I've done?"

Thorin's eyes fell to the bandage around Bilbo's neck, "I deserve to die, I deserve to die alone."

"You have never deserved that, Thorin. I love you because you are kind and selfless," Bilbo gently turned Thorin's face back to him again, "I love you because you are strong and you have fought all your life for your people and your family."

"I love you because you are the best man I have ever known and don't ever," Bilbo tightened his grip on Thorin's hand, "think what that ring did to you makes me feel any differently."

Thorin looked at him, almost in shock, for a few silent moments. More tears started to run down his face.

"I don't deserve your love, Bilbo. I never have. I never should have…"

"What?"

"I never should have tried to come back home."

Bilbo felt his heart clench. Erebor was… so essential to Thorin that hearing him denounce it made the ache in his chest grow even stronger.
"Erebor is mine, but at what price? Fili and Kili are… are dead," the word caused a fresh set of wracking sobs that turned into coughs, "and I hurt you, I hurt the person that I…" Thorin gazed at him with such pain in his face, Bilbo almost wanted to look away, "that I love most in this world. I wanted Erebor for my nephews, for their future… I wanted Erebor only if I could share it with them. And - and with you."

The hobbit clenched his teeth, trying to keep the wetness from running down his face, trying to keep the horrible ache away.

"You… you can, Thorin, you'll get better and then we can—"

The dwarf laughed softly, but this time it was more sad than bitter.

"I am not getting better, Bilbo."

The hobbit wiped away his tears then glared at the dwarf angrily. "Don't talk like that, Thorin. You are going to get better and you are going to show me every last blasted hallway in your damn mountain."

A small smile crept onto Thorin's face. "That is a wonderful dream, Bilbo. But that's all it is—" he coughed again, "a dream."

"How can you say that? After everything we've been through, you're just going to give up? I know—" he wiped away more tears "I know you're stronger than that, Thorin. You would never let a few wounds keep you down…"

Thorin pulled his hand from Bilbo's grasp and brought his shaking fingers up to Bilbo's face, cupping his cheek. The hobbit closed his eyes, feeling the hot wetness run down his face, and pushing his face further into Thorin's touch. He felt a thumb gently wipe away his tears.

Thorin placed his hand under Bilbo's chin and weakly tugged until the hobbit realized what he wanted. Bilbo pushed himself onto the bed, awkwardly clambering on with a broken ankle until he was resting on the edge, propped up by an arm, his face level with Thorin's.

The dwarf reached his head forward slowly until their foreheads were touching. Thorin tilted his mouth forwards so their lips met for a moment.

"I would have loved you until mountains crumbled, Bilbo Baggins. I would have loved you until the sun rose in the west and set in the east. I would have loved you until all the seas turned to dust."

Bilbo gulped, his throat painfully tight and no words seemed to come out.

"I wanted to show you my home, I wanted us to grow old together, I wanted… I wanted so much…" Thorin trailed off.

This time it was Bilbo who placed the kiss on Thorin's lips. If he couldn't speak then he would just have to show him.

"I wanted to love you for the rest of my days, Bilbo." Thorin coughed and a trickle of blood spilled out the side of his mouth, "I suppose that is the only wish I will fulfill."

The hobbit pressed his forehead into Thorin's, disregarding the pain that shot through his skull, "Thorin… please…"

He didn't know what he wanted to say. He wanted to tell Thorin to keep fighting, to not give up, to –
to... he didn't know. He knew the dwarf's injuries were bad, bad enough that even Gandalf thought Thorin was going to die. He knew the pain of Fili and Kili's passing had worn down whatever strength his heart had left to fight. No one, not even Bilbo, could heal Thorin's wounds, of body or heart, but he couldn't bring himself to think even a second into the future.

"I am tired, Bilbo, my..." he brought a hand up to rest on his heart, "I hurt."

When the dwarf's fingers pressed into the cloth, he saw a red flower bloom onto the linen and knew that Thorin's heart hurt for more than one reason. Bilbo nodded slowly, he didn't... he didn't think he could go through this alone. But he had to.

"I love you, Thorin Oakenshield," he kissed Thorin hard on the lips. Tears and pain and sorrow. Joy and happiness and love. All of it coursed through him like a raging flood. Thorin kissed him back just as fiercely, bringing the hand up from his chest to tangle in Bilbo's hair.

For a moment they were one and whole and nothing bad had ever happened. For a moment they were back in Erebor's halls after they had learned of Smaug's death and the whole future seemed bright and glorious and infinite. For a moment they were together, Thorin and Bilbo, and nothing else existed in the entire world.

And then they weren't.

Thorin let out another pained coughed and slumped back against his pillows. His body trembled with the pain of his hacking. Bilbo settled down in the crook of Thorin's arm, resting his head half on Thorin's chest and half on his shoulder. The dwarf brought his arm to rest feebly around Bilbo. The hobbit reached up and laced their fingers together, holding on as tight as he could.

They lay together in silence as Thorin coughed and coughed. Bilbo closed his eyes and listened to the dwarf's heat beat. He didn't know how long they lay there, it could have been hours, it could have been days, but he hoped it was years.

Thump... Thump... Thump....

The beat was faint, fainter than it had been when they'd been lying in the blood and mud of the battle. Bilbo edged his ear closer and tried to clear his mind. Tried not to focus on anything but Thorin.

He wanted to cry, to weep and beat his hands against the dwarf until Thorin promised him to stay alive. He wanted to scream and shout and just expel all of this – this hurt inside of him. It wasn't fair, none of this was fair. Thorin was back with him, back in his arms and that blasted ring was off but they wouldn't be together.

They wouldn't grow old, they wouldn't watch Fili and Kili lead the dwarves, they wouldn't spend countless days doing nothing more than mapping each other's minds; learning and loving and living. There was no time anymore. Each sharp, cruel breath he heard Thorin's lungs struggle to take in was testament to that fact.

His love was in pain, so much pain and there was nothing in the world he could do to stop it. The ache in his chest was different than it had been when Thorin had called him traitor. That had been sharp, like the jagged edge of a knife carving him to pieces and every moment had seemed to be an exercise in agony.

This pain was... inevitable. It was imminent, shadowed on the horizon. It was so great Bilbo could scarcely do anything but watch in a numb sort of horror as he felt it steadily draw closer like some
massive wave. He knew when it reached him he would drown. He would be buried by the enormity of it all and never have a chance to reach the surface for all his wild struggling.

Thump… Thump… Thump…

There were so many things he had wanted to discuss with Thorin. There were so many memories he wanted to make, he wanted to tease Thorin, he wanted to show Thorin that the dwarf could be loved. That there were people in this world worth trusting, worth handing over your heart to and telling them to keep it safe.

Bilbo had thought that person could have been him. He wasn't a great fighter; he wasn't that brave, or even really all that wise. But what he did have was a good heart, a heart worth trusting. At least, he had thought he did. It barely seemed to matter now. Whatever he had been before, Bilbo Baggins was no longer. His heart was shattered, imperfect, broken. Each failure, each betrayal, each death had chipped away at it and now he… he didn't think he could love again.

Thorin held his heart when it was whole and complete and so very ready to give itself away. Thorin held it still, even now that it had been torn. Thorin would hold it for the rest of Bilbo's life.

The hobbit had thought himself content before he went on this crazy adventure with a wandering group of raggedy dwarves. He had thought waking up in Bag End and going to sleep in the very same bed each night was all it took to be happy. He was comfortable, he was safe, and he was respectable.

Thump… Thump…

Bilbo thought of Thorin's face, shining and bright, smiling just for him and he knew that whatever happiness he'd felt in Bag End was an ignorant fiction. He hadn't known what happiness was before he'd met Thorin. He'd known what it meant to be safe, in both mind and body. Safe but sheltered.

Thorin had shown him what it meant to love. What it meant to want someone so badly that you would do anything, anything to keep them safe even if that meant casting aside your own well-being. The dwarf had taught him that his happiness lay within Thorin's smile, Thorin's laugh, Thorin's boundless strength and will.

Now as the dwarf lay weak and broken beside him, Bilbo horded those moments close to him. They were precious, the most precious things he had ever owned or would ever own in his life.

Thorin took another rattling breath in and his hand started to go limp in Bilbo's; but the hobbit just squeezed back harder. He had sworn to be Thorin's strength. He had… promised that to Kili. He had promised so many things to all of them, even himself, but this seemed to be the only one he was like to keep.

He was no wizard, he was no healer even though had played at one on their journey. Bilbo Baggins could fight no more battles, nor could he raise anyone from the dead. All he could do now is be with Thorin. Be with his love until… until…

He would not cry. He would not weep. Not yet.

He would be strong, damn it. Strong for Thorin, strong for himself. There would be a time to fall apart. To watch the pieces of his life fall from his numb fingers and feel nothing but aching sadness as they scattered to the past, to happier times. But not now.

Thump… Thump…
Bilbo looked up at Thorin's face, at his closed eyes, his drawn brows, and sickly pale skin. The dwarf looked gaunt now, almost hallow. Pain was dug into the lines of his face. Life had not been kind to Thorin Oakenshield and it seemed that death would be no kinder.

The hobbit wanted to… wanted to cup his hands around the dwarf's face and kiss him until there was nothing left in this world. Until dust and ash piled up around them, until the sun died and the moon disappeared into the dark of night. He wanted Thorin so badly it made his chest feel like it was about to crack open and shatter into dust itself. But Thorin was no longer his. Not completely anyway. There was a part of him that died with Fili and Kili. A part of him that just… couldn't live on even if Bilbo was there every day for a lifetime.

Tragedy had burrowed itself deep into the line of Durin and today it would claim its last. Death was a hungry god, Bilbo thought bitterly, and it cared nothing for those left behind. Those who linger in its wake, cursing death for taking, taking, taking.

Taking everything but them too.

Bilbo reached up and gently traced Thorin's lips with his finger, then moved to his nose and his cheeks. Down his chin and touching his neck gently. The hobbit would memorize every last detail about Thorin, every last curve and dip. Every tiny piece of perfection about the dwarf would belong to Bilbo's memory, to his steady, broken heart.

Thump…

Bilbo brought his hand down next to his face and rested it gently over Thorin's weak, almost still heart. The only part of his friend that would belong to him forever. The only piece of Thorin he could take with him when he left this place.

The hobbit felt the enormity of it all wash over him and for a moment he couldn't breath. This was love. This.

Love was Thorin looking to him. Asking, pleading Bilbo to teach him how to trust again. Thorin had needed to know that he was worth loving. That he wasn't so scarred and burned by the cruelty of life that another being could look upon him with anything more than cool indifference. He needed to know that there was something more than revenge, something more than stone halls and ancient treasure.

"You are worth it," Bilbo muttered into Thorin's chest.

"Hm?" the dwarf barely whispered, his blue eyes blinking open slowly.

"You are worth loving, Thorin."

The dwarf looked at him for a moment and then a smile broke out of his face. It wasn't big, it wasn't wide. But it was bright, like the shining sun in the sky or the biggest ember in the fire. It was heat and warmth and safety. But most of all, it was love.

Thorin closed his eyes again and gave Bilbo's hand a squeeze, that smile still resting on his face.

Bilbo listened for the next heartbeat, waited for the next thump in Thorin's chest, but it never came. The hobbit pressed his ear in hard.

Waiting, waiting, waiting.
But all Bilbo Baggins heard was a yawning silence as the tears started to pour from his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so I know a lot of you guys (pretty much everyone) wanted me to not kill them. I won't go into a huge novel length essay about why I am keeping the plot pretty much the same. I was teetering back and forth for a really long time but what it came down to, I think, is that Bilbo's story to me is not a fairy tale. If you look at the book with a pair of sparkly Bagginshield lenses it is really tragic. Like holy shit Niagara Falls is pouring from my face tragic. Which, in my slightly masochistic tendencies, I happen to enjoy. It feels more real to me and, while I enjoy fix-its as much as the next person, a huge part of why I love Bilbo's character is that he does have all this shit happen to him and he still lives on and he still cares for Frodo.

THAT BEING SAID THERE WILL BE ONE MORE CHAPTER. It will be an epilogue of sorts and, while I'm probably giving my master plan away, THIS STORY WILL HAVE A HAPPY ENDING DAMN IT (read: I would be ever so grateful if no assassins or mobs with flaming pitchforks came knocking at my door quite yet :P)
Okay so I totally thought this was going to be like 40 pages, 60 pages TOP and that I would get it out really soon after chapter 25. I was wrong. So very, very wrong. It's 120 pages, which is why this bitch took so fucking long to write, stg it's like a fifth of the total story length. Anyway, hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Silence.

Great and terrible silence weighed down upon him. It was thick and smothering and Bilbo felt like he might suffocate.

He knew he should want to tear through it with his hands and fingers until they were raw, bloody stumps. He should want to rip, to break, to do something that wasn't just lying there beside Thorin. He should want to do anything but wait; wait for someone else, something else to bring him back to the world of the living.

But he didn't. Bilbo didn't want anything. He laid there and tried to remember what it meant to breathe. What it meant to move, to think, to act and yet nothing came to mind. It seemed like the only thing his body could do right then was hurt. His head hurt from where it had been hit in the battle. His ankle throbbed with a sharp sort of burn. But most of all, more than anything, his chest was cold and nausea lingered in his stomach.

Thorin's story wasn't meant to end like this. Fili and Kili's weren't supposed to end like this. They were heroes. They were good; they were generous and selfless and kind.

Their stories were supposed to end in old age, happiness, and a restful sort of fulfillment.

The unfairness of it all was so unimaginable, so bitterly purposeless that Bilbo almost couldn't believe that… that this was real, that this was happening. The cruelty, the death and the pain; everything was so tragically arbitrary.

What was the point? What was the point of it all if the good perished and the wicked lived?

Where was their justice? Where was their retribution for all those years of hardship; for having to claw their way back home?

Bilbo clutched tightly to Thorin's cold hand.

Why was he left here, alone and afraid?

There were questions, so many questions floating around through his head and nothing but silence answered them… But hanging in that empty air was an answer in itself. Bilbo Baggins finally understood that there were no answers.

There was no justice, there was no – no powerful force out there watching over them. There was no
guiding hand that ensured those who deserved more than anything to be happy would get their years of peace in the end.

There was only death. The only thing that was assured; the only thing that would bind them all together in one final act of inevitability. The only thing that was guaranteed from their first gasping breath in this world.

And it wasn't fair. It wasn't right.

But it was real.

How could he deny that Thorin was gone? The fingers in his hand were stiff and cold, so unlike the fire he knew had coursed through the dwarf's veins ever since he had first laid eyes on Thorin.

How could he deny that Thorin and Fili and Kili were no longer here with him? He would never speak to them, he would never hold them, he would never see their smiles or hear their laughs. The last time he was awake, they had been alive and now they were all… they were all dead.

In a single moment everything he loved had been ripped away from him.

There had been a heartbeat deep in Thorin's chest that meant he was alive; that he would take one more breath and he would live. And then there wasn't. In one short second, in one horrible, awesome moment everything changed. How could… How could something so infinitely powerful, something so large and impossible to understand take place in such a short, insignificant period of time?

How could his whole world fall apart in a breath, in a heartbeat?

How many moments, days, and years had he spent sleeping or gardening or reading books in his house? How many of those moments had meant nothing at all? Had simply been a transition to the next experience, how many of those had he never even considered, cast to the back of his mind to memory; to gather dust and decay from lack of use.

How could one of those moments possibly hold enough power and significance to tear him apart?

But… maybe that was all they had in the end.

A moment of happiness, a moment of sorrow, a moment of change. All strung together with feeble hands, pushed close to try and make some semblance of meaning because the alternative, the randomness of it all was enough to break you. There was no order or path to set these moments. No combination that guaranteed that the outcome would mean happiness or fulfillment.

Bilbo felt empty and cold. But not empty and cold enough to not feel that ache. That excruciating, gnawing, biting ache that had become his closest companion, curling itself deep in his chest, digging its claws in deep, so deep Bilbo couldn't tell where it ended and he began.

Or maybe that wasn't right either.

Maybe he was that ache now. Maybe that was all he would ever feel again. Maybe he could just give in, just let it consume him body and soul until he withered away next to Thorin. He wondered how long he would have to wait until darkness took him; how many moments filled with this pain he would have to experience until there was nothing left. Until he was nothing but bones and dust and blissfully blank.

Gone, vacant, free.
Free of this feeling.

The thought clenched at his heart, digging into his mind with sharp, jagged points.

This feeling, this hurt… it was love wasn't it? It was his love for Thorin. For Fili and Kili. It was love turned to pain and loss and agony.

Or maybe it was just… love. Not turned to anything, not transformed, not bitter. Maybe it was pure.

Bilbo had always thought love was good and happy and warm. He had always thought that to be in love was the most glorious, soaring feeling in the world. He had loved his parents but he had never been in love with anyone else. He had never given his heart away to another for safekeeping.

All he knew of that love, he knew from his books. Where they lived happily ever after and held hands and smiled just for each other. There were trials and hardships before the heroes were in love but after it was all bliss. There were no deaths; there was nothing unfair about those tales.

He'd had… perhaps a few days of being with Thorin. And even then he hadn't had the chance to be with Thorin. He hadn't woken up beside his friend, his best friend, and smiled knowing that there would be countless days like this in front of them. He hadn't had a lifetime to make memories; he hadn't had any time at all really.

And that was the cruelty of it. He had read all of these stories and tales and he knew what he thought love should be. He had thought love would conquer all and nothing would really turn out bad in the end because when did that happen in his books? When did pointless tragedy tear everything down in a swift, irrevocable strike?

Never.

But his life wasn't a book. It wasn't a story or a fantastical tale about how an exiled dwarf king found love and redemption and led his people home to live the rest of his days in peace. It wasn't about a small hobbit of the shire who took a chance, who left home searching for adventure but found love and friendship instead. Who left his home but found another and lived full of warmth and glowing contentment until 'the end', until there were no more pages to turn and they remained immortal in love until you picked up the book again and started from the beginning.

There were no endings. No beginnings. This wasn't about him or Thorin or anyone. They were specks of dust, suspended on a brief sliver of sunlight and the world moved on when they were swept aside, just as it had before they had even existed at all. Nothing came to a close or was final or had a just conclusion; everything just was until it... until it wasn't. And how could they possibly matter when they hadn't meant anything at all to begin with?

The sun would not cease to rise again because Thorin and Fili and Kili were dead. The moon would not cease to shine in the night sky because they no longer breathed air deep into their lungs. Just because they were still didn't mean that anything would really change. The trees would not mourn their passing, the earth would not weep for their loss, the rivers and lakes would not seep into the ground to lament their deaths.

Men and elves and dwarves would talk of them until their names grew musty on their tongues. Until they were just that, names. Names without faces or feeling. Just… sounds whispered on a breeze.

Bilbo wanted it all to stop. He wanted to sun to explode in a blaze of fury. He wanted the moon to shatter in the sky and fall to the ground in pieces, tearing the dirt and water and trees to shreds. He wanted everyone to know what had been lost. He wanted to birds to sing their dirge; he wanted the
sky to weep until the end of all things. He wanted this all to mean something.

How could the world not mourn their passing? How could the sun rise again and day after day go on like nothing had changed? Like the world was not infinitely poorer for loss of three of the most amazing, brilliant, bright friends he’d ever known.

The sheer indifference of it all was horrifyingly overwhelming. They meant nothing. Each and every one of them meant nothing at all.

And yet…

As he looked at Thorin's still face, frozen in that smile; Bilbo knew they meant everything. What he was feeling was real, what he was thinking was real. Thorin's life had been real. There was nothing so insignificant and yet so frighteningly powerful as life.

If it wasn't… then he wouldn't feel this wrenching, stomach-churning sense of loss, would he?

They meant nothing to the world but they meant everything to each other. He couldn't doubt the enormity and power of a life when the loss of three were making his heart shatter.

He had loved Thorin when it had meant happiness. He had loved Thorin when it meant betrayal and hurt. He would continue to love Thorin now that it meant tragedy. He would love because that's all he could now, all he wanted to do. It would destroy him, Bilbo was sure of that, but there was never any other option.

Thorin had pushed himself into his home, into his mind and thoughts, and into his heart. The dwarf had grumbled and glared and shoved until there was no room for anyone else. Thorin had made him feel; had shown him what it meant to give yourself to another, to leave nothing hidden, to lay bare your hopes and dreams and desires. He had shown Bilbo what it meant to want to share yourself wholly and completely. He had shown Bilbo what it meant to sacrifice.

A lesson he now wished he had never had to learn.

But wishing didn't matter.

Wishing was a crutch, a blindfold for those who still had faith there was something other than chance pulling the strings of this world. But that wasn't right either, he supposed. There were no strings, no gears, no one steering.

There was life and there was choice.

Sometimes they looked the same, sometimes they were even intertwined but Bilbo knew they were separate and one was vastly inferior to the other. Choice was there, choice was important, but it would never be more powerful than life. What were they, if not the sum of their actions, of their decisions? But what made the circumstance for their decisions? What had forced Bilbo between choosing Thorin's life or Thorin's trust?

Life was chaotic and cruel. Horrible and sad; but it was also wonderful. Breathtaking and delightful. It was love and loss. Life forced them into their choices and they made the best of what they were given. There was never a correct answer, never a better choice because there was no outcome that was guaranteed by choosing one path over another. There was too much randomness and chance, too many variables to ever know what might have been done. If he had made a different choice, if he had done anything different that might have led to Thorin living.

And there was something horrible in that. A sort of inevitable ignorance that was great and
frightening. But that was life. That was what led them here, to this bed, to this moment where Bilbo took in another breath while Thorin couldn't.

It wasn't comforting, Bilbo realized. There was no assurance in this. There was nothing to hold back his despair or soothe the wounds of his mind and body. It simply was. And he would have to deal with it. He would have to move forward; have to see the sun rise and the sun set while Thorin did not. He was the one who would have to smile and speak and move his tired limbs.

He was the one who had to live.

Somewhere deep in his mind, Bilbo knew he should be grateful for that, but right now it felt nothing more than a burden. It was hard and it was tiring and it hurt more than anything. He didn't…. he didn't want any of this.

He wanted Thorin. He had only wanted Thorin. And now he had nothing but grief.

Bilbo squeezed the hand again and buried his face further into the dwarf's still chest. He knew he should move; should… should go get someone. But all he did was weep. Warm tears poured out between gasping breaths. He wished they would heat Thorin's skin, he wished he could share his breaths with the dwarf's lungs. There was nothing so final, so wretchedly horrible as the stillness beneath him.

Bilbo almost waited for Thorin to suddenly gasp again, to cough and wipe away his mouth. He couldn't smother that lingering, traitorous spark of hope that this was all a dream and everything would be all right when everything around him screamed at the fallacy of his thoughts. He knew Thorin was dead, he knew that but at his core, what made Bilbo, Bilbo was that he couldn't help but wish for the best. He had not been so scarred in life as Thorin, he had not been knocked down so many times that success and happiness seemed like an impossible dream.

He didn't want to live alone. He didn't want to go back to the Shire. To Hobbiton and Bag End and wake every morning knowing that Thorin wasn't there beside him. He didn't want to grieve for the rest of his life; to know that this feeling, this ache would never lessen. Bilbo didn't think he could live like that. He wanted Thorin and Erebor and happiness. But since he couldn't have that, Bilbo wanted the silence to take him too. He wanted to see nothing but dark, to be embraced by the empty nothingness of eternity.

He lay there, curled against Thorin for what felt like an age. He wanted someone to come in, someone to remind him that he was not alone; but he equally loathed the thought. He didn't want to have to pretend that he was fine. Bilbo didn't want to do anything but weep in the hopes that maybe the next tear would be the last.

"Bilbo…?"

A low, gravelly voice came from the entrance of the tent. It was Gandalf, he knew it was, but he didn't turn his head to look. The wizard's entrance would mean that life was moving forward again. That the next series of choices and moments were upon him and Bilbo didn't think he could bear that. If Gandalf was here that would mean that Thorin's death would not just belong to him anymore, that he could no longer cling to the false hope that if he waited, perhaps in the next moment, Thorin would start to breathe again.

"Bilbo…"
He pushed his face in harder, trying to ignore the noise, but it didn't make anything better. It didn't change anything.

"Go away…"

His voice was quiet and raspy, foreign to even his own ears.

Bilbo heard soft footsteps come to rest next to the opposite side of the bed he and Thorin rested on. There was a slight ruffle of fabric and he saw the wizard's hand come into view, resting gently on the sliver of Thorin's heart that wasn't covered by his head.

Silence.

The hand moved up to Thorin's face, two fingers rested gently on the dwarf's forehead as Gandalf spoke in a tongue that Bilbo didn't recognize. It sounded like a prayer almost, it sounded old and mournful but when the dwarf's eyes didn't flutter open as they had after the eagle's flight, the last shard of hope that had nestled unrecognized even by the hobbit was crushed in his chest.

He let out another wracking sob and closed his eyes.

Thorin was gone.

Gone, gone, gone.

His body remained, lifeless and empty. No magic would revive him. No tears would warm that corpse enough that a soul would slip back in. No amount of love in this world would raise the dead from their sleep.

"I am sorry, Bilbo."

What could he say to that? What could he possibly say?

Years of maintaining a respectable politeness to everyone he met almost made him thank Gandalf for his concern and assure the wizard that he was, in fact, perfectly fine and there was nothing to worry about.

But that wasn't true. There had never been anything less true. He was not fine. He was not going to be all right. He was broken and hurting and so very weary that if the ground swallowed them whole, Bilbo Baggins would have felt nothing except for relief that this grief, this tragedy was finally over.

He ignored Gandalf. He had nothing to say. There were no words for this. There were no thoughts or gestures that would do any of this justice. There was only inarticulate, horrible feeling.

"Thorin was…" Gandalf's voice trailed off, "Thorin was a good man."

Bilbo wanted to laugh, cold and bitter. He had never heard something more understated in his life. Thorin could not be summed up in a phrase, in a few paltry, insignificant words. Thorin had been everything. And now he was dead.

He brought his eyes slowly up to meet Gandalf's dark blue ones. He saw an old grief in the wizard's face and wondered for a brief moment what it would feel like to have all that power and still be so weak, so helpless to the brutality and chaos as the rest of them. To be so weak that he needed a hobbit to carry a ring for him. And for a moment he pitied Gandalf.

It was almost laughable. Strength and weakness, they didn't really mean a thing, did they? Thorin
was strong. Fili and Kili were strong. And what help did that do them in the end? Gandalf was a wizard and all he could do was watch as he gave Bilbo the key to Thorin's destruction because the keeping the ring in his safekeeping would have meant something worse for world.

Bilbo knew why Gandalf had given it to him, but in that moment the weight of the world's fate didn't seem nearly so heavy as the weight of Thorin's death. But Gandalf had made his choice, had chosen to trust in the hope that Bilbo would be enough to keep Thorin from succumbing to its will.

Gandalf had been wrong. He had been completely and utterly wrong. But in the end his choice had saved countless more lives than it had cost. And that was how the wizard had to make his decisions, Bilbo thought, Gandalf had to weigh the world over an individual and that was his burden to bear.

So why did Bilbo feel like nothing had been won? Some hypothetical future where the ring corrupted Gandalf had been avoided, but the future where the ring corrupted Thorin had come to pass. That one was real. That future had happened. And the hobbit couldn't help but want to trade all those distant, meaningless lives for Thorin's.

It was a horrible thought, dark and selfish. Bilbo knew he should shove it away and never dwell on it ever again. But he couldn't. All those people meant nothing to him, their happiness; their moments were no more real to him than those he read about in his books. Their safety brought him no comfort in the face of Thorin's death.

He would make a terrible wizard.

The thought almost brought a bubble of manic laughter to his throat. He could picture Thorin rolling his eyes at the thought. He could hear Fili and Kili's laughter as they no doubt assured him that he would be the best wizard that ever was, but only if he used his powers to get them some extra food.

The pain washed over him again, fresh and splitting.

Is this how he would have to live? Would he be haunted by their shadows? Alive only in the back of his mind, tormenting him with their absence?

"They will never be truly gone from you, Bilbo."

Had he spoken that aloud? Bilbo opened his eyes to see Gandalf was looking at him as he must have looked at countless before him. Death was surely no stranger to a man who passed through so many lives.

"They are gone," his voice cracked, "they're gone forever and now I'm –" he sobbed again, "I'm alone."

"They will live on in your heart and your memories."

Bilbo knew Gandalf's words were meant to be reassuring but they cut him deeper than any sword.

"That is cruel," he whispered, "I shouldn't have to live with just… memories. With shadows."

"I know it seems that way now," Gandalf reached across Thorin's body to rest a hand lightly on Bilbo's shoulder, "but in time you will… you will treasure them."

This time he did laugh, but perhaps it sounded more like a sob. The hobbit didn't think they would ever sound all that different again.

"Don't lie to me," Bilbo's hand clenched, "don't – don't offer me cheap consolation, Gandalf."
Time? What could time offer him? More moments? It was moments that cursed him, made him suffer. More time could only bring grief and loneliness. More time was the last thing he wanted. Not if Thorin wasn't here to share it with him.

The wizard looked almost hollow, his mouth set in a thin, crooked line.

"Thorin is… dead," the word tasted like rust on his tongue, "Fili and Kili are dead. I don't want memories. I don't want to treasure memories. I want them alive. I want…"

Bilbo's words curled like dried leaves on his tongue. He didn't even know why he was talking to Gandalf right now. He knew words would do nothing. He couldn't be consoled nor would expressing himself make this any easier. It just hurt.

Gandalf nodded, giving Bilbo's shoulder another squeeze. He clung to the sensation for a heartbeat, the feeling of something that wasn't cold.

"You need to rest, Bilbo," Gandalf pulled his hand away, "you have your own injuries to be tended."

The hobbit's hand unconsciously gripped Thorin's again. The thought of leaving filled him with fear.

"No…" he choked out, "no, I can't…. not – not yet…"

Gandalf nodded again slowly.

"I will return later."

The wizard turned and exited the tent, leaving Bilbo to his grief.

The hobbit pulled himself up so his head rested beside Thorin's on the stiff pillow. The dwarf's hair rested around his head in an inky black mess. Bilbo pushed his other arm above his head so his hand could thread through the strands. More tears, poured down his cheeks, dripping down so they fell down onto the dwarf's face.

He moved his hand through Thorin's hair in small motions, bringing it up again to rest of the dwarf's forehead. He closed his eyes and imagined Thorin was sleeping. A lance of pain shot through him again and the hobbit knew he shouldn't dwell in that fantasy. The only thing that would lead to was more pain.

"I'm sorry Thorin…" He whispered, lips a hair's breadth away from the dwarf's cold skin.

He was sorry for so many things. Sorry that he gave Thorin that ring. Sorry he couldn't protect the dwarf from its corruption. Sorry that Thorin had suffered so much in his life and that his end was full of violence and hurt.

He was sorry for the days they would never have and that the last of the ones they had shared had been tainted with betrayal.

He was sorry that in the end, Bilbo had failed his friend. He had failed to protect Thorin and his nephews when they needed him most.

Bilbo placed a gentle kiss on the dwarf's brow and lingered there. This was the last time he would kiss Thorin.

"I love you…" He murmured, Thorin's skin muffling the sound. It hurt so badly he wanted to clutch
at his heart and tear it away but instead he stroked the dwarf's hair.

"I love you, I love you..." sobs wracked his chest and each one hurt more than the last, "I love you..."

He knew his words fell on deaf ears, but... that wasn't the point. Thorin couldn't hear him anymore, but he could hear himself.

A wave of grief and agony and nausea flooded through him and he thought for a moment he might pass out again.

"I love you, I love you," he whispered through sobs.

Everything poured from him. Each word like a small release of heartbreak.

"I love you, Thorin. I love you..."

All that pain and hurt and affection. Everything seemed to come rushing out. All his regrets and his hopes. All of his love.

He cried and whispered into Thorin's skin until he felt numb and empty. Until his eyes were red and dry and nothing could come forth anymore. He felt dizzy, like he was balancing on the edge of unconsciousness.

Bilbo placed one last kiss on Thorin's forehead, his hand gripping tightly at his friend's hand and hair.

This was the last time he would ever look at Thorin again. Bilbo felt that deep in his bones. This was the last time he would ever kiss him, talk to him, feel him. This was the end. This final moment that they would be together. In his heart he knew that it had already passed when Thorin drew his last rattling breath, but he allowed himself this one last lie.

Bilbo pressed his lips in hard and clenched his eyes shut.

This was the end.

His choice was whether to make it this moment or the next. It was a feeble choice, a cruel choice, but it was the only one left to Bilbo Baggins.

The rain made his hair wet. Rivulets ran down from his drenched hair, curling down his face, dripping off his chin. The mud was cold around his legs where he knelt on the ground. Bilbo tilted his face up and closed his eyes to the gray sky. The rain was cold on his skin but it was something else, something other than the numbing ache in his chest.

He didn't even feel the wind. He didn't feel much of anything.

Bilbo wasn't sure how he got here, away from the camp and kneeling in a muddy field. He remembered kissing Thorin one last time and then... nothing. He must have wandered out of the tent despite his broken ankle.

The mud and the rain felt good on his skin. Or at least they felt better than the clean sheets of Thorin's bed. His trousers must be getting dirty, he thought absently.

Bilbo couldn't cry anymore. All his tears were spent inside the healing tent. It was nice that the sky was sparing him the effort.
The hobbit felt… empty. As if the grief had torn out everything from him and all that was left was a shell. He was almost surprised that the wind didn't pass right through him instead of around his body.

"Halfling!" he heard a shout from behind him, but it sounded like it was miles away.

"Bilbo! I've been looking everywhere for you!"

The voice was familiar, high and agitated; but his mind remained blank to everything except for the sensation of rain.

"Halfling! You shouldn't just go wandering off like that! What if there were a stray orc—" the voice halted.

Was it closer now? He honestly couldn't tell anymore.

"Bilbo…?"

A hand might've reached out and touched him, but he felt so very far away.

His face was pulled sideways and he was jerked back to his body. Back to the ache and the loneliness. Bilbo blinked once and saw Tauriel had knelt down beside him, a thick bandage wrapped around her left arm and one covering her right cheek.

"You're alive…" the words slipped out as he met her green eyes. Shouldn't he be happy? Shouldn't he feel something other than hollow?

Her lips quirked into a small smile, "I am not easily killed, halfling."

Neither was Thorin. But he was still gone.

She frowned at him and Bilbo realized that he must've said that aloud.

"What are you doing out here?"

Bilbo gazed at her with blank eyes and shrugged. What had he been doing? He wasn't sure but it also didn't seem to matter. Nothing mattered anymore.

"I don't know."

Tauriel's gaze turned sorrowful and Bilbo remembered how old she was. Older than him. Older than any of the dwarves or men.

The elf nodded and sat down in the mud next to him, crossing her legs with the elegance that seemed inherent to all her kind. She gently took Bilbo's hand with her pale, long fingers and threaded them between his own. It was a mockery of the hand he wanted there but… He couldn't bring himself to hate it.

She sat with him in the rain and they didn't speak. Nothing but the sound of rain permeated the valley. Her hand was tight around his, her thumb periodically rubbing small circles over the back of his hand.

The last thing Bilbo wanted to do was talk and not once did the elf open her mouth. Not to offer consolation or words of wisdom. No advice on how to move on or how to deal with his grief. She was just there, silent but unwavering.

He thought listening to the sound of her breath would be painful, but he found it… calming, he
supposed. If he concentrated on that, then the vacancy inside him couldn't swallow him whole.

Bilbo knew so little about the elf but he supposed if one lived as long as the fair folk, they were bound to know something about loss. Apparently Tauriel knew enough that words were so grossly inefficient, Bilbo would've done nothing but resent her for trying to use them.

His ankle was throbbing, as was his head. Objectively he knew he should be resting in a healing tent, away from all of the mud and remnants of the battle; but there was not a place on this earth he wanted to be less than inside those canvas walls. They were suffocating, pressing in all around him. Here, with the open sky, Bilbo felt like he could at least breathe a little. Even if those breaths were shaken and shallow.

He seemed to have lost all measure of time since he'd woken up after the battle. He just couldn't bring himself to care. If he spent hours or days kneeling in the mud, it wouldn't change a damn thing. He had nowhere to go, no pressing need to go back anywhere.

The gray sky started to grow dark, lightning flashing in the sky above them. He half expected Tauriel to usher them back to camp, to glare and snap about how it was much safer back there but all she did was watch the faraway flashes with even more distant eyes.

"You're both idiots," a new voice growled behind them.

Bilbo saw Tauriel's head turn and nod in greeting, "shifter."

"In case you hadn't noticed, there's a storm coming."

Beorn walked in front of them. Each step was a limp and Bilbo suddenly remembered all the arrows Beorn had taken. The hobbit had thought the shifter was wearing a white shirt, but it was actually just thick layers of bandages, some red seeping through.

"I'm well aware," Tauriel said as she glared up at Beorn, whose yellow eyes just glared right back.

"Don't you think you should be back inside." The shifter's voice made it clear he wasn't asking a question.

Bilbo saw Tauriel glance at him, her brows drawn tight, "we're not ready to go back yet."

Beorn let out a small growl as he bared his teeth slightly, "this is foolish. What's the point of getting your wounds treated if you just go rubbin' mud in them. Or get struck by lightning." He shifted his yellow glare up towards the sky.

Tauriel's mouth snapped shut and her gaze flicked towards the hobbit again.

Beorn looked between them and sighed. Despite his wounded leg, the shifter knelt down in front of Bilbo. "We're going back in."

Bilbo didn't – he didn't want to go back to the others. Back to those tents. At least he thought he didn't, it was hard to tell if anything was more than a shadow of a feeling. It was even harder to care. To turn the numb pain into coherent thought. The hobbit blinked at Beorn but didn't say anything.

"I didn't carry you through half the damn battle to see you die in the dirt," Beorn all but snarled the words though Bilbo couldn't hear any real anger in them.

He stared somewhere past the shifter's shoulder.
"I will pick you up, hobbit. Don't think I won't."

Tauriel let go of his hand and stood, mud dripping off her legs, "I will carry him, shifter. You're injured."

"It's Beorn," he glared at her again, "not 'shifter.' And so are you."

Tauriel crossed her arms in defiance and tried to hide the wince as her injured left moved.

"Less so than you, Beorn."

He rolled his eyes and reached out his arms, giving Bilbo one last look before scooping him up. The shifter ignored Tauriel's spluttered protests and started to limp forward. The hobbit felt... small. He could have fit under one of Beorn's massive arms but he held Bilbo almost cradled in two. The ground shifted beneath him and they were making their way back through the rain, towards the lights and the tents.

Bilbo shut his eyes, his head resting against Beorn's bandaged chest.

They made their way back slowly. Tauriel muttering about foolhardy men and Beorn letting out a small snarl before retorting that he was no mere man. The hobbit drifted in and out of awareness. Sometimes the gaping, aching hole in his chest was impossible to ignore. And sometimes he felt numb.

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Bilbo blinked and he was in a tub of warm water, someone was unwrapping the bandages around his head to wash out his hair. The hobbit turned his face and saw Bofur was sitting on a small stool that he had pulled up to the side of the basin.

"Been talkin' to you for a while now," the dwarf gave him a strained smile, "suppose you didn't hear none o' that, did you?"

The hobbit blinked again, "what..."

"Beorn and that elf woman brought you back here all covered in dirt and the like. I was told them I would wash you off, so they could be gettin' back to their business." Bofur tossed the soiled bandage to the side and poured some water of his head. The hobbit felt mud and dirt drip down his face.

"Shouldn't you be with..." Bombur and Bifur. Shouldn't he be with his family? Not here with the hobbit who had betrayed his leader.

Bofur shrugged, "they'll be gettin' on fine. Master Dáin's got lots for all them to discuss, they don't need a simple miner sittin' silent in a corner."

Bilbo curled his legs up to his chest and stared blankly at the muddying water.

"Why are you helping me, Bofur?" He didn't look up at the dwarf.

Bofur's hand paused for a moment before resuming their task, "why wouldn't I be helpin' you, Master Baggins?"

Bilbo was silent for a moment, not sure he'd heard right. Wasn't it obvious?

"Because..." his words trailed off with a shaken breath, "because I betrayed you all. I... I betrayed Thorin and gave up the Arkenstone to the one elf that you hated more than anything..."
"I wasn't ever hatin' the elves, Master Baggins," Bofur's voice was soft, "and you weren't betrayin' nothin'. I know why you did what you did, so does the rest o' the company."

Bofur was silent for a moment.

"Everythin' was… confused before the battle. We all knew Thorin was actin' strange but we thought… I'm not sure what we was thinkin' but it wasn't until Fili… the lad was shoutin' about how Thorin had hurt you."

Bilbo reached up and felt the bruises on his neck.

"When Thorin struck Fili before meetin' with the elves and Bard again, then we knew somethin' was wrong. He would never… he'd never hurt the lads, no matter what."

"But there wasn't time to do nothin'," Bofur poured more water over his head, "we were waitin' for them to come back, debatin' what we was goin' to do about Thorin when they came stormin' back into the mountain."

"The lads were shoutin' about how he almost… about how he tried you kill you, laddie," Bofur's voice sounded pained, "we couldn't believe it, none of us could. You were… You were his chosen, laddie. Dwarves don't… they just don't do that sort o' thing."

"Thorin turned on the, on all o' us. I thought he was gonna start knifin' everyone. I've never seen that sorta… rage in him before. Then he…" Bilbo felt the dwarf's fingers shake slightly, "he was shoutin' and then suddenly just sort o' gripped his head. It sounded like… like he was shoutin' at himself. All sorts o' mad things, his voice gettin' all twisted."

Bilbo could picture it in his mind. Thorin bent over, Orcrist clattering to the floor and his fingers dug into his skull. Trying to fight the ring with all his might.

"He was yellin' about you, Master Baggins. How he had betrayed you and then how… he was goin' to kill you. All twisted like I was sayin', like there were two Thorin's in his head."

"Then he gripped his hand and was yankin' off a ring," Bofur started to scrub at his shoulders, "threw it to the floor and sort o' collapsed. Knocked out cold for a few hours, none of us was havin' any idea what was goin' on. All we knew was there was a battle goin' on the morrow and our leader was… either goin' mad or already there."

"When he woke, Thorin… he started sobbin', laddie. I was never seein' him shed so much as a tear in all the years I've been followin' him around. The lads and Master Dwalin went to see him and all he was sayin' was how he betrayed you, how he had abandoned you."

Bilbo felt like his heart might've split open again. So Thorin had taken the ring off before the battle. Thorin had taken the ring off right has he was riding away on that blasted pony. If he had… only turned around, only chose to go after Thorin, then he would have been there to protect them at the beginning of the battle. He might've… might've saved them…

Bilbo let out a dry sob as he clung to his legs tighter.

Bofur stopped scrubbing, instead placing a hand there and rubbing small, gentle circles.

"We… were tryin' to tell him to go find you, laddie. All of us really, we were knowin' that you would want to see him, to talk; but Thorin wasn't listenin' to any o' us. He kept sayin' how he had betrayed you and how… he wasn't deservin' to see you again after everythin' he did."
Bilbo closed his eyes and wished there was some way he could just... stop. Stop everything, stop time, stop his mind from supplying images from a would-be future where he had refused to leave or Thorin had come to find him. The hobbit clutched his pounding head, ignoring the stinging as his fingers dug into the wound that was still fresh on his temple.

"The lads tried their hardest o' course, I think they were knowin' best that you..." Bofur trailed off for a moment, "that you would've wanted to be seein' him. He was your chosen too, wasn't he?"

Chosen.

He'd heard the dwarves use that term before. Bilbo just assumed that it was their way of saying that two people were in love, but now... It felt like something more. Not destined, not *meant* for each other; it was more powerful than that. To credit it to some kind of fate was cheap. There was no *choice* in that; there was no free will to act upon. When you chose someone, you decided – you – that they were worth whatever the future held, good or bad.

"He was..." Bilbo shuddered and knew that that was only half true.

"He is."

There was nothing 'past' about his love for Thorin.

"What does it mean to you?" Bilbo asked quietly, his fingers still digging into his skull, "what does being chosen mean?"

He knew what it meant for him. He knew that for him it would mean Thorin for the rest of his life.

"When a dwarf chooses..." Bofur gently pulled the hobbit's hands away from his head and placed them back in the water, "it's a whole long affair, really... Ma was always sayin' it was more trouble than it was worth, but I was always thinkin' she was just trying to poke fun at my Pa."

"It usually starts out with gifts and the like. Pa gave her a stone, to be showin' intentions. Nothin' is given lightly, laddie, it's a... symbol, I'm supposin'. Shows your intended what you could offer them."

"Like a mithril shirt...?" Bilbo thought back to Thorin's gift and suddenly it seemed infinitely more important. A symbol of protection and of safety. And then Thorin had tried to kill him. The look of hurt, of sheer self-loathing the dwarf had etched deeply into his face in the healing tent made more sense now. Thorin must have thought he went back on his promise.

Bofur paused for a moment and the hobbit could practically see the considering look he was getting.

"Aye, laddie. That would be... a kingly gift."

"Once the gift is given and bein' accepted, it... the union isn't official or nothin' quite yet, but the engagements don't really go back after that. I think you folks are callin' it bein' married, we call it bondin'. Dwarves are usually doin' it for life, laddie. That's why these things are takin' so seriously, it's a rather long commitment."

Bilbo let out a choked, bitter laugh, though it might've been a sob. A long commitment? Thorin had given him the mithril shirt less than a fortnight ago. So... Thorin had... had wanted Bilbo for the rest of life.

And the worst part about it was that Thorin had gotten exactly what he wanted.

A few days together. That's all they really had. A few days where they *knew* what they wanted and
then it was all over between a few heartbeats. It was sudden and brief. It was bright and blinding. It was like star exploding in the night sky, painting the dark with streaks of light before it disappeared; swallowed whole by the infinite black maw.

"I'm sorry, laddie," Bofur grabbed a cloth and started to wipe the water away from Bilbo's face, "I know what... I saw what happened to Bifur after he was losing his chosen. And the lads... I--" the dwarf's words halted, "I'm sorry."

There was pain in his voice that Bilbo recognized. The pain of someone who knew what it was like to lose a home, a family. The hobbit didn't feel any better, he wasn't sure he would ever feel better again. But it was something, to know that Bofur didn't hate him. That the rest of the company didn't blame him for giving up the Arkenstone.

"Th—" Bilbo wanted to sound grateful but his voice seemed raw and stripped with grief, "thank you, Bofur... I know this hasn't been easy for any of you."

"Don't go worryin' about us, laddie. We'll be gettin' on like we always have." Bofur wrapped a fresh bandage around the wound on Bilbo's head, "ain't no folks on this earth harder than us dwarves."

The hobbit saw Bofur stand up after tying the bandage, "you should be gettin' some rest, Bilbo. I can stay here if you're not wantin' to be alone."

"No – no... it's fine. I'll be fine."

It was a lie. They both knew Bilbo's words hung false in the air but Bofur seemed to realize that the hobbit wanted to be alone. The dwarf walked over to the flap of the tent and turned back to look at him, Bofur's face looked just as tried as Bilbo felt.

"If you're needin' anythin' just come find me, laddie."

Bilbo nodded as the dwarf pushed his way out the door. Despite the warmth of the water, the hobbit was shaking. His fingers quivered in front of his face and the nausea bubbled up in his stomach again. He got up and found another cloth and fresh clothes. They weren't his muddy trousers or singed jacket; just a plain linen shirt and a pair of trousers that looked as if they had been cut to accommodate his short legs.

Bilbo pulled them on with rattling limbs. As he shifted his head to get it through the hole in the shirt, the hobbit felt a sharp pain in his neck. After shoving his head through, Bilbo brought his fingers and felt dampness there and scabs. The cut, Thorin's cut had reopened.

The hobbit limped backwards until his legs hit the edge of the bed and he just about collapsed on it. Bilbo stared at his fingers, watching the bead of red slip down, down his finger and coiling around his wrist before sinking into the sleeve of his shirt. The tips were smudged in that same crimson that had smeared Fili and Kili's faces; that had blossomed through Thorin's bandages.

Bilbo wept again.

He thought he had shed all the tears he had back in Thorin's healing tent but apparently he was wrong. The wound felt fresh again, stinging and raw.

Where could he go? Where could he go that the memories of the ones he'd lost would not linger around each corner, waiting for him to mourn them again and again.

There was nowhere. Bilbo Baggins bore their marks. He bore them on his body, Thorin's cut was testament enough to that. He bore them on his mind, his memories trapped, unmovable, and
permanent. But most of all, he bore them on his heart. And there was no way he could rid himself of that; of the love he'd given to Thorin and Fili and Kili.

The hobbit wiped his eyes and saw there was a fresh roll of bandages on the chair where his clothes had been laid out. His pack and Sting sat next to it but next to the roll was a small, black dagger. The dagger Fili had given him. Bilbo reached over and grabbed the linens and the knife, cutting a strip of clean cloth, wrapping his neck over the cut.

The dagger was clean. There was no orc blood left on it from where he'd stabbed Azog's captain. Suddenly Bilbo could see Fili's bright blue eyes and wide smile. Laughing and giving him the wink he'd seen so many times before. He thought of the young dwarf brothers.

Fili and Kili who had loved their uncle.

Fili and Kili who had loved each other.

Fili and Kili who had died as they had lived, together.

He thought Dís, their mother and Thorin's sister. The one left behind. She didn't even know it yet. In her mind, they were all still breathing. Their hearts were still beating. In her mind they lived. In that moment Bilbo envied her more than anyone but it quickly turned to a bitter sadness.

She had lost her chosen. Her brother and her parents and her grandparents. And now she had lost all the family she had left. Her brother was gone. Her sons were gone. She was alone. The hobbit had never felt more kinship with someone he'd never met.

She was alone just like him. The ones who had escaped death. The ones who lived on, clawing their love back into their hearts; knowing that one more hurt, one more break and they would be shattered forever. Dust on the wind but still horribly alive.

Bilbo reached down into his pack and pulled out the mithril shirt. It was just as light as he remembered and cold. The hobbit leaned back on the bed and curled himself into a ball, Thorin's gift clutched tightly to his chest and he let the grief wash over him again. There was no one here to be strong for, no one he needed to hide from.

Only ghosts.

There was to be a funeral. Dáin had decreed that his kin were to be buried in the depths of the mountain along with their ancestors. Every dwarf of Durin's line that had resided in Erebor, except for Thrór and Thrain, were laid deep in those stone tombs. There would be a procession to the gates but once they reached it, the company would take the bodies the rest of the way.

At least that's what Dwalin was trying to tell him as Bilbo sat, staring blankly at a wall as the gruff dwarf practically threw himself into a chair.

"I want you there, lad."

Dwalin wasn't… he wasn't much for grief, not the way that Bilbo seemed to be. No one had known Thorin longer than Dwalin but his loss seemed to be manifested in anger rather than sorrow.

Bilbo didn't want to go. Or rather he didn't think he could go. Seeing them die was… too much, how could he face their corpses again? How could he look upon their pale, cold faces and not fall to pieces?
"I…” the hobbit began but Dwalin quickly cut him off.

"No, whatever you're about to say I don't want to hear it unless it's one word and that word is 'yes.'"

Bilbo's eyes drifted over to meet the dwarf's. "I can't – I can't see them like that—"

"And you think this is easy for me, do you? You think this is any better for the rest of us?"

"I saw them die, Dwalin. I saw – saw everything. I can't do that again. I can't."

Dwalin narrowed his eyes as the hobbit shrunk back unconsciously.

"I knew Thorin since he was a squalling babe. I knew Fili and Kili from the moment those two idiots stumbled into this world. They were my family and I will pay them the respect they deserve."

The dwarf's voice grew low and dangerous, more snarl than anything.

Bilbo sat in silence as he stared back at Dwalin.

"Thorin was my brother and the lads were as good as sons to me. Do you think there is anything easy about this?"

"N-no…” the hobbit mumbled.

"What was that?" Dwalin growled.

"No," Bilbo said just loud enough to hear.

The dwarf glared at him again but his face softened a fraction as he took in Bilbo's shrunken state.

"You were his chosen." Dwalin brought up a scarred hand to rub at his face, "I never thought I'd say this, and certainly not to a damn hobbit, but… he loved you, lad. It's your duty to see them off, same as me."

Bilbo looked away, his eyes lowered to the ground.

"It's our duty."

"Duty?" the word poured from Bilbo's mouth like acid, "is that what this is to you?" He knew Dwalin's devotion to Thorin ran deeper than anything. He knew that but it didn't stop him from trying to lash out, to – to get out of this somehow.

Dwalin's face grew cold and for a moment the hobbit thought he might get punched.

"I know you're grieving, lad," the dwarf's voice was deathly calm, "we all are. But if you ever question my motivations again, you will regret it."

There were several heavy seconds where neither of them spoke and Bilbo looked at the floor.

"He would do the same for you," Dwalin added quietly, "Thorin would see your body safely to Mahal and anyone who tried to stop him would get a knife in the gut."

"None of this is…” Bilbo felt a large hand rest on his shoulder, "none of this should've happened. I should have been there to protect them, I should have…”

The hobbit looked up and saw the same look in the dwarf's eyes when he'd told Bilbo of Bragi so
many moons ago. Loss, guilt, *anger*. But more than any of those, there was loneliness.

"I'm sure you did everything you could," Bilbo felt himself echo the words he'd spoken near Beorn's house.

"I did." Dwalin squeezed his shoulder, "and it still wasn't enough. I was sworn to protect Thorin and I failed him. Just because I did what I could doesn't mean I'm any less responsible, lad. It doesn't mean shit in the end."

"Thorin's dead. Fili and Kili are dead, and I'm the one who is going to tell Dís that the rest of her family is gone."

"Will she…" Bilbo wanted to know, needed to know that she would make it, "will she be alright?"

Dwalin eyed him for a moment and shook his head, "No. She will be the farthest thing from alright but I won't let her give in."

Bilbo saw the resoluteness in his gaze and couldn't help but believe the dwarf.

"You're coming. I won't let you sit here and give in to your grief either, lad. I know you can fight, I *know* you have strength in you."

Bilbo didn't feel strong. He felt frail and brittle. Like a light breeze would break him in two and he would be thankful for the distraction.

"Why do you care?"

Dwalin rubbed his face again, "you really are an idiot. Thorin was my brother and Thorin *chose* you."

"I see…" Bilbo didn't know what he was expecting.

"I really don't think you do, lad." Dwalin crossed his arms. "I watched him grow distrustful. I watched Thorin brood every day since Erebor fell. I watched him as revenge and rage consumed him."

"But it wasn't until I saw him with you that I realized what I had been seeing."

Bilbo glanced up to meet the dwarf's dark blue eyes.

"You brought him back, lad. You saved Thorin when I couldn't and for that I will always be indebted to you. Thorin had never… he wouldn't have let anyone close enough to become his friend let alone be *bonded* to them, and yet he *chose* you."

"But that's not why I care, lad. I care because you are part of this company and you are my friend." Dwalin gave a small shrug, "I let Thorin down when he needed me most."

"Dwalin –" Bilbo said softly but the dwarf raised a hand to silence him.

"I won't let you down too, lad. You'll regret it for the rest of your life if you don't go and if I can do anything for you; it'll be to at least save you from that."

Silence fell again, but this time it wasn't so suffocating.

"Will you go or am I dragging you?" Dwalin's voice made it clear that he would do whatever he needed to.
"I'll…"

It would hurt to see them there. But his heart couldn't ache more than it already did, could it? And at least… at least he would have friends there.

"I'll go."

Dwalin shot him a gruff smile, "good."

The sun was shining and air was surprisingly warm given the time of year. The birds were chirping and only a few white puffs of clouds obscured the sky. It was a disgustingly beautiful day and they were burying the dead.

The soldiers that had fallen had been picked up over the last few days. The remnants of their armies, men, elves, and dwarves, had donned their armor once more to bury Thorin Oakenshield and his nephews. They had gathered just beyond the camp on the side closest to Erebor's now open gates. The procession would go all the way up the winding road and into the mountain where the dwarves would carry their king and princes deep into the stone.

Thranduil stood tall next to Gandalf in his shining silver robe, his crown pale, bare wood resting atop his silvery-gold hair. The Elvenking's face betrayed little of what he was thinking but Bilbo was glad he was there. That meant that perhaps the negotiations between the elf and Dáin were going well. Legolas stood beside his father in a soft green tunic, plain but somehow on the elf it looked as elegant as the pale garment Thranduil had donned. Tauriel, he saw, stood slightly behind her king in the traditional garb of her station.

Beside Legolas, Bard was stiff and his hands were clasped behind his back. Bilbo had never seen Bard look anything more than scruffy and in a perpetual state of dishevelment. Today he looked… much like the king he now was. The bowman's cloth was simple but well made. There were no patches or rough-spun wool on him now. He wore no crown, but as the hobbit glanced at him, he didn't think Bard needed one. The bowman had won the allegiance of his men, of his people. He didn't need a piece of metal to show that he was now king of Dale.

Dáin was gazing at the three stone coffins in front of him with a somber sort of calm. Thorin's company was grouped to the new king's right and behind them stood the remaining remnants of their armies.

Bilbo had tried to limp by himself to the edge of camp but was quickly caught by Ori, Nori, and Dori. The youngest gave him a sad smile and stuck out his arm for the hobbit to take. Bilbo had grasped it reluctantly as the four of them walked in silence towards the ceremony but now that he was in front of the coffins, Bilbo was suddenly grateful for Ori's steady presence beside him.

If not for the young dwarf, Bilbo wasn't altogether too confident he would have lasted. His ankle was already throbbing and the sight made his legs feel shaky and weak. He'd almost run away half a dozen times but every time he turned his head to see the way to flee, he'd met Dwalin's eyes.

"Don't worry, Master Baggins," Ori whispered into his ear, "I won't let you fall."

No doubt the dwarf had felt Bilbo's hands start to shake and his grip tighten as soon as Dáin began to speak of the accomplishments of Thorin Oakenshield and his two brave nephews.

No one could sum up a life, let alone three lives, in a speech. No one could describe the way Thorin's smile was like a precious flicker of flame. Brief and fleeting but also bright and warm. No one could do Fili's easy laugh justice; no words could properly convey the way Kili would crinkle
his right eye when he grinned. There were so many things that made up these three lives that Bilbo couldn't bring himself to listen to Dáin's speech.

It seemed… like they were doing Thorin and Fili and Kili a disservice, to try and boil down what made them, them. To dilute what made them special and important into a speech.

Bilbo felt his vision start to go gray for a moment and he thought he was going to faint. It wasn't fair, it wasn't right, they shouldn't – they shouldn't be making everything so simple, they shouldn't –

"I've got you, Master Baggins."

Bilbo blinked and focused his vision on Ori's kind face.

"Just take a deep breath," the young dwarf inhaled deeply and held it until he saw Bilbo do the same. "Good, and out again."

The hobbit exhaled.

"Just breathe, we'll – we'll get through this, okay? I'll be right here."

Bilbo nodded and just tried to concentrate on one breath after the other.

In, out. In, out.

Soon the sounds faded away and all that seemed to exist in this world was the motion of his lungs and the three coffins in front of him. They were stone, as was near everything made by the dwarves, and they were carved with the same sharp, intricate patterns that decorated the interior of Erebor.

He hadn't seen Fili and Kili since the battlefield. He wondered if their faces were still smeared with red. If there would ever been enough cloth to stop the bleeding on Fili's back.

He missed them so intensely it felt like a limb had been wrenched away from his body. Bilbo felt distinctly like he wasn't whole anymore and he wouldn't be ever again. They were so… so young. They were his friends, they had kept him warm at night, and they had joked and laughed. They'd saved his life and now they were dead.

How did people go on? How did anyone experience all of these great and terrible things and just… move forward? How did one go back to normalcy, to gardening and cooking, like they hadn't had their heart torn to shreds?

All he did was hurt. The thought trying to move forward, to move on, made Bilbo feel sick.

"—aggins."

Bilbo blinked back the tears.

"Bilbo," Ori whispered

The hobbit looked up and saw the Thranduil had moved to stand in front of him. The Elvenking reached into his sleeve and pulled out something small and familiar.

"This belongs to Thorin Oakenshield," Thranduil said softly as he held out the Arkenstone in front of Bilbo.

The stone's lights weaved before his eyes, casting its ethereal brilliance across the elf's hands. The hobbit looked up at the Elvenking, his eyes were wet now and he couldn't bring himself to pretend
tears were not beginning to run down his face.

"Why are you giving it to me?"

Thranduil reached down and grasped one of Bilbo's hands, turning it so the palm was up and placed the Arkenstone there.

"I thought you should be the one to place it."

Bilbo's eyes went wide as he realized what the Elvenking wanted him to do. No… No, he'd already… he'd said his goodbye, he couldn't get any closer.

"I—I can't…" the hobbit choked out as Thranduil folded Bilbo's fingers over the stone.

"You can. Be strong, halfling." The elf smiled at him and Bilbo realized he'd never seen Thranduil's face anything but cold or slightly mocking. The Elvenking stepped back and suddenly there was nothing between him and the coffins.

"Do you — do you want help, Master Baggins?" Ori's voice was laced with concern as he turned to look at Bilbo.

Never looking away, Bilbo shook his head. No, he would… he would do this alone. This was his burden and his gift. He would be the one to give back what he'd taken. Bilbo Baggins would return the Arkenstone to Erebor, to Thorin.

The hobbit let go of Ori's arm and started to limp forward. His progress was slow and pain shot through his leg with every step, but it all seemed impossibly distant as he approached Thorin's coffin.

The dwarf was clad in a deep blue, much like the coat he had worn on their journey. His skin was pallid and sunken and the sight made Bilbo let out a choked sob as he approached. There was a stone crown upon Thorin's head, set with a single sapphire in the middle.

The King of Erebor.

His friend.

His love.

Bilbo reached down and gently grasped one of the cold hands that were folded across the dwarf's chest. He squeezed as he had done so many times before and moved it lower down so the left side of Thorin's chest was only covered by the fine blue cloth.

Bilbo's fingers shook as he brought the Arkenstone to rest on top of the dwarf's still chest. If Thorin's own heart could no longer beat then… maybe the heart of the mountain would do it for him.

All it did was glisten in the afternoon sun. Still as stone, still as Thorin.

'You didn't actually think that would work, did you?' he could almost hear Thorin's gruff chuckle, his eyes rolling in exasperation. 'Stone is stone, not flesh Bilbo."

The hobbit let out a sobbing laugh.

'No, I don't suppose I did,' Bilbo might've replied, 'but you know I always have to try.'

The hobbit leaned down and placed a kiss on Thorin's brow, his hand pressing into the Arkenstone.
'Goodbye, my friend,' he wanted to say, 'goodbye, my love.'

But in the end Bilbo couldn't bring himself to say anything at all.

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The rest of the company journeyed up with Dáin and his dwarves to finish the burial inside the mountain. Bilbo was tired, he was worn and weary and his head throbbed. He had decided to stay back near the camp. He wasn't sure his ankle would take much more abuse, let alone walking all the way back up and into Erenor. And he… he could only say goodbye so many times.

Bilbo stared at the now distant backs of the dwarves as they proceeded towards the massive green gates.

"Halfling," Bilbo looked up to see Tauriel walking over to him, Beorn on her heels with Bard and Legolas following after the bulky shifter.

As she approached and her eyes lingered on his. Bilbo knew they were wet and red and blank. Tauriel's mouth set in a thin line and she seemed to be debating something in her head.

"I'm going to…" she furrowed her brows with purpose, "I'm going to hug you, halfling."

She knelt down and gathered him into a firm embrace. Her strong arms making a cage around him. Bilbo's eyes widened in surprise for a moment as his vision filled with her auburn hair. The hobbit was limp in her arms for a confused second until he felt something break inside him. Bilbo wrapped his arms tightly around her neck and for a moment just buried his face in her hair, relishing the warmth and security of her embrace.

The hobbit felt so weak. He clung to her like a drowning man clings to earth, desperate and frightened.

The elf said nothing, just pulled him tighter into her chest. For a few minutes at least, Bilbo didn't have to do anything but cry into her shoulder. He didn't have to think, didn't have to stand, didn't have to hold back the wave of grief that felt so large, so impossibly insurmountable. All he did was let it crash around him, drowning out the world.

Bilbo was getting her shirt wet. He knew he should pull away, but his body felt so far away. Separate almost, tied together only by the aching strings of his heart. Tauriel shifted beneath him, pulling away slightly. She reached up and wiped away some of the wetness from his cheeks with her hand.

Beorn stood slightly behind her, watching with his dark brows drawn. "We should get back to camp."

Tauriel's head snapped around and she hissed something that sounded eerily like a promise of slow and painful evisceration.

"We will leave when he is ready, shifter."

Legolas walked forward and placed a hand lightly on her shoulder before kneeling in front of Bilbo.

"Can you walk, Bilbo?" the elf's face was both kind and mournful as he spoke.

The hobbit just wanted to curl up and never move again. Instead he gave the prince a small nod. Tauriel stood and offered Bilbo he hand. Before the hobbit could take it, Beorn moved himself forward with far too much agility for a man his size and scooped Bilbo up in his arms as he had the
day before.

"You shouldn't walk on that ankle, hobbit. It'll heal poorly if you keep straining it."

Bilbo tuned out their voices, closing his eyes as their small group walked back towards the camp in the setting sun. Beorn and Tauriel voices where constantly trying to rise above the other as soft murmurs from Bard and Legolas floated behind him; each of them trying to distract the hobbit and themselves as much as they could.

Soon enough, Bilbo felt himself being shifted and placed down on a cot. He opened his eyes and saw that they had congregated in Bard's tent. Tauriel snapped something at Beorn as the bowman walked towards a chest and pulled out a large bottle of some amber liquid.

Legolas rummaged around in another corner and pulled out five mugs, handing them over to Bard. Beorn rolled his eyes at Tauriel before moving past her and taking the bottle from Bard.

"I don't trust you civilized folk to know how to pour a proper drink."

"Do you even have cups in that little hut of yours?" Tauriel asked with sweet acidity.

"Big enough to hold your head, elf," Beorn growled as he poured a generous amount into each mug, "though I don't think they could make one big enough to hold that ego."

"Ego?" Tauriel hissed as she snatched up the mug, "Ego? I don't have an ego."

Legolas coughed and Bard started to gently hit the elf on his back.

She glared at her prince before rounding on Beorn again, "It's not ego if it's true. I am the best and I have worked every day of my life to earn that."

"Aye," Beorn nodded with false solemnity, "but can the she-elf hold her drink?"

His face broke out into a wicked grin, "Are you the best at that as well?"

"Would you care to find out, shifter?" Her green eyes were narrowed into angry slits.

"Why yes, milady," he gave her a deep bow, "I do believe I would."

She let out a barking laugh, "You'll regret that soon enough. I don't lose."

"But if you do," his yellow eyes flashed, "you call me by name."

"And if I win. Which I will," she sneered, "you will address me as your highness, the fairest woman and fiercest fighter in all the west."

"Fine," Beorn shrugged as if her threats meant nothing to him.

"Fine," she snapped back.

Bard stepped forward, a solemn sort of grimace on his face. "Before you both drink yourselves sick, we should toast the fallen."

Bilbo stopped staring into the depths of his mug and looked up at the bowman.

"To our slain companions, whose bravery and sacrifice we will never forget," Bard said in a weary tone.
"To our friends who we shall hold close to our hearts, may they find peace in the Halls of Mandos," Legolas added raising his mug.

"To our friends," Beorn and Tauriel echoed.

"To our friends," Bilbo whispered as they all drank from their cups.

The liquid burned down his throat. He knew he shouldn't drink too much at one time but maybe if it was enough… maybe he wouldn't hurt so much. The hobbit tilted the mug all the way back and took several large gulps, ignoring the sensation in his mouth.

His limbs felt suddenly light and after a few more drinks, his mind was too fuzzy to make any coherent thought. It was bliss compared to the torment that had been clawing at the inside of his skull before. Bilbo drained the cup before raising it to Bard, signaling for more.

"It would appear that you both have some unexpected competition," Legolas smiled as he reached around Bard and grabbed Bilbo's cup.

Beorn let out a low chuckle that didn't quite reach his eyes as Tauriel tilted the mug back, draining it and then slamming it down on the small wooden table. The shifter rolled his eyes again and drained his own, the mug looking almost like a teacup in his large hands.

Legolas handed the hobbit his cup back as he moved to sit down next to Bilbo on the low cot.

"If you keep going that fast," Beorn tilted his second cup back with lazy ease, "you're not going to last long, milady."

"Hah," Tauriel sneered as she sat down on one of the stools next to the table, "clearly you've never drunk with an elf before."

Beorn snorted as he took the other rickety stool that groaned under his bulk, "is there anything you lot don't think makes you vastly superior to us lowly mortals?"

"I do not think I am superior to all mortals," Tauriel raised a red brow, "just you, shifter."

"Whatever you say, milady," Beorn bared his teeth and filled his third cup, "I think you'll find I'm much better equipped for this than any man that had the misfortune to drink with you before."

The elf snorted into her cup, "Said every man to ever open his mouth."

Beorn gave her a feral sort of grin, "Aye, but unlike them, I can back up every word."

"We'll see," Tauriel shot him a sickly sweet smile.

Bilbo's mind was swimming. He was two full cups in and maybe… maybe if he drank one more then he would sleep without any dreams. The hobbit raised his cup and almost missed his mouth. He would have if Legolas' swift hand had not gently pushed the edge so it tilted into his mouth instead of onto his cheek.

"Have you had enough, Bilbo?" the elf's face was a blurry mess of gold and pale skin in front of him.

"No," he slurred, taking another gulp of the fiery liquid. It would be enough – enough when his mind went blank and his heart stopped aching. The drink, he knew, would only be able to do one of those things, but he'd settle for that over the tumult of horrible thoughts and heartbreaking memories
that would surface if he didn't.

The hobbit half expected Legolas to take his cup away from him anyway but he didn't.

"I will not offer you words, Bilbo," the hobbit blinked up at Legolas, trying to focus on the elf's face, "I know... I know they will mean nothing to you now. But if you ever have need of me, you need only ask."

"I know it feels more painful than you can bear, my friend," Legolas touched two his fingers lightly over Bilbo's heart, "but you will heal with time."

"Th—that's what they... what they say, isn't it?" the hobbit's words were clumsy as they tumbled from his mouth. His voiced as a horrible mixture of bitterness and sarcasm, "everything gets – gets better with time."

"I know that's not what you want to hear, Bilbo," Legolas pulled his hand away with a sad, knowing sort of smile, "I am certainly not saying that it is easy, but it is true, my friend, I promise you that."

"You – you have lived a—" he hiccupped, "a long time..."

Maybe Legolas knew something he didn't. Maybe that was the burden of the elves. Long life and wisdom but they were... out of place here. Everything else faded, everything else died a little bit every day. But not the fair folk. No wonder they always seemed so reclusive, Bilbo thought to himself sluggishly, when everyone but them has to die. Men, dwarves, hobbits... Even orcs and goblins were all united in their inevitable demise, but not the elves.

'Lonely...' he gazed with blurry vision at Legolas, 'he must be... so – so lonely...'

"I have," the elf smiled as Bard pulled up a chair to sit next to Legolas, "I'm somewhat of an expert on the issue."

"An expert on what now?" Bard settled down in the chair, his back curving into a gentle slope and he looked almost relaxed now.

"Oh, just life," Legolas smiled at the bowman. 'And death...' Bilbo's mind supplied.

"Ah," Bard rolled his right shoulder in its socket, "and what's your verdict, oh wise prince?"

Legolas took a small sip from his cup.

"That it is wondrous. And beautiful."

Bilbo drained his cup. Swallowing the burning liquid was easier than swallowing the elf's lies.

"But it is also cruel." Bilbo glanced up again. "And it will tear you apart until there is nothing left but a hollow, bleeding shadow of the person you once were."

"Life is everything, my friend. It is complex, like many fine threads woven together in a tapestry bigger than the sky itself. It cannot be simply good or bad."

Legolas met Bilbo's gaze and gave him another old smile, "All darkness must fade, Bilbo. Your loss is a wound and all wounds must be given time to heal. You will find beauty in your days again."

Bilbo wanted to cry. He wanted so badly to believe Legolas. He wanted to trust that impossible hope
that maybe, just *maybe*, his might not be consumed by this horrible ache. So he did cry. It didn't wrack through his body; it didn't feel like his grief was digging its claws into his eyes. He cried because, if only for that moment, he *did* believe and knew that it was fleeting.

The hobbit felt himself sway lightly then he collapsed on his back, his blurry eyes watching the top of the tent twist and turn above him.

"I'll drink to that," he heard Bard say after a second.

Bilbo closed his eyes. It felt like the ground was rotating beneath him, rocking him gently back and forth. The hobbit tuned out their voices again and slowly slipped between awake and asleep.

Hours passed as he lay there, not quite asleep, not quite awake. He drifted into the black and for a while there was nothing at all.

"Hair more – more crimson than dragon's fire!"

Bilbo blinked awake as he heard Beorn practically shout, his words so slurred together it was hard to tell what they even were. The hobbit sat up slightly and almost collapsed back, the world still spinning around him.

Tauriel was face down on the table, he thought she might have passed out but then he saw her shoulders shaking with laughter.

"Eyes like – eyes like…" Beorn waved a giant, scarred hand in the air, almost tipping off the stool, "like… what color are they again?"

Tauriel propped her chin up on her palm with a drunken grin plastered over her face, "*Green* you idiot. What kind of—what kind of…" she gestured with an uncoordinated flourish at Beorn but couldn't seem to find the word, "tries to *seduce* a lady without even knowing the color – the color of her… her—" she pointed at her eye, "these things."

"Eyes like a… a…" Beorn looked like he might have fallen asleep for a second before snapping his fingers, a wide grin spreading across his face, "a healthy moss!"

"Moss…" Tauriel stared at him before breaking into laughter again, "a *healthy moss*…" she gasped for air, her face almost slamming back into the table, "you are – you are quite possibly the – the *worst* poet I have ever heard! And I am…” she took another drink, the amber liquid sloshing over the sides, "including myself in that list."

"You should be – be ashamed, shifter," she slurred, "I've gotten better – better lines from *orcs*…"

Beorn tried to look grievously offended, but the effect was rather ruined by his grin, "and where are your – your *manners*, milady? A gentleman –" Tauriel snorted but Beorn continued with a wave of his hand, "a *gentleman* gives his heart to you and you – you mock him?"

"I think it is *I*—" Tauriel tried valiantly to sit up straight and school her face into a serious expression, "who should be – be insulted by your… your *clear* lack of effort."

The shifter chuckled before leaning towards her, placing his bearded chin on the back of his hand, "so… they – they aren't working?"

"Not," she hiccupped as her lips formed a crooked smile, "in the slightest."

"You sure?" Beorn winked a yellow eye, "not – not even a tingle?"
Tauriel reached forward and tried to pat his head with mock sympathy but missed by several inches, "don't feel... too bad, shifter, my – my heart belongs to another."

"Oh really?" Beorn took another drink.

"My dear," The elf grabbed one of the twin curved blades, whipping it out and slamming it into the table, "let me... let me introduce you to the bear," Tauriel cooed at the short sword lovingly before turning her grin to Beorn.

The shifter gabbed the hilt and pulled the blade back out again, eyeing it like he might a particularly beautiful woman, "and where – where have you been hiding all night, my lovely?"

"Hey!" Tauriel frowned as she watched Beorn make eyes at her sword, "that's mine!"

"Wonder is why I was – was wasting my time with you," the shifter gave her an unimpressed look, "when your friend here is – is much more beautiful."

The elf made a clumsy grab for her knife but Beorn leaned back too quickly, caressing the dull edge with a finger, "just look – look at those curves..."

Tauriel's fist shot forward and hit Beorn in the mouth. The shifter let out small grunt as he dropped the knife into the elf's waiting hand. Beorn stared at her drunkenly for a moment before letting out a raucous laugh, licking away the blood on his lip, "better not – not start nothin' you don't want to finish."

Tauriel poured herself another cup and drained it instantly, flipping her auburn hair over her shoulder, "you should – should take your own advice, shifter."

Beorn finished his cup and poured another, draining it and never breaking eye contact with Tauriel. He grinned and his mouth was red with his own blood, making him look almost more animal than man, "you're not bad, elf."

Tauriel's torso swayed as she tried to pour again, most of it missing the cup. "I suppose... turning – turning," she blinked once and her back started to slump down towards the table, "into a bear would be –" she yawned as her forehead landed on the wood in with a small 'thunk,' "fairly... useful..."

The hand holding her cup went limp and it tumbled to the floor, a loud snore coming from her nose.

Beorn snorted before tipping off his stool and landing on the floor of the tent in a heap.

Bilbo blinked again, trying to clear his vision but it stayed blurry as he lay back down onto the cot. "We will help you rebuild, Bard, do not worry so much," Legolas' quiet voice swam into his ear.

"I... I know..." Bard grumbled a reply, "but Dale has been in ruins since before I was born. I don't..." the bowman's voice trailed off, "I don't know how to rule, Legolas. I've been a criminal for most of my life. I can't lead anyone."

"Do not doubt yourself, my friend. You've already proven that you are capable leader, we would not have won the battle if you were not."

"We wouldn't have won the battle if Bilbo hadn't been foolish enough to come back."

He thought Legolas might've nodded, "that too."

"If he hadn't slain Azog, the orc would have rallied his troops and flanked us."
"He has sacrificed much," the elf's voice had a sad lilt to it, "Bilbo saved all our lives but lost those most precious to him. I don't think he will be able to see the good in his deeds for quite some time. This journey has… not been kind to him."

"I don't know," Bard replied with a strange tone, "he found love. There's something to be said for that."

"And lost it." Bilbo felt a gentle hand brush hair out of his face.

"When I… when I lost Liana I thought my life was over. I thought my grief and guilt would kill me. And if they didn't, I thought of doing it myself." Bard's chair squeaked as he shifted, "but I… I will never regret loving her. Even if I could go back and spare myself all the agony, if it meant never loving her, I wouldn't do it."

Bilbo felt the cot shift and Legolas moved closer to Bard's chair.

"She made me a better man. She made me a better person. That is… that is something I couldn't regret even if I tried."

"Bard…"

"And I think Bilbo will feel the same way, given time. Thorin and the two younger ones… He loved them. It'll hurt. It'll hurt more than anything has in his life. But he won't regret it." Bard's voice sounded assured. "He won't."

"I think you are right, my friend," Legolas replied. "But I had hoped that this would end differently. I cannot help but wish that his pain was not so great."

"So do we all," Bard's voice was quiet again, "but he is strong. Stronger than I ever was and if I… if I could move forward, Bilbo can as well."

The hobbit tilted his head away from them slightly so they wouldn't be able to see the tears on his face. His mind was still muddled with drink but their words. Was he strong? Was he strong enough to bear this? He hadn't thought so before. Bilbo had thought he would be crushed under the weight of all these hurts.

Maybe Bard and Legolas… maybe they weren't completely wrong.

Bilbo felt the darkness close in around him and concentrated on the tilting room once more. If he could just stay like this… floating and numbed. Everything muted and dulled. Unconscious.

If he could just… fall… asleep…

They were saying goodbye.

Bilbo had woken to Gandalf shaking his arm lightly. His back hurt from lying sideways on a cot, the edges digging into his neck and knees. Bard and Legolas had left the tent already, but Tauriel had slipped off her stool and had some how turned her body so her left boot was digging firmly into Beorn's cheek and her arm was draped over his legs.

He and the wizard had left them snoring in on the floor and made their way slowly back to Bilbo's tent. Gandalf had told him he was heading west in the morning and that he didn't have to accompany him, but there would be no safer passage back through the wilds. If Bilbo left with the wizard today, Gandalf had promised to see him to the Shire.
He hadn't wanted to go. But he hadn't wanted to stay here either. Bilbo felt as if he were in some sort of limbo. Bag End no longer felt like the home it used to and Erebor would never be home without Thorin. He… knew he should go back to Hobbiton. Back to where he had spent all his life before a company of dwarves had knocked on his door one fateful evening.

But he also knew that he didn't want to leave his friends. Bilbo had always had acquaintances. Hobbits he knew well enough, but none of them had ever meant so much to him as the dwarves of Thorin's company. Bard and Legolas and Beorn he also considered his good friends now. Even Tauriel, who he had known for a fortnight at most, would be missed if he left.

Maybe it was due to everything he'd lost lately, but he couldn't help the gnawing fear deep in his stomach that he'd never see any of them again.

Now Bilbo stood surrounded by what was left of Thorin's company. Bard and Legolas stood shoulder behind the cluster of dwarves as Tauriel and Bard shared rather green expressions as they tried to shield their eyes from the sun.

He… he didn't know what to say. Bilbo had always been bad at goodbyes, but he thought that was due to the fact that he usually never had to say any. If you had someone over for tea in the Shire, you'd wish them a good afternoon and chances are you'd see them later that day in their garden. There was nothing final about those goodbyes.

This felt final. This felt like an ending.

Ori ran up to him first. The young dwarf hugged him fiercely before reaching into the satchel that he always kept strapped to his body.

"I, uh, have a gift for you, Master Baggins!"

Bilbo couldn't help but smile at Ori. The dwarf always had a way of making him feel like there was something exiting to be learned.

Ori fished around in his bag and pulled out a piece of parchment before handing it to Bilbo. The hobbit took it in his hands and gently turned it over. It was the portrait Ori had drawn of him when they were looking for the secret door…

"Oh, Mister Ori I can't take this…” Bilbo tried to hand it back, "you said you needed them for your records."

Ori pushed his hands back, "nonsense, Master Baggins. I can always make another," the young dwarf tapped the side of his head with a lopsided smile, "I have a very good memory."

"Are you sure?" Bilbo glanced between the drawing and his friend.

"Well, if anything gets fuzzy I suppose I'll just have to come visit you." Ori smiled at him hopefully, his fingers worrying the edges of his sleeves.

"You are always welcome to stay," Bilbo pulled the dwarf into a hug, careful not to bend the parchment.

Ori nodded into his shoulder. "I was hoping that the drawing would… remind you of us, I guess. I, uh, don't want you to forget about us when you go back home."

Bilbo pulled away so he could look at Ori. How could Bilbo ever forget any of them?
"Mister Ori, I don't need a drawing to remind me. I don't think I could forget any of you if I tried," his heart clenched painfully as Thorin's face swam behind his eyes. "Will you write me?"

The dwarf nodded vigorously, looking positively ecstatic at the prospect. "Oh, of course, of course! I'll write you every day, Master Baggins!"

"Every day?" Bilbo gave him a small smile.

"Well, uh, maybe not every day, but I'll write as often as I can!" Ori gave him another hug; "you'll have to send me more records about the Shire so I can put together a book on hobbits! I don't think I've read a single one…"

"Move aside, little brother," Nori gave Ori a playful shove, "I'd like to have a word with Master Baggins."

The younger dwarf smiled at his brother, "oh, okay, of course, I'll be over here."

Nori stared at Bilbo for a moment before reaching into his shirt. The dwarf pulled out a dagger a second later and slung his arm around the hobbit's shoulder.

"I recall saying that I would be introducing my knife to your body if you told Ori or Dori about our little conversation…"

Bilbo glanced wide eyed at the knife then at the dwarf, "what? I didn't – I didn't tell them anything! Dori said he – he already knew!"

Nori flipped the knife in his hand before letting out a low chuckle, "Joking again, Master Baggins. You really do have a shit sense of humor."

Bilbo glared at the dwarf, "I'm not so sure it's me…"

Nori shrugged, "I wanted to thank you again, Master Baggins. I don't know what you said to Dori and I'm sure I don't want to know. But we… talked. Really talked thanks to you."

The dwarf flipped the knife so the blade was in his fingers and the hilt extended out towards Bilbo, "this is for you."

The hobbit stared down at it and realized the handle was encrusted with glistening rubies. "I, uh…" Bilbo began rather lamely.

"They're useful little buggers," Nori eyed the knife appreciatively, "small. No one sees 'em coming but they're just as deadly when they're stuck in your throat."

Bilbo took the knife in his hand.

"You did everything you could for Thorin, we know that." Nori looked more serious than Bilbo had ever seen him, "we owe you our lives and we're grateful."

Dori walked up and shoved a small stone container into his arms. Dori eyed the dagger with a sniff of distaste. "Really, Nori? A dagger? What is Master Baggins supposed to do with that?"

"Hopefully do us all a favor and knife you," Nori mumbled as he unhooked his arm from around Bilbo's shoulders.

Dori placed a firm swat on the back of Nori's head, "I heard that."
"Good," Nori rubbed the back of his skull gently.

"What Master Baggins needs, is a gift that he will actually use." Dori turned his imperious stare to Bilbo, "open it."

The hobbit carefully put the dagger in the pocket of his coat and opened the obsidian container. There were runes carved all over the surface and delicate gold patterns trailing around the edges. When Bilbo lifted the lid, the smell of something exotic wafted out.

"I cannot be certain what kind it is," Dori looked smugly pleased with himself, "but it is from the royal stores so I know it is of the highest quality."

"I have one more thing," the dwarf’s face suddenly grew more solemn as he pulled out something from one of the pouches that hung off his belt.

Dori held out his hand and resting in it was a familiar pipe. Kili’s pipe.

"He asked me to clean it for him before the battle," Dori looked down at it with a sad smile, "said he could never get it back together when he did it."

Bilbo reached out with shaking fingers and took it in his palm. He remembered Kili grinning at him through a cloud of smoke, his pipe dangling loosely from between his lips but it never fell. Bilbo grasped it tightly and clenched his eyes shut to keep the tears from forming.

"Th—thank you," Bilbo said in a quavering voice, "both of you."

"We owe you a great debt and you are our friend, Master Baggins," Dori gave him a small bow, "it was the very least that we could do."

The pipe felt heavy in his hand as he tucked it into his pocket along side the dagger. It felt so surreal, like a daze or a dream.

"You will write us, yes?" Dori's expression made it clear he would not take no for an answer.

"Of course I will," the hobbit replied quietly, desperately trying not to think this was most likely their last encounter.

Dori gave him a warm smile and pulled him into a quick embrace, then grabbing his brother by the sleeve and whispering something about Nori's lack of propriety and reprehensible taste in gifts.

Oin and Glóin ambled up to him next. They each had suffered wounds in the battle but neither had suffered anything too serious.

"There he is! Our brave hobbit hero, come back to save us from ruin!" Glóin pulled him into a great hug, squishing Bilbo to his chest with enthusiasm.

"And now you're leaving us already!" Glóin pulled back and his face was pulled into an exaggerated hurt face.

"A great shame, Master Baggins," Oin nodded from slightly behind his brother, "a great shame."

"Aye, he speaks true, Master Baggins!" Gloin bellowed, "I thought you promised to stay and meet my family!" The dwarf glowered at him under his bushy red eyebrows.
"I… uh –" Bilbo shrunk back slightly. He had completely forgotten and a twinge of guilt wriggled at the back of his mind.

"It's no matter, lad!" Gloin's face broke out into a wide smile, "we'll just have to come to you. After I've told my lady wife all about your feats, I'm sure she'll want to visit the Shire and meet the hobbit that saved us all!"

Bilbo was no hero, he knew that. Hearing Glóin speak as if he'd… he'd done something miraculous made him wring his hands in discomfort. The hobbit looked up again to see Oin looking at him with something that looked eerily like understanding and pity.

"Brother," Oin elbowed Gloin in the ribs, giving the red-haired dwarf a significant look, "don't you have something for Master Baggins?"

Glóin didn't seem to notice Bilbo had started to shrink away. "Right you are!" Gloin reached into a small pouch and pulled out something small and silver. He held it out in his palm but before Bilbo could take it the dwarf's face broke out into a grin and he took it in his fingers.

"A locket for you, lad!" Gloin opened it with a flourish, "just like the one you returned to me. Once you get back to that hole of yours, you can fill it with whatever portrait you please."

Bilbo took the locket and saw that it had the same intricate carvings as the one that adorned his companion's. He traced some of the etchings with his finger.

"Aye and I have somethin' for you too, Master Baggins," Bilbo looked up to see Oin smiling at him and holding out a small jar. "A bit of balm for your journey home. Mahal willin' you won't have to use it but we'd all rest easier knowin' that you had some with you."

"Thank you," the hobbit gave them both a small smile, clutching the gifts in his hands. They started to walk away when Bilbo called out to them.

"Uh – Mister Glóin!"

The dwarf turned to smile at him, "yes?"

"I… I would like it if your family came to visit. I would… I would like that very much."

Gloin grinned, "good! We were comin' anyway!" The dwarf clapped his brother on the shoulder as he guffawed and turned away again.

Bofur came striding up to him next, Bombur and Bifur slightly behind him. Bofur gently grabbed the hobbit's shoulders, turning him so the dwarf could assess his state better.

"You're lookin' like utter shite, Master Baggins." Bofur pulled him into a tight hug, wrapping his arms firmly around the hobbit.

Bilbo was limp for a moment before he gripped back just as tight and couldn't help but let out a small watery laugh. He would… he would miss Bofur most of the dwarves left in Thorin's company. Bofur who had taught him how to live on the road, Bofur who had told him stories and made him laugh.

Bofur who had been kind to him. Bofur who had waited by his bedside and washed the dirt away. A few tears escaped Bilbo as he buried his face in the dwarf's chest.
"Hey now, no gettin' my shirt wet, Master Baggins, the things just dried!" Bofur patted his head gently.

Bilbo laughed again and pulled away slightly. "Sorry, sorry," he wiped away at his face with a sleeve.

Bofur leaned back slightly so he could see Bilbo's face and he gave the hobbit a small, sad smile. "No more o' that, alright? You'll put the rains to shame if you're keepin' that up."

The hobbit gave Bofur a small nod, trying to dry his face completely.

The dwarf pulled him into another hug, leaning his head down so he could speak into Bilbo's ear. "They wouldn't want to see you so sad, laddie. Not for moment, you hear?" The hobbit didn't need to ask who 'they' were. "I know it's not bein' that simple a thing to do, but you owe it to yourself to try."

Bilbo nodded again. He knew the dwarf was right. He knew Bard and Legolas were right. He knew they were all right and yet what was 'right' didn't seem to make even a bit of difference anymore. If things were right, then Thorin and Fili and Kili would be alive. He would… he would try, he would have to, but in that moment, not a thing in the world seemed more impossible.

The hobbit felt Bofur step away again and then something was being wrapped around his neck. Bilbo blinked and looked up to see the dwarf was placing his knitted scarf on him. Bofur grinned at him when the hobbit shot him a questioning look.

"It'll be winter soon enough, laddie. This'll be keepin' you warm." Bofur gave the scarf an appraising look. "well, a bit o' you at least. Necks are bein' very important." Bofur nodded sagely, "they keep that chin held high."

"I'm not much for writin', never could make much sense out o' those pen scratches, but I'll be makin' sure Master Ori sends you somethin' from us," Bofur gestured at his kin as he stepped away.

Bifur stared at him for a moment in silence before gathering Bilbo into a quick hug. He muttered something in the gravelly dwarven tongue.

"He says…" Bofur paused for a moment, then looked away from his cousin to Bilbo, "he says that it will hurt—" Bifur touched his fist to his heart, "it'll hurt here."

"But up here…" Bifur raised his hand to tap at his head, "up here it will get easier."

The hobbit stared at Bifur in silence. Of course… Bifur had lost his wife and child. Bifur understood. Understood like Bard did. Never more than in that moment did Bilbo wish he could speak to Bifur, ask the dwarf questions and just… learn about how to deal with the great ache inside him.

Bombur shuffled forward and shoved a basket into Bilbo's hands without saying a word, but giving the hobbit a small smile before waddling back. He looked down at it in confusion.

"It'll be food, laddie," Bofur chuckled as he threw an arm around Bombur's shoulder, "for your journey."

"Thank you," Bilbo gave the three dwarves the largest smile he could muster, "for… for…" he wanted to list every single kindness they had showed him but the hobbit didn't think there could ever be enough time, "for everything."

Dwalin and Balin came up to him next. The two dwarves looked so weary, Bilbo almost asked them
if they were alright but he knew their answer would have been the same as his own.

"What will you do?" Bilbo asked them quietly as the rest of the company started to chat amongst themselves.

"That is something to consider," Balin gave him a kindly smile, "I would like to… to go on one last journey before these old bones give out."

Dwalin glared at his brother, "no bones are givin' out anytime soon."

Balin patted his brother's shoulder with a roll of his eyes, "perhaps I'll come visit you in the Shire, laddie. You have fine food and quiet days, what more could an old dwarf ask for?"

"You're more than welcome," Bilbo smiled him, before looking at Dwalin, "both of you. Whenever you'd like."

To his surprise Dwalin didn't scoff at him like he'd expected but rather gave him a small shrug. "I'll be returnin' to the Blue Mountains. I have some… things I need to do there after we get Erebor back on her feet. Maybe then."

Dwalin pulled out something that had been resting between his arm and side. Holding it out to Bilbo, the hobbit saw that he was holding Thorin's fur-trimmed blue coat.

"For you, lad. I think he would've wanted you to have it." Dwalin's face grew tight as his eyes glanced down at the blue cloth.

"Thorin would have wanted you to have all the gold in the mountain if that were somethin' you cared for," Balin's smile had turned somber, "but we knew you'd find more meaning in this."

Bilbo's eyes went wide as he reached out for it. The first touch of his fingers against the material were almost too much, too familiar. A flash of the past, a flash of a doomed future. Bilbo grasped the coat and brought it up to his face. It had been cleaned but somehow it still smelled like Thorin. Like earth and stone. Like rain and fire. It smelled like love.

The hobbit clutched it tightly to his chest and almost felt his heart break again. He was sure it would've had it not already been shattered into so many pieces.

"You did everything you could for him, laddie," Balin gave his shoulder a squeeze, "you may doubt anything else, but never that. You gave Thorin hope. We wouldn't have made it half so far if not for you."

"Stay safe on the road, lad," Dwalin said gruffly and considered him for a moment. Then the dwarf pulled Bilbo into quick hug, "and don't do anythin' stupid."

The hobbit let out a small chuckle as he nodded, "I will. And Mister Dwalin?"

The dwarf raised a scarred brow.

"I know she… she doesn't know me or anything but…uh, say hello to Lady Dís for me and that – that I'm sorry."

'For her loss…' he had wanted to finish, but that seemed false even in his head. He was sorry for so many, many things. For so many failures. The rational part of his brain knew that Dís would not blame the deaths on some hobbit she had never met, but it was quickly shut out by another wave of guilt and grief.
Dwalin's face was blank but after a moment he nodded, "aye, I will, lad."

Bard and Legolas followed by Tauriel and Beorn came up to him next. The bowman knelt so he was of a height with the hobbit and hugged him.

"You saved my life, Bilbo," Bard gave the hobbit that grim smile of his, "in Lake Town. Against the dragon. And in the battle. You helped me stand against the Master when no one else would. I… I wish there were some way of thanking you that would mean to you what your friendship has meant to me."

Bard turned his head and let out a soft whistle that sounded almost like a bird song. "This little fellow saved my life too," to Bilbo's astonishment a very familiar little brown and white bird hopped out of the mess of Bard's hair onto his shoulder, "he will watch over you on the road."

The thrush fluttered over from Bard's shoulder and landed on the hobbit's shoulder. Bilbo turned his head slightly and saw the songbird was looking at him with one beady black eye. The hobbit winced atomically, expecting to be pecked as he had so many times before but the thrush simply edged its way closer and hopped onto Bofur's scarf. The bird rubbed the side of its head against Bilbo's neck briefly before fluffing out its tiny wings and settling into the knitted folds for warmth.

Bilbo smiled at the bird as the other three stepped forward.

"I hope that your travels are safe, my friend," the elf knelt to hug him, "I am sure that we will meet again."

"I…" the hobbit paused for a moment, "thank you, Legolas. For… for everything that you did for us."

"Of course, Bilbo," Legolas smiled at him warmly, "you have a gift for inspiring hope even in the oldest of creatures."

"Thank your father for me, won't you?" Bilbo asked quietly.

"I will."

"Move over, princeling, he hasn't got all day," Beorn grumbled loudly from the elf's side.

"Watch you tongue, shifter," Tauriel glared at Beorn, but swiftly knelt as well.

"Farewell, halfling," she gave Bilbo a small smile, "I will write to you if… if you'd like."

"I would," the hobbit hugged her tightly, "I would like that very much."

"Stay safe, hobbit," Beorn inclined his head, "I won't have all my hard work keepin' you safe undone."

"I'll… I'll try my best," Bilbo almost grinned but it didn't reach his eyes even though he knew this might be the last memory they all had of him.

"Thank you, all of you," the hobbit added with weary sincerity as he looked up into their faces, "I'll… I'll miss you."

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Bilbo Baggins came home.

Or at least what could pass for home now that Thorin was gone. Gandalf had left him at the edge of
the Shire as small snowflakes started to swirl around them. The hobbit was tired, his ankle hurt, and the last thing he wanted to find was the sight of his relatives ransacking his house and looking utterly put-out when he pushed open the round green door.

After he had assured them that he was indeed back to stay and refused to answer any of their altogether uncomfortable and probing questions, Bilbo had all but pushed them out the door.

He leaned back against it, head pounding and everything hurting. At least they had the decency to light a fire in the hearth so the chill of winter did not linger for long. The thrush seemed relieved as well. The songbird burst out of Bofur's scarf and perched on the edge of a chair that sat next to the fire and promptly went back to sleep.

Bilbo finally looked around his home. Everything felt… strange. Like the furniture had all been shifted an inch to the right. It was familiar but… wrong. There was dust and a stiff sort of silence. He felt none of the warmth that his memories held of this place.

But as he hobbled through the curved hall, Bilbo thought that maybe it wasn't Bag End that was wrong. Maybe it was him. Maybe he had changed too much. The Bilbo that had lived here before was gone and in his place there was someone else.

Someone whose bitter loneliness tainted the very air itself. Someone who had seen too much, felt too much.

The Baggins' of Bag End were always considered to be very respectable folk in the Shire. Except now he didn't feel respectable. Bilbo felt broken. Like all the pieces that made him who he was had shattered and a blind man had tried to shove them back together. The general shape was there but now holes and sharp edges marred his silhouette.

When he had seen the Sackville-Baggins' taking his things, Bilbo had felt a flash of anger course through him. But now that he was alone, the hobbit felt almost grateful. If everything had been in the exact same place as he'd left it, Bilbo might've set the whole place aflame.

He hadn't realized while journeying back with Gandalf; but what would have been worse than coming home to a significantly barer house, was one that hadn't been touched by anything but time. The last time he'd been here was when the company had stayed. When Thorin and Fili and Kili had stomped through these halls, alive and well.

Plundered and picked away, Bag End reflected almost how he felt inside. Bare, empty, filled with shadows and dust.

Bilbo limped up the stairs and went to his room. Setting down his pack, the hobbit stared at his bed. He hobbled over to it and sat down, a small cloud of dust puffing up as his weight settled on the sheet.

The hobbit felt exhaustion wash over him. The strain of the journey on his already injured body had taken its toll even though the wizard's presence had made the return significantly less life threatening. He lay atop the blanket not bothering to even to settle in.

Bilbo remembered his last night in this bed.

He had told Gandalf no. Had told the wizard he was not made for adventures, not made for danger. He was a Baggins of Bag End and they most certainly did not simply pick up and leave, trailing after a raggedy group of strange dwarves. And then he heard the song.

*Bilbo pulled the blanket around himself, trying to stamp out the irritation he felt towards Gandalf.*
How dare he just—just invite a whole company of dwarves to his house? Without even so much as an hours notice?

But did that bother the wizard? No. No it did not.

Apparently Bilbo Baggins was good for his pantry and empty floor space. Gandalf had been good friends with his mother, but he had not seen the wizard for years. People with manners did not just show up with a dozen other guests and expect to be fed.

Except when they did.

And tonight was just one of those nights. Bilbo could handle a dwarf. He could even handle two dwarves. Perhaps three on a good day. But thirteen? Thirteen?

They were loud and messy and rude. It was one thing to ask politely for some spare cheese and possibly a nice chair to kip on for the night, but they had just barged in there like they'd been invited!

Which... they had, he supposed. Just not by him.

And that was the kicker. Gandalf had not only welcomed these dwarves into his home of all places, but— but tried to get him to go on some foolhardy journey with them as well! As if he—as if Bilbo Baggins had nothing better to do than go gallivanting through the forest in search of a mountain with a dragon inside.

What sane person ever went towards a dragon? They had teeth and fire and all manner of sharp claws ready to disembowel unwary idiots. Idiots that included himself, according to Gandalf.

And if that was not bad enough—the wizard seemed to have not even discussed him with that Thorin fellow!

*He may not be the friendliest hobbit to ever live in the Shire. He might not be the most welcoming or whatever; but Bilbo Baggins had never been so remiss as a host to warrant the scorn the dwarf leader had shown him within seconds of his arrival.*

*The dwarf had just waltzed in and japed at him! The worst part was that Thorin's 'joke' hadn't even been funny.*

"Oh congratulations, Mister Dwarf," Bilbo hissed to himself as he punched his pillow into a more comfortable shape, "you have eyes. And would you look at that? They even appear to be working!"

Bilbo shoved his face back down rather aggressively as he continued to mumble, "Would you like a ribbon? Or perhaps a cookie? Oh wait, your bloody dwarves ate them already!"

*If he never saw another dwarf for the rest of his life, Bilbo would consider that a resounding success. Just because he didn't look like some sort of criminal with a sword strapped to every limb didn't mean he was worth any less than Thorin.*

*Bilbo had nothing against adventures. He had read about them since he was a small hobbit and he'd even been known to journey to the edge of the Shire on nice days. But from what he could tell, these dwarves were going to be dead anyway. There were thirteen of them and countless leagues plus a dragon separating them from their goal.*

*The odds, he thought to himself with bitter satisfaction, were most certainly not in Thorin's favor. Not that he cared.*
They would all be gone tomorrow and that would be the last of that. Bilbo would go back to his normal, peaceful, and dragon free life and forget about all of this nasty dwarvish business.

Whatever fool notion had driven Gandalf here, Bilbo had surely dispelled it by now. Just because he occasionally felt that itch at the base of his spine to just get up and go somewhere didn't mean that he wanted to journey halfway around the earth in search of treasure.

Bilbo rolled over and tried to shut his mind off. The sooner he went to sleep, the sooner they would be gone.

Then he heard low voices floating up the stairs. Were they… were they singing?

Did dwarves just break out into song in the middle of the night?

The hobbit shut his eyes and tried to concentrate on the words. He heard Thorin's voice above all the others. He had not known the dwarf long, and to be honest, he didn't want to know him any more than he already did; but there was no denying that Thorin was skilled.

His voice sounded like the last embers in a fire. It sounded like the forest at night, like smoke and stone. It sounded like old wood and ages long past.

But more than any of that it sounded… sad.

There was so much longing in Thorin's lament; Bilbo felt something deep in his heart stir.

He heard distance in the dwarf's voice. He heard blood and loss and a terrible sort of loneliness. There was determination. There was purpose there. A great fire – dragon's fire – burning deep within the dwarf's soul that scorched everything he touched; charring his flesh and so very blinding. But laced with every word, in every silent note, sadness seeped through.

Bilbo frowned as he felt tears start to prick at his eyes. It was not his home that had been taken. It was not his home that had burned.

And yet…

When Thorin sang, somehow Bilbo felt as if it were.

The hobbit reached up to his neck and felt the thin scar that lingered there and touched it lightly with shaking fingers.

How cruel that this scar was the thing that reminded him most of Thorin. How cruel that it existed because of a dark ring and the dwarf’s decent into madness; that it existed because in that moment, Thorin had wanted to kill him.

Bilbo thought he had felt Thorin's loneliness in that song. He had thought that while he lay there, listening to them sing of home, he had tasted their loss.

Now the hobbit knew that had been a mere flicker, the smallest sliver of sorrow. Bilbo had not known loss until Thorin had died. Bilbo had known nothing of heartbreak, of watching your home burn to the ground as ash filled your mouth and eyes and hands.

He had known nothing of the ache that now filled him.

Bilbo thought he felt the tears start running down his face again. But as he reached up to wipe them away from his face, he realized that his fingers were dry as parchment.
It seemed odd to him that he could cry for a song. He could cry for the passing shadow of a thought that merely hinted at loneliness. But now that he felt the pain that Thorin had, now that he had tasted that bitterness, Bilbo could shed no more tears for himself.

Winter passed. The snows melted and the days grew longer. Bilbo's ankle no longer hurt so much and all he had left on his temple was a scar hidden by his hair. It had grown long, past his shoulders over the cold months.

The hobbit had done little more than sit in his chair in front of the fire, though it seemed more often than not that the fire had gone out. Bilbo sat listlessly, staring at nothing at all. He moved rarely, only to feed himself and the thrush. He had a passing thought to name the bird, but it had chirped angrily at every suggestion so Bilbo gave up.

He was growing thinner, he knew. His clothes hung loosely off his body but Bilbo couldn't much bring himself to care.

Relatives had come knocking at his door. Neighbors and friends did too, all wondering where Bilbo had been for a good portion of the last year but he barely spoke to anyone. They mostly just sat with him in his sitting room, occasionally trying to prod him into telling but he just ignored them. Soon they stopped coming altogether.

Bilbo hated the silence, but whenever it was broken he hated it even more.

It hadn't been long after he'd gotten back that the hobbit had found his ale stores. All he could think of was the night of Thorin's funeral and how that amber liquid Bard had given him had turned his thoughts to mere shapes and blurs at least for a small while.

Some nights he drank. He drank until he couldn't think anymore. Until he couldn't remember. His heart always ached, it always hurt, but sometimes if he drank enough, his wouldn't see Thorin's face every time he closed his eyes.

Some nights turned into most nights. Most nights turned into every night. And soon enough Bilbo was passed out more often than he was awake. He knew in the back of his mind that this was wrong, that he shouldn't, but what choice did he have? It was this or seeing Thorin in the corner of his eye. It was this or seeing Thorin's last smile on his face and hearing the last 'thump' his heart had made before it grew silent.

Days faded into a blur. Months faded.

Any strength he had thought to cling to as he saw the company on the day of their farewell had faded long ago. Without his friends here, with only himself to look at everyday, Bilbo was not strong enough to resist the pull of memories. And with memories came bitter heartbreak, as fresh as the day Thorin had died, and with heartbreak Bilbo turned to drink.

His house felt so horribly empty and Bilbo did nothing to replace the things his relatives had taken. He got some sense of bitter satisfaction from that every time they came to visit and complained loudly that if he was going to let the place fall into disrepair, he should have just let them have it.

Bilbo's thoughts slipped in and out while he was conscious. His dreams were haunted by smiles and laughs. By blood and death. There was no relief. So he drank until their faces turned to smudges. He still hurt, but at least this way it was dulled.

The edges not quite so sharp.
"Bilbo."

The hobbit groaned and he felt his cheek sticking to the grain of the wood beneath his face.

"Bilbo get up."

He shook his head but immediately regretted it. It throbbed, the blood in his ears pounding and Bilbo felt immediately sick. Nausea boiled in his stomach and Bilbo let out another groan.

"You smell like a pig sty," the voice muttered with a familiar gruff disapproval.

The hobbit blinked as he peeled his face from the table. Narrowing his eyes, Bilbo looked up and tried to focus on the figure in front of him but the sun pouring through the windows made his head split even more.

"You smell like a pig sty," Bilbo grumbled as he let his face fall back onto the wood.

"Bilbo…" the voice sounded concerned and… sad, "Bilbo look at me."

The hobbit sighed and glanced up and saw that Gandalf was standing over him, stooped in his little kitchen.

"Gandalf," his voice was scratchy and hurt from lack of use, "to what do I owe this pleasure?"

The wizard frowned as Bilbo picked up half empty mug beside him and drained it.

"I came to see you, my friend," Gandalf sat down on one of the stools opposite him.

Bilbo let out a cold laugh as he set the mug back down, "Check up on me you mean."

"That as well," the wizard's brow furrowed.

"Well," the hobbit stood up on wobbling legs and half walked, half stumbled over to the large barrel of ale in the corner and filled his mug again, "Don't keep me waiting… how do you find the burglar? Alive and well I hope." Bilbo sneered the words as he leaned against the barrel, staring at the wall.

There was a moment of heavy silence and then Bilbo heard a sigh behind him.

"Bilbo…" Gandalf said his name with so much weariness the hobbit felt anger flash in him.

He spun on his heel to face the wizard but seemed to just stumbled sideways, "What? Not to your liking?" Bilbo spat as he righted himself, head pounding, "Expecting something else?"

It was laughable, really. He was broken. He was shattered. He was empty. If Gandalf expected anything different then he was a fool.

"Hoping…" the wizard's face seemed to age a thousand years in that moment. "I was hoping for something else."

"Well—" Bilbo sneered again, draining his second mug. "I do so apologize for disappointing you."

"You have nothing to apologize for, Bilbo. I…" Gandalf trailed off.

"You what?" Bilbo snapped, anger filling him again. "You were hoping that I'd what? Greet you with a smile?" His mouth twisted into a mockery of the word, "take your hat and offer you some tea?"
His hands tightened on the mug, the other fisting, the nails biting into the skin of his palm.

"Did you want me to just forget? Go back to gardening and reading like you never brought the company here?" Somewhere deep in the hobbit's mind he knew that he was being unfair, but he had been surrounded by silence for so long that it felt... it felt good to feel something else. Even if that something was anger.

Gandalf stared at him with that sad, tired expression and it just made him more angry.

"Thorin is dead" he snarled, blood running down his palm, "the only man I've ever loved is dead and you thought I would just forget?"

"I didn't expect you to forget, Bilbo." Gandalf said quietly, that infuriating expression still on his face. He didn't want the wizard's pity. He didn't want anything but for his friends to be alive again.

"What do you want then?"

"I want to help you Bilbo."

He felt the sudden urge to lash out. To break something and feel that fleeting sense of control if only for a second. Bilbo bared his teeth at the wizard and flung the mug at Gandalf's head. The throw was clumsy and missed by a good foot but it still made a satisfying noise as it splintered against the opposite wall.

"Get out."

He felt the drink coursing through his veins, making his blood boil and his head foggy but the last thing he wanted was see that look on Gandalf's face. Like seeing Bilbo broken was the most pitiful thing in the world.

The hobbit spun again and felt the ground tilt. He fell to the floor, his elbow crashing against the cold stone. Bilbo's vision started to go black as his face pressed into the ground.

"Get out," he whispered, dust and dirt scraping against his lips. "Get out, get out..."

He just wanted to be alone... He just wanted it all to go away... He just wanted...

Bilbo blinked awake. His head was splitting again and for a moment he felt very odd. The hobbit looked down and saw that he was lying on his bed. When had he...

"How do you feel?"

Bilbo's head snapped up and he saw the wizard sitting in the chair that rested in the corner of his room.

"Gandalf?"

So it hadn't been a dream.

Bilbo brought his hands up to grip his throbbing head. He let out a groan and tried to massage the pain away. "any chance I could get some ale?"

"I'm afraid not, my friend," Gandalf replied with a small sigh, "I think you've had enough to last quite a while."
The hobbit leaned back to rest against the pillow, shutting his eyes. "Did I… did I throw a mug at you?"

"You did." Bilbo let out a groan. "Though your aim was rather poor."

The hobbit glanced back to see Gandalf's face had a small smile on it.

"I… I'm sorry, I shouldn't have…" Bilbo's voice halted. He knew he should apologize but his head hurt and weariness was heavy in his bones.

"No," Gandalf's voice had a dry quality to it, "but you were very drunk."

Bilbo shut his eyes tighter as silence fell over him again.

"You cannot continue like this, Bilbo."

The hobbit felt indignant anger for a split second before it faded into tired grief.

"I know…" he whispered, "but I…"

He didn't know what words could describe what he felt. What words could convey this terrible, gnawing sadness he felt every waking hour.

"Can't…" was all he said. It was a single word, but it was all he had. He simply could not go about his day knowing Thorin was forever parted from him. Couldn't help the bitter sorrow that had sunk bone deep beneath his skin.

"I know," Gandalf stood and walked over to his bed, sitting down on the edge. The wizard took one of his limp, clammy hands in his own, "but you must, my friend."

Bilbo opened his eyes and stared at his friend. Nothing had ever felt so impossible, so… so futile.

"How?" he almost begged. Bilbo knew what, knew he had to find a way to remember Thorin but not… mourn him. But he hadn't even the faintest notion how do it.

Gandalf gave him another sad smile as he squeezed the hobbit's hand.

"I do not know, Bilbo."

The hobbit felt his heart clench.

"Day by day, I suppose." The wizard looked over to the window, his gaze seemed leagues away.

"Time heals all wounds," Bilbo muttered bitterly.

"So say the wise," Gandalf said with a sigh.

"Aren't wizards supposed to be wise?" The Bilbo from before would've said it with a wink and a smile but all he felt now was a hollow and disillusioned sort of desperation that he couldn't even bring himself to hope would be answered.

"I used to think so, my friend," the wizard half smiled, half grimaced, "but now… I think we are just as foolish as the rest of you. Perhaps even more so."

In that moment Bilbo wondered if Gandalf blamed himself for what happened. Gandalf had come to his home, had brought him on the journey. Introduced him to Thorin and given Bilbo the cursed ring.
The wizard looked so old and weary that Bilbo couldn't help but think he did.

He wanted to reassure Gandalf that it was not his fault. That Bilbo had made his own choices, choices that he would have made a thousand times over. But all he did was squeeze the wizard’s hand back.

They were all fools. No matter what comfort they offered each other, no matter what words were traded between them. Gandalf was a wiser fool than most, but in the end, that's all they were.

A heart burdened by the tremendous weight of responsibility.

A heart shattered by cruel misfortune.

Doomed to hope again and again. Doomed to try to heal and love. Doomed to keep on trying, clawing their way forward even when giving up was infinitely easier.

'Foolish,' Bilbo thought as he leaned back against pillow, 'foolish enough to try.'

Gandalf had stayed with him for a long while. The wizard had forced him into the bath and shoved a brush in his hand, declaring that Bilbo would not step out of the wash room until he stopped smelling like a tavern.

Gandalf had cut his hair for him and poured out every last bit of ale that Bilbo had hidden around the house. Together they started to clean. The hobbit had been on the verge of insisting that Gandalf need not trouble himself with such mundane tasks but just as he had been about to, he saw something in the wizard's face that stopped him.

Gandalf was weary. He could see that the wizard was tired. The old man had not spoken in depth about what happened to him when he had gone to fight the dark power in Dol Goldur, but Bilbo could see that whatever had happened had taken its toll on him as well. Perhaps Gandalf needed to occupy himself as much as Bilbo did.

So they scrubbed and dusted. They went to the spring markets and found new furniture to replace the items that his relatives had sold while he was away. They planted new seeds in the gardens. They worked and kept themselves busy before settling down in the evenings to read over cups of tea.

Bilbo did not feel the pain inside him abate, but each day he felt like he could deal with it a little better. With his hands busy and Gandalf around, he found that when his thoughts started to drift towards Thorin, he would quickly find the wizard and start a conversation. They talked about everything and nothing. They talked until Bilbo's rapid breathing calmed and he his hands stopped shaking.

Together they managed and Bilbo had never been more grateful for Gandalf’s friendship.

Months past and soon spring bloomed into summer. The days were hot and sunny. It was… peaceful, he supposed. Peaceful like it had been before the journey.

One warm night at as they sat on the small bench atop Bag End, watching the stars and smoking on their pipes, Gandalf said that he would be leaving soon.

Bilbo nodded and took a long draw from his pipe.

He knew the wizard couldn't stay forever. The world needed Gandalf. His friend had a purpose on this earth, a purpose that was a mystery to him, but he knew there was something that separated the
wizard from the rest of them.

"Where will you go?" Bilbo asked quietly as he gazed up at the stars.

"Oh here and there, there and here. Where the road takes me." Gandalf chuckled as he blew a large smoke ring into the night air.

Bilbo rolled his eyes, "must you always speak in riddles?"

The wizard winked, "an old man cannot stay in one place too long or else his bones harden and he never wants to move again."

"I think you mean a wizard can never stay in one place too long," Bilbo let out a soft chuckle, but felt sadness creep into his laugh. He would be alone again. He felt… better than he had, but Gandalf's steady presence would be sorely missed.

"Will you come back?" Bilbo asked quietly after several moments.

Gandalf's gaze shifted from the stars to Bilbo's face. "Sooner than you know, my friend. You'll hardly miss me."

The hobbit gave his friend a smile, "good."

They sat in silence for a while longer, puffing on their pipes as they had done so many nights before.

"Thank you, Gandalf."

He meant it. He meant it with all his heart. It had been Gandalf who had stepped through his door and changed his life and Gandalf who had picked his broken body up off the floor when that life had seemed too much.

There may have been a time, moments when the sorrow felt like it would tear him apart, when Bilbo had thought to blame his friend for all of his suffering. But he knew… he knew that would mean that he regretted meeting Thorin and the company. That he regretted loving Thorin.

He had known more grief than he ever thought possible. His heart had shattered into more jagged pieces than he ever thought he could endure. But he did not regret loving Thorin. He couldn't regret loving Thorin.

Not when the dwarf had shown him what it meant to love. What it meant to be whole.

"I never…" the hobbit paused for a moment, "I never blamed you, Gandalf. Thorin was everything to me. He is everything. I never would have… I never would have met him if not for you."

He hoped the wizard already knew that but it seemed too important not to say aloud.

Gandalf stared at him and for a second, Bilbo thought he might've seen the shadow of a tear run down the old man's face.

"You are strong, Bilbo," Gandalf had said the words before, though it seemed like an age ago. "You will find that strength again."

The wizard reached into his robes and pulled out a piece of parchment, handing it over to Bilbo.

"What is it?" he asked, taking it gently in his hands.
Gandalf nodded towards it, "look."

The hobbit delicately opened it and saw that it was the Thorin’s map. He stared at it for a long while memories of campfires, of Fili and Kili sleeping beside him, of sitting beside Thorin in amiable silence flooded his mind.

He felt that ache again, the longing to see their faces again. To know they were safe and happy and alive. But now… now he didn’t feel as if he wanted to tear out his heart. There was pain, of course there was pain, but for the first time since he had returned to Bag End, Bilbo didn't not feel hopeless.

"Are you sure… are you sure I should have this?" Bilbo glanced up at the wizard, "shouldn't the dwarves—"

"I am sure," Gandalf smiled into his pipe, "I doubt Thorin ever thought of me as his friend, but he was not half so difficult to read as he thought he was. Thorin would want you to have it, my friend."

"But I—" Bilbo started, not convinced.

"You'll find a use for it, I'm sure," Gandalf cut him off as he gave the hobbit a significant look, "perhaps if you ever write a book."

"A book…?" Bilbo glanced back down towards the map.

He could… he could record his story. Add it to the many that lined his walls inside the hobbit hole. He knew Ori would be writing down the details of their quest but he was equally sure the dwarf would be doing it from a historian's perspective. Maybe he could do the same, but write of the details that Ori might omit.

Maybe he could write of how Bofur had been the first to befriend him. How Kili had wanted to grow a beard and be like his uncle in every way. How Fili had loved his brother more than anything and always gave Bilbo the best advice.

Maybe he could write of how Bifur saw things no one else noticed and carved more beautifully than anyone Bilbo had ever seen. How Gloin spoke of his wife and how Nori had sacrificed everything to keep his brothers safe.

Maybe he could write of Thorin's smile. Of Thorin's laugh. Of Thorin's love.

Maybe he could write what made each of the company so alive, what made them unique and special and the best friends he had ever had.

His tale would not be a history. But neither would it be a romantic tale of heroism where the characters had names but they were the embodiments of virtues or vices; meant to entertain and teach but could have any name and still have the same message.

His tale would be different. He would write of small things. Small things that made his friends who they were, small things that made them alive, not merely ink on a page. Bilbo would remember them; remember Fili and Kili and Thorin, not as three noble dwarves that died to save their home, but as individuals with faults and hopes. And if anyone ever picked up his words after he was long gone, after they were nothing but faded names, they would know the company of Thorin Oakenshield.

Not as heroes, but as individuals.

That would be his last gift to Thorin. To Fili and Kili. To the rest of the company and friends he'd made on his journey.
Who they were would never be forgotten.

"Yes, I… that's not a bad idea."

Gandalf gave him another smile and patted his shoulder gently.

"Not bad at all…"

Gandalf left the next day.

Bilbo felt his friend's absence acutely. There was no longer someone to turn to distract him when his thoughts grew dark. So he opened up a blank book and started to write down his story.

Some days he only wrote down a single sentence. Some days it was even less than that when his memories grew too painful to dwell on.

But as time passed, as days turned into months and months turned into years, Bilbo started to write down more. He started with whatever came to mind. Sometimes he wrote a whole page on the way Thorin's lip would curve up just slightly more on the left side when he smiled. Sometimes he wrote about conversations he had. They were disorganized, random and chaotic, but when he put them to paper, he almost felt like those memories didn't hurt so much.

Bilbo tended his garden. He sat with the thrush perched on his shoulder, signing its tune as he worked and some days he didn't yell at it once.

Some nights when the moon was full and bright Bilbo would sit on top of Bag End and pull out the small carvings Bifur had given him. He would hold them up to the moon and squint as he had the first time he'd held them, moving the small figures back and forth and, when he was brave enough, he would sometimes let himself pretend that they were real.

Time passed, just as Gandalf had said it would. Day by day.

Some were worse than others. Some days he would stay in bed and curl up in Thorin's coat, clawing at his chest, and he would mourn the loss of his love.

But then some days were better. Some days the ache seemed almost dull in his chest.

The best days were when he received letters from his friends. Ori wrote most frequently, but to his surprise, Tauriel wrote almost as often.

Each morning he would check the mail box, allowing hope to well in his chest. The first time he got a letter from Ori had been a few weeks after Gandalf had departed.

Master Baggins!

I hope all is well in the Shire! Things have been quite busy here. There is so much to do! You would not believe – well perhaps you would, since you saw how dreadful the wreckage was – how much work has to be done. Dáin is trying to get Erebor repaired as soon as possible so we can start mining and trading again. Almost all of his warriors have stayed to help. He is sending for more from the Iron Hills and Dwalin has gone to the Blue Mountains to inform Lady Dís that Erebor is ours again.

I have taken up residence in the library. There are so many books here, Master Baggins! And they are in much better condition than I could've hoped for! I've almost finished compiling all of my notes.
from the journey and hope to start my official record soon, but for some reason Dáin has requested me as his Keeper of Records so I have scribe duty to attend to as well.

There is so much to be done, but we are hopeful that Erebor will be habitable by the next autumn and fully repaired within a few years. Normally something of this scale would take much longer but Smaug left us more than enough funds to expedite the process a bit.

Dori sends his regards. He is working as Dáin's Master of Commerce, so once we are fit to trade again; he'll be quite busy and probably even more irritable than he is now. He's telling me that he has never been irritable in his life and I should stop slandering him in my letters, but we all know that slander implies falsity in the claim. He's now telling me that I am not in the least bit amusing but I will have to disagree on that point.

Nori has taken lead of the city guard. He tried to foist the position on some other dwarf, but I insisted that once Erebor is a working city again there will, of course, be criminal activity that must be monitored, and who better to do that than an ex-criminal? He says hello and that he hopes you are taking care of yourself. He is insisting I also tell you to take good care of the dagger he gave you even though I assured him you would.

Bombur has taken charge of the kitchens. Bofur was worried that he wouldn't want to stay in the city, but I think it is doing Bombur a lot of good to be here. I've never heard him talk so much since I've known him. Bofur and Bifur have taken to helping repair the residential portions of Erebor that were destroyed. I think they might want to work in the mines once the city is working again, but—oh, Bofur wants me to tell you that he is doing well and that he would very much like to hear from you soon. He says that he hopes the scarf kept you warm over the winter and that Erebor could always use a hobbit when you come to visit.

Oin and Glóin left for their home a week ago. They stayed long enough for Oin to advise Dáin on repairing the mines but I think they were eager enough to go back. Glóin was... uh, more vocal than usual about the impressive beauty of his wife towards the end, I half thought Nori was going to stick him with a dagger. Nori assures me that he was indeed going to stick him with a dagger. Oh, pardon me, he says several daggers.

As I said, Dwalin left to return to the Blue Mountains. I worry about him quite often, though Balin assures me he will be fine. I know Dwalin took what... what happened very hard, even if he didn't show it, and going to tell Lady Dís will not be easy for him. Though he is the strongest dwarf I know, I pray that Mahal will watch over him.

Balin is assisting Dáin is all matters of the state, especially in his dealings with Thranduil and Bard. I know he is glad to be back home, but I can't help but think Balin is somehow... restless. Though he always talks about how old and tired he is, Balin has also been having me go through our records on the lost kingdom of Moria. Sometimes he talks of trying to retake it one day now that we have Erebor back. I must say, I find the idea fascinating, think of all the books we could find! Perhaps once Erebor is rebuilt, we will have strength enough to take it back from the orcs.

Life is very busy, Master Baggins, but it has been good for us. Things are going as smoothly as we could have hoped.

I wish that you had more time to stay with us after the battle but we all understand why you had to go. I know that this time will be... hard for you, and that these words will offer you little comfort, but know that we all think of you and pray that Mahal watches over the days ahead.

I hope to hear from you soon! I'm still expecting your notes on hobbits so that I can write my book on you Shire folk. I would regret having to send Nori after you, so make sure you don't take to long!
Bilbo had read the letter over and over, so many times that by the end of that week; the edges of the paper were worn and ripped. He had written back almost immediately and each day he hoped for another response. It wasn’t long after Ori’s first letter arrived that Tauriel’s had appeared in his mailbox.

Halfling –

I don’t much care for writing letters. To be quite honest, I find it tedious and time consuming but here I am, writing it anyway. So…

Things have been… changing since you left.

The Bowman had moved his people into the ruins of Dale. My king has delegated a number of our people, along with the dwarves, to held rebuild the town in a show of friendship between our people.

Legolas insisted that he stay and personally help the Bowman so I am unfortunately stuck here until he decides that we have better things to do with our time than coddle the humans. All they do is plan and meet with the dwarves and build. I told Legolas that he need not be so… literal when he said he wanted to help, but my Prince insists on directly aiding with the construction. It is so boring. Better than court, I suppose, but there are only so many patrols I can go on before I go insane.

What’s even worse is that the shifter insists on staying as well. He says it’s because Bard offered him a large sum of gold to help with the heavier lifting, but he seems to be doing less lifting and more lurking. I fear the oaf has fallen madly in love with me, halfling. Not that I blame him, I doubt he has seen a real woman for an age and I am not unattractive, but his presence is so tiresome – he requests that I rewrite that.

I will not, because it is true.

It is an outrageous lie. Don’t believe her.

What is more outrageous is that you can write –

You elves are so bloody pompous. Hobbit, don’t listen to a word of the filth she writes in this letter. If anything, she won’t leave me alone –

Hah! That is very amusing, shifter, but the halfling would have to be an idiot to believe the likes of you –

And he’d have to be blind not to recognize the shite drivel you’re writing –

I have taken care of the shifter, halfling. He’s currently passed out drooling on the floor of the tent. If I had any talent, I would draw the scene for you. It really is quite stunning, I believe he will have quite an impressive black eye for his impertinence.

Anyway, you had better be taking care of yourself. Legolas and Bard wish me to convey the same sentiment. I… am not gifted with elegant speech, halfling. I’m sure I do not need to remind you of that, but I… I hope that you are well. Or that you will be soon. Do not let your sorrow consume you. I know that the coming years will not be easy for you, but you must give your heart time to heal. Learn not to give your memories too much weight. They can be the things that destroy you, but if you let them, they can become something to cherish. I am old, halfling, perhaps not so by my people, but I have lived many lives of men. If you believe me for no other reason, believe me because of that. Time will pass and you will move forward.
It would please me if you wrote back soon. I am growing terminally bored here and your letter would most welcome.

– Tauriel

Bilbo couldn’t help the small smile creep on his face as he read the elf’s letter and wrote one back to her the next day.

Every year on Durin’s Day, Bilbo would clean of Kili’s pipe and take out Fili’s knife. He could grab Thorin’s coat and step out into the cool autumn night and walk up to his bench. The hobbit would find a small twig, wrap himself in the coat, light the pipe, and whittle away until the morning sun rose.

He never carved anything good, but it gave him something to do with his hands. For the first few years, the hobbit had wept bitter tears into the fur of Thorin’s coat. He always hurt, but on that night, the wounds seemed raw and bleeding.

Bilbo never wrote the next day, but he always wrote the day after that. Some years he wrote of Fili. He wrote of the golden dwarf’s smile. Of the little lion toy he had shown Bilbo. He wrote of what Fili had told him of his mother and how he cared for his uncle. He wrote of bright grins, easy laughter, and an infinite love for his younger brother.

Some years he wrote of Kili. Of the young dwarf who always seemed so self-assured but underneath that there were years of insecurities. He wrote of Kili’s fearless bravery, of how the dwarf would stick out his tongue when he thought he’d made a particularly fine joke. He wrote of how in the end, Kili had wanted to take care of his brother just once.

Later he wrote of Thorin. In the beginning he would just describe the dwarf’s appearance and how he had appeared to be in the beginning. He wrote of the wrongs dealt to Thorin and the wounds that had been carved deep into his mind. Bilbo wrote of how Thorin had hated him at the start but then how they grew to know each other.

Sometimes his fingers shook and the words turned to messy lines. On those days he would stop writing and go find the thrush that had taken up permanent residence in his house. He found that talking to the bird, no matter how odd it looked, helped him fight the grief that threatened to overtake him.

He had tried to be friendly with his neighbors, to his relatives, but they all seemed so… petty now, ignorant almost. They talked of gardens and gossip. Of who had the biggest sow and what new children were on the way and Bilbo found it all aggravating.

They knew nothing. Nothing of the war fought to the east. Nothing of brutality and loss. They had never seen the person they loved die in front of them. There always seemed to be a barrier between him and the rest of Hobbiton. Something that kept him separate. He gave them his practiced, tired smile but it never reached his eyes.

The only correspondence he enjoyed were the ones he received from the company and his friends to the west. Everything else felt so forced to him, like he had to pretend to be someone else to enjoy their prattle.

Mostly Bilbo kept to himself. He gardened and read and cooked. The hobbit kept himself occupied.

Dreams haunted him every night. Usually they were dreams of Thorin dying. Of Fili and Kili being torn apart by Azog’s mace.
But sometimes they were dreams of an impossible future where Thorin and his nephews had lived. Bilbo hated those nights most of all. They were so sweet and perfect and they felt so real until the hobbit woke the next morning to an empty bed and an emptier heart.

Master Baggins,

I hope all is still well. We very much enjoyed your last letter (I especially appreciate your notes on the structures of hobbit society) and I must say you write with enviable skill! Perhaps you should consider coming to Erebor and working as a Recorder yourself!

I am still finding my duties to be most fulfilling. Dáin has proved to be a most capable leader and very open to council. Erebor feels alive again, Master Baggins. There is still a certain emptiness to it, but I believe in a few more years we will be just as great as we once were.

Dori says that our alliance with Dale and the elves of Mirkwood has proven to be most lucrative. Trade flows freely between the mountain and our neighbors. He and Balin have been discussing an expedition to Moria. If we should be able to reclaim the city, we can once again open trade with the East and travel will much easier. If Balin has his way, he could be leading a party there within the next decade or so. I've asked him if I could come along (oh, to get my hands on those tomes!) and he has said yes!

It is my hope that we are at the beginning of an age of great peace and expansion. If Moria is opened again, East and West will be united through travel and trade. I know you said that you are keeping yourself quite busy, but perhaps when Moria's gates are open again, you will be able to travel here much quicker. I know we would all love to see you!

Sometimes it feels strange to wake up every morning and see this great city being born again, but I can't think of anything more exciting! Oh yes – Bofur has been promoted to Master of Mining. He tried to refuse it, saying he didn't want any more responsibility, but Dáin gave him that Durin glare and he couldn't say no.

Erebor will be the greatest kingdom once again, Master Baggins, I promise you that. It will be a kingdom that Thorin, Fili, and Kili would have been proud of. Sometimes I go out to the forest and find some of those flowers you had on the night before we found the secret door. I don't know how to make those crowns quite so well as you did but I put one on each of their tombs. I know if you were here you would do the same, but since you can't, I will.

They will never be forgotten, Master Baggins.

– Ori

Halfling –

I suppose you're wondering why I'm still writing you from Dale after all this time. Well, let me assure you it is not done by my own volition.

A few years may seem a long time for your kind to spend away from home. It is. Excruciatingly long.

My king assigned me to Legolas' personal guard after the first year when my prince made it very clear he was not leaving Dale. Sometimes we travel back and forth between the palace and Dale, but Legolas has apparently made it his personal mission to be his father's emissary to Dale and Erebor.
So here I am. Surrounded by men and dwarves. I think I might have lost any shred of sanity I had left due to substandard company. Do the insane know that they are insane? Or do they simply feel normal…

Bard is doing well, I suppose. For an up-jumped criminal that is. Though I am reluctant to admit it, the Bowman has a certain talent for ruling. Naturally that is mostly due to Legolas and his constant meddling, but it doesn't hurt to give him some credit.

The shifter has, unfortunately, decided to remain in Dale for the time being as well. Perhaps my insanity is contagious because the Bowman decided it was a good idea to make the bear the head of his guard. And of course Legolas thought that was just absolutely delightful and suggested I be in charge of training their bowmen. I told him that perhaps the famed 'Bowman' should teach his own incompetent underlings how to fire an arrow but my wisdom and great wit goes continually underappreciated here.

The shifter thinks this is all quite amusing, but we all know his sense of humor leaves much to be desired.

It is not all bad, halfling, as I did find a dwarven ale that is much to my liking. Of course by that I mean it gets the job done swiftly, so to speak, but I find the less sober I am, the more tolerable the company I am forced to associate with becomes. It can only be a matter of time before Legolas comes to his senses and decides to return home. Until then, however, my days are filled with dwarves, men, and men that sporadically turn into bears.

Valar save me, halfling, I must be going mad because I actually smiled as I wrote that. Smiled. I will pray that was the ale and not a sign of my mental degradation.

As always, stay strong halfling.

I hope to hear from you soon.

– Tauriel

The sun had just set against the hills of Hobbiton and Bilbo Baggins was washing his dishes. His hands worked methodically around the small plates, wiping them gently in the basin before placing them on the rack to dry.

It had almost been three years to the day since Thorin's company had arrived on his doorstep. Bilbo sighed as he looked out the small, round window that looked over the small incline to the path outside his house. He saw one of his neighbors stumble drunkenly with a lantern swaying precariously in front of him. Bilbo briefly hoped that the other hobbit wouldn't pass out and set fire to his garden.

He reached forward and pushed on the handle until the glass opened and the summer breeze wafted through. Bilbo shut his eyes for a moment and enjoyed the feeling on his face. A small pang shot through his heart as he thought of how Thorin might've looked walking around his home for the thousandth time. Sometimes, mostly without meaning to, he would find himself slipping into these fantasies. Bilbo had never seen the dwarf do anything even remotely domestic in all the time they'd known each other, but the slight absurdity of it made the hobbit smile if only for a moment before the sharp sting of loss lanced through him again.

It happened less often now, that the ache overwhelmed him; forced him to stay in bed all day and mourn. The letters were a large part of it, he supposed. Even if he couldn't see his friends, knowing
that they still cared, that they still wanted to know how he was… it helped.

Beside his bed on the wooden table, Bilbo piled up each of the letter's he'd received from the east. When he felt that wave of grief swelling up, threatening to overtake him, the hobbit would start with the first letter he'd received and read them all the way through until the most recent. By now the earliest were well worn with use, the edges torn slightly when he'd gripped the edges too tightly; but there was something almost reassuring about that. The words written there grounded him, reminded him that he was not alone.

Thump, thump, thump.

Bilbo's head shot up as he shook himself out of his reverie. The hobbit glanced towards where the door was and frowned. He hadn't had many visitors since Gandalf left, and even less over the last year. Most of his neighbors had written him off as becoming truly 'odd' and no longer any sort of pleasant company. Maybe… he'd imagined the noise? It was quite late…

Thump, thump, thump.

That was… definitely real. Bilbo edged his way to the door, walking as quietly as possible through the curved hall. He'd almost gotten there when he realized that he was sneaking in his home. His home. If there was one place Bilbo surely didn't have to sneak, it was his place of residence. The hobbit sighed, shaking his head at what a horrible recluse he'd become and tried to walk with more surety towards the door.

Bilbo reached the door and took a deep breath trying to prepare himself for whatever social nicety he was going to have to fake his way through now. He placed a hand on the cool metal ring and pulled until the green door creaked open. Bilbo peeked around the edge and saw…

"Dwalin?"

Bilbo gaped at the familiar bulky silhouette of the dwarf. He rubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn't imagining anything.

'Nope…' Bilbo continued to stare, 'still there…'

Was he asleep? Was he dreaming?

"As much as I am thoroughly enjoying being ogled by you, lad, if you'd open the door a bit more that would be most welcome."

Dwalin crossed his scar-covered arms and rolled his eyes as Bilbo jumped at the sound of the dwarf's voice.

"I'm… I'm not dreaming?" Bilbo asked quietly as if he still couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"If you're spendin' your nights dreamin' about me, lad, I think we should have a talk…"

Bilbo felt happiness swell within him like a gust of warm air. He flung the door aside and all but sprinted forward, wrapping his arms around Dwalin fiercely, hugging the dwarf as tightly as he could.

For the first time since Gandalf had left, Bilbo felt… good. Not like he was just surviving, but like he was truly glad to have woken up that day.

Dwalin patted his back a few times and tried to gently push the hobbit away, "alright, lad, that's…"
that's good."

"So this is the hobbit you keep prattling on about."

Bilbo stiffened in surprise at the new voice. He quickly stepped back from Dwalin and peered around his friend. In the darkness of the night, Bilbo could only make out the stranger's dark cloak, pulled close around a body.

"I, uh…" Bilbo glanced at Dwalin nervously, but the dwarf simply shrugged with a small smile, "who – who are you?"

"You mean they never talked about me?" the voice was low and there was the hint of a pout in the stranger's tone, "I think I should be insulted."

Bilbo blinked, feeling impossibly more confused than he had before.

The stranger stepped forward into the light coming from his house and a pair of hands came up to remove the cowl. Light hit the stranger's face and Bilbo let out a small gasp.

It was a woman. A dwarf woman.

Who looked impossibly familiar. Who looked impossibly like… like Thorin.

"Lady Dís?" Bilbo whispered, his eyes wide with shock.

She let out a small laugh and nodded, "Lady? I'm not so sure about that part but yes… I'm glad I seem to have come up in at least one conversation."

"I…" Bilbo stumbled forward and stuck out his hand, but then pulled it back suddenly. He should bow, shouldn't he? Wasn't she a dwarf queen or – or…. The hobbit settled on an extremely awkward half bow, half curtsy monstrosity.

"It's a – a pleasure to meet you, Lady Dís."

She smiled at him and for a moment all Bilbo saw in her face was Fili's grin. For a moment he felt his heart clench. It must have shown on his face because the dwarf's expression turned sad.

"None of that lady business, Bilbo Baggins," Dís placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, "may I call you Bilbo?"

Suddenly as Bilbo looked at her, looked at how closely she resembled Thorin, the hobbit let out a manic laugh as that ache split through his chest again, clawing and tearing.

Dís gazed at him curiously but said nothing until his laughter died away.

"I'm—I'm sorry," Bilbo wiped a small tear from his eye and couldn't even tell himself if it was sad or happy, "it's just… it took Thorin a few months to ask me that and even then, I had to – had to ask for him…"

Dís stared for a moment before letting out a similar laugh, happy and sad. Pained and joyful.

"That does sound rather like him. Thorin was always very rigid when it came to customs. He was very…" Her mouth twisted into a sorrowful sort of grin.

"Awkward?" Bilbo matched her expression.
"Yes, he was... very awkward," Dís pulled him into a quick hug, "it is wonderful to meet you, Bilbo."

"Very touching," Dwalin grumbled from beside them, "can we go inside now?"

Bilbo's eyes widened as years of social training kicked in again, "Oh, yes! Of course – sorry, sorry," the hobbit scrambled back into the house and pulled the door open for them to come inside.

The hobbit took their cloaks and bags, placing them near the door before ushering them into the kitchen. He had half a thought to offer them ale – he hadn't known a dwarf opposed to the stuff – but quickly remembered that he hadn't restocked any since Gandalf had thrown everything out.

"I, uh, I only have tea..." Bilbo gestured towards the table for them to sit down, "...sorry."

"Tea is fine," Dís smiled at him again but quickly turned a fearsome glare towards Dwalin who looked ready to protest, "tea is perfect, isn't it Dwalin?"

His mouth snapped shut and Dwalin looked away almost sheepishly, "tea will be... acceptable."

"Good," Dís patted his arm with a dangerously sweet smile.

Bilbo busied himself preparing the tea. It all felt so... surreal. Like some very strange dream he'd never imagined would even occur to him. As he set the kettle to boiling, Bilbo took the chance to sneak furtive glances at Dís.

She was... beautiful. Just like Dwalin had said.

Half of her wild black hair was piled into a sort of bun at the back of her head and the rest spilled around her shoulders, littered with small braids and those metal beads. Her beard was cropped close to her face much like Thorin's had been, except at her chin were two smaller braids, each with a blue stone at the end.

Her mouth, her nose, her cheeks... She shared all of those with Thorin. He saw Fili in the quirk of her lips. He saw Kili in the way she tilted her head just so when someone was talking. But it was her eyes... those deep blue eyes that made him want to look away, if only to spare himself some pain. She looked so much like Thorin that it made him want to shrink away.

The hobbit bustled over and placed cups in front of them, looking only at Dwalin.

"So what, uh, what are you doing here?" Bilbo asked as he sat down opposite them at the table. "Not that I don't want you to be!" the hobbit added quickly, "it's just... well, it is a long way." Bilbo flushed as his gaze fell down to his cup. Normally it took him a few more minutes to offend his guests but tonight would have to be a new record.

"We're going to Erebor, lad." Dwalin replied as he eyed the delicate cup with a very unenthusiastic expression on his face.

"You haven't been back?" Bilbo glanced up surprised. He knew Dwalin had gone to the Blue Mountains, but he'd just sort of assumed the dwarf would want to go back to Erebor as soon as possible. It had been years after all.

"No..." it was Dís who answered, though he couldn't bring himself to look into her eyes. "I needed time..." she trailed off and swirled the tea in her cup absently, "but now I need to go back to... pay my respects."
Dwalin reached over and placed his hand over hers and squeezed, his expression softer than Bilbo had ever seen. "It wasn't just you," he mumbled gruffly, "I… needed time as well."

The hobbit watched them for a moment, thinking back to the conversation he'd had with Dwalin back at Beorn's house. As he watched the dwarf's face, Bilbo felt hope swell within his chest and a small smile creep onto his face. He hoped that they had found comfort in each other.

'Someone should have a happy ending,' Bilbo thought to himself with a sliver of envy before he remembered that Dís had lost both her sons and a brother. It felt like cold water had been poured over him and Bilbo felt immediately guilty.

"I told Dís everything about the journey," Dwalin continued, looking back at Bilbo, "she wanted to meet you, lad, so here we are."

Dís narrowed her eyes at the other dwarf, "don't be rude, Dwalin, you wanted to see Bilbo as well."

Dwalin seemed to flush minutely, red creeping up over his beard before glaring back at her. "He knows that," the dwarf gestured at Bilbo with a scowl, "I don't need to go around sayin' every damn thing I'm feelin'!"

Dís was about to reply when the hobbit let out a small chuckle. She glanced at him and stared so intently Bilbo had to look away again, not sure he could handle the intensity of her gaze, of those hauntingly familiar blue eyes.

They stayed up and talked for a while longer. Well, less talked than Bilbo listened to the two dwarves bicker over certain aspects of their journey so far. It was well into the night when Dwalin excused himself to go to sleep, leaving Bilbo and Dís alone in the kitchen together. The hobbit had hurriedly tried to busy himself with the dishes and not notice the curious sort of silence that had fallen over them.

"Do I really remind you of him that much?"

Bilbo's hands gripped the teacup so tightly that it almost shattered, startled at the sudden noise. The hobbit couldn't turn around to face her. Not after spending so many hours looking everywhere except at her face. Shame welled within him suddenly.

"I…"

He heard the sound of a chair shifting and soft footsteps until there was someone beside him. Dís stood there for a moment before gently taking the cup out of his stiff fingers and easing it into the basin.

Bilbo sighed feeling weary and couldn't bring himself to lie. "Yes. You look just like… just like Thorin." The name felt like dust on his tongue. It had been so long since he'd said it aloud.

"But much more beautiful, yes?" Her tone was joking, but Bilbo caught the same hint of tired sorrow in her voice as he felt weighing deep in his bones. The hobbit tried to smile but he couldn't make anything more than a grimace.

"Do you have bench up there?" Bilbo saw her gesture to the ceiling and nodded.

"Good. Let's go," Dís put her arm through his and lead him out the door up to the bench that sat facing the bright summer moon. Bilbo felt almost a blur as he walked up the hill and sat down, absently aware that Dís was lighting a pipe and asking for his. Bilbo pulled it out and saw her face halted at the sight of Kili's pipe. The hobbit's eyes grew wide and he tried to pull his hand back, but
she held his wrist tightly.

"No... it's fine, Bilbo. I just wasn't expecting to see that here." Dís smiled down at the pipe with such sorrow, the hobbit knew that any pain, any horrible loss that he had suffered since Erebor was matched equally in this dwarf.

"He always took such poor care of it," Dís took the pipe in her hand and lit it with her own, "but Kili would just smile and laugh, saying it was sturdy enough."

Bilbo watched the moonlight play across her face and he almost started to weep. Bilbo had been there to watch her sons died, her brother die. Bilbo had some... some closure at least; he had been able to say good-bye, no matter how much it hurt. But Dís... she had to find out through someone else, she had worried for months and months about the shattered remnants of her family only to find out that they had all been...

"Do you want it?" Bilbo gestured toward the pipe, "I think you should... you should have it."

Dís shook her head lightly, "It is yours, Bilbo."

The hobbit took the pipe back and stared up at that great moon as they sat in silence for several minutes.

"When you say Dwalin told you everything..." the hobbit trailed off.

Dís eyed him for a moment, "Did he tell me about you and my brother, you mean?"

Bilbo nodded, still unable to meet her eyes until he felt warm fingers touch his face and turn it until the hobbit had no choice but to look at her face.

"You should not let your memories own you."

The hobbit blinked away at unwanted tears but kept staring at her forehead and not any lower.

"Look at me," she said softly.

Bilbo stared at her hair instead.

"Look at me, Bilbo."

The hobbit clenched his eyes shut and took a deep breath. It was stupid. It was so stupid that even after years, he was still this weak, this broken. Bilbo wrenched his eyes open and forced himself to look back at her. To see Dís and not Thorin, even though his heart screamed out to him to stop, to look away, to cower.

"You have mourned enough," Dís moved her hand so it cupped his jaw and Bilbo saw that there was something shimmering in her eyes as well, though no tears fell down her cheeks.

"You knew Thorin's love, Bilbo. That is..." she gave him that smile again, "you must treasure it, not weep for it."

"I—" Bilbo let out a choked gasp, "I can't. I can't it's too – it's too hard."

He thought that he was healing. He thought that the gaping hole that had been ripped into his heart might've been growing numb. But as he looked at Dís, as he saw all the hurt and the pain and the loneliness reflected in her blue eyes, Bilbo knew that he hadn't even begun. There was strength in her eyes. There was the same fire he'd seen in Thorin's. There was a will to live there that Bilbo
knew had flickered out when he'd seen them all die.

He felt guilty.

"I know," Dís pulled him into a hug, "I know it is."

He felt guilty for crying all over the woman who had lost more than he could ever understand, he felt guilty for showing weakness when she was showing such strength. But most of all, more than anything, Bilbo Baggins felt guilty for being responsible for her pain. He'd given Thorin the ring. He had tainted his friend, corrupted him. Who knows how things could have gone if he hadn't? They might all… they might all be alive and…

Bilbo gripped tight into her shirt, burying his face into her neck, their pipes forgotten on the bench.

Everything rushed back, every single thing that he'd tried to bury since Gandalf had left, every single thing he tried to cover up with letters from his friends. He was responsible. He had torn everything asunder and now one of his victims was trying to comfort him. He was disgusting. He was a monster.

"I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry—" Bilbo knew it wasn't enough. How could it ever be enough? No amount of gold was worth a life. No glowing stone was worth a life. And a few paltry words were worth even less than that.

"It was—it was my fault," he sobbed, knowing it was futile, knowing that he deserved every second of his misery, "it was all my fault, all of it… I killed them, I killed them and—"

"You did not."

"I did, I did—" Bilbo's hands tightened.

"Bilbo, look at me."

"I did, I did, I did—"

She leaned back and took his face in her hands, like he'd done for Thorin in the treasure room. "Look at me."

Bilbo looked up through swimming vision and saw no blame in her face.

"Bilbo Baggins," Dís began quietly as he kept her hands firm on his face, "you did not kill my brother or my sons, Azog did."

"But the ring—" how could she not understand?

"Dwalin told me of the ring, Bilbo. It was not your fault."

Dís sighed as he looked away for a moment, "Did the ring fill those orcs with malice? Did the ring make Azog kill my grandfather and drive my father to madness? Did the ring make Azog want to cut the throat of every dwarf left in the line of Durin?"

"I…" Bilbo blinked away tears, "I don't…"

"It did not," Dís' voice was stern, "Did the ring make Azog lead the orcs on Erebor? Did the ring make them fight a war? Did the ring make Azog kill them?"

"It did not," Dís didn't wait for him to answer, "whatever may have happened between the elves and
my brother while that ring was on him, it did not cause the orcs to act as they have since their stain was smeared on this earth."

"Azog has thirsted for our blood since Moria. That beast killed my family," she shook his head lightly, "not you."

He wanted to believe her… he wanted to trust that beautiful, wonderful, impossible promise of forgiveness that lay within her words but…

"I cannot believe that the person my brother chose to love would do anything to hurt him."

Bilbo had to look away. He didn't deserve that faith.

"No, look at me Bilbo."

He did.

"If what Dwalin told me has even a speck of truth to it, Thorin loved you as he never loved anyone else," Bilbo felt his heart clench, "he refused to trust anyone for years, Bilbo. He was so… he was so closed to everyone but his family, I never even thought to trust a hope that he would find someone."

"I knew Thorin better than anyone. He would never, never, want you suffer for him. He would want you to live, Bilbo. He would want you to look at the sun and smile at its warmth. He would want you to get up every day and be happy..."

Dís pulled him into another hug.

"My sons and my brother, they… they died because they believed in something. They died for a better future for our people. I know that doesn't comfort you because it will never comfort me. I know your grief, Bilbo, I know we would trade that mountain in a heartbeat for them to be alive again. But we can't."

Her arms held him tighter.

"So we must live. For them." Dís' voice grew quiet, "We cannot taint Thorin's memory with so much sorrow. Not when… not when I know he would give anything to see us happy. And so would my sons."

"But… how—" the hobbit felt dizzy, felt like the world was crashing around him again, "how?"

"I…" Dís pulled back slightly so she could see him, "I blamed myself for… for a long time. I thought to myself, 'what if I had gone with? Would they still be alive? Would I have been able to protect them?'"

"I spent so many days feeling like… like it was all my fault. Frerin died going back into the mountains during Smaug's attack after I told him Thorin had gone in and I just stood there and watched. For years I promised myself I would never let that happen to my family again. I would never just stand by and watch."

"When I found out Thorin was going back, I…" Dís' voice grew weary, "I wanted to go with, I demanded to go with but he told me that I should stay back and rule, that everything was going to be fine, even though I knew in my heart it wouldn't. Then I got that damn note that my sons left saying they were following my brother back to Erebor and that I shouldn't worry because they would… they would keep each other safe."
Bilbo saw a pain in her eyes. A mother's pain. A sister's pain.

"I was so angry with them that I almost packed up and followed just to drag them back. But… Thorin was right, the Blue Mountains needed someone to rule. So I stayed. I dreamt every night about getting a letter telling me Erebor was ours again, telling me that my sons and brother were safe."

"When Dwalin returned alone, I… I knew that they were gone. And I blamed myself. Over and over I dreamt of every different choice I could've made and they all seemed infinitely better than the ones I did when I was awake. I mourned for them but… I lost myself to the grief and blame."

In that moment as Bilbo looked at Dís' face he thought he'd never known someone so intimately and yet not at all. She was the same as him, twin in their suffering, and he felt that he'd known her for a lifetime even though she was almost a stranger.

"Dwalin saved me, Bilbo. He let me mourn but when I… lost myself, he dragged me back. Reminded me that I am not… not responsible for their deaths. What do we have in this world, what are we responsible for if not our own choices? I will not discredit theirs by tarnishing my memories with guilt that things might've been different. I had to… I had to forgive myself to realize that. I'm not… I'm not saying it is easy, Mahal knows I will never not mourn them, but I won't… I cannot let it consume me, Bilbo. And neither can you."

Something broke within Bilbo and all of the hurt, all of the sorrow and the guilt and the blame started to pour from him. He'd spent the last few years trying to heal, trying to move forward but all he had done was clench his eyes shut to everything going on around him. He had stopped, pretending that everything was going to be better when really all he was doing was surviving.

The hobbit hadn't needed consolation. He hadn't needed good memories to look back on. What Bilbo had needed was forgiveness. He had needed absolution, he needed to know that maybe… maybe it was not his fault that Thorin and Fili and Kili were dead. That sometimes life was just cruel and no matter how hard you try, in the end giving everything you had wasn't enough. And that was… that was something that could be forgiven.

He had never thought to look for it in the sister of his dead love. He had never thought to ask the mother of his dead friends. Because why should she? Why should she forgive him? But as he looked into her blue eyes, for a moment he didn't see Thorin, he saw himself. He saw in Dís the possibility of forgiveness, of a future where he could be really and truly happy again.

And he believed her.

Bilbo's chest felt like it was splitting, like his lungs weren't getting enough air and he might never get enough again. But just like that, Dís gave him a small watery smile and he broke again. He was breathing sharp, shallow gasps and his heart hurt but for the first time since Thorin had died, it hurt because he was mourning the past, mourning the lives that were extinguished; not the future he had blamed himself for taking away from them.

The hobbit clutched to Dís like a lifeline, like she was the only thing in the world ground him. But this time, it was not because Bilbo felt like he was drowning in that impossibly large wave of grief and guilt, but because he felt light. Like some burden had just been lifted from him. He still hurt, he still mourned, and he knew he would for the rest of his life, but now… now he was forgiven. He wouldn't let himself be consumed; he would fight for his happiness because that's what Thorin would have done. That's what Fili and Kili would have done.

Bilbo buried his face in her neck and felt the heat of her body. Felt the heat of the life that thrummed
through her veins and remembered when he had talked with Bofur that night under the moon. He had told the dwarf that every life was precious, that every life should be treasured. In his guilt and grief, Bilbo had forgotten to include his own. Dís was right, they couldn't just live for their lost ones, they had to live for themselves.

Dís rubbed at his back and whispered softly into his ear, "I regret our first meeting has included so many tears, Bilbo. You must think me a horrible guest."

Bilbo pulled away with a watery, choking laugh, "of course not, Lady Dís. I think I might've ruined your cloak."

The laugh sounded rough and cracked even to his own ears, but for the first time in ages he actually felt the warmth reach into his bones. It felt... good.

"This old thing?" Dís shrugged, "I'll just switch it with Dwalin's, he'll never even notice."

She winked at him and the hobbit felt real laughter start to pour out of him, just as that horrible ache had. Dís eyed him for a moment but started to laugh as well; and soon enough they were holding their stomachs, bent over with a different sort of tears in their eyes.

It wasn't even that funny, really. Bilbo thought it was mostly a mixture of relief and surprise that he even could laugh again. When he finally sat up, the hobbit felt a certain hollowness in his chest, but it didn't cause him to grieve as it did before. This time it felt more like something had left, leaving open space to be filled with something different, something better.

Dís put her arm around his shoulders and together they sat staring at the moon until the first hints of sunrise came above the hills.

"I..." Bilbo paused immediately. He didn't know what to say, he didn't know if he even had words adequate for expressing his gratitude for what Dís had done for him. How did one thank another for something priceless?

"You're welcome," she turned to him with another wink.

Bilbo chuckled and turned back to watch the sunrise with a small smile on his face. She understood, she understood better than anyone. In that moment, as they sat side by side, watching the sunrise, Bilbo realized that there never would be words sufficient enough, but at the same time, he had never needed to use them.

Dís and Dwalin stayed for a few more days in Bag End. Dwalin had come outside in the morning looking for them, only to find Bilbo and Dís leaning against each other, asleep as the morning sun warmed their faces.

Dwalin had grumbled something about being surround by lunatics, but when he saw the pair of them laughing at him, grins on their faces, Dwalin had given him a curious, relieved sort of smile.

Bilbo found that his affection for Dís grew impossibly fast over their stay. He felt like he known her for an age. They were kindred spirits, tied together through the love of their lost ones and that bond, that same need to not just survive, but to really live, made the hobbit feel that there were few people he had ever met in his life that he had known better.

The hobbit had sent them off with plenty of food for their journey east to Erebor, as well as a few letters for the rest of the company and Tauriel. He'd given them both giant hugs though Dwalin had tried to protest until Dís had thwacked him hard across the arm with a glare.
As he waved them down the road, Bilbo hoped with all his heart that they found happiness with each other. They had both lost so much… They deserved to find love once again; they deserved to be happy.

Bilbo felt their absence acutely over the next few days but he also felt… better. Better than he had in years. He no longer felt that he needed to occupy himself just to keep the memories at bay. He found that he could sit in his study with a cup of tea and relax, as he hadn't been able to since he'd returned home.

Summer passed into autumn and autumn passed into winter.

There were nights when Bilbo took out the little wooden statues and watched them as the moon passed over their small faces. And he mourned. He remembered Thorin's touch. The way the dwarf's fingers were rough with calluses but gentler than anything he'd ever known. He remembered the way Thorin would hold his hand sometimes and they would just sit in silence because nothing more needed to be said.

But now there was no guilt in his sorrow. It wasn't… easy, by any means. There were days when he'd still just want to curl up and do anything but face the world for the day, but while there was time enough to grieve, he also found time to learn how to live again.

The dirt felt cooler under his feet. The sun felt warmer on his face. The snow left tiny, freezing trails across his skin as it melted away.

Bilbo held tight to those days and each time he felt he couldn't get up, he would remember that there were things to explore, books to read, people to meet. He would build his home again, here in Bag End, because he knew it couldn't be with Thorin anymore. Thorin was dead and he was alive; and damn it all, Bilbo Baggins would live. Even if it hurt so much he couldn't move some days, he would live.

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**Master Baggins,**

*How are you doing? I'm sorry it's been so long since my last letter but it was for good reason, I promise! I have some very exciting news! It's been quite a long time, but do you remember how I motioned that we had been discussing the possibility of returning to Moria?*

Well – Master Balin has said that we will be departing within the year! Master Balin has asked me to accompany him as the official Recorder, which of course I was delighted to accept. Can you just imagine it, Master Baggins? All those books – all that history just waiting to be rediscovered and I'll be the one to do it!

**Master Oin** will be accompanying us as well. He says there will be many opportunities for making money in the abandoned mines once we get there. I asked him how he could even thing about that when there are thousands upon thousands of books just waiting to be read again but all he did was roll his eyes.

This will probably be the last letter I can write to you for a while since we’ll be on the road, but once we've succeeded, I'll be sure to write again! Hopefully once Moria is open to trade, we can have letters and goods passed much more quickly through the Misty Mountains than before.

*If my calculations are correct, it could cut travel time between, say, the Shire and Erebor by a month at least! There are so many exciting new possibilities, Master Baggins, I get shivers just thinking about them!*
– Nori assures me that that is not normal and I should probably go see a physician.

He is simply jealous that I am going on the expedition and he is stuck here running the city guards.

– He insists that Dori's presence in the city is not helping (don't believe him Master Baggins, we're getting along splendidly).

Were you able to find those books on your family history? If so, don't send them to Erebor. I'll let you know when we're settled enough so you can send them to Moria. I think I've gotten a good portion of the record on hobbits done, but you have a surprisingly fascinating history that I just keep finding more to add!

I hope this reaches you well! The rest of the company sends their regards and best wishes. (Master Bofur would like me to add that he is still waiting for you to visit and will be very cross if you hold out too long!)

– Ori

Halfling –

I know I complain about this every time I write to you but I feel compelled to do so because we are still in Dale. Still! Years do not mean so much to an elf as they do for men, but even so…

Legolas is still insistent that there should be an elvish presence here to facilitate relations with the men and dwarves, but don't you think years are a bit extreme?

I do.

To be fair, he did tell me I was free to return to court any time, but I know that my absence would result in everything we've worked for falling apart. I can see you rolling your eyes at this, but it's true. Without me, these city guards wouldn't know a twig from an arrow. There is very little crime in Dale. Why you ask? Because I can shoot a thief from a half a league away and they all know that. If I left, halfling, Dale would descend into chaos.

The shifter has decided to remain as well, even though the city has been rebuilt. Don't ask me why, but he insists on staying in the barracks to pick fights with new recruits that don't know of his… affliction yet. I believe he finds it amusing to turn into a bear and watch them piss themselves.

Which, to be fair, it is, but I will never admit it to his face. Can you just imagine how smug it would be? I already want to punch him on a daily basis; I don't think my extraordinary resistance could hold out if he knew I enjoyed it just a little.

Legolas is with Bard most days and the people have taken to calling him their 'Queen of Dale.' I have put several of these idiots in the stocks to teach them a lesson but the title seems to be sticking. When I informed him of this, he just laughed and waved me off but I will remain vigilant, halfling. Someone has to in a city full of moronic ingrates.

Despite the very… human qualities of Dale, I find myself not resenting it as much as I did in the beginning. It never feels quite like home, but I cannot deny that I do have a sense of pride looking at all we have accomplished. Everything that my kin have created always seemed so… old, even to me. Thranduil's palace was around for an age before I was even born. But here, I have been able to help create and build; to watch this new kingdom rise from the ashes and say that I helped put some of the stone in place. It is a… good feeling, halfling.
I do miss the Great Forest. It is the only home I have ever known, but for now, I... oh this is so stupid I think I could be happy here. But only for a little while. And only if no one ever finds out I don't resent them quite as much as it appears.

I hope this letter finds you well, Bilbo. As always, stay strong.

– Tauriel

(Legolas, the bowman, and the shifter all send their regards and wish you happiness)

It had been many years since Bilbo Baggins had returned to Bag End when he heard of his second cousin Drogo and his wife drowning in the Brandywine River.

The night had been stormy, wind and rain lashing at his windows and Bilbo had just been about to settle down next to the fire with a nice cup of tea when he heard a knock on his door.

Confusion had prodded at his thoughts as the hobbit went to see who was visiting him at this time of night and in a storm to boot. When he opened it, Bilbo quickly ushered in two hobbits, one old and one very young.

The moment he'd opened his door, Bilbo had been changed forever, though he hadn't known it at the time.

The older hobbit he knew lived in Buckland near Drogo, but he had never known him as more than a passing acquaintance. Mungo was his name, Bilbo thought absently as he tried to see who the small one hiding behind Mungo's leg was.

That's when he'd been told that Drogo and his wife Primula had drowned earlier that day. Mungo had leaned forward to whisper in his ear that they weren't sure if the boat had merely sunk under Drogo's girth or if Primula had pushed her husband in only to be dragged down as well.

Bilbo felt sorry for them, of course he did, but they hadn't been exactly close. It was more for little Frodo's sake that he felt remorse. The few times his second cousin had brought his family to Bag End, the boy had been a refreshing surprise. Unlike his parents and, in Bilbo's opinion, many of the Baggins hobbits, Frodo showed a desire to explore, a desire to find out more about the wide world around them.

The last time he'd seen the lad was on Frodo's eleventh birthday a year before when Bilbo had given him one of his old maps. Frodo had delighted in it though his parents sent Bilbo dirty looks for encouraging what they deemed as 'distasteful behavior.'

That was when Mungo had pulled the small hobbit out in front of him, pulling off boy's hood.

"He doesn't have anyone else right now, Mister Bilbo," Mungo had fidgeted with his sleeve, "We can… try to find other arrangements soon, but the boy needs somewhere to stay for the time being and you're his closest relative."

Bilbo had knelt down immediately and unclasped Frodo's cloak trying to get the sopping thing off him as quickly as he could. The boy's face was red and wet with tears, his hands shaking as Frodo brought them to his big blue eyes, trying to wipe away the wetness there.

"U-uncle Bilbo?" Frodo had said in such a small, broken voice.

Bilbo pulled his nephew into a tight hug and waved Mungo back out the door.
"Yes, yes, it's me," Bilbo had rubbed soothing circles into the boy's back.

"They're… they're gone…" Frodo had started to sob again, tears pouring into his uncle's shirt.

"I know," Bilbo had whispered, "I know, Frodo. But I'm here for you."

The small hobbit sobbed even harder, his limbs felt so fragile in Bilbo's grasp.

"I'm here."

"Frodo… will you come out now?"

Bilbo leaned his ear against the door to young hobbit's room, waiting for a reply.

It had been a week since Frodo's parents had drowned in the river and the boy had barely spoken a word to him. It wasn't… abnormal, Bilbo supposed, but there was only so long anyone could go without food.

"Frodo?"

There was a scuffling sound behind the door until it shifted open a fraction. One large blue eye peered out at him, red and wet.

"I don't want to come out."

Bilbo sighed and gave his nephew a weary smile, "Can I come in, then?"

Frodo seemed to consider him for a moment before shutting the door sharply in the older hobbit's face, "No! I don't – I don't want you to."

Bilbo had never really considered having children. Sure there were days in his youth when he dreamed of a family but after his mother and father died, Bilbo was content living by himself. Then he had gone on his journey and… no matter how many years passed, the hobbit had loved none other than Thorin. The heart he had thought broken forever would always belong to Thorin, but as he looked at this small child, helpless and wet and so lonely, Bilbo felt affection swell in his chest. A… fatherly sort of love, he supposed.

Of course, that didn't mean that he had any idea what he was doing. Frodo wouldn't speak, wouldn't eat, and as far as Bilbo could tell, wouldn't sleep either. He wouldn't talk or listen, just sit in Bilbo's spare room and cry. Children were… complicated. Children who had just lost their parents and been forced to move across the Shire were even more so.

Bilbo sat down against the door with another sigh and leaned back on the polished wood.

"Okay. I'm just going to sit here for a while, alright?" Bilbo settled onto the floor, "You don't need to talk, but I want you to know that I'm right here for you."

He heard a sniff through the door and for a moment there was only silence until there was another sound. A small body sliding down against the other side of the door and coming to rest on the wooden floor inches from where he was.

Bilbo waited, saying nothing, but hoping Frodo might talk. Even if he didn't though, it was… enough, he supposed, that the young hobbit know that he wasn't going to leave.

"Why…" Frodo's small voice came muffled through the door, "Why did they have to go, Uncle
'Why, indeed?' The older hobbit thought to himself with hint of sorrow. Of course, the one question Frodo wanted the answer was the one he himself had never been able to find. He'd been trying for the last twenty years and come no closer than he had in the beginning.

"I…"

Should he lie? Should he offer comfort to a child even though… even though there was no comfort except for lies? Was it kinder to give him a reason, or was it kinder to teach him early on that sometimes life was cruel?

"I don't know, Frodo."

It was the truth at least. He wouldn't lie to Frodo. He couldn't lie. There was no purpose in his parents' death, no reason to give the boy that would make him feel any better. All Bilbo could do was make sure that he was there.

He heard Frodo starting to cry again and his heart clenched. He… he wanted to help, wanted to make the tears stop, make the boy's parents come back; but as he had found with so many crucial moments in his life, Bilbo Baggins had no clue what to do.

"What – what am I…" Frodo gave a wet sniff and gulped, "What am I supposed to do?"

Bilbo closed his eyes and leaned his head back to rest against the door. That was the crux of it all, wasn't it? Maybe it wasn't so much why these things happened, but what the people left behind did in the face of such tragedy?

"Be brave, Frodo Baggins," Bilbo found himself saying though he wasn't quite sure where the words were coming from.

Frodo sniffed again, "Brave?"

"Mhm," Bilbo nodded against the door, "Do you want to hear about some very brave friends of mine?"

"O-okay…" he heard the young hobbit move his head to rest against the door.

"I once knew a pair of brothers, dwarf brothers."

"You were friends with dwarves?" Frodo's voice picked up slightly with interest.

"Yes I was, a whole company of them in fact. But these two, they were princes of a very distant kingdom buried deep within a lonely mountain."

"You were friends with princes?"

Bilbo chuckled lightly, "I used to keep very illustrious company, little one. Very respectable and whatnot."

"My parents said that you weren't—weren't very respectable at all…" Frodo trailed off.

The hobbit couldn't help but grin at that, "That's because they hadn't gone on any adventures! Anyway, these two princes had lost their home to a mighty dragon—"

"A dragon?" Frodo gasped.
"A very big, very scary dragon named Smaug. Their home had been burnt, taken away from them. And not long after that, their father died as well. They were very sad because they didn't have a home and they didn't have a father."

"Just like me?"

"In many ways, little one," Bilbo said gently. "They also had an uncle, just like you. An uncle who was brave and strong and kind, an uncle who decided to raise them as his own sons."

"You see their uncle was a great king of dwarves who led his people west. He had many burdens to bear and many responsibilities for he loved his people and wanted them to live in safety. But the thing he cared for most in this world were his two nephews, his two sons. He helped raise them, helped them learn to be strong, but most of all, he taught them that even though many terrible things had happened to them, they could still be brave."

"The two princes grew tall and strong. They faced many trials together, but no matter what, they were brave and they had their uncle to support them. They refused to let all the bad things that happened make them sad."

"And... I can be brave? I can be brave like the princes?" Frodo asked with fragile hope in every word.

"I know you will be, Frodo." A small smile pulled at Bilbo's lips.

"And you'll be my uncle? Just – just like the uncle in the story?"

"Mmmh," Bilbo nodded, "I'll help you be brave, little one, but I can only do that if you let me."

There was a moment of silence and then a small shuffling. Bilbo felt the door open slightly behind him and the older hobbit stood up. Frodo shifted his weight from foot to foot but his eyes looked drier at least.

"I – I think I'm hungry now," Frodo murmured as he stepped out into the hallway.

Bilbo felt relief wash through him and he smiled down at his young nephew, feeling for the first time since the boy arrived that things would be alright. He held out his hand and Frodo quickly took it in his much smaller one.

"Let's see what we can cook up, shall we?"

That night Bilbo made more food than he had in years and saw Frodo smile.

Once Frodo moved in, time seemed to flash by. Days turned into years and the young hobbit seemed to grow almost instantly. The first year had been hard on both of them. Bilbo had spent most of his life living alone and Frodo had needed to adjust to both his loss and his new home.

But it wasn't so long before Frodo's friends came knocking on the door of Bag End. There were three in particular that stopped by most often and whisked Frodo away to come up with who knows what sort of mischief. Samwise was the most calm and the one Bilbo trusted to keep them out of any real trouble, but Merry and Pippin did their best to make Bilbo apologize on their behalf to Farmer Maggot nearly every other day.

Since Frodo had moved into Bag End everything seemed to have changed. Not in ways that were overtly noticeable at first, but over time. Bilbo found that he couldn't dwell within his own mind so
much anymore, not with a child to care for.

Apart from the random bouts of mischief his nephew happened to be dragged into, Frodo was well behaved enough that Bilbo didn't need to do much 'parenting' as it were. Which, he thought with some relief, was probably for the best seeing as how he almost constantly felt as if he was floundering around with no proper training.

Frodo was a good lad. After his parents' death, the young hobbit had grown more reserved and even with several years and a group of very persistent friends, it still took more for Frodo to smile that it had before the accident.

Bilbo considered himself somewhat well versed on the topic of loss and grief over his years and he knew that Frodo would either grow past his tragedy or it would linger, all he could do was be there for his nephew.

It had been two years since his cousin Drogo had died when an old friend showed up on a balmy summer evening. Bilbo and Frodo had been sitting at the kitchen while the young hobbit regaled that day's adventures with his friends when a knock came at the door.

Bilbo walked over to the door slower than usual. His ankle was bothering him more than usual today and he wasn't exactly a spritely young hobbit anymore. Even so… Bilbo mused to himself as he absently traced the ring in his pocket, he… didn't look so old as he felt.

The hobbit opened the door with a creak and a tall figure cloaked in gray, leaning against a wooden staff smiled down at him.

"Gandalf!" Bilbo rushed forward and wrapped his arms around the wizard's middle, "I haven't seen you in years!"

The hobbit grinned up at his friend, stepping back slightly, then fixing a mock frown on his face, "I thought you had forgotten where I lived."

"Forgotten?" Gandalf laughed in his gruff voice, "How could I forget, my friend?"

"Well, it certainly took you long enough," Bilbo rolled his eyes and stepped back, letting the wizard into Bag End, "Come in, come in. Just because you are a poor friend doesn't mean I'll be a poor host."

Gandalf stepped inside, stooping low to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling. "Is that dinner I smell?"

Bilbo let out a small chuckle, "You always did have a good nose. Frodo and I were just sitting down to eat, would you like some?"

"Frodo?" Gandalf shot him a quizzical look, "A friend?"

"A nephew," Bilbo smiled as he led the old man into the kitchen, "Frodo, I have someone I'd like you to meet."

The young hobbit twisted around in his chair to look and his eyes traveled up to the wizards face with a suspicious look on his face.

"Gandalf this is my nephew Frodo," Bilbo gestured at the table with a wave, "Frodo, this is Gandalf."

"Gandalf?" Frodo's eyes went wide with awe, "The wizard?"
"One in the same," Bilbo laughed as he began to set up another plate at the table.

"But…" Frodo glanced between the old man and his uncle, "I thought you made him up!"

Bilbo clutched at his chest with mock indignation, "Why Frodo, I am shocked!"

"But you said he was a wizard!" The young hobbit whispered as he leaned towards his uncle.

"Gandalf, I fear my honor as a story teller has been impugned by this non-believer." Bilbo gave the old man a look, "If you'd be so kind…"

Gandalf gave him a crinkly smile before stepping closer to Frodo, holding out his hand for the young hobbit to inspect.

Frodo peered into the empty palm with his brows furrowed before looking up at the old man with a frown, "There's nothing there, Mister Gandalf…"

The wizard gave Frodo a wink, "Look again."

Frodo glanced down and almost shot out of his chair in surprise. A small flicker of flame curled in the wizard's palm.

"H-how…?" Frodo's jaw hung open in shock, "So you really do exist…"

"See, your Uncle Bilbo always tells the truth," Bilbo grinned at his friend as the wizard sat down at the table.

"So – so," Frodo's eyes were rapidly flicking between Bilbo and Gandalf, "you did go on an adventure with the dwarves? You really talked to a dragon?"

"He did indeed," Gandalf said as he tucked into his plate with fervor.

"Oh wow…" Frodo's face was full of wonder, his food completely forgotten, "I can't wait to tell Sam I met a real wizard! Could you – could you show him that thing with your hand Mister Gandalf? Cause he'll never believe me otherwise…"

"Gandalf is not here to do ticks at your whim, Frodo," Bilbo gave his nephew an exasperated smile.

"Oh, it's quite alright," the wizard waved his hand in dismissal. "I wouldn't want the Shire to think you a liar, old friend."

"Can you tell me more about Fili and Kili, Mister Gandalf?" Frodo said eagerly as he watched the wizard eat with rapt attention.

Gandalf's hand paused mid-air as he glanced over to Bilbo.

"They're his favorites," Bilbo said with a mild shrug and an almost sad smile on his face.

"Uncle Bilbo says they were princes, were they?"

"They were," Gandalf settled back in his chair and began the tale of the dwarves of Erebor and the journey back to their lost kingdom.

The wizard talked for hours, twisting the flames on the candles to make small shadows that looked almost like little figures. Frodo watched with rapt attention until his yawns grew louder and louder and he eventually fell asleep with his face pressed against the wood.
Gandalf had only gotten to Beorn's house and for that Bilbo was thankful. The end of that story was not happy no matter who told it and it always made Frodo teary even though he begged his uncle to tell it at least once a week.

Bilbo carried his nephew up to his room and tucked him in before returning to the kitchen table.

"How long as he been living with you?" Gandalf asked as Bilbo began to clean up the dishes.

"A few years now," Bilbo replied as he sunk the plates deep into the basin and started to wash. "His parents drowned in the river."

"I see," Gandalf nodded slowly. "He's… he's good for you Bilbo. I think you'll be good for him as well."

The hobbit let out a small sigh as he turned his gaze out the small window, "I hope so, Gandalf. Half the time I feel like a bumbling idiot, but… I suppose I'm better than nothing."

"You don't give yourself enough credit, my friend." The wizard brought his pipe to his lips and lit it with a finger, "How have you been?"

"I've been…"

Bilbo's hands went still and they sunk deep into the basin as he stared at the night sky. What an impossibly large questions to ask. It had been nearly two decades since he'd last seen the wizard. He spent the first few years surviving, thinking that he was getting better but it hadn't been until Dís' visit that he'd finally been able to forgive himself.

He still hurt and mourned. But he'd learned to live, not just for the sake of living, but for himself. And now for Frodo.

"…Doing better."

And he had.

He heard Gandalf take a long pull from his pipe, "I'm glad to hear it, my friend."

Bilbo caught the relief in his friend's voice as he wiped his hands clean from the soap. "How about you? Luring any unsuspecting folk into you schemes?"

"Not since you," Gandalf gave him a small smile and Bilbo thought he might have seen a hint of regret there, "I've been… travelling, investigating."

Bilbo glanced up quickly, "Anything in particular?" There was something in the wizard's voice that made him uneasy.

"Nothing you need trouble yourself with, my friend," Gandalf waved his hand again. "But it is… wearisome work. I found myself in need of some peace and good company."

"And so you came to the Shire?" Bilbo gave him a smile, "We are a very quiet sort of folk."

"I came to you," Gandalf looked suddenly very old and tired.

"You're welcome to stay as long as you like," the hobbit added sincerely. "If I can do anything to help, just say the word."

"You have my thanks, Bilbo." The wizard looked like a burden had been lifted off his shoulders, "I
find myself much more at ease when I am here."

"Well, I'm glad you're back Gandalf. I'm sure Frodo will enjoy seeing your famous fireworks," Bilbo gave him a small grin. "You did bring your fireworks, didn't you?"

Gandalf laughed, "I know better than to show up at the door of Bag End without them. I believe you taught me that lesson long ago. There were tears involved if I'm recalling that correctly."

"I have no idea as to what you're referring," Bilbo sniffed indignantly, "I never cry."

"I'm sure you don't," Gandalf chuckled as he sat back in his chair.

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Master Baggins,

We've finally arrived at Moria and have begun to set up our colony here. I don't know how long this letter will take to get to you, the roads to and from Moria are quite dangerous still; but I've been assured that it will arrive!

It's been a long journey getting here, but Master Balin is confident that when the colony has been established for a few years then others will come.

We haven't been able to clear a path to the library yet and the anticipation is killing me, Master Baggins! It's like all those books are right there and yet I've never been far away. Oh well, I'm sure if I give it some time, we'll get there eventually. It'll be worth all the effort if I can just get my hands on a few of them.

There are so many things to do here, Master Baggins, I had no idea what it took to not just set up a camp but also keep it running!

I do have some good news, though! I finished the record of our journey before I left. I know you mentioned writing your own account in some of your letters and I'm very eager to read it. Dwarf records tend to be quite dry sometimes, all facts and no emotion. If you don't mind, once your done I'd love to make a copy of yours and put it in the records as well.

I'm very hopeful, Master Baggins. Every day is hard but the word we're doing is so important and I don't doubt for a second that we'll succeed! With Master Balin leading us, how could we? I feel like there's this bright future for my people in Moria and I'm here at the beginning of it, molding history with my hands. It is a very good feeling, Master Baggins!

How is everything in the Shire? If you write that everything is 'fine' and the 'grass is green again' I will personally come to your house and shake you. I thrive on details, Master Baggins! None of this glossing over business. I know where you live.

I hope you are well and I'll write as soon as I can. Don't be worried if you don't hear from me for a while, everything is perfectly fine!

– Ori

Gandalf stayed for weeks. And then those weeks turned into months and then years. The wizard left sporadically for a few months at a time but he always returned.

Gandalf took a great liking to Frodo. There was something about the child's inquisitive nature that the wizard enjoyed. Bilbo often found the old man trying to teach his nephew about the various
plants and wildlife around the shire or any random topic that they both deemed interesting enough to discuss.

Bilbo Baggins was quietly relieved that the wizard had decided that Bag End should be his refuge on the travels that the wizard chose not to speak of at length. The hobbit didn't mind, Gandalf surely had important wizardly affairs that didn't concern him, so he would just greet his friend at the door with a cup of tea and a smile. The old man tempered Frodo's friends' influence and, much to Bilbo's secret pleasure, was intimidating enough that while he was around, Merry and Pippin were almost, *almost*, well behaved.

It felt good to have his friend around and he thought Gandalf needed somewhere to come back to every so often, even if the residents of said place had seen fit to label the wizard a 'Disturber of the Peace.' He and Gandalf had a good laugh over that and decided that they had made Bag End quite possibly the least respectable residence in all of Hobbiton.

After a few years, Frodo started to grow rapidly and Bilbo started to feel old. Though even as he looked in the mirror, the hobbit saw little age in his features. It was… perplexing, though Bilbo never devoted much time to how he looked.

Soon enough, Frodo was a young man and spent more and more time outside and out with his friends, so Bilbo devoted more of his days to writing his book. 'There and Back Again' he decided to call it. But there was still much work to be done. He wanted to record his journey with as much accuracy as possible and so he enlisted Gandalf's help when he could.

They would spend many hours, late into the night, discussing events, writing down thoughts, and trying to compile as much information as they could. It was a hard business trying to compress all his thoughts and feelings into mere words but it was important. Important that Frodo would know his story in its entirety. Important that there was a record of all of the things that had happened to him.

The years passed and Bilbo started to feel restless. It was like there was an itch at the base of his spine. An itch that urged 'go' every time things got a little too quiet around his home. He found himself gazing at Thorin's map, his eyes always drawn to the Lonely Mountain inked onto the page.

He felt old. But not so old that he couldn't go on one last adventure. Bilbo traced the ring in his pocket, a now familiar habit, and felt a sort of calm determination wash over him. He wanted to get up and stretch his legs and feel the dirt of the forest beneath his feet. He wanted to see the sunrise above the trees, he wanted to see waterfalls, and taste the fresh air on his tongue.

He felt *restless* and yet also tired. He just wanted to *move* again, wanted to find somewhere else to finish his book.

"Gandalf," Bilbo said quietly on the night before the wizard was going away again.

"Mm?" The wizard replied absently, taking a puff of smoke from his pipe.

"I… I want to leave."

"Leave?" The wizard turned his blue eyes onto the hobbit, "Where do you want to go, my friend?"

"I don't *know*, I just…" Bilbo sighed, "I can't stay here the rest of my life, I can't just sit in Bag End and not go anywhere again. I want to – I want to see *mountains* again, Gandalf. Mountains…"

"I see…" the wizard gave him a nod that Bilbo knew meant his friend understood what he was trying to say. "And what about Frodo?"
"Frodo is an adult," Bilbo felt a twinge of guilt at the thought of leaving his nephew. "He'll have Bag End... I'll leave everything to him. But I can't... I can't stay here."

"I'm... I'm old, Gandalf," the hobbit sighed as he twiddled Kili's pipe in his fingers, "I know I don't look it, but I'm beginning to feel it in my heart. I feel... thin. Sort of stretched, like butter scraped over too much bread..."

"I know, my friend," Gandalf puffed out another ring, "I'll see what I can do."

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**Halfling –**

I... I have never been gifted with eloquence, but even if I was I'm uncertain there is a good way to say this so I will be direct.

Bard passed away last night. I know this will not be a shock to you; the Bowman was not a young man by any means. It was as peaceful as one could hope for a mortal's passing.

I find myself... sorrowful, halfling. I've spent many years in Dale now and it has become something of a second home to me, no matter how much I tried to resist it. And Bard was... he was a dear friend to me. I don't think I ever said so to his face, but I know he understood.

I never had a mortal friend before I met you all. I am no stranger to death, certainly, but for my people it is not an inevitability. I have never been around a mortal long enough, known a mortal long enough to watch them... fade. I do not enjoy it, though as I look back I treasure his friendship even more.

Beorn assures me that Bard did not suffer, but surely to age is to suffer? I... have questions, halfling. Questions I've never even bothered to consider before.

I always pitied mortals, pitied their brief lives and wondered how they could experience any of the wonder of this world with such limited time. They are like a candle's flame, bright for one moment and gone the next. I used to look at men and dwarves as if they were... children, I suppose. Children that knew nothing.

But now that I have lived among them, I don't know anymore. Part of me thinks that maybe... maybe it is we who are unlucky. We spend ages living amongst each other, hidden in the trees looking down on the other peoples of this earth as ignorant and insignificant, but I am beginning to think it is we who are ignorant.

Bard was one of the bravest men I've ever met. His life was but a mere fraction of my own but he slew a dragon, he built a kingdom from ashes, he gave his people a future. What have I done, halfling? I have had centuries more time on this earth, but have my actions made even a fraction of the difference that his did?

When I spoke with Legolas about my thoughts he just smiled at me like I finally understand something very essential and Beorn was, of course, nothing but vague. They are, as usual, not helpful in the slightest and I am even more confused than I was before.

We are going home. Our true home, but... is it strange that I feel as if that I'm leaving one as well? I never thought I wouldn't resent having to stay here, but I will... I will miss it, halfling. Of course I could come back to visit but I fear without Bard it would not be the same. Give it a decade or so and most of the men who fought with us against the orcs will be dead as well.

Court never changes. The same elves that were there when we left will still be there. But Dale will
always be different. I have never felt so… powerless as I do now. The friends I made here will all die
and there is nothing I can do, and yet when they laugh and tell me it is all part of 'life' when I try to
discuss it with them. It's like death is the most significant and yet the most insignificant part of their
lives. They all share this final act, some of them dread it, some of them are indifferent, but they all…
they all deal with it every day. They mourn their dead and then they move on because they have such
limited time as well. It drives them, terrifies them, inspires them…

I hope I am not being insensitive, halfling. I know hobbits share this with men and dwarves but I
know you would understand or at least try and help me understand.

I keep waiting for Legolas to… I don't know, do something, but… Even though he was closer to
Bard than any of us, he seems to have some level of understanding about the bowman's death that
escapes me.

Beorn assures me this is all very normal, but I am still fairly certain he was raised by bears and your
company were the first civilized folk he'd ever seen, so I am reluctant to accept the truth of his words.

How do you fare in the Shire?

I would very much like to meet your nephew should the opportunity arise, he sounds very intelligent
for one so young and not at all a bore to be around (a quality I value highly in an individual).
Perhaps I can convince Thranduil to send Legolas and I west.

As always, stay strong Bilbo.

– Tauriel

Bilbo was on the road to Rivendell as per Gandalf's arrangements. He breathed in the fresh night air
and relished the fact that he no longer had to play host to the party going on below. His party.

He had said goodbye to Frodo earlier that day in his own way. Bilbo knew Frodo would have tried
to make him stay so he'd decided to slip away without a formal farewell. He felt a twinge of guilt, but
he knew Frodo was a grown hobbit now. He was brave and smart and kind. Without Bilbo lingering
in the halls of Bag End, perhaps the lad could start his own family.

Bilbo had taken precious few things with him on the road. He took the book with his notes and
maps. He took Kili's pipe and Fili's dagger. He took the mithril shirt and Elrond's book. He took
Thorin's great blue coat to keep him warm on the road, Bofur's scarf, and the little figures Bifur had
given him. He took Sting and Thorin's mithril shirt. He took all his treasures but he'd left his magic
ring to Frodo.

When he'd tried to get rid of it Bilbo had felt the strangest sensation overcome him. A burning wash
of jealousy and rage filled him and for a moment, Bilbo wanted to reach out, to strike at Gandalf; but
as soon as the ring left his hand, the sensation passed. Once the golden band was away from him,
Bilbo felt odd. It was like he was lighter than before but infinitely older.

His bones seemed to creak as he walked and the hobbit leaned more heavily on his walking stick
than he had before. Maybe all his years were finally catching up to him.

Bilbo felt the dirt beneath his feet and before long he was at the border of the Shire, the moon
hanging full and bright above him.

He felt free.
It was a dangerous business; going out your front door he'd always told Frodo. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no telling where you might be swept off to.

But it was also wonderful. He wanted nothing more in that moment than to be swept off. Than to be guided on to his next adventure. And his last.

He would miss Frodo. He would miss his nephew more than anything else left behind in the Shire. Frodo was strong, but in his heart, he knew his nephew, his son, would understand why Bilbo had to go.

Bilbo had been in Rivendell for a few weeks when he finally realized that he was aging rapidly. The hobbit felt his skin start to sag, his fingers ached when he wrote for too long and his bones creaked when he moved.

His old ankle injury acted up so often, Bilbo had taken to walking with a cane through the halls of Imladris.

When he'd first arrived, Bilbo had almost tried to avoid the alcove where he'd stayed with the company so many years ago. He knew he was being foolish, after so much time had passed and so on the third night Bilbo hobbled down to the place where Thorin had first told him of his past and the hobbit wrapped himself in that old blue coat.

Even after all these years, Bilbo never felt safer than when he was deep in the folds of the soft wool.

Even after all these years, Bilbo felt his heart ache with the loss of Thorin.

He'd never really thought that he would love again, but now that the hobbit was near the end of his life, he knew it to be true. He'd given Thorin his heart, every last bit of it. Bilbo had never felt more pain than when he'd lost his love, but neither had ever known such joy and completion than when he and Thorin had been together.

And so it became his ritual. During the days, Bilbo would hole himself up in the library and write his book. But in the evenings, he would grab Kili's pipe and wander over to the alcove and watch the moon drift slowly across the night sky and think about what part of the journey he would write the next day.

Elrond had been most courteous to him during his stay and his sons seemed delighted to have him back in their halls.

Elladan and Elrohir would join him in the library when they could. They wouldn't talk sometimes, just sit and read or write. Sometimes their sister would join as well. Bilbo found Arwen to be pleasant company and sometimes in the afternoon she would stop by his room with a cup of tea and they would discuss anything and everything that came to mind.

Bilbo had debated whether he should return the tale of Aulë to Elrond's library but decided against it. As far as he was concerned, it was basically returned. He was sure once he was gone, they would find it in his room and put it back where it belonged. For now... he counted it amongst his treasured possessions.

Nearly a month had passed when Arwen had disappeared from the halls of Rivendell. A week later she galloped into the courtyard with Frodo almost dead in her arms and Bilbo felt grief tear through him.

Elrond had healed him but the wound on Frodo's shoulder but the sight of his nephew pale and
broken on the bed had made Bilbo collapse with sorrow.

Frodo couldn't die before him. He'd seen… he'd seen so much death. Watched his friends and his love die before him, he couldn't bear to watch that happen to Frodo as well.

Bilbo felt weary relief flood through him when Gandalf had arrived and Frodo had awakened the next day. He had wanted to stay at his nephew's bedside, but all his worrying had caused his health had taken a turn. Cold felt like it had permanently seeped into his old bones and his ankle hurt too much to walk on. A cough had edged its way into his lungs and Gandalf had all but dragged him into his bed.

Bilbo had stayed in bed with a fever for nearly two weeks and awoke to a most wonderful sight.

"Legolas?" Bilbo croaked out as he tried to sit up, "Tauriel?"

"No need to move, my friend," Legolas smiled down at him, "Gandalf would be very cross with me if I were the reason you were not resting."

Tauriel glided to his bed and gathered him into a fierce hug. For a moment Bilbo just let himself be held and closed his eyes, breathing in the scent of woods and the brightness that seemed to cling to her hair.

"It is very good to see you again, Bilbo," Her mouth spread into a wide grin and Tauriel's green eyes were so wonderfully familiar that the hobbit's cough almost turned into a sob.

"What are you – what're you both doing here?" Bilbo coughed into his arm but gave the elves a wide smile, warmth spreading though him at the sight of his friends.

"You must have been deep in your dreams if you missed all the shouting earlier." The elf let out a small chuckle.

"Shouting?" Bilbo asked with no small amount of confusion in his voice.

"A council was held today. To decide what to do with the ring," Tauriel's mouth fell into a frown.

"The… ring?" Bilbo felt as if he were missing a very crucial part of the conversation and Legolas gave him a small, sad smile as if the answer was going to hurt the hobbit.

"You can't go, Frodo!" Bilbo sat back in his chair with weary anxiety.

"I have to, uncle," The young hobbit glanced at Bilbo with determination written on his face, "if I don't, Lord Elrond said it could mean the end of the world!"

"Frodo…" Bilbo sighed and brought a withered hand up to his face, "You might not make it back…"

"I know that, uncle," Frodo reached out and took Bilbo's hand in his own, "but I have to try, you understand that don't you?"

"I…" Bilbo looked at his nephew and knew there was no talking him out of it. "I do."

Bilbo slowly rose from his chair and walked over to the chest at the end of his bed. "If you insist on going, then you'll be needing supplies."

"I'm sure Lord Elrond will give us some," Frodo glanced at him curiously.
"Not those kind of supplies," Bilbo grabbed at some of the contents before him, "these."

Bilbo held out Sting for Frodo to take, "It's elvish steel, glows blue when orcs are around."

"Does it really?" Frodo took the blade in his hand and examined the scabbard.

"It comes in handy," Bilbo chuckled as he sat beside his nephew and held out the mithril shirt.

Frodo's eyes were immediately drawn to the shimmering metal, "What… what is it?"

"A gift," Bilbo felt his gaze linger on the shirt, "from a very dear friend. It's made of mithril; stronger than steel but lighter than cloth. It will…"

Bilbo's smile turned sorrowful as he stared down at it.

"It will keep you safe, Frodo."

Thorin had always kept Bilbo safe, and now his gift would guard Frodo's life as he went on some impossible journey to save the world from dark forces. It would have… it would have made Thorin happy, Bilbo knew, to see the armor guarding his nephew.

"Frodo, I…" Bilbo felt so weary and old, "I hope you already know this, but I…I always thought of you as my son."

"Uncle…" Frodo squeezed Bilbo's hand tightly.

"I know I can't make you promise to stay safe."

Bilbo knew enough of danger and journeys that no one could make that promise and not be lying.

"But I want you to promise me that'll you'll try. To be safe, and to come back to me."

"I promise, uncle," Frodo smiled at him and Bilbo wished with all his heart he was not about to lose another person that he loved.

The deck of the sleek, white ship bobbed in the ocean as Bilbo gazed out over the waters.

Frodo had come back safe from his journey two years ago and when he had approached his uncle with Gandalf and Lord Elrond in tow, speaking about taking a boat to the Undying Lands, Bilbo had thought he'd been in a dream.

For the last year he'd been bed-ridden almost constantly, drifting in and out of consciousness. In and out of dreams. His body had withered more and more each day. His limbs had grown stiff and weak, so much so that he barely ever moved.

They had been sailing for over a week now and instead of making his old body even worse; Bilbo had started to feel younger almost. Like the years were fading away from him.

When he mentioned this to Gandalf the wizard had laughed, "Of course you do, Bilbo. We are approaching the Land of the Undying."

"It is not a common thing to witness," Elrond said as he joined them on the deck. "Few mortals ever make the journey but of those that do, it is said that they look as they do when they were most content."
"So I'll… look the same as when I was happiest?" Bilbo gave Frodo a look to see if his nephew understood any better than he did. It all sounded very odd to him, but then again he was going to a land where the elves came from and the Valar resided so who was he to question the oddities of immortals.

"That is a… large simplification, my friend," Gandalf chuckled as he looked at the sun setting across the waters. "But, yes… more or less."

"Oh good," Bilbo stretched his aching back, relishing in the returning strength. "That sounds like a very good thing to me. But Gandalf," the hobbit paused for a moment, "why don't you look any younger? Were you always…"

"Old?" The wizard chuckled as Frodo whispered something to his uncle about not being rude.

"Well…" Bilbo shrugged at his friend with a grin, "I wasn't going to use that exact word, but yes."

"Should you really be talking, uncle?" Frodo grumbled from his other side.

"You heard the man," Bilbo gave his nephew an elbow to the side, "I'll look as young as you in few days."

"Many ages and more than a few names ago, I suppose I must've looked different." Gandalf shrugged, examining his hand with a curious look on his face, "But I have many more years to unwind than you, my friend. We shall see."

Bilbo leaned over the side of the ship and tried to catch his reflection in the smooth waters. His hair did seem less snowy than it had before and the old lines on his face seemed to be disappearing. The hobbit glanced over at Gandalf once more and… yes, there did seem to be something different about the wizard, but it was rather hard to place.

The hobbit was… relieved in a way. He certainly did not want to spend the rest of whatever years awaited him on these faraway shores as a crippled old man. He thought back on his life, on all the moments and experiences he'd had. But when had he been happiest?

And then he laughed because it was the most obvious thing in the world. He'd been happiest with Thorin. Of course he'd been happy once Frodo had arrived at his home that dark, stormy evening so many years ago, but for all the joy his nephew brought him; Bilbo had never been… whole since Thorin had died.

"What… what do you think it'll be like?" He heard Frodo ask quietly enough so that the others couldn't hear.

Bilbo glanced at his nephew and saw the same weariness he'd felt in his heart. The boy had done so much, experienced so much and it showed in the lad's eyes. His heart twinged slightly, knowing that no matter how hard he had tried to be a good parent to his nephew, no matter how many trinkets or rooms he had left; he hadn't been able to prepare Frodo for his journey.

"I think it will be…" Bilbo took a deep breath of the fresh sea air, "I think it'll be peaceful, Frodo."

"I always thought of death as peaceful…" Frodo trailed off, leaning his weight against the rail of the ship. "I hope we made the right decision."

Bilbo reached out and grabbed Frodo's hand in his own and squeezed it in comfort, "I suppose we'll find out when we get there."
Frodo gave him a small smile and 'hmm'd' in agreement though there was still a hint of weariness in his eyes.

"Frodo…" Bilbo squeezed his nephew's hand again, distinctly aware of the half stump there.

"Yes, uncle?" Frodo's large blue eyes shifted to meet his again and in that moment Bilbo wanted nothing more than to see his nephew happy and peaceful again.

"No matter what, we'll do it together."

"Okay," Frodo smiled.

Bilbo awoke to someone shaking him gently, the sound of the sea floating in his ears.

"Time to get up, my friend, we'll be there soon."

The hobbit blinked and tried to shield his eyes from the sun.

"How long have I…?" Bilbo muttered as he tried to focus on the old wizard.

Except… he didn't look old.

"What… Gandalf?" Bilbo's eyes went wide with astonishment. His robes were the same, the hat was the same, but his face…. He looked more like an elf than an old man, "You look…"

The wizard raised a pale brow as his sharp blue eyes crinkled with amusement, "Younger?"

"Well…" Bilbo thought that might have been a slight understatement, "Uh… yes."

"So do you, my friend," Gandalf helped him up of the plank he'd been resting on. As soon as the hobbit's feet hit the wood he realized that no pain shot up his ankle. His legs felt strong for the first time in years, his back was no longer slightly hunched. Bilbo stretched his arms above his head and reveled in the feeling.

"I think I could get used to this…" Bilbo turned to grin at his friend but his head swiveled, he caught sight of the shore and his mouth hung open in awe.

It was… beautiful. More than beautiful, more than any word he could think of. There was a long white dock jutting out of even whiter sand. Beyond he could see the distant shapes of mountains and forests and what looked to be a valley.

The trees were tall, elegant spires splitting the sky with their branches. Their leaves were a blur of many greens, and they looked almost alive as they swayed in the breeze. The ground was dotted with splashes of color. 'Flowers,' he thought almost absently, 'so many flowers…'

"Stunning, isn't it?" Gandalf placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"That's putting it rather mildly," Bilbo rubbed his eyes just to make sure they weren't deceiving him.

The hobbit stepped over to the rail and leaned over as far as he could to get a better look at the shore. There were figures there, small, dark smudges. Bilbo squinted, trying to focus his eyes, but he couldn't make out anything more than their general shape.

"Are they elves?" Bilbo looked up at Gandalf with a questioning glance.
"Perhaps," the wizard gave him a curious look, "Elves are not the only inhabitants of the Valinor."

Bilbo felt his face fall into a small frown but shrugged it off.

The ship slid smoothly over the waters and seemed to halt of its own accord at the edge of the long dock. The three elves of their party disembarked first, gracefully stepping onto the white wood. Gandalf followed them and helped Bilbo and Frodo out.

Elrond began to lead them down the dock and Bilbo couldn't help but think that this must be like coming home to them. He and Frodo stayed at the back of the group after exchanging a look. Bilbo knew no better than his nephew what would be waiting for them on the shore.

He felt almost as if he were in a dream, like nothing around him was truly real. Bilbo had grown so used to his old, withering body over the last few years, that standing upright and moving with the ease of youth made him feel almost a stranger in his own skin.

"What do you think we'll do once we get there?" Frodo whispered to him as they walked closely behind Gandalf.

"I, uh… I don't know," Bilbo could see little of the shore with the rest of their party in front of him, "I suppose we'll have to find somewhere to stay."

"I didn't see any houses…” Frodo looked slightly uneasy as he peeked around Gandalf's white robes.

"Don't worry, Frodo," Bilbo clapped a hand on his nephew's shoulder, "Gandalf wouldn't let us wander around the forest. Would you, Gandalf?"

The wizard looked back at them over his shoulder with a smile on his face, "Of course not, my friend. But something tells me you don't need to worry about that."

Bilbo stared at Gandalf feeling even more confused than he had before as they walked down dock, "Must you always speak in riddles?"

Frodo chuckled, rolling his eyes at Bilbo's petulant pout, "It's like you've never even met sometimes."

"Oh hush you," Bilbo gave his nephew his best glare, "just because I look younger doesn't mean you get to treat me with anything less than a healthy measure of respect. I did raise you myself."

"That does explain quite a bit," Frodo grinned at his uncle and dodged away from Bilbo's firm 'thwack' to the back of his head.

Bilbo was about to retort when he felt his face connect with Gandalf's back. The party had come to a sudden stop at the end of the dock just as the wood met the sand.

"Ow." The hobbit held his smarting nose, "What's all this about? Why are we stopping Gandalf?"

There was no reply as Bilbo gingerly prodded at his nose, "You could've at least warned me you know –"

"Uncle," Frodo cut in suddenly.

"What?" He turned to glare at his nephew, still holding his nose.

"I think they're here to, uh, see you." The young hobbit glanced between Bilbo and something that the rest of the party was blocking from his view.
"What are you talking about—" Bilbo turned to stare at his nephew like he'd just grown an extra head.

Gandalf put his hands on the hobbit's shoulders as he let out an exasperated sigh and pushed him to the front of their party. The hobbit twisted his head to glare at the wizard, about to mention just how much he did not enjoy being manhandled when…

"Bilbo."

The hobbit froze.

His feet stopped working and time seemed to slow down until everything was sluggish, like wading through sand.

That voice. He knew that voice, better than he knew any other.

But… no… no, it couldn't be. It—

Bilbo clenched his eyes shut as his face turned towards the speaker almost unconsciously.

If he was wrong, he couldn't… he couldn't bear to be wrong, so he shut out everything but the pounding of his heart. Was his mind playing tricks on him? Was he dreaming?

The hobbit felt Gandalf's hands leave his shoulders and the sound of boots in the sand approaching.

"You certainly took your time."

Bilbo's eyes sprang open and standing before him was a sight far more beautiful than anything he'd ever seen.

Thorin.

Thorin was here.

"B—but how?" Bilbo let out a choked gasp as he raised a shaking hand to touch the dwarf's face as the world started to go dark.

Was this some sort of trick? Some sort of twisted dream that his mind was conjuring up to torture him with after all these years? Bilbo felt confusion and sorrow and a tiny spark of impossible hope.

He half expected his fingers to slide through the skin as the quivering tips just barely touched Thorin's face. His skin felt warm, so very warm. Warm like the embers of a fire. Warm like the summer sun. Warm like life.

Thorin raised his own hand to the one Bilbo held on his cheek and his face broke into the widest, brightest smile the hobbit had ever seen. His deep, blue eyes held none of the burden, none of the sorrow that they had before.

"Am I…" Bilbo felt his mind starting to swim as the world fell away, "I'm not dreaming, am I?"

"Not this time," Thorin squeezed his hand and Bilbo felt the dwarf's calloused skin slid across his.

"I, uh…" Bilbo felt his vision start to bleed gray and he stumbled forward as the ground seemed to shift beneath him, "I think I'm going to faint."

The last thing Bilbo remembered as the world went black were Thorin's eyes going wide in surprise.
as the dwarf lunged forward to catch him.

Bilbo groaned as he clutched his head and blinked up at the bright sun above him. "What…" He felt a pair of hands shift beneath him, "What happened?"

"You passed out, Bilbo." He heard someone laugh above him.

"That is so typical," the hobbit shook his head slowly and opened his eyes. Thorin's face swam into view with an expression of indulgent exasperation. "Thorin!" Bilbo shot up, forgetting where he was, and their foreheads slammed together. The hobbit fell back into the sand holding his head as Thorin recoiled, mimicking Bilbo's motion.

"You know, this really shouldn't surprise me," Another voice added from behind Bilbo, "but I can't say I wasn't expecting something a little more… romantic."

"And they say I'm the dumb one," a second voice sighed.

The hobbit let out a groan, whining at the pain, and twisted his neck so he could see…

"Fili!" He all but shouted, twisting himself violently in the sand, "Kili!"

The two brothers grinned at him and pulled him out of the sand, enveloping him in a tight hug. Bilbo felt happy tears start to pour from his eyes as he planted two wet kisses on each of their cheeks despite the dizziness that fogged his mind. They had died. He had seen them all die. This couldn't be real. This couldn't be real. And yet… Unless his eyes, his hands, his ears were all deceiving him, then…

"Oh come now, Master Boggins," Kili tried to shove him away with a grin, wiping at his face with a sleeve. "No need to get so sentimental."

"I knew I should have left you two behind," Thorin grumbled as he pulled himself out of the sand. "Don't get jealous, uncle," Fili gave Thorin a wicked grin. "The sight of your face caused Master Baggins here to faint, I think you've bested us."

Bilbo let go of the brothers and turned to face Thorin, a flush spreading across his face. "I, uh… sorry about the…" The hobbit made a lame motion towards the growing red spot on the dwarf's forehead. Bilbo wiped away at the tears and felt himself start laughing at the absurdity of it all. A long forgotten happiness welled up inside him. It filled him until the hobbit thought he might burst. He was seeing Thorin after all these years. After everything and he had… he had fainted and head butted the dwarf within five minutes.

Thorin stepped closer and started to raise his hands as if to wrap them around the hobbit in a hug.

"Are you serious?" Bilbo felt giddy, like tingling warmth had spread through him all the way to his fingertips. His mind seemed to be in the process of shutting down, unable to process what was happening in front of him.

"What?" Thorin looked perplexed that he was doing something wrong.
"A hug? After, what, seventy years?" Bilbo put his hands on his hips and tried not to laugh at the red tinge that flooded across Thorin's face.

"Oh come here, you dolt," Bilbo grabbed Thorin's braids in his hands and pulled the dwarf forward, pushing his lips up to meet Thorin's.

The dwarf immediately brought his arms up to pull Bilbo flush against him and together they moved. Thorin's mouth tasted wonderful, infinitely more wonderful than he remembered in his memories. The hobbit bit at Thorin's lip and pressed his tongue in further.

Bilbo never thought he would see Thorin again, taste him again, feel him again. Bilbo felt the steady beat of the dwarf's heart against his chest and thought there was nothing more perfect in this world.

All those years, all those countless years of pain and hopelessness seemed to melt away as he dug his hand into Thorin's hair and pulled the dwarf closer and closer. For the first time since he left Erebor, Bilbo felt full. Like that bleeding, torn hole in his chest forgot what it meant to know loss because the feeling of relief and happiness and love washed over him.

That great, all-consuming wave of grief he had thought himself drowned in over and over after Thorin had died seemed no more than a fading ripple now.

Thorin was here with him. He had no idea how, but nothing could have made him care to find out in that moment. It was impossible and yet... and yet, what could have been more real than Thorin's lips moving over his own? What could have been more real than the life pounding through the dwarf's veins?

He wanted to cry, he wanted to weep because the joy welling up inside him was too much, far too much to contain.

Someone coughed behind him and Bilbo felt Thorin pull away, panting as he rested his head against Bilbo's.

The hobbit turned just slightly to glare at whoever had the gall to—

And then he remembered there was a wizard and three of the most powerful elf rulers ever to have existed standing only a few yards away.

Not to mention Thorin's nephews with their stupid faces twisted into leers.

As well as his nephew whose face had gone quite red.

Bilbo felt his face flush as he notice two other dwarves he didn't recognize standing behind Fili and Kili. One of them looked completely unfamiliar but the other... Bilbo's eyes went wide in shock.

This dwarf look so much like Thorin. They shared the same dark hair and blue eyes and... was it?

"So this is the hobbit you've been talking about..." The dwarf gave him a kind smile before aiming a glare at Thorin, "Aren't you going to introduce us, brother?"

"Frerin?" Bilbo's mouth hung open as he stared at the approaching dwarf.

"I see my reputation precedes me," Frerin grinned at him. "This is Brehen," the dwarf tipped his chin to gesture at the other dwarf just slightly behind him, "and we are honored to make your acquaintance Bilbo Baggins."
"It's a, uh, pleasure to meet you both," Bilbo shook their hands feeling that this day could not get any more surreal.

"I'm sure we'll get to know each other quite well," Brehen added softly with a gentle smile, "though I feel as if we know you already."

Bilbo's face must have reflected his confusion because Frerin let out a bright laugh, "What he means is that Thorin had not shut up about you for more than five minutes."

Bilbo caught Frodo's eye and realized that he had completely forgotten his nephew knew these dwarves by story alone.

"Oh, yes, uh, this is Frodo," Bilbo waved the young hobbit over to his side. "My nephew. And savior of the world, so you two," Bilbo shot the dwarf brothers a look, "behave."

"Uncle!" Frodo's face flushed again in embarrassment.

"Why, Master Baggins!" Fili covered his heart with mock indignation, "How dare you insinuate that we be anything less than courteous towards your nephew!"

"We are the very pictures of gallantry, Master Boggins!"

Fili and Kili sidled forward until they were on either side of Frodo, slinging their arms around the young hobbit's neck. Frodo looked as if he wanted nothing more than to sink into the ground.

"In fact, we will show just how gracious we can be," Fili nodded sagely, "Kili and I will personally guide your nephew to the house."

Bilbo watched the three of them walk towards the forest and almost had to wipe at his eyes to make sure he really wasn't imagining this.

"Wait," Bilbo turned to look at Thorin, "there's a house?"

The dwarf smiled at him with a small shrug, "We had to fill the time somehow."

"Come on," Thorin held out his hand for Bilbo to take, "I'll show you."

Gandalf and the elves had left them on the beach, saying that they had matters to attend to but the wizard promised to visit as soon as he was able.

They had walked through the small valley and into the forest until they came out the other side of the trees.

Bilbo had let out a gasp at the sight. There were rolling hills covered in flowers, clusters of every type of tree imaginable shooting up from the earth. In the largest dip of the valley there was a small lake and on the opposite side there was what looked to be something crossed between Bag End and Beorn's cabin.

"Do you like it?" Thorin squeezed his hand gently.

"It's..." but Bilbo didn't have a word that could describe how perfect it was. "It's wonderful, Thorin."

The dwarf's face broke out into smile and they walked slowly around the lake until they reached a stone pathway that led up to the house.
"There's good earth here," Thorin motioned to the tilled ground on either side of the pathway, "I thought you might like to start a garden."

"All in good time." Bilbo grinned up at his friend, "So… does, uh, everyone live here?"

Thorin nodded, "Fili and Kili have taken over a few of the rooms on the west side, I'm sure they'll try and drag your nephew over there. Frerin and Brehen are up in the cabin. This part," the dwarf motioned at the eastern portion of the hill, "is ours. If you… if you want it…"

Thorin glanced at him from the side of his eye with a hopeful smile.

"Don't be stupid, Thorin, of course I do." Bilbo shook his head with an exasperated sigh, though a happy smile crept onto his face, "So are you going to show me inside?"

It felt so easy to slip back into their conversation as if all that time hadn't passed. Maybe even too easy, given that Bilbo had spent so very long mourning the dwarf and now he was here. It still felt like a ludicrous dream. But if this was a dream, it felt real and Bilbo never, ever wanted to wake from it.

Thorin chuckled as he pushed open the large door and as soon as the wood shut behind the hobbit, Bilbo saw Thorin turn and his back hit solid wood into the solid wood.

"Thorin," Bilbo said, his voice thick.

The dwarf pressed a kiss to the base of Bilbo's neck where his shoulder began.

"Weren't you—" The hobbit let out a small groan, "giving me a tour?"

"I've waited a hundred lifetimes for you," Thorin lip's moved against his skin and Bilbo thought he caught the barest hint of teeth, "and I would have waited a thousand more."

"But you're here," Thorin's mouth moved up the hobbit's neck to the shell of his ear, "and I mean to have you."

Bilbo shuddered as he brought his hands up behind the dwarf's neck and pulled Thorin's face closer to his burning skin.

"Do you remember what you last said to me?" Thorin's tongue moved against his earlobe towards the base of his jaw.

"I said—" Bilbo panted as he tried to keep his mind clear, "I said that you are worth loving, Thorin."

"Do you still mean it?" Thorin pulled back a fraction so he could see the hobbit's eyes and in that moment Bilbo knew what was really being said.

It was almost laughable that the dwarf could still even harbor the shadow of a notion that Bilbo had ever, ever blamed Thorin, ever stopped loving him. But he knew Thorin well, he knew that his friend would need to hear it, need to know that whatever happened in those last few days before the battle had never once changed how Bilbo felt.

The hobbit brought his hands forward and cupped Thorin's chin, looking deep into the dwarf's eyes so his friend would never doubt what he was about to say.

"Always."

Thorin surged forward and the hobbit felt himself slam against the door. The dwarf's lips crashed
against his own and for a moment all there was to feel was heat. Glorious, blazing, burning heat.

Thorin's arms reached down and Bilbo felt the ground leave him. He wrapped his legs around the dwarf's waist and buried his hands deep in Thorin's inky black hair.

"Thorin." The word came out of his mouth as a breathy moan. He wanted it to mean so much more than he could ever say, "Thorin."

The dwarf pulled back, his eyes dark and his breaths coming in short bursts.

"I've dreamed of this a thousand times," Thorin pushed himself closer, so their bodies touched in brilliant symmetry, "I've dreamed of you."

Bilbo grinned as he heard the dwarf's hungry, broken voice and thought it was the best sound he'd ever heard. It sent a shiver down his spine and a delicious sort of heat pooled in his stomach.

"Thorin," the hobbit rolled his hips.

The dwarf let out a low growl and he kissed Bilbo with such intensity that the hobbit knew if his legs had been on the ground, they would have gone limp in a second. Thorin's lips were warm and wet as he kissed the hobbit, claiming and hard enough to bruise.

It was different from their kiss on the beach or any they had shared before. This time, Thorin wasn't holding anything back. There was no burden shadowing the dwarf's every thought, nothing pulling Thorin away from him.

Now… now, Thorin was his, all of him.

Bilbo shivered as he felt the dwarf's hands grip him as if he were a lifeline. Thorin's fingers tightened and it was like a shock jolted him into action, every other thought turned to ash in his mind.

All he knew was Thorin. All he ever wanted to know again was Thorin.

"We should –" Bilbo's voice was a rasp, "somewhere else."

The dwarf stumbled back, never breaking contact, and somehow they made it down the hallway, every so often slamming into another section of wall so Thorin could claim Bilbo's mouth once again.

Thorin kicked open a door and walked backward until the dwarf's legs hit the edge of a bed. They fell on the soft blanket in a tangle of limbs, Bilbo settled on top of Thorin's waist. He placed his hands on either side of Thorin's head and hovered a centimeter away, relishing the moment, knowing that no dream could ever be as real as this.

Bilbo pressed his lips down and Thorin opened his mouth against his. Bilbo was devoured.

Thorin slid his hands down Bilbo's sides, over his waist and down his backside, pulling the hobbit as close as he could possibly get. Bilbo poured all of his love, all of his longing, all of the bitter years he'd spent mourning Thorin's death into the kiss.

His hands slipped under Thorin's blue linen shirt and he felt every curve, every dip of muscle and skin. Every scar, every bone. He memorized the feel of Thorin, mapping him, claiming him.

There had never had much time before. There had always been something else, something on the horizon shadowing them like some colossal giant. But now, now Bilbo wasn't about to let even an
inch of Thorin's skin go untouched.

Thorin hands moved back up and fingers clenched at Bilbo's shirt. They pulled away only long enough to throw it aside. Thorin paused for a moment, his eyes roaming over the hobbit's skin, growing dark with years upon years of longing.

"I've wanted you for so long," Thorin's voice was a rasp as he ran his hands up Bilbo's chest. "Every night you came to me, but it was nothing, nothing like this."

"Is it really so bad?" Bilbo leaned forward with a laugh and ground his hips in retaliation.

"You shouldn't, ah—" the dwarf gripped Bilbo's hips, holding him hard enough to bruise and pushing him down. "You shouldn't tease, Bilbo."

"And what," Bilbo pressed his mouth forward again, "are you," he slipped his tongue in, making a slow circuit, "going to do about it?"

Thorin shuddered with a groan but in a split second, he had flipped them, Thorin leaned up to toss of his shirt before coming to rest between Bilbo's legs, his arms bracketing either side of the hobbit's head as the dwarf pressed a searing kiss to his mouth, frustration and love and longing filled Bilbo's mind.

A low moan escaped Bilbo's mouth as he pulled Thorin flush against him, his hands wrapped low around Thorin's hips as he brought his cock against Thorin's and ground against him.

"Thorin…" He rasped as they broke apart for a moment, his hands moving up then his nails raking down the dwarf's back. Bilbo's touch was hasty and warm and clumsy but all he knew was that Thorin, the man he loved with all his heart, the man he'd lost for countless years filled with loneliness and pain, was here, touching him.

Thorin seemed to go still for a second, his face falling beside Bilbo's, buried in the blanket, his body trembling. Bilbo's hands reached down under the line of Thorin's trousers and his nails scraped at the skin there.

The dwarf shuddered, his hips bucking forward, breaths coming in heavy gasps.

Bilbo watched Thorin avidly, hunger singing in his veins.

Thorin's blue eyes opened and their gazes met for a second.

Bilbo reached down between them to cup Thorin, hot and heavy even though the dwarf's breeches, and squeezed lightly. The groan that tore from Thorin's throat as the dwarf almost collapsed on him was absolutely lovely.

They were both panting, Thorin's hands moved to wrap around either side of Bilbo's face as he pressed their foreheads together, keeping Bilbo close while the dwarf kicked his way out of his breeches.

"Bilbo," Thorin said, and the hobbit reveled in how undone the dwarf's voice sounded, how it sounded like a prayer and a plea, "Bilbo…"

Bilbo was shaking and sweating, his muscles taunt and hard. One of the hobbit's hands trailed up to Thorin's back and he could feel scars there, the scars that Azog had left that night on the mountain, curved and split into different bursts from where the mace's spikes had torn into the flesh.
He felt the sudden urge to run his hands and tongue across the marred flesh. He wanted to reclaim it, cleanse it, make it a mark of affection, of beginning and not a memory of pain and hatred.

But there would be time enough for that later.

From the way Thorin's body was twitching and shivering, moving and undulating above him; Bilbo felt too much urgency to claim and be claimed. To love and be loved.

He had never loved anyone the way he loved Thorin, never had given himself over so completely to another person than he had with his friend. And he knew Thorin felt the same. No one had loved Bilbo the way Thorin had and no one had loved Thorin, touched Thorin the way he did now. And that was all that had ever mattered.

Bilbo had wanted Thorin, mourned Thorin for years, and now… now he was going to show Thorin that he was worth that love until the very foundations of this earth crumbled beneath them.

The hobbit woke with a groan and rolled closer to the very warm body next to him, burying his face into an arm.

'Wait…'

Bilbo's eyes shot open and for a moment he felt utterly disoriented until it all came back.

The hobbit smiled at the dwarf laying on his stomach, Thorin's hair spilling all around him in a dark mess.

Bilbo brushed the strands off Thorin's back and looked at the scars there. He brought up his hand to trace the mottled flesh. It seemed so long ago that he had faced Azog… That was the beginning of their friendship, he supposed.

And then he'd done his best to heal the marks even though Thorin had be so stubborn about it while they were imprisoned in the cells of Mirkwood. That night, Thorin had told him of his brother, of his loss and his pain.

Bilbo's fingers moved like a brush across a canvas, mapping the edge of the scars where the marks met healthy flesh.

"What are you doing?" Thorin mumbled with a sleepy smile, turning his face to look at Bilbo though his mass of hair.

"Just remembering…" Bilbo flattened his palm and ran it down to the base of Thorin's spine.

"Why do you have the scars?" The hobbit asked feeling suddenly curious, "Gandalf said we… take the appearance of when we were happiest or… something…"

Thorin rolled so he was on his back and gave Bilbo a long look. "I would've thought it was obvious."

"Is it?" Bilbo raised a brow, not sure if he was teasing him or not.

"That night in the cells," Thorin began softly, "when you were healing my back and I told you about Frerin and Erebor."

"What about it?" Bilbo leaned over to rest his head on Thorin's chest.
"That was the night I…" Thorin's words halted for a moment, "That was the night I first knew that I could love you."

Bilbo tilted his head back to look at Thorin's face.

"I told you everything. Things I hadn't told anyone since the fall and you… you said that I shouldn't feel guilty, that Frerin would've wanted me to live… You knew what I needed even though I was lost in despair and... you saved me that night, Bilbo."

"I had never truly known love and I'd given up on such notions for many years. And I never thought… I never thought to find it in a hobbit." Thorin flushed slightly, "Not that…"

"I know what you mean, Thorin," Bilbo chuckled lightly.

"But then I found myself consumed with thoughts of you. Thoughts of… of forgiveness, the possibility of happiness, and that maybe… maybe that someday you might feel the same."

"At first I hated these thoughts," Thorin let out a small sigh, "I'd… lost enough in my life that anything good felt as if it were there just to taunt me."

"But you… you kept showing me kindness. You were loyal and selfless even when I did not deserve it…" Thorin's eyes shifted away for a moment, "especially when I did not deserve it."

"I had never met anyone like you, Bilbo," Thorin pulled him closer, "I had thought I was too broken, but you… you had faith in me. You taught me strength, you allowed me to hope that there was something more than all my hate."

Bilbo felt his heart swell with affection and he leaned up to place a gentle kiss on the dwarf's lips.

"I love you, Thorin. And I always will."

Thorin smiled at him and Bilbo thought he might drown in it. This was happiness. He'd almost forgot what it felt like. Warm and safe and whole. This was love.

"And I you, Bilbo."

Just at that moment the door slammed open and Fili and Kili stumbled through.

"Good morning, uncle!" Fili grinned as Bilbo yelped in surprise, pulling the blanket over his face.

"Or should we say 'uncles'." Kili grin was far too toothy and pleased with himself to warrant anything other than a good punch.

Thorin groaned and rolled over, putting the pillow over his head, "Why, Mahal? Why?"

"I swear," Bilbo hissed, peeking over the cover, "I will skin you two alive if you do not get out right now."

"Is that the way to treat the two dwarves who just made you breakfast?" Fili gave him a look as if he were speaking to a toddler.

"A very large breakfast, might I add," Kili winked at him.

"Out. Now!" Bilbo threw a spare pillow over at them and, most unfortunately, missed both.

The brothers cackled as they sprinted out of the room, slamming the door behind them.
"How did those idiots ever make it out of whatever hell they were in?" Bilbo grumbled, falling back onto the bed.

"Actually…" Bilbo rolled over to face Thorin, "How did you all get here? Where ever here is…"

"When dwarves die, it is said we return to the stone from which Mahal carved us," Thorin turned to face him.

"So you were… stone?" That sounded absurd even to the hobbit that had de-aged some half a century while sailing over some seawater.

"Not… not literally, no. On the western part of the Valinor there lies the Halls of Mandos that house the dead. Mahal has prepared a place for us within these halls where the dwarves are to await the end of all things and help him rebuild the world…"

Bilbo stared at Thorin blankly.

"What?"

The dwarf let out a small chuckle, "I know it sounds strange. For a long while, we all… drifted, I suppose is the best word. But after a time, I started to remember, and I… became me again."

"And you…" Bilbo still felt utterly confused, "you just left?"

"I…" Thorin looked as if he almost couldn't believe his own words. "I Spoke to the keeper of the Hall. I explained to him that I… that I needed to find you."

"For a long time he said nothing, I thought maybe I was just a spirit, but one day I just knew where I had to go to wait for you to arrive." Thorin gazed at the ceiling absently, "I found Frerin and my nephews and… broke out."

"You escaped?" Bilbo glanced up at Thorin in surprise.

"You cannot escape from those halls. I think…" The dwarf paused for a moment, "I think the keeper chose to look the other way as we left."

A sudden thought struck Bilbo, "Do you think the rest of the company is there?"

"If they have passed on," Thorin shrugged, "I do not know where else they would be."

"So let's say a foolhardy hobbit and a few dwarves were to break back in..." Bilbo schooled his face into a blank expression, "Do you think we could get them out?"

"Are you serious?" Thorin looked at him incredulously for a moment.

"You are serious, aren't you…" Thorin laughed and it was bright and free and wonderful. "What am I going to do with you, Bilbo Baggins?"

Thorin pulled him forward and pressed a tender kiss to the hobbit's lips.

"You know what I think," Bilbo grinned as he nipped back lightly.

"What do you think?" Thorin let out an exasperated sigh that was equal parts loving and very weary about whatever mess he was about to be drawn into.

Bilbo grinned up at the dwarf he would always love with all his heart.
"I think that I'm quite ready for another adventure."

The End.

Chapter End Notes

So... that's it! It's been like, what, seven months since I started this? Fuuuuuck man it's pretty unreal for me to even think about, I've never done anything like this before. Anyway, I really hope you all enjoyed reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it! Seriously, thank you, thank you, thank you to everyone who stuck with this bitch and took the time to write me a very kind, very long reviews (you are the cat's pajamas ilu). It's been an awesome first writing experience and you all were a big part of that! :*

I might add some more one shots to this universe in the future, but if I end up being exactly the type of lazy bitch I usually am, hopefully I can at least do some gd Bagginshield fluff :O Also! If anyone ever re-reads this and wants to like reverse beta this behemoth, that would be fantastico! I literally tried about 50 times but I keep missing my stupid shitty spelling errors and coming disturbingly close to punching my computer screen. If that's something you're interested in, PM me and I'll give you so much credit it'll be insane (read: I'll try and write you something hobbity as a ty or draw you a shitty picture if that's your jam).

But for real, thank you all so much, you've been top, and I really do hope you enjoyed it :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!