The Disappearing Act

by LadyRedFeather

Summary

Returning to the Shire is not all that Bilbo Baggins had hoped. Certiantly there was no fanfare for him, not even jubilation for returning in one piece. Was he even the same Hobbit who had left the Shire?

Who is Bilbo Baggins? Hero? Adventurer? Mad Baggins is what the hobbits of the Shire whispered behind his back. Burglar is the name he earned among the dwarves. Halfling the men call him. If he was being honest with himself, it felt like Bilbo Baggins died at The Lonely Mountain.

One morning, in early winter, the frost thick, a hobbit formally known as Bilbo Baggins set out once more into Middle Earth to find out who he is-- and he hasn't been seen in many years.

Notes
These first couple chapters are going to be more of a prologue then anything else.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Sunrise Over Shire

At last, Bilbo sighed. His lips twitched up into something he hadn’t done in half a year: a smile. Melancholy it may be, but it was a smile nonetheless. Before him lay the mid-autumn hills of the Shire, and more specifically, Hobbiton. In the distance nested into the top of the tallest hill, lay Bag End. Home. It was such a hollow word now. His heart ached at the mention of it. He had longed for his cozy hobbit hole for over a year, and now—he was back. It had been worth traveling all night to see the sun rise once more upon his birthplace. Drinking in the sights of familiar roads and smials that dotted the hills, Bilbo slowly and silently walked through town. No one but the birds were up with him. Gardeners and farmers would soon rise, followed by the merchants and bakers. Slowly but surely the town would rise from its innocent stupor in the sweet dreamlands where peace reigned, good food was always ready, and a friend stood by your side.

Bilbo Baggins had none of those. Alone, he walked through the sleeping town, to an empty home, where no food would be ready, or a warm fire to greet him. This is where he had started.

Letting his pack fall to the ground, Bilbo took a moment to admire his green door. Even after being gone a year, the paint looked as bright as the day he ran out of his round door. The flowers hadn’t grown up or ratty—most likely due to the Old Gaffer. He would have to pay the man for taking care of his home in his abrupt absence. Home. There was that word again. Hesitantly, he reached for the brass doorknob, but stopped. Shaking his head he went and plopped down on his bench.

Why was he so afraid of going into Bag End? He had longed for this moment since the first day of his adventure—oh, there it was. The moment he stepped into Bag End, the adventure, would finally draw its conclusion.

A worn and shaggy hobbit had finally made it back to his beginnings because he was not wanted with the Company he had left with. He had departed a prim and proper hobbit with nothing more than a desire to see what lay beyond the borders of his lands. Many perils he had triumphed over, and many foes he had faced and slayed. Slowly—if painstakingly—the dwarves had wormed their way into his heart; they taught him new things, showed him the world and what she had to offer, and eventually became one of them. What a set they had been. Thirteen dwarves, a wizard, and a hobbit. Off they had gone to slay the great dragon Smaug. They triumphed and called one another brother and kin for life. Mead they shared and stories they told, laughing and eating all the way. It had seemed the darkness had passed, as all things must eventually do.

It had not.

The Heart of the Mountain they had called it, more like the heart of all greed. The gold fever set in fast and quite furiously within Thorin’s mind. It had spread to the others almost as quickly but not nearly as obsessive. He had hidden the Arkenstone, fearful of what was overcoming his friends.

Betrayal had been bittersweet. His new kin had been in disbelief. Really, Thorin was being unreasonable. It was just a glowing rock and it had cost Bilbo everything. Banishment was his reward. Threat of death upon sight, an added bonus. Topping it all off was his lonely journey back to the Shire.

He had stuck around for the battle of course, scars littered his body and face as proof. It had been the least he could do in retribution. Sting, his elvish blade, resting always at his hip now, had struck the mortal blow to Azog in battle. The pale orc had his blade raised above his head to strike the King Under the Mountain down, when from behind Bilbo had been quicker, and shoved his own blade into the black-blooded heart of the Defiler, ending the long strife between the orc and Thorin. He
didn’t know if Thorin knew it was by his hand the orc fell, but it didn’t matter much now.

It was all said and done. He wouldn’t take back anything he could. He had made sure the Company was alive before he left. Fili had caught him leaving and held him in a bone crushing hug, he begged Bilbo to come with him to see his Uncle, but the hobbit was having none of that.

“I am weary, Fili,” he had said. “My presence is no longer wanted and I yearn for a comfy bed and some Old Toby to smoke.”

“I’m sure Uncle will have forgiven—”

“No, Fili.” He rested a hand on the dwarf’s head as if he were a child. “Please don’t.” He shook his head, his curls hanging limply around his head and dried with sweat. “He is far too stubborn to give up a grudge that easily.”

“Then when I am King you can come, it is not fair—you’ve fought for this mountain just as hard as the rest of us.”

Bilbo gave the blonde heir a smile, the last one for a long time. “My life is already halfway over, Fili.” This must have shocked the Prince for a pained expression came over his visage.

“Already half over, but—”

“I wish to spend my little life back under a cozy hill. It's where….” He belonged? No, that didn’t seem right, but it was his home after all. Wasn’t it? “I’m...sorry, Fili.”

“Bilbo.” The heir enveloped him in a hug once more. Shushing him, Bilbo murmured Fili must get back to Kili, for he had been injured. After a time the battered dwarf released him and gave a low bow. “Goodbye, Mister Baggins.”

“Mister Baggins?” A new voice questioned. Bilbo blinked out of his memories and came to see the Old Gaffer walking up the way. Not unexpectedly the older hobbit looked surprised and slightly off put.

“Hello, Mister Gamgee. Fine morning it is.”

“I’m glad to see that you’re back.” He settled his tools down by the gate’s entrance. “They were going to auction off the things in Bag End today. Many thought you were dead.”

“Yet you kept my garden nice.” They shared a smile.

“I knew yer mother very well, Mister Baggins. She’d go off for times longer than a year before she settled down. You’re her child through and through with the sense of your father. I knew you’d be coming back.” Leaning back a bit he spotted Bilbo’s rucksack. “Did you just get in to town then?”

“Yes, I came in as the sun was rising.” A beautiful sight it had been, a warm welcome from nature back into the folds of the rolling hills of the Shire. “It was nice.” Was that all he could say about it? The elder hobbit saw a deep and weary gaze that should never appear on the young and offered Bilbo a smoke, Old Toby, and nothing else would the Gaffer smoke. Fondly, Bilbo declined.

“I lost my pipe ages ago.”

“You have a few more inside, don’t you? You must have quite a tale to tell this old man.”

Bilbo looked to his green door once more. It was inevitable; eventually, he’d have to go inside and
face the truth that was staring him down. Slowly rising, his heart gave a painful twinge with every step he took towards his door. He placed his hand on the cold brass knob, eyelids flickering down, shutting his eyes. Phantom echoes of laughter ran around him, and a song low and haunting still played in his ears as strongly as the first time he heard it. But that’s all they were now: ghosts of his past.

“Yeah, that’s all it is now I suppose, a tale.”
"I'll have it post by next Monday" ha. Ha. Ha. Real Life quickly smashed that down into the ground. Simply Mid Terms happened for both my beta and myself. I hope the longer chapter makes up for the wait. Enjoy!!

That’s it,” Bilbo huffed as he heard another series of knocks at his door. Back less than a week and he was already fed up with all the hobbits in the Shire. Every last one of them. The day he had returned had been the worst, no doubt. Everyone was shouting and running about—whether it was in disbelief, happiness, horror, or general mayhem—calling for more to come and see that “Mad Baggins” had come back from his adventure.

Yes, Mad Baggins they were already calling him. Mad enough to go out and run amuck around all of Middle Earth he had heard his oh-so-lovely cousin Lobelia say. No doubt that horrendous woman started the terrible trend.

He had tried to be patient with everyone, and he commended himself for trying as long as he had—but it was grating with all the repeat questions, snide remarks, and the large swell of whispers and rumors following everywhere he went. Many simply refused to believe him, turning their noses up at his explanations. He knew there wouldn't be a fanfare upon his return but he had hoped for a warmer reception. Dwarves, royalty, piles of gold taller than their smials, and a dragon, and many more things unseen and simply unheard of within the Shire’s boundaries. ‘How ludicrous,’ many scoffed. Here he wasn't a hero. He wasn’t someone who went on a suicide mission to reclaim a lost Kingdom Under a Mountain and faced the perils of the worlds. He wasn't revered for facing orcs or even just making it back in one piece. No, there was scornful whispers and Bilbo tired from explaining himself over and over, only to be sneered at. If he had to make one more pot of tea that morning for another no good, nosy hobbit he would most certainly chuck the flowery ceramic pot at the next “visitor’s” head. Damned be his reputation! Not like that held any of it’s former high esteem these days.

Slapping his hands against the wet floors he was scrubbing, he pushed his body up with a grunt. Chucking the rag none too gently into the bucket, slopping water everywhere, he stood up and dusted himself off with aggravated pats. Though his gardener, bless his green thumb, had taken care of the outside of his house, the inside had been left alone, gathering dust everywhere in his absence. He hoped to finish before the permanent winter frost froze the ground. Granted he would be finished by now if his pesky relatives would stop bothering him. What he wouldn't give to slip on his gold ring and disappear but no! They all knew he lurked in here; he only ever went out now to get food or hide in a meadow for some peaceful pipe smoking.

Ready to fire off a “No more visitors today,” he wrenched open the green, round door and halted, biting his tongue to stop his words from falling onto an innocent face. “Frodo,” he breathed out. This was one hobbit he wasn’t opposed to seeing right now. He would gladly take the 7 year old over any of his other realitives any day.

If it were possible, the lad’s blue eyes that already shined with his own unique brand of curiosity and mischief lit up more at the sight of his Uncle. “Hi, Uncle Bilbo!” Curly black locks bobbed with his
eager greeting as he bounced on his heels. “Can I help you with anything?”

Bilbo smirked a bit and rested his hands on his hips, raising an eyebrow. “Help me?” He cocked his head to the side. “Or make a sad attempt to finish a chore while you wheedle a story out of me and get distracted?” Frodo’s smile just grew. Shaking his head, Bilbo waved the boy in. “Come on.”

Frodo was among the very few who actually took his story seriously. Whether it was because he was still a fauntling or he really did believe him, Bilbo wasn’t sure. What he was sure of was that Frodo would stop at nothing to hear every last glorious or gruesome detail about his adventure.

Telling the tale wasn’t as hard as the older hobbit thought it would be, at least when it was just Frodo. When the words started tumbling out of his mouth onto eager attentive ears, it came as easy as if he were reading it straight out of a book. Nor did it rub salt into his still healing wounds; in fact, they were, if only minutely, starting to close up.

“Wow, you did a lot of cleaning Uncle.” The black-haired fauntling looked around the empty smial living room. He had passed all the living room furniture on his way to the front door so he had expected this, but it was a strange sight to see cozy Bag End so uncharacteristically hollow of it's warm homey decor.

“Well, there isn’t much else to do,” sighed Bilbo, adjusting his rolled up sleeves which drew the fauntling’s eyes to the jagged scars there, “and it has to get done if I don’t want to sneeze everywhere I go this winter.” He wrinkled his nose against Frodo’s earning a lighthearted laugh only a child could make. It was their little thing to do now after Bilbo had told him about his nickname “Bunny Baggins.”

“After we clean the floors can you tell me more of your adventure? You just got to the icky spiders.”

“Yes, the spiders big enough to consider you nothing more than a bite!” Frodo squealed as his world went upside down. His attempts to free himself from his Uncle’s tickle torture were futile. “They were strung upside down, covered from head to toe in the stickiest web, white as the hairs on Grammy Took!”

It took all day with a lot of snacks, but the floors were scrubbed spotless and the dust was beaten out of the furniture before being moved back inside.

“You’re really strong, Uncle,” Frodo commented, watching his elder place the last chair down. Giving the boy a sheepish smile and laugh, Bilbo wiped his brow, “Well, that’s what happens when you face off orcs on semi-normal basis.” The young lad nodded seriously. He watched his Uncle’s eyes roam over the contents of Bag End seeming to search for something. A frown tugged at the elder’s lips and he stopped looking around. Hazel eyes stared off, looking at something towards some undetermined horizon with such sadness that Frodo knew there laid something his Uncle missed.

“Think I’ll ever have an adventure like yours?” he asked softly.

This froze Bilbo for a moment. Blinking, he turned to Frodo and smiled sadly, “I should hope not. I don’t fancy you’ll enjoy meeting a dragon or orcs.”

Throwing his hands wide Frodo exclaimed, “I still want to travel across Middle Earth one day!” Bilbo chuckled and picked up the fauntling, resting him on his hip. Frodo clutched one of Bilbo’s suspenders and rubbed his nose ungracefully against Bilbo’s nose. Something squeezed at Bilbo’s heart. He could barely fathom sweet little Frodo traversing across the hard wilderness, and what he
could imagine—it petrified him because it always led to destruction and Frodo’s inevitable demise.

He spoke softly. “I hope if you ever do go out there, your journey is far less treacherous and not as heartbreaking.”

“Heartbreaking?” The little voice jumped a few octaves. “No one in the company died, did they?”

“No, no one died my lad.” He gave a few wry chuckles trying to ease the worries of the younger. “I am surprised we all made it to Erebor,” a fond smile tugged at his lips “but we did. At the end… well,” whatever hint of smile had been there was instantly gone, “let’s just say Thorin didn’t see eye to eye with me in certain matters.”

“What happened?” It was an innocent question, but that part of his memories still hurt to look back upon.

“I won’t spoil it for you now, we’ve only just gotten out of Mirkwood.”

“This is such a long tale Uncle, can you write this down for me? Perhaps as your birthday present to me?”

Giving Frodo a secret smile, he teased, “We’ll see.” Frodo groaned at the secretive tone. “Now, let’s go down to the market and I’ll buy you a sweet for helping me.”

Frodo’s mood turned around quickly. “Yay! Can I get one of Mrs. Buckleberry’s cherry tarts?”

Bilbo nodded. “But you’ll have to save till after supper, or your mother will have my head!”

“But Uncle! We didn’t have afternoon tea or elevensies!!”

“Goodness me, we didn’t. I’m sorry Frodo, I haven’t had much of an appetite for quite some time. I’ll also get you some cinnamon bread as well then! Come along.”

Frodo didn’t comment on Bilbo’s eating habits. He knew the other hobbits didn’t think very nice things about his Uncle. Everything from his manners, to the clothes he wore, and his near constant daily walks. He would walk around the Shire from sunup and on until sundown, pausing only long enough for a small nibble of food. Certainly his Uncle was the leanest hobbit of the Shire. Even though Frodo was young, he could tell even the adventure-hardened hobbit was hurt by the nasty words floating about him everywhere he went. So he kept his mouth shut and took his Uncle’s hand with a smile. Which earned him a rare smile right back.

Bilbo watched Frodo explore the sweets stall. He thought back to what Frodo had requested as his present, his adventure in a book. Frodo couldn’t know that every night before bed, he had sat at his desk with paper in front of him, quill in hand, and tried to put his memories to words. The most that happened was ink dripping onto the paper because his hand hovered above the pages too long.

He couldn’t even register the pages in front of him, his mind far, far away in lands he is forbidden to tread, legs itching to go and catch up. It’s always a long time before he can settle down enough to go to sleep after his meager attempts. Half the time he finds himself waking in front of the hearth on the floor wrapped up in a nest of blankets because his bed is too soft, almost suffocating. He needs the crackle of fire to fall asleep--just something to fill the silence. Dying embers normally greeted him in the morning because he does not sleep long enough for the fire to putter out completely. He rises with the sun and roosters. Other times he did not even sleep, the urge to get up and head back out into the world had led him to many a midnight walks, Sting at his side, checking it every so often for the warning blue—just in case. Often he found himself staring back at the ancient map of Erebor when he sips his bitter tea. It is the one thing he actually stole, because he needed a reminder. The company
was real, the pain, fear, anguish was all real—Thorin was real. What he, Bilbo, had done, what he had failed to do, and all the consequences he had to live with. A life here--

“Uncle!” He felt a tugging on his sleeve.

“Yes?” he looked down and met pale blue eyes—much like a dwarf King’s he knew.

“I decided I want apricot tarts instead. Is that okay?”

“Quite alright, we’ll get a few more, those are Prim’s favorites and your father has a hollow leg when it comes to anything containing sugar.” He booped Frodo’s forehead. Giggling, Frodo nodded eagerly. “You going to tell Mrs. Buckleberry?”

“Yes!” He ran up to the woman and politely waited until she finished talking with another customer. Bilbo saw a few of Frodo’s friends and other fauntlings coming down the road and quickly tacked on a couple handfuls of taffy to the order.

“I’m giving you some of my pumpkin cookies as well, you’re far too skinny, Mr. Baggins. With all that cleaning and walking I see you doing. Goodness me, it must be a fright to try to find time to eat 6 meals a day.”

“Oh,” Bilbo blushed, not bothering to correct her assumption. “Thank you, Mrs. Buckleberry. Pumpkin is my favorite.”

“Not at all, dear. You need to earn some more layers before the winter sets in. Only weeks away now!”

“It’ll be nice to spend winter in Bag End this year.” He graciously took the sack of wrapped sweets.

“I should say so. Better than holing up with stinky, lout dwarves!” she chuckled. She meant well by her words, better than most hobbit, but he could only offer half a smile in return.

When they stepped out of the shop, Frodo spotted his friends before they saw him. Bilbo chuckled as he followed Frodo over to them.

“Frodo!” Little Reggie Brandybuck called out.

“Hey guys, coming back from the meadows?”

“No, we’re actually heading out to catch the last of the fireflies. Wanna come? You too, Mister Bilbo!” The fauntlings all loved Bilbo’s stories, whether they were about his adventure or the ones he made up.

“Can we, Uncle?”

“Sure as long as you don’t mind sharing the taffy.” He grinned as the other children’s eyes lit up.

“Let’s go!” they all cheered. Bilbo laughed, almost dropping his sack of sweets as they tugged him forward. The children babbled on to one another, their fingers steadily growing stickier from the taffy as they scuttled eagerly toward the main meadow. Cresting the hill just before their destination, Bilbo paused.

To the side, waving a gentle greeting, was the golden field of barely that shone with an unmatched brilliance in the setting sun, much better than any heaps of metal gold could every hope to stand up to. It was filled with the love and laughter of children and the folks of Hobbiton on a daily basis. This
was a gold, Bilbo thought with an aching heart, that he wished he could have shared with the Company.

“Mister Bilbo! Hurry up, the fireflies are starting to come out already!”

“Oh no!” he feigned fretted and jogged down the hill and on past the kids into the soft grassy meadow. Shouting over his shoulder he grinned. “Last one to catch a firefly is a stinky troll!”

“No fair!”

“There is one!”

“I call it!”

“Ahh, more over here!”

“No pushing!”

The laughter of children echoed into the twilight sky. It was much easier to forget his woes in the presence of the little ones. He was allowed to think of lands vast and grand to the far East and the great heroes that defended them. A youthful sparkle of mischief appeared in his eyes, much like the twinkling stars coming out in the falling daylight.

Somewhere the task of firefly catching morphed into a game of freeze tag. Frodo’s cousin Meriadoc was it and Bilbo hadn’t seen any children for awhile now. They had moved the game to the edge of the forest by the road to allow for better hiding and for a home tree. Which was where Bilbo was slowly inching towards through the tall grass, home tree was in sight. Peeking through the edge of the grass he didn’t see anyone on home tree and grinned, squirming a bit and ready to bolt. He dashed across the shorter grass and was yards away when all the hobbit children shouted, springing from their hiding places and swarming him. The first to land on him was Meriadoc, who had launched from a long, low-hanging branch of the home-based tree, screaming ‘Got’cha!’ and tackling him to the ground.

As soon as he was on the ground the others came in and ruthlessly started to tickle him, giggling all the while themselves. Through his laughs and gasps for air Bilbo sputtered out for ‘mercy’ and words of ‘not fair’ and ‘picking on an old man’.

Catching one of the children’s arms he turned to tickle them, finding a new fauntling every time one got away. He finally caught one under the arms and hoisted them high up into the air, but regretted it the next moment he felt the chilling night air on his stomach. Some of the children had gasped and he knew they had seen his scars. He most certainly had not returned to the Shire unscathed. The scars on his arms were baby like compared to the vast mesh on his stomach. Going on an adventure without amour had not been the smartest idea.

The worst scarring was on his abdomen: a warg had clawed him during the Battle of Five Armies, but that was after he earned smaller cuts and lesions from orcs and goblins along the way. Four nearly horizontal gashes ran across the front of him, they had barely finished healing when he had returned to the Shire and they were still ugly and puckering pink in deep ridges.

Before he could get a word in a tutting came from the road. Bilbo reflexively scowled at the sight of Lobelia, her dress looking as positively stiff as her attitude.

“See those scars, fauntlings!! That’s what happens when you go out beyond the Shire. Nasty lot those adventures are! You’re likely to get shredded up and eaten in a beast’s stew!”
The children looked disheartened at Lobelia’s words and many turned to Bilbo, hope in their eyes that it wasn’t true. “The route we took was filled with dangerous creatures but it was because—”

“You heard it yourself kids!” she practically shrieked at them.

“It was like that,” Bilbo interjected, there was no way he was going to let the children be swayed by his cousin, “because that route had been abandoned when Erebor fell. Many other routes are safe or well protected by rangers and elves.” He relaxed a bit when the children calmed down at his words.

Lobelia scoffed. “I don’t even think I see a spot of the old Bilbo Baggins in there anymore! You’re hardly a hobbit! Look at ye: skin and bones, and don’t think people haven’t noticed you walking all around the Shire with that hideous sword of yours at the hip at night. Or at day, scantily stopping for food! Not even elevensies or tea! You hardly respond to social callings. I can barely call you a hobbit! Bilbo Baggins is dead for all I know and you’re just a poor imposter who crawled into his skin!”

Bilbo’s jaw snapped shut and he couldn’t find the words to respond because it was true. He didn’t feel like ‘Bilbo Baggins.’ The proper young hobbit who lived at Bag End and did nothing unexpected. He had gone on an adventure, on a Tookish whim to see the mountain and her glittering caverns and gold long lost in a night of fiery demise. A gentle hobbit he had been, then a sword was placed in his hands, and he had killed. Many, many times wargs, spiders, and orcs had felt his blade. All for the Company. By the Valar, Bag End didn’t even feel like home anymore. They reason he had so thoroughly cleaned it out was because he thought it would make it feel more like home. Get him back into a hobbit-y routine but when he had looked around the smial, as clean and scent of citrus in the air, filled with his family’s knickknacks and history, it hadn’t filled the void in him.

Something about his look must have already tipped her off. A deep and dark hollowness came to his eyes and the twinkling light of merriment was swallowed up. Jaw set firm and hands clenched by his side, Bilbo stood rigid. Lobelia took a step back, a softer frown on her face. When he didn’t respond she gestured to the children with the umbrella she always carried on hand.

“Come on, you little mud trackers. Let me escort you home.”

The children warily hugged and bid both Frodo and Bilbo goodbye. Frodo waved them goodbye, staying with his Uncle. It was a minute before Bilbo moved and picked up the sack still filled with tarts and cookies. “Let’s get you home, Frodo. Your mother must be worried and these pastries won’t eat themselves.”

Frodo smiled and latched onto Bilbo’s hand, noticing for the first time the many callouses on it and the faint scars littering the back. He knew they weren’t from gardening like those on Hamfast Gamgee. These were from being warrior hands. They had gripped swords, not towels, these scars were from other blades and beasts, not from bramble bushes or cats.

As they walked to Drogo and Primula’s smial, a quiet came over the two. One didn’t notice it and the smaller one worried over it. A glazed over look that the young lad could only describe as a deep sadness and longing came about the older hobbit’s face. More often it had appeared and it churned something uneasy in Frodo’s tummy. His Uncle didn’t even realize they had gotten to his house. Tugging on his sleeve, he said, “We’re here!” He put on his biggest smile he could, but it only seemed to dampen Bilbo’s mood more, even with the small smile gracing his lips.

“Be a good lad for your parents, Frodo.”

Nodding, Frodo drew Bilbo down into a tight hug, hoping to help in a way he really couldn’t understand. Hopeful, he asked, “I’ll see you tomorrow Uncle?”
“Goodnight, Frodo.” That wasn’t the response he wanted to get. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He giggled at his Uncle, rubbing their noses together. “Goodbye.” Oddly, when Bilbo kissed his forehead, it felt much more like final goodbye than a see-you-tomorrow.

Frodo reluctantly stepped away and opened his front door, taking the sack of sweets with him. He waved to his Uncle, his tummy churning again. He knew his Uncle well enough to know that he was planning to do something.

Bilbo walked back to Bag End now with an eager purpose for once. Taking a deep breath, he entered his house for the final time, grinning very much like the mad hobbit he’s called. He’s leaving the Shire.

He had refused for the longest time to admit he missed the traveling. Stars twinkling, like the gems the dwarves promised were lying underneath the mountain, above him steady and unyielding. The resounding snores of dwarvish companions beside him, the sounds lulling him to sleep while the fire crackled in the background. Gamey meats and wild potatoes simmered together with wild spices eaten with coarse bread rolls. The sheer splendor of the vast lands always leaving him breathless.

Nothing came close to the Shire’s rolling grasslands and farmlands but it wasn’t for him, it was too peaceful. Mundane even. Something inside him was restless and he knew a part of him was missing. Just like Lobelia said, he wasn’t Bilbo Baggins anymore. Bilbo Baggins had been left behind somewhere. Perhaps he was among the dead at the Lonely Mountain’s foot, or had he even made it to Erebor? He wasn’t certain, but he was sure it wasn’t who he was anymore. No longer was he confined by his Baggin’s respectable side to stay but neither was he defined by his outlandish Tookish side. He was- well he wasn’t certain who he was, but was going to find out!

His eyes are wide and aglow; there is a spring to his step as he bustles about the hobbit hole creating a traveling pack for himself. This one would be much better packed than his last one. He made sure to stuff his old blue waistcoat he had been given by the dwarves down at the bottom of his pack; he had a sneaking suspicion his newer crimson one would meet the same fate as his red one had along the way. The blue jacket was really warm and could easily fit over his waistcoat if he were to get that cold, so in the pack it went. Also this time around he would wear a cloak to protect himself from the torrential rains that tended to plague the wilderness, his was a lovely dark blue. It had been forgotten when he dashed out of Bag End last time. Also tucked tightly into his pack was a small cooking pot and eating utensils and plenty of spices. Much of his food went into the pack before also setting out a side bag with more food. He may not eat as much as he used to but there was no one else to carry extra food.

It was daunting to think he, a single small hobbit, was going to go out on his own to see the world. No laughing campfire tales, jokes, or merry tunes accompanied with deep voices to fill the time. No one to take the watch to make sure they would not be taken by surprise at night. He would just have to be careful, Bilbo thought. Staying in the Shire was no longer an option and if he died, well-- maybe Frodo would miss him, if he wasn’t forgotten by the little fauntling too soon.

Casting aside darker thoughts, for he had had enough of those for a lifetime, he went back to packing. Throughout the night, Bilbo packed a few sets of clothes in along side bandages and a few medical supplies. On a whim he packed his mother’s small book of herb identification as well as two small blank books. One was a leather-bound red book he would use to write his previous adventure in like his nephew had been urging him to do. Perhaps when he finished he would send a copy back to him for a birthday surprise. A matching dark blue leather book was placed next the red. He would use that one for his new adventures. Charcoal sticks, ink, and quills were also added to the mix as
well as a few odds and ends trinkets he couldn’t bear to part with. A pouch of gold was hidden within the folded blue waistcoat at the bottom of his bag and an even smaller pouch in one of his pack’s outer pockets. He wouldn’t need much and could always go back to the troll cave to get more if he needed to. Food would be his only priority when he came into towns. Finally done packing, he lashed his bedroll to the outside, another smaller blanket tucked in between it’s folds, for he would not have companions to share warmth with in the night. Specifically, an overly majestic, broody King.

Several mornings they had awoken in an awkward tangle of limbs. More often than not on those particularly chilly mornings he had woken up together with one of Thorin’s legs having found its way between his, a large, dwarvish arm resting in the slight dip of his waist, the other somehow becoming his new pillow in the night, Thorin using Bilbo’s blanket as a pillow substitute. Often the hobbit’s own arms would be curled up between their bodies. Waking up before Thorin had been far and few between but in those quiet mornings, Bilbo would never admit to anyone, he loved basking in the security and warmth under both Thorin’s blanket and fur coat.

Not ready to face one particularly frigid winter day, the only part of Bilbo exposed to the air was the tips of his ears, nose shamelessly nuzzled into Thorin’s collarbone under the blankets. He remembered distinctly what Thorin smelled like. A soothing mixture of something uniquely dwarvish, mint, and wood smoke—oh!

With a stifled cry, snapping out of his reverie, Bilbo ran to get a pipe and his flint and steel pack. There was no way he would be adventuring without his pipe, no sir. He lost his favorite one in the river and the last leg to Erebor had been stressful without something to smoke. He tucked his pipe into his waistcoat and added a large bag of Old Toby to the top of his pack. With a final jerk of the leather strap, he nodded.

Waiting for his kettle to heat up to make himself a large cuppa, he placed Sting alongside his pack by his walking stick he acquired on his journey back to the Shire. While the tea leaves were steeping, he remembered his waterskin, which he filled to the brim and placed with his pack. Perhaps he’d buy a second one, just in case. ‘Hm’ing to himself, he spread out several maps of Middle earth before him on the dining table. Last time a map had been placed on this table he had fainted at the mere thought of a dragon. Ha! How far he had come since then and how far he would go, he thought, giddily tracing the inky ravines and mountaintops. Just seeing the places drawn in ink was enough to get Bilbo’s legs twitching.

It was right before the winter weather was to fall over the Shire and hardly anyone would be going out. The timing was perfect. No one bothered him very much anymore. It wouldn’t be until spring that people would notice he was gone again. Not that they truly cared, he was nothing more than a topic for vicious gossip. Of course some of his distant relatives cared, and Hamfast, but most of his accepting relatives were over a town or two and good ol’ Hamfast was busy most of the day working to feed his family. Frodo, the brilliant boy, he would grow into be a fine, handsome hobbit and a fine hobbit would most certainly get married and need a good home.

“And Bag End,” he murmured looking around, “is a finer home than most.” His parents had wanted the pitter-patter of many little feet running around the vast expanse of Bag End but Bilbo had been only child. He hadn’t settled with a lass, which he wasn’t surprised at but he had always wanted his own fauntlings to run around and make the pitter-patters fill up the silence for their grandparents. It never came to pass as both Bungo and Belladonna found their eternal rest far too early. Frodo always loved Bag End, and so it would be his.

Truthfully, Bilbo had no idea how long he would be away or if he would return at all. “Perhaps I’ll come back when I’m old enough not to care what old biddies say.” He mused. “Or maybe I’ll just
retire to Imladris when I can’t walk any further. That would be nice…”

Going slowly around the place that had been the center of his life for 50 years, he straightened up things, placing them just so. The nest of blankets in front of the fireplace was untangled and folded. Placing them on the couch, he fondly smoothed down the corners, admiring for the last time each neat hand stitch design done by the deft hand of his mother. No matter how much sentiment lay under the cozy hill, he simply couldn’t stay.

He flashed a grin at his parent’s portraits on the wall. “Goodbye, Mum, Dad. I’m off to see the world, perhaps I’ll find myself again.”

After he finished washing up his few dishes and blowing out his candles he stood in the foyer. Reverently, he slid on his cloak, hefted up his pack and the extra food sack hanging on the side, water skin going on over that, and lashed Sting to his side. Finally, he grabbed his walking stick, and the key to Bag End, he had forgotten to lock his house when he had left last time. There were only two keys. Hamfast had one for emergencies and this one would be given to Frodo. It would keep thieving relatives out until Frodo wanted to open Bag End up for himself. He had written a quick letter to Hamfast explaining he was handing over everything to Frodo and to shoo off any unwanted lurkers, and had a money stub in the fold of the letter as payment for him to keep on caring for Bag End. Everything was signed and his family’s seal pressed into crimson wax to officiate the letter.

Breathing in deeply, he gazed around the dark confines of Bag End one last time. Nothing moved, nothing could love him, nothing could keep him here, not any more. So bearing a smile, one born out of nostalgia, he turned away and stepped out. The door softly locking behind him.

Frodo pretended to be asleep when his father checked up on him in the middle of night after a midnight snack. Once his door was closed and he was sure his da would be in his room, he bolted up. Dropping to his knees, he pulled his winter cloak out from under his bed. He had fetched it from the closet before bedtime. Tying it off and sliding the hood up he climbed his toy chest by the window. He was going to visit his Uncle, something about the way he said goodbye had left him terribly unsettled, so much so he couldn’t even eat the apricot tarts Bilbo had bought him. Nervously, he unlatched the lock to his window and pushed it open. With strength that only comes from climbing trees for most of his childhood, he easily hoisted himself up. With a small ‘oof’ he landed on the grass. He waited a few minutes to make sure he hadn’t been heard. Deciding it was safe, he bounded out his yard and down the many winding lanes of Hobbiton.

His hood fell off at the racing pace at but he didn’t care because upon arriving at the edge of the hill that Bag End was carved into, he saw his Uncle stepping out in traveling attire, pack on his back, and Sting at his side.

Bilbo was taking a few moments to gaze at the town below and for that Frodo was thankful because it allowed him to creep closer.

Without his eyes leaving the town his Uncle spoke, a smile on his face, “Frodo.”

The lad scowled for a moment, he had never been able to sneak around Bilbo successfully. “How did you know it was me?”

“Secret.” The same answer as always. Bilbo’s gaze shifted to the fauntling. “What are you doing out of bed?”

“You were acting funny after Lobelia shouted at you. More so than your usual squabble with her.”

“I knew you were smart.”
“Why are you leaving, Uncle Bilbo?” Oh, how innocent those soft blue eyes were. They were an icy blue much like a dwarf’s he wished he could forget though unlike Thorin’s, Frodo’s eyes were always kind and his childish glares held no true malice.

Kneeling down the best he could with his heavy pack on, he met Frodo at eye level. “I--I lost myself at Erebor, Frodo, and I need to find out who I am. Bilbo Baggins may have left the Shire but he did not make the return trip.”

“But you are Bilbo.” There was the child mind of Frodo. A smart lad he was, but still a kid. Sighing softly he drew the smaller hobbit into a hug.

“You remember what I told you about Thorin being angry with me?”

“Over the Arkenstone.” He puffed up in pride when he felt Bilbo nodded in confirmation. He wrapped his own tiny arms around Bilbo’s neck, nuzzling the copper locks. Bilbo always smelled like a warm autumn day, pipe weed, and sweet grass.

“Well, you see, dear, I didn’t leave Erebor because I wanted to.” If Bilbo held a little tighter than was comfortable, Frodo didn’t tell him. “I--I betrayed him, and Thorin--he didn’t take it so well.” Frodo felt the world shake, but he soon realized it was just Bilbo, trembling.

“Did he send you away?” a confused Frodo asked.

“Yes, dear boy, he banished me from Erebor.” The lad didn’t need to know he had also been threatened with death.

“What?” the tiny hobbit recoiled, pulling away from Bilbo. Tears fell from hazel eyes. Frodo frowned and drew out his only hankie. It was cream colored, embroidered in turquoise along the edges. A F.B. embroidered boldly on the corner. It was wrinkled from being in the pocket of a child but he used it to gently wipe the tears from his kin’s face. “How could he do that? After all you did for him. You were friends!” He grabbed one of Bilbo’s hands, eyes wide with the innocence Bilbo missed having, but no longer envied.

“Well, it wasn’t enough for Thorin I guess. When he cast me out, I felt a part of me die there at Erebor. I haven’t quite felt the same. Traveling with all those rascally dwarves,” he wiggled his bigger nose to Frodo’s small faunt like nose, eliciting a laugh from the boy, “was the best of my years Frodo.” His mind distant, eyes trailing subconsciously to the east were memories were made, those which Frodo couldn’t begin to imagine. “Companionship, a whole wide and new world to see, to learn from. The stars were the best roof over our heads,” he gestured up with one hand, “the rustling of the leaves at night our lullaby to fall asleep too. All the new and interesting people we met, it was wonderful.” The older hobbit came back to himself, and looked to Frodo. “The Shire—it’s a wonderful place, Frodo. Filled with wonderful Hobbits and such but--I can’t stay here. You understand?” Frodo seemed to hesitate so he continued on, “Bilbo Baggins died at The Lonely Mountain. I don’t know who I am anymore Frodo.” He sounded old, and weary, but Frodo could hear the trum of excitment as he went on. “I know I want adventure, the rain soaking me to the bone, the sun on beating down my back, to find those ruins of long lost kingdoms and villages, speak the tongues of others, and I can’t figure out who I am here. I don’t belong here, this isn’t my home.”

“But Bag End is your home!” protested Frodo. At this, Bilbo gave him a smile and drew from around his neck a small chain with a large key strung on.

“Not anymore.” Gently, he took Frodo’s hands and clasped them over the warm metal. The key his father had given to Belladonna Took as a marriage proposal, the key to his childhood, his last connection keeping him firmly rooted in the Shire. Letting go of the chain and key, he felt a weight
lift off his chest. “Bag End is yours now,” he murmured softly.

Frodo stared at the key in his hands, he didn’t want his Uncle to go. Bilbo was unhappy here, that much Frodo could tell. It wasn’t fair. It just wasn’t fair, thought Frodo, tears and snot dribbling down his face. With a half-amused huff, Bilbo withdrew one of his own handkerchiefs. His was a sharp, clean white, embroidered in green, much like the color or his door. In the corner two big bold B’s interlocked. He wiped Frodo’s face clean and tucked the cloth into the boy’s jacket pocket as a memento of him.

“Come now, Frodo, it won’t be forever.”

“P-p-promise?”

Bilbo sighed, a soft, fond expression overtaking his features. “I promise. Now, I best be getting off, don’t want to stir up a ruckus with the others.” He stood up, joints popping into place. He grabbed his walking staff just outside his door. Frodo grasped his other hand and the other tiny fist held the key to Bag End.

“I’ll walk with you.”

“Only till the edge of town,” Bilbo lamented. Frodo nodded, trying not to shed any more tears. Adventurers were supposed to be strong. In silence, they walked hand in hand down the twists and turns of Hobbiton. They stopped briefly to slip Bilbo’s letter in Hamfast’s mailbox before continuing on. They could see their breaths in front of them in the morning air. Thick patches of frost were starting to form, blanketing Hobbiton, crystallizing it as if trying to capture it in a moment of time, just for Bilbo. Nature was slowly falling asleep; he had seen the flowers curl away and the leaves fall in droves from the trees. Sluggishly, the sun rose higher above the horizon as they reached the edge of town. Bilbo gave Frodo one last big hug and kissed his nephew’s forehead, muttering an old hobbit prayer of protection.

“Uncle, take this.” Frodo held out his own handkerchief, his first one Bilbo knew, and it had been the one Frodo had used to wipe off his Uncle’s tears earlier. “Since I dirtied yours up….and to remind you of me.” Reverently, Bilbo took the cream colored cloth and folded it neatly before tucking it away safely in his breast pocket.

“Thank you. Chin up, little hobbit, it’ll be okay.” He smiled warmly. “Goodbye, Frodo.”

“Goodbye, Uncle, I hope you find Bilbo Baggins out there.” He managed to smile, though he knew new tears were sliding down his cheeks.

“As do I.” With that, the older hobbit turned to face the world. Frodo watched him reach the next far hilltop. Bilbo turned back and waved, Frodo returned the gesture a bit more wildly, all the while clutching the large key to his chest. Turning around again and walking across the far hillside, Bilbo became lost to Frodo’s sight. That was the last any friends or family had seen of the hobbit formerly known as Bilbo Baggins.

Chapter End Notes

So I was starting to format this the other day and I swear you can all sense when I'm about to update because a lot of comments started coming in on the first chapter.
Winter came and she had not been kind. She had stormed in early, blanketing the hills and fields, putting nature to rest with a perfect white blanket. Just enough to keep older hobbits inside most days, but not so much that eager faunts and tweens couldn’t go outside and enjoy sledding on better days. Snow forts soon littered the fields and roadsides where hobbits lay in wait to ambush friends and relatives.

Those times grew fewer and farther apart for just as it seemed to get better another blizzard would come and cover the dug-out paths, bury forts, and make it more and more difficult for the smaller race to get about.

When he could, Frodo would bundle up so that only his eyes and nose peeked out, shout to his parents he was off to the meadow to play, and run out the door in whirlwind of snow. He would return at dusk, rosy-cheeked, cold, and hungry, but not from bombarding his cousins in the field. No, more often than not that wasn’t where his feet would lead him.

Winding his way through the back of Hobbiton up to Bag End was where wool mittens were removed and the large key brought forth from under the many warm layers and slotted into the back door lock of the smial. Turning the key, the well-kept gears gave way with the smallest clicking sound. Even though he knew no one would be home, Frodo would always creep in quietly and shut the door softly, afraid to break the hollowed silence.

There he would slowly shuffle through the halls and many rooms. He carefully inspected each one, memorizing what they held and remembering what had been. He missed his Uncle, more than he would care to admit. No one knew Bilbo was gone yet. Except Sam’s father, but he hadn’t seen either Sam or his father since the snow set in.

It was a marvel, thought Frodo, that Bag End is his. He still couldn’t fully accept that fact, not with all the little touches of Bilbo still around. Candles in the study, off to the left so he wouldn’t bump them with his writing elbow. Ink smudges littering the desktop. Peppermint tea in the front of his Uncle’s collection, for it was the most often used. Beds were all made, quilts folded down at the end so sleepy hobbits wouldn’t have to pry up the blankets and fuss about to get under them, they could just pull it up and fall asleep. Picture frames hung in neat rows down the halls, they contained paintings Bilbo’s father had painted from the vivid descriptions Belladonna had given him of her adventures. There were a few of Bilbo’s, mostly flowers but there was one of his small family, down at the very end.

The three of them were in a meadow, green and lush, early summer judging by the wild flowers dotting the edges. Bungo held a picnic basket in one arm, the other a blanket, and, with what Frodo could only describe as a fond look on his face, eyes gazing toward his family ahead of him. Belladonna had a wooden sword in hand, the other hiking up her skirt to give chase to a young Bilbo, her curls flying behind her. Young Bilbo was also carrying a wooden sword, a bright, happy
look of laughter on his face. It was the closest thing to true happiness he’d seen in his Uncle, even if it was just a painting.

Bilbo had painted it, Frodo knew, for his coming of age present to his mother. She had been the only one there for him at the time. Bungo had passed 4 years before his coming of age, and Frodo had been to enough relatives’ parties that he knew Bella had only lasted that long to see Bilbo inherit Bag End for his own family in the years to come.

No hobbits came to fill the house, but dwarves did.

It had been easy to hear that they had been the family Bilbo needed. Frodo carefully grabbed one of the mugs, from the set the dwarves had thrown about while they sang. “Blunt the knives, and bend the forks,” Frodo said to himself as he made a cup of peppermint tea, remembering autumn afternoons when he sat in his Uncle’s lap listening to him read. Careful to keep smoke down to a minimum, he used the stovetop, grateful for the temporary warmth of it.

Once the drink had steeped, he took to lighting a candle and sat down in the dining room, across the way from the map of Erebor. Swinging his legs, shivering in the cold house, he breathed out slowly letting the vapor of his breath curl up and cloud his view of the map for a moment.

Scrunching his face up, he tried to envision the mountain. Tall and looming, a solitary peak on the horizon, Bilbo had said. Cloaked in mist, the green that had returned to her sides glistening like the gems she housed inside her. Frodo hummed in distaste, his Uncle had sounded so wistful, but knowing the dwarves had banished him left a sour taste in Frodo’s mouth.

Bilbo had left before he could finish his story properly, and the fauntling hoped one day, he would know it all. This was where his mind usually wandered to in the end. Staring at the ancient map of dwarves, thinking what his loving Uncle could have done that had been so terrible, so horrendous, he had been cast out by the people Bilbo spoke so fondly of.

Frodo spent much of the winter wondering upon this, sipping peppermint tea within the safe confines of Bag End, winds howling outside like the distant cries of wargs.

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It grew harder and harder, as Spring came along, for Frodo to get into Bag End unnoticed. Hobbits were coming out in droves to enjoy the warmer weather and it wouldn’t do well if he was seen coming and going sneakily, especially since no smoke had come from the chimneys of Bag End all winter. Eyes were turning toward the smial at the top of the hill and it wouldn’t be long till someone came a knocking for Bilbo.

Frodo didn’t just expect it to be his parents.

He and Sam were coming up Bagshot Row after spending a day picking blackberries by the lake. He was hoping to take Sam into Bag End today and tell him about his Uncle and the key left to him.

Coming into view of the green door, Frodo came to an immediate halt causing Samwise to collide with his back.

“What’s the matter, Mister Frodo?” Sam adjusted the full pail of berries in his hands.

Keeping his eyes trained ahead he said, “There are hobbits standing in front of Bag End.” Peering around Frodo, Sam did see a group of hobbits standing in front of Bag End, looking particularly worried.
“Hey, isn’t that your mum and da?” Sam inclined his head to couple by Bag End’s mailbox.

“Yes, it is…let’s find out what’s happening,” he said, though it was plain for Frodo to see. Bilbo’s missing presence was going to be discovered. Creeping forward around the nearest neighbor’s bushes, the two faunts got down on their hands and knees and left their berry bucket behind. Crawling through the line of bushes, they got a little closer, enough to hear the adults talking.

“I came by the past couple mornings to invite him over for dinner and he wasn’t answering so I thought he might have been down at the markets,” Frodo heard his mother, Primula, say. “So I tried coming back at Elevensies today but still he wasn’t here. I tried again an hour before supper but still —”

“Dear,” Drogo started, trying to calm his wife, “are you sure Bilbo isn’t in Tuckborough or Bree? He probably went to stretch his legs. It’s been an awfully chilly winter. He’ll be back.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” cousin Rory cut in. “I haven’t seen any chimney smoke all winter. Some days I thought I saw some.” Frodo swallowed the lump in his throat. “But it was always so dreary and windy I wasn’t sure if it was snow just blowing around or not.”

“Do you think he’s dead in there?” asked another. The group of hobbits started to twitter about in speculation. The volume grew louder and louder as they all tried to interject and give their own theories as to where Bilbo was.

“Uh oh.” Sam cringed. “I see my da coming up the way.” Sam’s father was coming up the opposite road from Frodo and Sam. He didn’t look particularly pleased.

“I’m not going in– hey, Hamfast! You have a spare key, don’t you? Bilbo isn’t responding.”

“All of you leave Bag End please.” Mr. Gamgee waved his hands toward the gate, as he climbed the steps.

“Why?” It was Lobelia Sackville-Baggins who asked, stepping forward. Frodo and Sam both couldn’t stop the frowns from appearing on their faces; Lobelia was the most shrill, loud, and greediest hobbit in all four farthings. “Where is Bilbo Baggins?”

Hamfast stood in front of the round green door, “He’s away at the moment.”

The hobbits muttered amongst themselves, though the glare of the shrill woman just narrowed. “He’s been gone all winter, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, away visiting people.” Frodo spied the relief in his mother’s shoulders.

“Where?” Lobelia snapped.

“I don’t know, Mr. Baggins did not say,” was the placid reply. How unusual, many thought, where would Bilbo have gone? Perhaps to visit his Took cousins; it seemed most likely.

Though one among many didn’t think like her fellow hobbits. Boldly, Lobelia asked, “He’s gone on another adventure, hasn’t he?” Frodo and Sam waited with baited breath. Frodo knew his Uncle had left on an adventure. No doubt this newest excursion to the outside world would shatter his Uncle’s already rickety reputation. When Hamfast hesitated to answer right away that was all she needed. “He’s gone off into the wild like some tween in search of elves again!”

“He has not left in search of Elves, miss. He left a week before the first snow to--”
“If he left before winter set in, he probably got caught in the blizzard on the road,” came the distraught voice of a Proudfoot lass.

“Poor sod probably froze to death in the first blizzard,” came another’s somber reply.

“I want his silverware!” declared Lobelia.

“Lobelia!” exclaimed Primula, scandalized by the quick dibs the woman had called out.

“I was gonna buy his living room furniture that day he came back–” said another wistfully.

“Yeah, and I wanted his tea-sets... Oi, Hamfast open the place up! Let’s have a look through there,” said old lady Daisy. Many pressed forward to the door and Hamfast tried valiantly to speak over them.

Frodo scowled at the petty greed of the hobbits. Bickering over a hobbit’s home and goods when they didn’t even know if he was alive. He was clenching his hands so tight his nails broke skin. Not that he noticed. He was livid, never even hearing Sam’s fretful mutters as his father got into a direct argument with Lobelia.

Stamping down a foot firmly, Lobelia commanded, “Open up this home up right this instant, Hamfast Gamgee!”

“What is going on?” The chatter died almost instantly. Frodo let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. The Thain had come, a flustered, slightly red-faced, and out-of-breath Mrs. Gamgee by his side. Hamfast nodded his silent thanks to his wife before addressing the Thain.

“Lobelia is trying to get Bilbo’s silverware.” Frodo’s mouth twitched up, that wasn’t new.

“Well, Mad Baggins has run off again without warning! He barely came back in time to save his stuff last time. He won’t be so lucky out there on his own. He left before the first snowfall! The sod is probably thawing out in a ditch as we speak!” Frodo thought his mother was going to slap Lobelia. "I want his silverware and house. I’ll pay for them like I was going to the day of the auction!”

“Lobelia,” the woman quieted with a huff. Thain turned to Hamfast. “Is this true? Did Bilbo leave for another adventure?”

Hamfast straightened up, “Yes, he did sir. He wasn’t sure when he was coming back but asked me to keep up the place in his absence.”

“What proof of documentation do you have that Mad Baggins left Bag End to your care?” came the bitter rebuttle of Lobelia.

“This,” Frodo could see the letter from where he was the broken red wax seal of the Baggin’s clan on the back quite clear to see. The hobbits parted easily as the Thain walked up and took the offered letter and began reading it.

Twirling her umbrella in hand, Lobelia muttered, “This is ridiculous.”

“Master Baggins is not dead, Miss Sackville-Baggins. He’s simply gone away on a sightseeing holiday! He’s survived worse than a few inches of snow on his last adventure.”

“Pah,” she sniffed, throwing her nose in the air, “Who’s to say he will be coming back?”

“Who’s to say he won’t!?” Many were surprised. Hamfast was normally such a docile and peaceful
hobbit. “I heard what happened down at the fields right before winter came about.” The gardener jabbed a finger at Lobelia’s direction, who had the decency to look a little ashamed. “You’re the silver-tongued serpent who drove him out.”

Lobelia clutched her parasol tighter. “Why I never—”

“Should have opened your mouth, miss?” quipped Hamfast, “Indeed, I agreed wholeheartedly.”

Mouths hung open all around, looking between the two in horror. Frodo snuck a glance at Sam, who was equally as gobsmacked as the rest of them. No one said anything as the pair glared down one another. The woman wouldn’t be so easily deterred. Taking a step forward into Hamfast’s face she spat, “You are not the keeper of this house anymore, your beloved boss is long gone along with your pay!”

“Enough, Lobelia,” cut off Thain, an underlying iciness to his tone. He held the letter up, directing everyone’s attention to it. “The letter here says Hamfast is indeed the keeper of Bag End, and he will be receiving stipulations from Bilbo’s inheritance as long as he continues to do so.” The hobbit woman glowered and growled. “Furthermore, Bilbo Baggins has already passed on Bag End and his estate’s entirety to someone else.”

The hobbit woman looked like she was about to erupt. “Well, who is it?!” she shrieked. Sam and Frodo winced from their spot at the sheer volume alone. The loud pounding of his pulse in Frodo’s ears made it hard for him to hear as he waited for his cover to be blown.

“It is of no concern to you,” Thain replied evenly. “Now, dear lady, please vacate the premises. All of you.” He made a shooing motion. “No one is getting anything from Bag End, these are officially signed and crested documents from Bilbo Baggins.”

Many backed off, crested documents were to be honored. They were good as a hobbit’s last will and testament.

“I shall make copies of this Hamfast,” Thain said, the gardener nodding in agreement quickly. “Though I wish you would of showed me this earlier.” he waved the letter up.

Hamfast bowed his head a little, “Mr. Baggins wanted it to be held off as long as possible, sir.”

“Whatever for?” Lobeila asked.

“No one has been kind in accepting the tales Bilbo tells of his adventure.” huffed Hamfast. So it was probably to prevent hobbits such as yourself, Mrs. Sackville-Baggins, from cutting him down any further.”

Lotho chased after his fuming wife, the first to go, and slowly the others disappeared as well. With each new hobbit walking down the lane they also carried away some of Frodo’s tension till there was no one else left but the fauntling’s parents. Tentatively looking at one another, Frodo and Sam started to walk up to the smial. Primula and Drogo were talking with Hamfast, the younger couple obviously worried.

“What will Frodo think? Bilbo is gone without a word to him.” Primula wrung her hands. A habit that only surfaced when his mother was close to crying, Frodo knew.

“It’ll be okay, Bilbo will be back, dear. He’s a brave hobbit. Strong like his mother, and a good Baggins brain in his head like his da,” Drogo reassured his wife.

Frodo approached with Sam by his side. Hamfast looked between Frodo’s parents and caught the
black-haired faunt’s eyes in a meaningful look. Hamfast touched the spot over his sternum the spot that matched where the key rested on Frodo’s body. He knew he was Bilbo’s appointed heir. Drogo turned, following Hamfast’s line of vision and quieted his wife with a hand on her shoulder. Primula gasped when she caught sight of Frodo. She turned, her skirt flaring, and scooped Frodo up into a tight hug.

“M-mum?” he couldn’t help but stutter. The key that lay on his chest was pressed between them snugly. He wasn’t ready for others to know he had it yet. He was grateful for Hamfast holding his tongue.

“Oh, sweetie. I’m so sorry,” she breathed out, rocking him side to side a little.

“What’s going on?” It was Sam who asked, looking more lost than Frodo. Hamfast sighed and picked up his own little one, settling him on his hip.

Looking at Bag End wearily, Mr. Gamgee chose his words carefully. “Mister Baggins,” he paused, “has left on another adventure.” Frodo felt his mother’s grip on him tighten, as if he would go running down the lane to find his Uncle.

“When will he be coming back, da?”

“I don’t know, Sam.” The gardener shook his head, “He didn’t say.”

Sam started sniffling and when Hamfast brought out a handkerchief for Sam to blow his nose in, that got Frodo started. Bilbo’s own handkerchief was still tucked in his small vest pocket. He cried into his mother’s shoulder because he knew. Knew that Bilbo Baggins would never be returning to the Shire despite his promise. The actions of the hobbits today showed Frodo the true colors of his fellow hobbits and why Bilbo couldn’t stand it here. Clutching his hand over the key under his shirt, his wailing dissolved into hiccups and gasping breaths long after his mother and father carried him home. His mother asked him where his handkerchief was, and the sobs came back. She couldn’t get coherent words out of him, so his father scooped him up and brought Frodo to his room, lying down with him on the small bed.

“I miss him too, Frodo,” Drogo whispered to his son. “Too kind, too loving, and far too noble for the Shire.” He shushed Frodo softly. “To save a kingdom and come back to this. He must have been bored out of his mind. Not to mention nasty Lobelia always being a--erm, not nice person.” Frodo let out a small laugh. Smiling, Drogo pressed a kiss to the top of his son’s black locks. “Never forgave him for turning her down. I bet he’s out there being what he’s always denied himself. Being a respectable hobbit was more or less forced upon Bilbo.”

Frodo looked up to meet his father’s brown eyes, no one had really explained to him about his Uncle’s bachelorhood or lifestyle. “You know his Mum and Da joined our Green Lady early, don’t you?” Frodo nodded. “Well, your Uncle was a very spirited child, a rambunctious tween, and a teen wilder than the summer storm winds, such as no one had seen since Belladonna. At the end of every summer his hair would be a blazing golden blond and his skin nearly copper in color with all the time he spent outside chasing unseeable thing in the forests.”

“What changed?” Frodo asked softly. “Why did he always seemed so…repressed”

“More like depressed if you ask me,” offered his father. Drogo shook his head, his fair-colored Baggins curls bobbing. “Bilbo had barely come of age when he suddenly found himself all alone. I think he hoped if he was respectable enough, he could find someone to help fill the halls of Bag End.”
“Pitter patters in the halls, that’s what he always said.”

“Always what Belladonna said too, least that’s what your Grandmother always told me she said.”
The older hobbit stared at the ceiling, absentmindedly stroking Frodo’s hair.

“Bilbo didn’t find anyone,” Frodo murmured, eyes still glistening.

“Ha, plenty of lasses found him suddenly handsome and worth their attention. I think in the end, respectability backfired on him, and he couldn’t trust anyone with his heart. And,” Drogo stressed, letting out a long breath, “I think that’s what he’s looking for out there. Someone to share his heart with. To be able to walk side by side and go head first into the great big world.” He paused. “Bilbo won’t find that here.”

There was a certain character in his Uncle’s adventure that stood out in Frodo’s mind, remembering blank, longing looks to the far horizon with a small smile tugging at his Uncle’s mouth as he spoke, but Frodo didn’t say anything. He laid there with his father using his arm as a pillow, both sprawled out and staring up at the ceiling, watching the shadows of the day creep across. Slow and steady like the sands of time. When the cooler days of spring faded into summer, so too faded the attempts to break into Bag End.

Frodo liked to think it was because Hamfast always shooed away less than noble intended hobbits away but it could also of been the dwarvish locks upon the windows and doors that deterred them the most. Bungo had ordered them a long time ago, and they couldn’t be picked open. Though Lobelia would still come tutting down the lane, it had become a ritual of sorts. Hamfast would greet her at the gate, barring her from entering, Lobelia would glower and veil an insult in her good mornings, Hamfast would give her a quip back, Lobelia would sneer try to get him to slip up and tell her who Bilbo’s heir was, Hamfast would only smile and say he was grateful it wasn’t her, and she went tromping her way down the lane.

Frodo never did tell Sam about the key.

Frodo wasn’t sure how much Bilbo had told Mr. Gamgee. Though by the way the gardener never questioned the fauntling when on the occasion would run into to each other as Frodo exited out the back door, he knew Frodo had the other key. Thain knew also by the secret smiles he would shoot him at parties. Every time Frodo ran into Hamfast outside of Bag End the older hobbit would respectfully greet the faunt. Frodo would stutter a hello back and ask if Samwise would like to play sometime. The elder acted as if Bilbo was going to return someday, and frankly, Frodo doubted that.

The seasons passed and blended into one another and there was no head or hair, nor word from Bilbo Baggins. It was on an autumn’s eve, and Frodo was busy wiping down the counters, ridding Bag End of dust as he did every now and then, when three large thumps rang out into the empty air of Bag End. It embarrassed Frodo to realize that it took longer than it should of that someone had actually knocked on the door. When it finally dawned on him, he panicked.

Someone, was at the door. Frodo’s heart raced. Who could it possibly be? Had someone seen him come in? All the hobbits in the Shire knew Bilbo was gone—it wasn’t someone from the Shire. The realization hit quick and Frodo panicked. Scuttling along the shadows toward the front door, he tried to find out who it was. Perhaps a dwarf? No, they were all far away. Would they have come for Bilbo? Frodo’s mind raced with questions that would only be answered by one thing—finding out who had come knocking.

“Hello,” he heard the Gaffer’s muffled voice outside, “Can I help you, er, sir?”

“I hope so,” the voice sounded old. “I’m looking for an old friend of mine.” It didn’t seem deep
enough like his Uncle had described to be a dwarf’s. “Bilbo Baggins.”

So he was here looking for his uncle!

“I’m Hamfast Gamgee, his gardener.” Ah, Frodo smiled. Hamfast was always blunt. “Who might you be? And why do you seek him out?” and protective.

“I’m Gandalf.” Frodo couldn’t help but let out a gasp. The Grey Wizard. He clamped his hand over his mouth as he sat below the porthole by the door. This was the wizard who had brought the Company to Bag End.

“Ah, yes, I have heard many things about you Mr. Wizard.” Hamfast smiled, a bit too sweetly for Gandalf’s tastes. He had seen those smiles before, usually on the young and spiteful.

“Call me Gandalf, please. I hope these things you hear are good.”

“They are...unfinished tales I’m afraid. I can’t judge you from that.” Frodo heard the wizard huff a bit. “Bilbo Baggins isn’t home.”

“Where is he?” asked Gandalf, perplexed. Frodo took a chance and peeked out the porthole. The Wizard stood tall. Taller than any man Frodo had seen. Cloaked in billowy, grey robes and a staff in hand, he was everything Frodo had imagined. Except the hat. Uncle forgot to mention the pointy hat. Somehow, it suited the wizard.

“Not in the Shire.” This came as a surprise to Gandalf though he didn’t show it, much.

The Grey Wizard hesitated, as if he feared the answer, “Bree perhaps?”

“Not there either I should think.” Hamfast shook his head.

Sighing, Gandalf tilted his head down to the side, “Did he make it back here at least?”

“Oh yes, he made it back late summer the year after he left.” The wizard seemed to be relieved by this but he must have sensed something was amiss.

“When will he be back?” Gandalf prompted.

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Aren’t you his gardener?”

“That I am, sir.” Frodo snickered to himself quietly in the house.

“Should you not know where your employer is?”

“It’s none of my business what Mr. Baggins does in his own time.”

The wizard was agitated by now, and huffed. “Then pray tell, Mr. Gamgee, do you know anything about Bilbo Baggins?” He shook slightly in frustration. The stubbornness of smaller races, thought Gandalf, would never cease to frustrate him.

“As far as he told me in his letter sir?” Hamfast shrugged regretfully, “On another adventure.” The shock was now very pronounced on the Grey Wizard’s face. “He’s been gone for almost two years now.”

~*~*~
The tip of a quill scratched over off-white pages in assured strokes. Black ink lines slowly converged at an intersection, pooling slightly before thirsty pages sucked the excess down, permanently staining the page in the recollections of a hobbit.

A hobbit, whose hair was now a permanent golden nest of curls, gleaming like fine strings of the spun metal it rivaled in crackling firelight. Sun-kissed copper skin almost seemed to glow on its own. His clothes were well-worn and mended in many spots but they kept him warm and protected from nettles and brambles on his journey—no, he couldn’t call it a journey. Not really, for he, the hobbit, had no destination waiting for him at the end of his travels. Nameless he claimed to be, though whispers had started to follow him on the westly winds that followed him. Smallest Wanderer many knew him by for he was shorter than most sentient beings, or more recently a new name had popped up, Sting.

Bilbo, as he still referred to himself mentally, chuckled to himself as the words forming from his hand reminded him of a silly song he had sung against the spiders. He mused about how stupidly foolish he had been running around chucking stones at spiders. Pausing at the end of the song, he let out a huge yawn, tears welling up reflexively. Wriggling his nose, he blinked away the tears and clasped the red leather book shut. He would continue it another night.

The tale was slowly coming to life in the book, the entire story. At first he had written one with himself severely edited out (which he had done so the in his first red book he had brought with him), but there was a desire in him. Bilbo wanted a complete written account of what happened. Everything from the scandalous and laughable tales the dwarves regaled in around the campfire, to how they liked their tea (if they drank it) when they got the chance to have it, who specialized in what weaponry, the terrain they crossed, all of it. So he bought a bigger red leather journal, this one embossed with gold. In the darkness of night he often contemplated why he was making this more complete version for his own sake. Was it so he would remember years later why he had left the Shire in the first place and who the wonderful dwarves were that showed him the world, taught him, called him brother, and ultimately turned his viewpoint of the world around? He certainly didn’t feel the desire for the world to know his role in the quest. No one wanted to read about a hobbit. Thinking of hobbits, Bilbo thought. Frodo. He had promised the faunt he would finish telling the boy his tale. Perhaps once the Big Red Book was finished he would send it off as a birthday present. He felt awful because despite his promise to little Frodo, Bilbo had no intention of returning to the Shire any time soon. He hadn’t even written a letter to him. That, Bilbo concluded, wasn’t fair. With a sharp nod Bilbo finished his decision. When the book was finished, it would become Frodo’s, like everything else Bilbo had left behind.

Idly, he rubbed his wrist. *Home is behind, the world ahead,* was scripted with ink on the inside of his right wrist in Tengwar.

Home was something Bilbo didn’t have any more. Bag End had been his parent’s home but since they parted from the green world, it never really had been home. Even though he had thought it was home when had upped and left it all behind dashing out his door. It had taken some time but the Company had accepted him, and they had been the family he never had. Though they traveled under pressing circumstances and the stars were their roof more often than not, he had felt at home. Home, they dwarves thought, was Erebor and they had won it back.

Shaking his head, Bilbo sighed heavily. It had come at too high a price. War, death, blood, those are the only promises that came with the hoard of gold they claimed when Smaug was well and truly dead. Buried within it all had been that blasted stone. The Arkenstone, heart of all greed. The true heart, Bilbo supposed, of a dwarf. It still stung to think upon that day. He risked everything he had made and built up with the Company, and Fate, she took it all. All the trust, the care, and friendship
toward one another, carefully built up over their shared perils and strife was gone within a day.

Without them, there was nothing for Bilbo. In fact, that was when he was sure Bilbo had died. The moment Thorin turned him aside, without so much as a backward glance, no defense for the hobbit rising up. It shattered the hobbit Bilbo Baggins into thousands of pieces. He was gone for good after the Battle of Five Armies began, for even when he had survived the battle, there was no forgiveness to be had. Fili had tried to reason with him, but the damage was already done. No family, no home. In exile all he would have to return to was a smial filled with trinkets, clothes, and maps. Nothing was there that could reciprocate his emotions, nothing to talk to, to eat with, to be merry with.

That was probably the very reason he leapt into the fray so fiercely, hacking at orc ankles and warg eyes.

Shuddering, Bilbo shook his head a bit; he didn’t need any nightmares. He slept light enough as it was. Switching wrists, he smiled at the runes on his other wrist. *Not all who wander are lost*, in Kuzdul, which Balin had been kindly teaching him along the way. He may have lost something very dear but he wasn’t lost. The Smallest Wanderer, he went wherever he pleased at the pace he set. Already in the past two years he had crossed the Misty Mountains three times. Two by himself and the third and most recent was as a guide to a dwarven caravan heading East to Erebor. There was a lot of talk on the roads and in the inns about the reclaimed dwarven kingdom. Many were traversing there just to see it.

One such man Bilbo had met on the road. He saved him from a rockslide, and the man wanted to thank him but had no money or object Bilbo desired. Bilbo restocked his own gold supply from the troll hoard the Company had found. When Bilbo asked the man where he had gotten his tattoos, the man just grinned and said he did them himself. They were quite vibrant and covered most of the man’s skin. He asked the man, Vernix he learned, if he would be willing to tattoo something on him; the man happily obliged. The dwarvish runes came out a deep blue while the elvish were a dark, forest green. They both looked black from afar but Bilbo was content.

Yawning once more, Bilbo drew out his sleeping roll and settled in front of the dying fire. Thankfully, a rock wall was at his back, leaving him with one less direction to worry about predators coming from. Reaching into his pack, he pulled out the oversized dwarven coat and laid it over his sleeping roll as an extra layer. Winter was coming soon. Perhaps he’d find a city to stay in this winter. His next destination would be a good choice, his mouth twitched into a smiled. He was only a week away from one of the greatest human Kingdoms in Middle-Earth, Rohan.

Chapter End Notes

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I GOT TO UPDATE. Sorry for my over enthusiasm, I'm not all present at the moment, but I do hope you enjoyed the newest chapter!
Kings To Be

Chapter Notes

Updating this is the only good thing about today. I was hoping to update this before I went on vacation but that didn’t happen and today...has been one disappointment after another. So yay for mobile phone updates!

Forewarning now– I may have changed Rohan’s look a lot (just roll with me here) and totally blew apart the canon timeline! New characters have arrived!! >:D Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ancient tomes and scrolls piled from floor to ceiling, covering every nook and cranny of the mile high bookshelves. Spiral staircases led up to a second floor balcony level that ran in a circular loop. Stained glass panels depicting the slow rising history of Rohan were between every other bookcase, casting the first floor into a kaleidoscope of colors in the morning sunlight. Bilbo made it into town early last night and had slept in a bed for the first time in months at a local inn. It had brought a certain peace to him being under a roof and surrounded by four walls. Looking at the library brought a deep settling peace within his soul and mind.

Bilbo sagged to the side, leaning all his weight on to a stone pillar as he took in the serenity and quiet amongst all the written texts before him.

Bilbo sighed dreamily. “Oh, this is marvelous. So much history, so many stories,” he mumbled to himself. “I could read away my life.” A soft chuckle alerted him to someone behind him. Bilbo blinked from his trance and turned to see an old scribe fondly gazing at the books.

“I’ve been doing that ever since I could pick up a book.” He gave a wistful sigh. “Best choice I ever made.” He turned his merry smile toward Bilbo. “I haven’t seen someone look that enamoured with books since– well, myself!” He chuckled. “Are you a collector?”

Bilbo found himself returning the smile easily. “I used to be, of a sorts. I had a wonderful collection of books. A lot of Elvish and Epics, poetry, gardening, even a few Dwarven books.”

“My my, I hope our collection meets your standards, Master--?”

“Oh, just call me Sting. I’m not a Master of anything anymore.” He gestured to the books. “This is by far more impressive than my old collection.”

“Sting.” The old man just gave a nod, not questioning the name further. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Sting. I’m Nathanial, one of the librarians and scholars here.” They exchanged a polite handshake. “Might I ask what became of your collection?”

“I gave it away to my nephew. I found after one adventure they weren’t as exciting as the real thing, but–” He adjusted the lapels of his jackets, rocking forward on his feet with a smile, a happy tick he hadn’t outgrown. “I haven’t lost my appreciation for good literature.”

“Well, then,” the older man exclaimed joyously, “by all means browse to your heart’s content. We rarely get any younger folk around here. I know,” he held up his hand to prevent Bilbo’s correction,
“that you’re a hobbit, but I assume you are younger than I. Least you look younger anyways. “ He chuckled, to which Bilbo smiled more at.

Bilbo’s shoulders slumped in relief. “I’m glad you recognize what I am. People have been giving me weird stares all day. Probably thinking I’m some barefooted youngin lost on my way.”

“Not every day a hobbit wanders this far east. In fact, I’ve never seen a hobbit east of the Misty Mountains.”

“Well, like I said,” he bounced on the balls of his feet once more, ”I got a taste for the world once and it stuck with me. And now,” he said, looking at the books. “I think I’ll enjoy getting lost in the books.”

“It’s a wonderful place to get lost in.” Nathanial waved him on into the books eagerly. “Come join me for tea and tell me what you find in those rows. There’s no telling what you’ll find stacked up behind a pile of scrolls or in the back of a musty book.” With a final word telling him he could leave his pack at the front desk if he wished, the elder hobbled off toward the back, but not before Bilbo happily agreed to have lunch with him. After tossing his sack behind the front desk, Bilbo almost skipped down the long aisles of books his joy was so overwhelming. He spent the morning simply browsing the aisles and climbing ladders to look at books, scribbling down a list in his blue book to potentially read later (which was growing delightedly long). He hadn’t even covered an eighth of the library’s first floor when the noon bell tolled outside, signaling lunch for Bilbo.

Lunch was filled with a variety of finger sandwiches, fruits, salad, and tea. He was introduced to the head scribe managing the library and was offered a small room in the apprentice wing for however long he wished to stay. All the librarians were besotted with the knowledgeable hobbit and tried to catch him in conversation. What time wasn’t spent eating was filled by talking with the small group of scholars, scribes, and young apprentices. Meanwhile, Bilbo was watching a small figure out of the corner of his eye dart around the room. It was trying to hide from his detection but it would take great deal of stealth to hide from a hobbit.

So it wasn’t a surprise when the small figure started following him after lunch. He pretended not to notice, wondering if it was one of the scribes’ many children mentioned. He had gone through the shelves of an entire aisle that spanned the long width of the library and his shadow hadn’t left him. It was impressive for a child. Not many could idly stand by in the shadows for long before they either got bored or caught.

The child, Bilbo was sure it was a child by now, had crept closer. The large bookshelves were broken up into small bunches along the row, allowing people to easily switch aisles if need be.

Poised near the top of the rolling library ladder in the middle of a bunch of bookcases, sitting on one of the steps, nose in a book he called out. “I know you’re there.” He didn’t say anything else. It was always a waiting game with children. Being the Uncle of many young faunts and spending nearly a year with dwarves had improved his patience nearly tenfold, but it seemed he wouldn’t need all of that.

“How long have you known I’ve been there?” Less than a minute. Bilbo smiled.

“Since lunch,” he said neutrally, not looking away from his book yet.

“Drat.” The pout could be felt in the young child’s voice. “Since the beginning.”

“It’s hard to sneak up on a hobbit, you know,” he finally looked up from his book and down to the ground where he saw a human child, “unless you’re another hobbit.”
The boy was taller than Bilbo. In fact Bilbo was sure the wavy blonde haired boy was at least a half a foot taller than him. His eyes resembled a clear summer day sky. Tilting his head the boy asked, “What’s a-a– O’bbit?”

“Hobbit,” Bilbo corrected with a grin. “We are a race of peaceful creatures, about half the size of a full grown human, we like our food, home, and everything comfortable. Oh--not to forget our gardens and parties.” He finished of with a flourished wave of his hand. The child looked at him in awe. Being around more humans the past two years he estimated the boy was about 8 years old.

“I’ve never met a ho-hobbit before” the child said, stuttering over the new word. “Where are you from, Mister Hobbit?”

“Well now,” the hobbit slid down the ladder, big feet thumping the floor on impact. “It’s quite rude to ask a stranger where he’s from before at least exchanging names.” Placing his hands on his hips, he looked up with his perfected ‘you should know better than that’ stare.

The child blushed but he did not shy away or shuffle his feet like most children did. Instead he looked down, from what little distance from his height to Bilbo’s smiled and brightly said, “I’m Théoden.”

~*~*~*~

It always began like this.

“Sting?” His name spoken as a question.

“Yes, Theo?” was the automatic reply, not looking up from page nor cup of tea.

“I have a question.” And the game for the day had begun.

Théoden was a near constant presence at Bilbo’s side when the lad was in the library. Which was most afternoons. He always had a new question, an insatiable curiosity for anything and everything. When Bilbo couldn’t answer the question himself, they would set off arm in arm down the towering rows of literature in pursuit of knowledge. Théoden was an intelligent young boy, brave too. He would not hesitate to climb the bookshelves and get whatever book or scroll the hobbit couldn’t reach. Peering over Bilbo’s shoulder as the hobbit read he was eager to listen and learn.

It turned out however, that Théoden already had a teacher. Who had been missing him most afternoons. Not that Bilbo knew, not until the day a resounding “Master Théoden!” broke the library’s silence.

Head snapping up, the blonde boy paled. Bilbo’s brow furrowed as he leaned over to peer down the aisle to the person stalking toward them. It was a librarian scholar according to her robes. They billowed quite dramatically behind her if Bilbo was truthful, but it added to her look of anger. The look pinned on the child beside him who was inching off his chair about to flee.

“Ah, ah, ah young man.” Bilbo caught Théoden by the scruff of his clothes. “What did you do?”

“Nothing!” squeaked Théoden.

“Then why are you attempting to avoid that scholar?” He raised a single eyebrow when no response came. “Don’t lie to me, Théoden.” The child slightly flinched at his full name. “It’s not polite.”

“W-well, you see--”
“Master Théoden!” came the old woman’s call again. She swiftly narrowed in on them and stopped right before them, ending her trip with a huff. “I am growing quite exhausted with you missing your afternoon studies.”

“Theo!” scolded Bilbo. “You told me you just had lessons in the morning!”

“Well,” the child was obviously trying to look at him directly, but too ashamed to meet his eyes, “I have fighting lessons in the morning.” He shifted a bit on his feet, shoulders hunched over his frame.

“And you are supposed to have scholarly studies in the afternoons, Master Théoden,” scolded the teacher. “I know you don’t like reading—”

“I like reading!” Théoden looked up. “I really do! But the books you make me read in that stuffy corner of the library are too boring. You don’t explain anything to me. It’s just read this, test on that! Read some more. It’s not even useful stuff!”

“It’s your country’s history, it’s not supposed to be fun,” sighed the scholar, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Sting makes it fun! He answers all my questions, always has new, interesting passages for me to read every day. If he doesn’t know something we go on an adventure to find it!” He threw his arms out wide.

“Ahh, yes, Master Sting.” She switched her gaze to the hobbit. “I’m Esmerelda, Théoden’s teacher.”

“Mister Sting is fine. It’s nice to meet Théoden’s teacher.” Bilbo smiled, extending his hand. “He’s a very bright boy, you’ve done well teaching him.” Esmerelda smiled. Her smile grew more when Bilbo bent down slightly and kissed the back of her hand. Neither adult saw the gobsmacked look upon the child’s face beside them. “He’s told me all about Rohan, I can only guess that was your handiwork?”

She nodded proudly, “Yes, it takes some time but eventually the knowledge gets through to him. On the afternoons he is with me, he’s told me a lot of things about you. You are quite the teacher yourself, Mister Sting.”

It was Bilbo’s turn to smile proudly. “He’s just an active learner, that’s all.”

“Well then, perhaps it would be best if he stays under your wing while you are here. He seems to learn much more quickly by your side than he does being forced to sit in front of old tomes.”

“A-are you sure? I wouldn’t want to impose on your job.”

“Yes, it’s quite alright Mister Hobbit. Perhaps Théodwyn will stop putting honey in my shoes and hair.” She gives Théoden a hard side-glance when the boy giggles.

Leaning over toward Bilbo Théoden whispers, “I’ll have to introduce you soon. She helps me get out of my lessons.”

“I heard that, Master Théoden, and it comes as no surprise. You two are as thick as thieves whenever you get together.” The child just beamed while the scholar rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “Oh, before I go. Here’s a letter from Gondor. It arrived yesterday.”

“Denethor!!” In a flash the blonde child snatched the letter away with many hasty thank yous. Holding the letter up to Bilbo to see he nearly shouted, “Denethor is my best friend in Gondor! His da is the Steward. He’d like you a lot if you met him!” He continued to babble on.
Bilbo and Esmerelda shared a smile. There was nothing like friendship that could excite children so.

“Sting,” the lad tugged on Bilbo’s waistcoat, vying for his attention once more, “Can you help me write a reply? Please?” he added on. “I’m not so good with my spelling.”

Chuckling, Bilbo ruffled Théoden’s blonde locks. “Of course. I’d be happy to.”

“Woo hoo!” He jumped up and down clutching the letter to his heart.

Bilbo’s smile froze, looking at the letter in Théoden’s hands. He realized he hadn’t penned Frodo a single letter in these last two years. Two years…yes, time had flown by so fast. He was already a good chunk into his third year on the road. What could he possibly say to Frodo about that?

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With a final press of metal into the dark blue wax the letter was sealed and finished. It was a rather thick envelope but Théoden had insisted on telling Denethor all about his new friend Sting and the hobbit culture he learned about. Bilbo was embarrassed and flattered by how much Théoden respected and looked up to him.

It was a surprise still when Théoden started asking about girls. “How did you get Madam Esmerelda to smile?”

Bilbo paused from straightening up the paper strewn all over the desk, sending a small prayer to the Green Lady that this wasn’t going to go down a road he didn’t want to talk to a child about. “What do you mean?”

“She hardly ever smiles. She smiled at you twice, that’s—” The kid looked a little more than bewildered. “Esmerelda isn’t mean she’s just…” Théoden struggled to find the right word.

“Serious?”

“Yeah!” exclaimed Théoden, kicking his dangling feet back and forth. “That. Her husband is the only one who can make her smile. He does the hand kiss thingy too.”

“It’s called being a gentlehobbit,” Bilbo adjusted his suspender straps, “or in your kind’s case a gentleman.”

“Oh, that’s what Mum says Dad is. A Gentleman. Usually after he does stuff like bring her flowers, kisses her hand, says mushy stuff, or holds doors for her. She really likes it when they dance.”

Bilbo nods, “In the Shire we’re taught from a young age about being polite and courteous to others. You’d be surprised how easy it is to win over someone’s good graces by just kissing a hand or offering them tea.”

“Tea, huh?” Pursing his lips Théoden stared at a small ink smudge on the table obviously deep in thought.

Oh dear, thought Bilbo, there’s someone he likes. He just knew it. Unsure of whether or not he should inquire what was on Theo’s mind, he finishes tidying up the desk. They had gone through a lot of rough drafts because Theo had wanted the letter as neat and correct as could be.

“Do girls like tea?”

Drat.
“Depends on the girl really.” Bilbo shrugged. “My Aunt Penelope hates it.” When the blonde didn’t say anything back Bilbo sighed and plunked down on the chair by Théoden. “Okay, spill. Who is it? Théodwyn?”

“Ew, no! That’s my littlest sister!”

Holding his hands up, Bilbo resigns. “My fault assuming that. Your names are too similar.” Théoden stuck out his tongue to Bilbo.

“I like Elfhild. She’s our friend and helped me escape my afternoon studies,” Theo blushed a little at Bilbo’s small head shake, “but that’s not all of it! Elfhild isn’t afraid to come and spar with me. She’s a really good swordswoman, well–she will be. We both have a lot to learn but she beats me more often than I beat her.” Théoden’s smile grew wider. His voice dropped and he leaned in close to Bilbo who leant in when beckoned. “Don’t tell anyone I said this, but I hope she’ll agree to marry me one day.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” Bilbo held out his pinky and winked. Théoden smiled and interlocked his own pinky with the hobbit’s. “We use flowers in the Shire to convey our feelings to those we cherish. I can teach you how make flower crowns too if you’d like.”

“Really?! Would you please?”

“Of course, but promise me when the time comes you’ll court her properly.” He said with the seriousness of a gentlehobbit. Théoden nodded, equally as grave. After a brief moment of staring intently they both broke out into smiles and laughter.

“Hey, Sting, do you want to go visit the markets and drop off my letter to the post office?”

“It’s nearly suppertime. I was gonna sit down for a cuppa too before writing some more tonight.” He was nearly finished with his large collective tale of his first grand adventure. If he could just sit down for maybe a day, he would have it done.

“You’re always in the library,” pointed out Théoden. “Won’t you come out to the post office with me, please?” Bilbo blushed when he realized he had not indeed left the library since he came in early winter. So caught up in the realm of paper he hadn’t considered going outside yet. Winter’s trace was being lifted and bunches of flowers and greenery was coming alive.

“You are,” Bilbo started shutting his book, “absolutely right. I am always in here.” He looked up. “Why don’t we go for an evening stroll while we’re at it. Perhaps you can show me around town a bit? I’m afraid I haven’t actually gotten a chance to look around.”

Giggling, Theo nodded, “You’re just like Denethor. You have to be reminded to get out and enjoy things.” Picking up the letter with one hand and linking his opposite arm with Bilbo, they set off.

Huffing indignantly, Bilbo scowled a little, “I know how to have a good time. Normally I don’t have reasons to go out.”

“I can’t show you much tonight, but maybe we can go for a ride on the horses tomorrow! I have my own. He’s called Snowmane. Even though he’s called that, he couldn’t leave the stables very much this winter because of all the snow. He’s still a pony but he can hold us both. Have you ridden a horse before?”

"Of course I have. I've only ridden a pony for a few years, but trekking half way across Middle Earth tends to make you a fast learner." He sighed despondently. "I never did learn what the fates of our ponies were."
"Our? Did you travel with someone?" Théoden's eyes grew wide and bright. Bilbo chuckled and when he opened his mouth another question was fired off. "How far have you've been?! Were they Hobbits too?!"

That got Bilbo double over in laughter. It was a good 5 minutes before Bilbo could look at the confused Théoden without laughing. "I-i'm sorry Theo. I-it's just," he giggles, "Hobbits never leave the Shire. They're too content with their cozy simals, seven meals a day, flower beds, and gardens. It's the perfect haven for a Hobbit."

Théoden tilted his head, "Why aren't you there then?"

"I would be, if hadn't been for the will of a wizard and thirteen of the rowdiest and loyalest dwarves. I'd still be there, sitting outside Bag End, my old home, smoking a pipe of Old Toby doing nothing extrodinary. Just being," he shrugged, "respectable. " After looking up Bilbo noticed that a lot of people were staring at the small duo. They were making good pace through the evening rush of buyers because they were parting for them. Odd, thought Bilbo.

"Is respectability bad? Isn't that what part of being a gentlemen is?"

Turning his attention back to the blonde Bilbo sighed. "Being respectable is perfectly fine. Don't misunderstand me. A hobbit's standard of respectablity isn't my cup of tea, oh no. It never will be again." The hobbit's hair flew out with the sharp shake of his head. "But you don't have to be respectable to be a gentlmen. People can always despise you and demean your credibility as a person but that doesn't mean you can't be polite and civil." Théoden nodded in understanding. "Words are very tricky things. Never believe everything someone says and never judge someone from the word of mouth of another." The child nodded again.

"Can you tell me about your journeys? I know you mentioned the Shire to me but- where is it?"

Grinning Bilbo said, "You sound very much like my nephew, Frodo, back in the Shire. He could give you a good run for your money in the number of questions he asked me everyday."

Théoden gave a small giggle. He knew Bilbo didn't mind all the questions. "He's back in the Shire then? With the rest of your people."

"Yes, he's back in the Shire. It's a place far to the west past the Misty Mountains. Past the Last Homely House in Rivendell, tucked away between rivers and forests, it's unlike any other part of the world. For the Shire," Bilbo's hazel eyes twinkled, "thrives on peace."

Jingling, the door to the post office swung open with ease. A voice from the back called greetings to them and they'd be out in a moment.

Théoden watched Bilbo's eyes wander the shelves in wonderment, for they were stocked with a variety of paper stock, journals, inks, quills, and pens. It wasn't a big secret Sting loved books. Be it blank or filled with script even he can't read, he cherishes them. He once asked Sting why he loved blank books. The hobbit had pulled out a large red leather book along with a smaller blue one. He handed over the blue one and Théoden. Opening it up had revealed pages filled with neat handwriting by detailed drawings of various scenery, plants, and animals.

Books are gateways to different worlds, Sting had explained. They're always there when your feeling down and the blank pages of a journal are just waiting to hear what you have to say. Théoden always carried a small green notebook with him now.

"Théoden!" the child jumped.
“Y-yes?” he turned to see an exasperated hobbit looking at him.

“I’ve been calling you for the past few minutes. What do you think of these notebooks?” Bilbo held up several different colors.

“They–”

“Prince Théoden!?” the voice that had greeted them sounded close. Sure enough a spy middle aged man popped through the door behind the wooden counter. “O-ooh, my apologies my Prince. What can i do you for?”

“Prince?” muttered Bilbo.

“It’s okay Ricky. I have a letter bound for Gondor!”

“Dethanor?”

“Uh-huh!” he handed the letter over and the man took it with a small bow. “Thank you! Oh, this is my friend Sting. He’s King of the Shire!”

Both older men sputtered.

“It’s a pleasure to meet your aquaintence King Sting.” Théoden giggled and mutter how that rhymed. “I hope Rohan has been a wonderful place for you to visit!” Bilbo couldn't get a word in as the man held up the letter, “Excuse me, I must go place this with the others before they pack the crate for Gondor away tonight. I’ll be back to help you with your purchase momentarily.” and Rocky dissapeared beyond the door.

Turning back to his friend Théoden found a very confused and red face hobbit.

"Sting? What's wrong?"

"You called me," Bilbo took a deep breathe, "the King of the Shire. Why?" He wasn't noble, or carried himself like a King. Not even an heir of royal lineage. The Royal Durin line and the Elven Lord and King had been commanding in their own way and walked tall, chins up. Even Bard, the reminence of an old Kingdom line had acted more regal and commanding than he.

"Aren't you the King of the Shire?" The young Prince asked innocently. His look told Bilbo he truely thought he was the King.

Bilbo spluttered. "W-where on earth did you get that idea Theo!?"

“Well,” he started, "why is your name Sting then? Your parents couldn't really named you that. So it has to be an alias, but why would you need to hide? Unless you were someone important.” When Bilbo was still trying to process what was happening, Théoden charged on. "You've referred the Hobbits as your people before. You carry a sword at your hip and it's really fancy. Kinda like the one my da has." The King, Bilbo's mind supplied. "You're a gentlehobbit and know all about being proper-"

"No," he cut off Prince Théoden(Bilbo wondered how much Royalty he meet in his lifetime). "I'm-" he giggled out of nerves, "I'm just a wayward hobbit out to see the world." He shook his head when Theo made to protest. "It's true," he took a deep calming breathe. "Sting isn't my real name, but I am not the Hobbit I once was Théoden. I took one running leap out my round green door into the world I always dreamed about and I haven't looked back. W-we hobbits don't even have Kings or Queens or nobles and knights." He trailed off. Goodness, Bilbo hadn't felt this flustered since he was first
asked to ride a pony. Théoden looked down at him in surprise. "They are, my people." The hobbit started again his voice steadier than he felt. "Not in the sense these people of Rohan are to you, but no matter how far I run away from them. They will always be my people but as distant kin and kith."

"Oh, well I think your noble!" the Prince exclaimed with a smile, not at all mortified he had made a rather large error. "I could just put a crown on your head and people would believe you were a King!" He smiled so earnestly Bilbo had to smile back. "I also think, I understand," Théoden said slowly, "Those thirteen dwarves and the wizard you traveled with. They gave you the world."

"They were our world." Bilbo croaked. He would not cry, he swore he wouldn't, not ever again. On the return trip home he had huddled around a small fire, crying in despair over the friendships lost. All the hope he had gained that finally he had found his place in the world. That maybe he would have a happy home, there in or even by the Lonely Mountain with 13 dwarves to be merry with. A best friend, Thorin, to confide into and be the King's pillar when the majestic dwarf felt too embarrassed to turn to his kin. His entire world, shattered apart by a pile of useless cold metals and rocks. The only comfort he had was the much too large dwarvish coat gifted to him, but even that had reeked of dried blood and guts of battle until he had beaten it against a rock and scrubbed at it until his own hands were pink from the suds. He vowed to be done with crying. After all, why cry for something that doesn't cry for you.

"Something happened." This was confirmed when Bilbo didn't object. "Did they hurt you?!!" Bilbo let out a shaky laugh clenching his hands by his side, tears threatening to fall. They had hurt him, but he knew it was the consequence he had to live with.

"Why don't I start from the beginning? You know that red book I showed you?"

"The big red leather one you write in always and tell me to keep my sticky paws off of?"

"Yes," an emotionally worn hobbit confirms, "that one. There is a story. I would like to tell you."

~*~*~*~

It took the rest of the evening, all night (in which Théoden slept over after much begging to his mother), and unto the evening hours of the next day to tell his tale to the young Prince. They were spending the night this time in Théoden’s room. The moments before springing the hobbit onto his parents. Any awkwardness that Bilbo had went away when the Queen swept him up into a hug and started talking like they were old friend. It had been easy to tell where Théoden got his active mind from. King Thengal was a merry soul as well and soon they were trading tidbits about farming sales. Bilbo still scolded the smug Théoden about his little stunt. The Princling had just laughed and tugged him along toward his room. The littlest Prince’s room was giant (by hobbit standards), for Théoden was expected to grow into it.

"Well, King Thorin is a fool for letting the gold get to him!" Théoden proclaimed loudly once Bilbo had finished his recollection. Leaving the super bloody and depressing bits out of course, no child should be subjected to the monsters of the mind.

"Now Theo," Bilbo shifted on the plush pillows to face the boy, "What did I tell you about judging others by words from another?"

"But you told me the truth, right?"

"Yes, but you only heard my side of the story, and that's not fair to Thorin. The goldlust has been running in his family for generations. It was bound to happen."
"How can you keep defending him?!" Theo nearly shouted. He was angry for what the dwarves had done to his friend. How could they have just thrown him away like that and forget the times they had shared around the campfire. Why were adults always so complicated?

Bilbo sighed, "Because he was my best friend and I love him. I loved him so much I was willing to let him hate me, curse at me, even kill me, if it meant his safety."

Théoden had nothing to say, and Bilbo was sure it would take the young boy longer to understand why he loved someone in the face of hatred and death. Soon the child fell asleep to the lull of his own thoughts, snuggled up next to the hobbit for the second night in a row. However, right before the child dropped off completely he whispered, “I promise to never to do that to you or anyone else weather I’m King or not.”

Bilbo just smiled and stroked Théoden’s hair till the boy, who had become like a nephew to him, slip into dreamland.

As Bilbo lay in bed, sore from the day’s horseback ride, contemplating his first adventure, his mind eventually turns to the point the dwarves accepted him and how he wouldn’t of survived the trip to Erebor without a tiny trinket he had forgotten was tucked in his pocket.

Bringing the plain gold band out he watched it catch the light of the moon glinting off of it. It was a cold glint and it made Bilbo shudder for an unknown reason. He shook his body from his head to his toes to get rid of a creeping sensation that seemed to accompany the ring.

He went back to staring up at his bedroom ceiling, mindlessly playing with the ring in his hands. A sudden spark of curiosity flared up.

Did the library have any books on magical rings?

Chapter End Notes

*CACKLE * I thought long and hard about the ring’s involvement and I decided “WHY THE HELL NOT? I’m not gonna leave any loose threads out there.”

This chapter is dedicated to MoonRose91 and her love for Rohan and horses :) and for inspiring me not to leave loose threads lying around. //HIGHLY AND SHAMLESSLY RECCOMENDS HER WORK//

Sooo, Bilbo is lovable and people can’t resist the charm of Hobbits so that’s why the librarians took a quick liking to him.

Pfft, okay so no dwarves. I keep saying soon and I swear I keep meaning to uphold that promise but they keep getting pushed back because ideas come up and I really really wanted to add them in, but this chapter was getting really long anyways and it made more sense to end here D: (*wispers pathetically from my hiding spot* Dwarves will be here in 2 chapters.)

Does the ending also seem....a bit rushed?
“Wow.” Blue eyes were blown wide in awe as they scanned the scene before them. “You’re invisible!” Théoden laughed. “I can’t see you at all, not even an outline!”

“Yes, but if you pay attention,” Bilbo’s voice came from the seemingly empty space in front of Théoden, “you can see my shadow still. Look at the bookshelves.”

Indeed there was a solid shadow waving at him on the bookcase, the morning sunlight pouring through the windows.

“Come toward my voice.”

Tentatively, Théoden walked toward the area the voice sounded from. He took baby steps with his arms out in front of him.

“That’s it, a few more steps--there.” Théoden felt Sting’s hands grasp his.

“You’re really there!” laughed the Prince. He patted up Bilbo’s arms and face till he reached his mentor’s hair.

“Of course I’m here, silly boy, I’m merely invisible not a spirit.”

“You could pretend to be one you know, scare a couple of the scribes.”

“No,” Bilbo scolded. “That’s not very kind.” He was still grinning ear to ear at the idea though. Thank goodness for his invisibility. “Now let go of my hair. You’re messing it up.”

“Well, I can’t tell if it’s messed up. I can’t see you!” Before Bilbo could pull away, Théoden mussed up Bilbo’s hair. He laughed more when the Hobbit took off his ring, giving the boy glare, though its potency was reduced by the copper curls sticking up every which way.

“Are you going to help me or not?” grumbled Bilbo, trying to set his hair back in place.

“Of course! Let’s start with the ‘R’s’!”

There was nought to be found in that section. Nothing under rings or jewelry. They tried artifacts and invisibility. It wasn’t until Nathaniel came to see what they were doing that they got some headway on their search. It turns out the elder man knew a book in the journals section that held an account of a ring with magic to make the user invisible. The journal given to them was handed over with words of warning. It was an ancient book and Nathaniel didn’t want it to be roughly handled. They thanked him and headed back to their little nook of research they had building up.
Théoden scanned the pages carefully while Bilbo went to look under the magic section. Bilbo had a few good leads only a quarter of the way though the section when the Princeling came to him.

“Sting, I think I found something,” he said holding up the book.

Bilbo looked up from the book in his hand and down to the floor from his perch on top of the bookshelf. Théoden face was flushed and he was out of breath. He must have run from their nook all the way here. “Read it to me.”

“It states ‘The ring which makes it’s bearer invisible can only be from the works of Orodruin. I fear a shadow is slowly creeping across the land, following it. So slowly those living in Arda will soon not see the nightmare creep across the land, and surely, the darkness will consume us all.’ It’s sounds like your ring, the invisible part anyways, but I have no idea what this darkness is about. How can a ring cause such a ruckus?”

Bilbo shook his head. “There are a lot of prophecies of the future and what is to come. I find it hard to believe in such things but then again, magic has always eluded my comprehension. Barmy wizards,” he muttered the last bit under his breath. Gesturing to the book he asked, “Who’s the writer?”

“It doesn’t say, these are all really old though and the bindings are coming off.” He lifted the cloth covered book up; the only reason it wasn’t falling off the very crinkled and curled pages was because Théoden was holding it as gentle as one would hold a kitten. “It’s the only lead we have so far. A work of--” he checked the book, “Orodruin.”

“Hm, Orodruin? Orodruin....” Tapping his lip, Bilbo’s face scrunched up in concentration, “Now I have heard that name. Where have I heard that?”

“What’s Orodruin?”

“It’s Sindarin for...” he trailed off, eyes locking onto the northeast corner of the library, “fiery mountain.” Teeth clacked together when his jaw snapped shut. “Come on, Theo, let’s go look at the map.”

He slid down the ladder with a practiced ease and immediately set off.

“The map?” Théoden echoed.

"Yes, my dear boy," They swiftly maneuvered through the pillars of knowledge weaving their way back to the geographical section of the library. "Orodruin is a place my grandfather, the Old Took told me about once." He muttered to himself, “If only I could remember what he said.”

Théoden nearly had to jog to keep up with his mentor's fast walk. "Old Took?"

"Yes, that's what they called him. He was the longest living Hobbit. He died when he was 130."

"Wow, that is old, but what's a Took?"

Bilbo quirked a smile. "A Took is many things: mischievous, wild, adventurous. They're one of the biggest and most respected clans in the Shire next to the Bagginses. The Bagginses are more...proper in Hobbity ways. I could spend an entire Age telling you about clan dynamics and the who’s and what’s of hobbits but it’s all--" He waved his hands in the air unable to articulate the confusing mess of Hobbit culture.

"Are you a Took or a Baggins?"
Bilbo laughed heartily, "I'm both actually. My father was a Baggins and my mother was a Took."

"So your Grandfather Old Took is your mum's dad."

"Correct, my parent’s marriage was a surprise for all. My father built her a smial. The largest in Hobbiton. He'd loved her for quite some time even when she went out on adventures. I don’t know how but he knew she'd always come back."

Théoden smiled. "So he built her a home to come back to?"

Bilbo nodded as they neared the geographical section. "Yes, he told my mother, Belladonna, even if she didn't want to marry him the house was hers. She figured if Bungo, my father, was willing to wait for her, she could stay for him." Théoden gave Bilbo a smile as they rounded the last corner to the back of the library. In the very back going from floor to the ceiling of the balcony of the 2nd floor was a map of Middle Earth. It had been painstakingly painted on the wall and constantly revised as boundaries, towns, and names changed.

"Oh, oh, oh," Théoden jumped up and down, "where's the Shire, Sting?"

"Over here, far west over the Misty Mountains. Right," his finger tapped the green 'S' using the aid of small step stool,"Here," he slid his finger up to a little dot, “and this is Hobbiton. Where I grew up.”

"Wow, how far away is that?"

"About three," Bilbo drew out, "and a half months by foot. Perhaps two and half by pony."

"There's Erebor!" One of Théoden's short fingers pointed up, trying to reach it as the boy stood on his tiptoes. "How far is that?"

"From the Shire?" The Princeling nodded. "About 5 months or so. It took us 6 because we were held up in Mirkwood for almost a month." Bilbo drew his index finger along an invisible path from the Shire toward the East. "We ran across the fields into Rivendell."

"With Radagast's help!" Théoden exclaimed. "And the Rhosgobel Rabbits!" The smile on Bilbo's face faltered a bit, for a brief moment he was painfully reminded of Frodo.

Straining a smile Bilbo continued on. "And after Rivendell," his pointer finger went up and down through the Misty Mountains, "we escaped Stone Giants, battled goblins, and orcs. Then," he smiled more genuinely, "thankfully the Eagles Gandalf called flew us way up here," he tapped a single point after hopping onto a stool. "The Carrock where Beorn was kind enough to take us in."

Standing back to see the invisible trek Bilbo took better the child spoke up, "Then Mirkwood, where nothing good grew and spiders lurked."

"Attercrop attercop," Bilbo muttered to himself. Louder, "And on to Laketown via barrels." He traced the bright river blue remember its icy spray. "And there on to Erebor." He made a quick jolt from the city of men to the Lonely Mountain. Faintly visible under the latest coat of paint was the outline of a Dragon hovering above the peak.

"Where, there now rules a King." Bilbo tried to keep his head up, he had won, done what he set out to accomplish and kept them all safe, but the void in his chest caused him to lower his head, curling in on himself a bit. "Thorin--" With his head lowered, it was only then he spotted it. "Orodruin."

"Don't you mean Oakenshield?" Théoden questioned, eyes still trained on the dark blue lines of the
Dwarven Kingdom.

"No, Theo, it's right here." Bilbo grew excited. "Orodruin." He pointed to another lonely peak, but his previous excitement faded.

"That's--" gasped Theo.

Surrounded by a nest of spikey mountain ranges, deep in the lands of darkness was the fiery peak. "Mount Doom," Bilbo breathed.

Coming to stand by Bilbo's side Théoden frowned. "Mount Doom, that's where Esmeralda said the rings of power were made."

"Rings of Power?" Those certainly sounded like doom.

"My turn to lead us! Come on, I know where the book is. It's by the old Rhoric scrolls up on the 2nd floor eastern balcony." He diverted to a nearby staircase practically running up the stairs and Bilbo struggled to keep up. "Esmeralda said it was vital I knew about them."

"They don't sound too pleasant. Anything with the word power in it generally means ill fate will follow."

"That's because they aren't pleasant at all." The child rounded the top banister. "Not from what I remember. Some guy, Maron? Marion? I think he changed his name. He asked the elf smiths of Eregion to make them back in the second Age. Oh--" Théoden backtracked into Bilbo, leaving the hobbit winded. "This bookcase!" He ran up to one filled with mostly old hide scrolls, a few paper ones scattered throughout and perhaps 5 books total on the tall bookcase.

He motioned for the ladder by Bilbo, who rolled it over. In no time at all the small book Théoden had wanted was brought down and they moved back to their little corner they had set up on the main floor with the rest of their findings.

It was certainly a scrwany book even by Bilbo's standards. It couldn't be more that 30 pages long and barely bigger than one of Bilbo's hands. It held together by crinkling, worn, and faded black leather. The pages were coarse and yellowing, and Bilbo swore he saw a few rusty stains of blood drops as his friend thumbed through the book.

"It talks about the different rings and what they can do."

"These rings can do things?"

"Uh-huh. Especially the three given to the Elven Kings. They rule over air, water, and fire. Supposedly there was a fourth made for the earth element and it was given to a dwarf but that's just speculation."

"How old is this book?"

"Esmeralda said it came into the library at the beginning of the third age when the library first was erected. It also has descriptions of a few famous swords and artifacts."

Bilbo glanced to his bauble ring in the middle of table, "Think it has anything about rings causing people to turn invisible?"

"Mhn," Théoden looked thoughtful, "maybe there is something in here like it. Your ring looks relatively new, not thousands of years old."
“Yes,” Bilbo eyed his ring, “it does look quite new, doesn’t it?”

Bilbo went back and brought a few of the promising books on magical items he had been scanning through while Théoden searched for the bit on rings.

Finally there was the passage that caught Théoden’s eye. It wasn’t the text on the main part of the page but the hastily scrawled words in Westron in the side margin.

“Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,” the Prince began to read. “Seven for the Dwarf-lords in halls of stone, Nine for Mortal Men, doomed to die,” Bilbo paused and looked up from his own book, not liking where this passage was heading. “and One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne, In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.” Théoden cocked his head to the side as he continued to read. “One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them. In the Land of Mordor,” he looked up and met Bilbo’s gaze, “where the Shadows lie.”

Silence fell around them as they stared at one another. The ring sat on the table in between them, glinting in a small patch of bright sunlight peeking through the colorful stained glass patterns.

~*~*~

No. No! NO!

This couldn’t be. Bilbo twisted his fingers into his curls. Pulling on it repeatedly, trying to resist the urge to smash his forehead very hard against the nearest solid surface. The fireplace in front of him was looking very tempting.

“Sting?” Théoden’s voice wavered. He was partially hidden behind a chair. Sting had told him to stay there while he had tested the ring for the fire script. He saw the ring go into the fire but only for a few moments. When it was removed with a fire poker, Sting’s hunched back blocked the view of the ring. The Hobbit hadn’t moved for several moments and he was worried. "Sting?” He tried again but the hobbit hadn’t heard him and the next moment Bilbo chucked the ring across the library with a scream. One filled with rage, frustration, and tinged with terror before he fell to the floor clutching his copper hair. Théoden heard the small metal ring hit and bounce off a bookshelf. He spotted the trinket and flinched at the glowing script fading away.

This thing had been Gollum’s who knows how long. Bilbo tried to compose himself still tugging at his curls. A cursed item of immeasurable power and unspeakable evil origins. He wasn’t sure if there was anyone or anything searching for it. Sauron, did he live? These books splayed out on the desk behind him suggested that the Ring was the Evil Overlord’s source of power.

After the passage Théoden had read to Bilbo they switched the topics they searched, and the amount of horrific history about a little ring that could make it’s user invisible slowly grew. Bilbo’s heart had sunk more and more as they uncovered this “One Ring’s” part in Arda’s history, but there had been no proof his ring was The Ring. Until a small passage translated from a description of the original bearer of the ring, Isildur himself, came up.

“It was hot when I first took it, hot as a glede, and my hand was scorched, so that I doubt if ever again I shall be free of the pain of it. Yet even as I write it is cool, and seemeth to shrink, though it loseth neither it’s beauty nor it’s shape. Already the writing upon it, which at first was as clear as red flame. Fadeth and is now on barely to be read. It is fashioned in an elven-script of Eregion…”

It only confirmed Bilbo’s fears. This was not what he had hoped to find about his magical ring’s origins. He refused to acknowledge this, that he, a simple hobbit, held the One Ring. Yet, there was
the blazing script on a ring too cold to be real. Sauron had come back before, who was to say he wouldn’t come again?

Maybe he was overthinking this.

He couldn’t handle this. No. He was one small hobbit.

“Sting?”

Bilbo stiffened, coming back to the world.

“What do we do?”

Blinking, Bilbo turned to the boy who was glaring at the ring on the ground. It could stay there for all Bilbo cared. He’d had enough of fighting and bloodshed for a lifetime. “What do you mean, Theo?”

“It’s evil,” he stated. “It can hurt people.” Théoden’s innocence shone through his eyes as they met Bilbo’s weary ones. “A lot of people. Shouldn’t we destroy it?” Bilbo opened his mouth, and then shut it. He tried again, only a squeak came out.

“What’s wrong? We just have to melt it don’t we?”

Opening his mouth for a third time Bilbo managed to make his mouth work, “The fires of Orodruin, it’s--only the fires,” Letting out a short sigh he tried to control his breathing.

Looking up, Théoden’s brow furrowed. “The fires of Mount Doom?” He sounded as appalled as Bilbo felt about the place, “That’s where it was created with the other rings.”

“Yes, and with the fires by which it was created,” he recited from memory, “it can only be destroyed.” Bilbo tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

Mordor. The land where evil bred and thrived. Not even the most hardened warrior would go into that foul pit of hopelessness. A similar thought must have crossed the Prince’s mind because he looked positively horrified. With that terrified look on Théoden’s face Bilbo knew instantly what he had to do.

He had to do this.

Take the ring to Mordor and cast it down Mount Doom’s fiery chasm.

That was the final decision and there was no ifs, ands, or buts about it. It didn’t matter if he wanted to march to Mordor or not, there was a job to do and they were the only ones aware of what he possessed. He couldn’t cast away the ring. No, it could easily fall into another Gollum’s hands or worse.

Another ring bearer, that might…not be possible, now that Bilbo thought about it. Even if he had decided to give it away, the hearts of men, Bilbo knew from the history books they found, had been too weak to cast it aside those ages ago. Though if Bilbo were honest, thinking back at the history they had pieced together, he would have preferred if Lord Elrond had pushed Isildur over the edge of Mt. Doom all those years ago. (He’d have words with the Elf about that day if he survived this.) There were no elves he knew of enroute to Mordor to trust. Never would Bilbo trust this simple band of gold to any dwarf. He knew all too well the ease of gold sickness that could befall even the kindest and wisest dwarf. He wouldn’t risk it. It had to be him.
"It has to be done," Bilbo croaked. He would play this bloody part. For it would no doubt end with another red sea sooner or later. Sooner, it sounded like, would end less lives.

Bilbo straightened up. Though he had forsaken his homeland in pursuit of a greater happiness he was still born a Took and a Baggins. Wild as the four winds with a wit sharper than the edge of an elven blade but most importantly he was a Hobbit, and Hobbits never did anything half-baked.

Jerking his head in a stiff nod he let out a small huff. “Théoden.” The boy looked down to him, eyes wide and on the verge of breaking down, “I’m going to take the ring to Mount Doom.”

~*~*~

First thing. Money. He needed it for supplies. Water skins would be needed by the looks of terrain maps, and food that would last. Mordor it seemed was not inhabitable for anything—anything semi pleasant at least. Normally he would head to the troll hoard and restock his gold pouches there but there wasn’t time to waste.

He refused to ask the King for help. He wasn’t sure if he even wanted to tell him what he possessed. Though it hadn’t affected anyone yet, the ring Bilbo feared would wake any moment. It seemed the small thing had a bloody path following Isildur.

There wasn’t much he could do to make money or anything he had he could sell—the Quest, his story. Hazel eyes glanced down at his rucksack by the side of the desk he occupied. It was early morning so Theo had sword-fighting lessons, and this afternoon a few of the King's friends were coming so Bilbo was by himself all day. He had made Théoden to promise yesterday not to tell anyone what they had found out and sent the boy home with many reassurances but he still left sniffling.

The Princeling didn't want Bilbo to go to Mordor. They both knew the odds of him coming back from there were too slim for any amount of comfort. It's not like he wanted to die.

Sighing, Bilbo drew out his first small edition of his adventure. It was still a good version, tiny in comparison to his full-fledged version, which he still needed to finish. He was only a few pages away from finishing it. It would need to be finished soon, Bilbo thought. To send to Frodo before he left.

Dragging the larger red book in front of him he flipped it open to his last spot. He uncorked his ink bottle and nabbed the quill from behind his ear and began to write.

All that was left to tell was the final moments of battle and thereafter. Azog was already dead by his blade, the Eagles had driven off the orcs and wargs, and Beorn had taken Thorin into the mountain for medical treatment. From there he picked up. Many were wounded on all sides: Men, Elves, and Dwarves. Yet despite past feuds, infirmary wards had been arranged in accordance to injury severity. Bilbo wrote on how much of a coward he had been, not even sticking around after the battle. His last conversation with Fili before he left the battlefield.

He only knew all 14 of his companions, wizard included, had miraculously survived. Not the extent of the Company's injuries, how long it took them to recover, if their families made it to Erebor yet. Was Thorin free of the gold sickness? Did his crown weigh heavy upon his brow? Did they wonder where he, their burglar, was? He knew none of that. Only his own growing despair and loneliness the further he ran from the majesty of the Lonely Mountain. Something, Bilbo realized as he penned the last words, that hadn’t really disappeared. It was branded into his heart like the scars upon the land Smaug demolished.
It was a poor ending Bilbo decided. That he could not tell Frodo, the end of their tale. And how could he tell the faunt his own story, was going to draw to a close soon. The farthest reaches from the green glen he was going travel to, just to toss a gold ring into a volcano.

How foolish it all sounded.

Bilbo scrapped the first several attempts to write to Frodo. His hands were trembling and he couldn’t stop them from creating wiggly and uneven letters. Words were hard to find and even more rare was the right string of words. How did one explain so much to a nephew who was so far away, tucked in a niche of peace and prosperity, that he, Bilbo, was sorrier beyond words that he hadn’t written to him for years and most likely wouldn’t again? Too many finals words of wisdom, memories, stories, everything he never got share with Frodo muddled his mind. It took him 5 hours to finish an acceptable letter that was legible and explained why he was doing this.

 Mad Baggins indeed.

Once he transcribed the letter into the back of the book he closed it, placed a kiss on the cover, and set it down. The tale was done.

He stared at bright red leather, letting his eyes follow the gold embossing along its edges. Perhaps there could have been a happier ending, one where there was no strife, war, blood, or hate. Only a King Under the Mountain with his family and friends surrounding him, and a crown, light upon his head. Living happily in his kingdom to the end of his days and if Bilbo let a tear or two fall from his eyes there was no one there to see them.

He took out a familiar handkerchief and ran his thumb over the bright embroidered F.B. Perhaps, if he survived this, it would be time for a visit.

“Do you have to go?” Théoden’s voice was small.

"You should be at your lessons."

"I know," he sounded miserable, "but I couldn't concentrate at all so my teacher cancelled my lesson."

"And then he came to get me." Bilbo’s head whipped around to see King Thengel standing behind a teary eyed Théoden. "It seems you've discovered Middle Earth’s bane, Master Hobbit."

"I'm sorry, Sting," blubbered Théoden, "but I don't want you to die!" At that the child latched himself tightly to Bilbo, nearly knocking him off the stool he was on.

"Aragorn," Thengel called. A scrappy young boy appeared from nowhere, he could barely be 13, “Can you take Théoden to the kitchens, see if the cook can get him something calming to drink. I need to discuss a few matters with Mister Sting." The boy nodded but Théoden protested and clung tighter to Bilbo.

"Lad, it'll be okay. I'm not going anywhere just yet.” The hobbit tried to comfort the boy.

The boy called Aragorn gave a respectful nod to Bilbo before picking up Théoden. Bilbo and King Thengel watched them leave before speaking.

“If you would accompany me to my study, Master Hobbit.” Bilbo could only nod and follow after the man. It was silent trip and it allowed Bilbo to gather up his wits a bit. Royalty always made him nervous despite his previous encounters in the east.
The King’s study was homely, like Bag End was. The walls were a pale yellow, lined with bookshelves filled with books and knick knacks, though there were more weapons adorning the shelves than Bag End had. They sat across from each other in the plush furniture. “Please,” the King gestured to the tea set and snacks on the table between them, “help yourself.”

“Thank you.” Bilbo had never been happier to see tea in his life. He set up getting his cup prepared while Thengel reached under the table and pulled a bottle from somewhere.

“Do you mind?” he held up the bottle, “I fear I may need something stronger than tea to calm my nerves.” Bilbo shook his head. “My wife doesn’t like me drinking, says it bad for my health but,” he chuckled as he uncorked the bottle, “I find it quite necessary to help me deal with my council on certain days.”

“Don’t I know what you mean.” Bilbo raised his teacup. “At my family parties it was almost a requirement to sip a few drinks to bear through the week.” Bilbo smiled a little. “It’s generally a haze for anyone old enough to drink.”

Nodding in agreement the King poured his own drink into a tea cup before hiding the bottle again. “To our mental health.” Their glasses met with a soft clink of ceramic as they toasted.

“I know we’re not here to just drink to our health,” Bilbo said, setting his teacup gently on to the saucer he held.

Thengel gave a small nod and sighed. Bilbo could see the years of leadership weighing on the man’s shoulders. Thengel could not look at Bilbo as he spoke, “I cannot send any of my men with you.”

Letting the words soak in, the hobbit closed his eyes breathing steadily through his nose. He already knew he was going alone.

“But there is one that wishes to accompany you.”

What? thought Bilbo. He opened his eyes.

“I do not--I don’t want to sound ungrateful or prejudiced, but I would not feel comfortable with a man traveling with me so close to the ring. I still don’t know what it can fully do.”

“Yes,” Thengel agreed, “but I would like for you to hear his reasons first before you decide to head out alone.” Right on cue a knock came at the door. “Come in.”

A tall man, dark haired entered the room. His eyes were bright and his face had a moustache that was trimmed short, went down the sides of his mouth, and continued an even width up his jaw and into his side burns. He wore the familiar garb of the Rangers. He bowed once to each of them.

“King Thengel. Master Hobbit.”

“Come now, Arathorn, we are friends.” King Thengel stood and hugged the Ranger. “Arathorn, this is Master Sting. Sting, this is Aragorn’s father, Arathorn son of Arador.”

“I’m sorry if I’m supposed to know you but--”

“Peace, Master Hobbit,” Arathorn held up his hand, “if you knew who I was I would be very worried because I’ve spent my life trying to hide who I am.”

“And who are you then, Arathorn son of Arador?”
“I am the heir to the throne of Gondor and,” he took a deep breath, “the descendant of Isildur.”

Bilbo stood up abruptly, sloshing tea everywhere, and took a few steps back.

“I mean not to take the ring from you,” he held up hands, “the ring is yours but if you would allow me. I wish to accompany you to Mount Doom and fix the err of my lineage.”

“You don’t want it?”

Arathorn shook his head and sat down as to seem less intimidating. “Always a bloody path follows the Rings of Power, but the bloodiest trail of all would be the one my ancestors have made in deciding not to cast it into Mount Doom.” Bilbo came and sat down in his original spot. “Do you know why I am wearing the clothes of a Ranger instead of a crown?” He got no reply. “It is because this is the only way I feel I can repay for the misdeeds of my ancestors. Helping you destroy this ring, I think my family could return to Gondor.”

“You want to be King?”

“That’s not important, I could care less if the people want me as King or not. I just want to be rid of this noose of darkness that’s wrapped around my neck. If I cannot prevent this evil then it will be passed on to my son.” Shaking his head, Arathorn sighed. “I would do anything to prevent that from happening.”

Rubbing the rim of his teacup Bilbo spoke up. “I feel it.”

“Feel what?”

“The darkness, it oozes from everywhere. Hobbits are close to nature and we’re affected by the state of the land. The moment I stepped off the Misty Mountains I could hear the earth cry. Something deep and rotten has taken hold of the land. I feel it in the dirt between my toes.” Bilbo looked down at his feet, wiggling them a little. “The land is sick and the more I’m on this sick land, the worse I feel.”

“It will only get worse as we go to Mordor,” Arathorn pointed out and the frown on his face, though slight, aged him many years.

“I know.”

“Do you expect to come back, Master Hobbit?”

“It’s a very slim possibility, but I’ve faced impossible odds before.”

“Théoden has told me some of your journey, Sting.” Thengel turned to him. “You’ve faced many orcs in your travels.”

Bilbo tried to keep a smile off his face. “Among other things, yes.” He ducked his head for a moment. “I’ve been on the road these past 4 years. I know how hard it is to travel.”

“Yes, it will be a taxing journey.” Arathorn shifted in his seat, “Will you allow me to accompany you to Mount Doom?”

“It would be nice not to have to worry about sleeping in the night alone.”

Arathorn smiled. “We should leave as soon as we can.”

“Yes, but I would wait till the snow starts to melt,” Thengel suggested. “I don’t think you’ll get far in
“No, we won’t get far if we leave now.”

“Then,” Bilbo set down his teacup, “let us plan out our journey.”

A map was brought out and they discussed a route to Mordor. How they were to get in was sketchy at best. The gate was impossible to pass through and in the end they decided to skirt the Ash Mountains. Bilbo would restart sword training and try to put a few more pounds on. He was still skinny even with sitting on his rump most of the winter.

Though the King was supplying money for all the supplies, he and Arathorn would still need Bilbo to sell his small book to a local book vendor. It was taking up space and Bilbo had no use for it. It added a few more coins to his purse, and the vendor seemed pleased about the storyline and more so that it was a Hobbit author. When asked where he got it, he bluffed it off telling the man he got it from Bree during his travels. He left the stall and thought no more of his tiny book.

His mind had turned to his larger red book. He had asked Arathorn if there was another Ranger in the vicinity because he had a package to deliver to the Shire before the end of September. Aragorn had offered to take it but his father wouldn’t allow him to travel so far alone. Apparently the lad was in training to be a Ranger like his father.

Another Ranger was found. Boar was his nickname and he was already traveling from Lothlorien to Rivendell with a message. Bilbo handed him a large purse of money while spewing out directions to get through Hobbiton.

“Oh, could you write that down for me, sir?” Boar asked.

“Yes, of course, how silly of me. You’re traveling months the least I can do is write you directions, yes. Frodo is a good lad, he’s rarely seen big folk so it might be hard to get him alone.” He jabbed his quill in the wrapped book in the Ranger’s hands. “That is for him and him alone. You hand that to him, not to his mother or father, not to the Thain and certainly not to anyone with the last name Sackville-Baggins. Horrid people.”

Théoden and Aragorn watched the Hobbit, amused by his flustered antics. Bilbo was worried about the book getting to his nephew safely. Arathorn and Boar had to reassure him multiple times.

“I know you’re all capable. Rangers helped us survive Fell Winter. This is very important to me.”

Boar patted Bilbo on the back, “I know what you mean. I have three siblings and over 10 little nieces and nephews. I will deliver this as promised.”

“Thank you.”

“Papa,” Aragorn slid off the bench and headed to his father’s side, “am I staying here?”

“Yes, you’ll be staying with Théoden and his family.”

“Yes, you’re most welcome here, Aragorn. You can join Théoden in his lessons,” Thengel offered.

Théoden walked over to Sting, who greeted him with a smile.

“More nervous than when 13 dwarves stormed your house?”

“Oh yes. I know very well this time what I’m getting into. Want to go on a walk? I need to start
moving around again. You’ve all spoiled me with your library and food.” They headed off down the cold castle hallways.

“You’ll always be welcome here you know. I’m sure Nathanial would love to have you as a scholar librarian.”

“Perhaps when I’m older I’ll settle down at a nice library. I’m still young--well, middle aged--but my legs still yearn to wander.”

Théoden stopped and Bilbo copied a few steps ahead. He turned to face the Prince but Théoden refused to look at Sting instead choosing to look at the snowy world outside. “I want to come with you.”

“You have to stay here, Theo,” Bilbo began, “and protect Théodwyn and your parents. Eru forbid, if I fail,” the child made a distressed noise, “if I fail,” he reiterated, “I have faith in you, Théoden, to protect Rohan.”

“You do?”

“I’ve seen you spar in the mornings, and you can ride a horse better than anyone I’ve seen. You’ll make a fine fighter, but I hope in this journey, you won’t have to fight off the darkest shadows of the world.”

“You shouldn’t have to. Not again.”

“I must, Théoden, for no one else can.” But the boy shook his head. “What happened on my journey with the Company I chose the ending. I faced Smaug, chose to betray Thorin, Azog fell by my blade,” he tapped it. “Sting is its name.” Théoden’s face was priceless. “I never told you that, it was when I faced the spiders that I named it, for the cowered at its sting. There is nothing that I have done, Théoden, that I wouldn’t do again. I left Erebor on my own cowardice. I had every right to scream and to yell.” Bilbo shook his head. “I didn’t because I couldn’t face my friends, and yes,” he cut off Théoden’s protest, “they are my friends because you know what? No matter how bad it gets friends will always be there and I always will be. They are my dwarves and I their burglar. Though they don’t know it I shall protect them once more from the evils of this world.” Bilbo arced his arm out to the west, “As I shall for my nephew, Frodo, far away in the Shire’s borders. And,” he rested his hand on Théoden’s shoulders, “for you and your family, all my friends from here, through Mirkwood’s dark canopy to Rivendell’s marble archways. There is a lot at stake and if it means this crotchety hobbit has to fight a few more orcs and the Dark Lord of Mordor, so be it.”

Théoden looked down at the Ring resting on Bilbo’s breast, hanging innocently on a mithril chain his father had given to the Hobbit. “If I were older I’d come with you.”

Giving him a fond smile Bilbo said, “I know.”

“1-I want you to have this.” Théoden thrust a small item wrapped in brown paper and green ribbon on to Bilbo’s chest. After giving Théoden a quick confused look Bilbo took the package and untied the ribbon. Unfolding the paper, Bilbo came to a large wooden pendant. It was a horse’s head, roughly carved away, but smooth to the touch and varnished with a warm colored stain.

Bilbo was in awe, “Theo--”

“It’s a protection charm,” the Prince said, rocking back and forth on his feet, “to wear by the One Ring, to help ward off its evil and keep you safe. It’s my first carving I made last year, it took me months to finish it but,” he started to mumble, lowering his head, “it’s not very good.”
“Théoden,” Bilbo said gently, the boy raised his head with tears streaming down his cheeks, “it’s absolutely perfect.” Bilbo gave him a watery smile and laughed a little, taking out Frodo’s handkerchief to wipe away the boy’s salty tears. “Did you know, this handkerchief was given to me by my nephew, Frodo Baggins?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“I’ll have to tell you about him some day then. I think you and he would get along very well.” The hobbit smiled a little wider. Théoden nodded vigorously. Taking the boy’s hands into his, Bilbo squeezed them. He gave a little huff before he met Théoden’s eyes. “Bilbo Baggins.”

“What?”

“Bilbo Baggins. That’s who I used to be.”

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At the end of spring’s reign, Bilbo and Arathorn set out on foot to the east once more, to another mountain that stood solitary amongst the ruin brought on by evil. Where Bilbo was sure his hobbitish mettle would be tested once more. This time, on his new quest to bear the ring henceforth into the very heart of evil, he honestly didn’t expect to make it out alive. Mt. Doom, the name foreshadowing what was to come, Bilbo was sure of it.

Already the environment was becoming unforgiving, the grasslands had quickly turned into dry dusty prairies. The straw easily broke underfoot and Bilbo was grateful for the tough soles his ancestors passed down the line. With those thick soles, however, also came the ability of those closest to the earth. He could feel the sickness in the land, hear it cry out in despair, yearning for a season of green. A rot prevented even a single blade of grass to grow. It ran deeper than the roots of ore within the Lonely Mountain. It covered the entire Eastern half of Middle Earth and for reasons unknown it just stopped at the Misty Mountains. Perhaps it was the Misty Mountain’s own cruel and wild nature that kept the rot from penetrating westward.

Rot, it was the closest word to what was slithering slowly into every nook and cranny of the earth. It was rapidly getting worse the closer Bilbo ventured toward Mordor. The closer he drew to the heart of the problem the more he had to stop occasionally to gather his wits. No, it wasn’t the ring, it didn’t whisper to him like few records suggested it did. He had to pause because he would feel waves of nausea hit him. Hobbits weren’t meant to leave the lush and lively Shire. They were connected to the earth and the wellness of nature around them reflected in their health.

He hadn’t noticed the rot the first time around because running for your life tends to make you focus only on staying alive. Beorn’s had been a small haven, much like the Shire. Full of flowers and animals coexisting in harmony. It hadn’t been till Mirkwood that he noticed the illness. He had yelped upon touching the ground by the forest. Beorn had given him a worried look but with the dwarves staring at him he waved it off. Mirkwood had taken the worst toll on him. That month had made him shed all the weight he had gained with the skin changer and then some. From there on it had been a race to the Mountain and a battle to save his friends. His misery distracted him on his way home and though he never took another step in Mirkwood it had taken a near permanent toll on him. If it hadn’t been for Beorn feeding him and nursing him within the small green niche he probably wouldn’t have made it back to Bag End. Even then he had returned skinnier than a hobbit should be.

The illness of the land had hit him hard. He had been fit, but just fit enough to be going off again into the world when he left behind Hobbiton for a second time. He had stayed in the West most of his travels. A few bouts across the Misty Mountains in chase of a few relics and ruins of old kingdoms had shown him exactly what evil could do. It wasn’t the ruins of castles and tall spires that saddened
him, it had been the charred, overgrown huts and homes of people whom Bilbo would never know. Nor would anyone else.

In the left inside pocket of his maroon jacket that had surprisingly lasted so long, was a small wooden top. Once he was sure the paint had been vibrant and jolly, now they were muddled, one side blackened from the fire that must have taken the small village he had found it in. Bilbo liked to imagine it belonged to a little boy, one in similar age and mind like Théoden and Frodo. Their momentos close at hand too. Frodo’s handkerchief in the breast pocket of his waistcoat over his heart, and Théoden’s hand carved horse pendant hanging next to the One Ring warding off its evil. They were little things but they were big reminders of why he was risking his neck.

This was for Middle Earth and the tranquility that had settled over all the lands, for Erebor so she and her new King may keep their peace, for the Shire a place his people had built from the roots up, Bilbo prayed to the Valar the serenity in the lush rolling hills never faded, and most importantly, Bilbo was doing this for Frodo and Théoden.

He hoped their generation never had to bear a burden this heavy, that the lads would never face the true evils of the world, and would have a long happy life with a family that cared deeply for him, all within the safe halls of their homes. Bilbo had no walls, doors, or a roof over his head, but he did have family. One filled with little children and dwarves and no one threatened a Hobbit’s family and got away with it.

Those were the thoughts that kept Bilbo heading to Mordor.

One night, a little over a week into their travels, they sat around their campfire smoking their pipes.

“So,” Arathorn let out a long stream of smoke, from a dark and woody blend, “Bilbo.” The Hobbit, who had been trying to create a smoke ring, choked on his smoke. He wheezed and coughed for several long and painful minutes. Arathorn slapped his back and offered him a water skin. “Sorry, I should have waited till you had exhaled.”

“Where did you hear that name?”

“When you and Théoden were out in the halls. I came to tell you that we were riding horses and not walking.”

“Well,” Bilbo cleared his throat, “please don’t call me that.”

“Why? It is your name, or would you prefer Dragon Thief? Or Barrel Rider? Perhaps the Ghost of the Elven Halls?”

Pinching the bridge of nose with one hand, he used the other to run through his curls. He muttered, “I knew I’d regret telling Théoden my adventure.”

“He was quite happy to share it with Aragorn. You’ve made a deep impression on him, Master Baggins.”

“Don’t,” croaked Bilbo. “I am not that hobbit anymore. He died at the Lonely Mountain or perhaps he’s dead in a ditch somewhere.”

“I don’t understand. You faced trolls, goblins, orcs, spiders, and dragons. Why would you toss away your name? You’ve done great things for someone so small!”

“The story I told Théoden was a watered down version. He did not hear how fearful it was, the isolating loneliness I endured the first half of our journey. I was a single, ill-prepared hobbit among
thirteen dwarves. When I was accepted finally into the Company, as good as kin I was to them, we hit Mirkwood. In there the shadows suck the life out of you, hollowing you out like the emptiness of your stomach because the forest was unrelenting in its misery and grew nothing but poison. I wore this blasted ring,” he held up the One Ring, “for a month! It might as well have been eternity because when you wear this Ring.”

Arathorn frowned as Bilbo shook the chain.

“The world grows dim and color ceases to exist. It’s just you and muffled life slowly pittering around you. Your shadow is your only companion and yet it is your worst enemy when you are trying to hide in a fortress filled with beings you have keener eyes than Hobbit mothers!

“Oh, and let me not forget to tell you what happened when we finally reached the Mountain. “Never,” he wagged his finger at Arathorn, “laugh at a live dragon. However, I think I would have fancied taking a shot at slaying Smaug than seeing my closest friends turn into mindless, greedy, gold-lusting heathens!”

“They abandoned you?”

“Worse than that.” The spite in his voice was clear.

“What is worse than abandonment?”

“They trusted me but did not heed my pleas. Abandonment is easier to deal with, for you know you are given up. Being ignored is worse because when you're surrounded by people you know and love, it hurts because they know you're there but they refuse to acknowledge what’s in front of them.”

“What was in front of them?”

Looking up, tears fell down Bilbo’s cheeks. “An army.” He shook his head. “Men from Laketown, which had gotten demolished, and Elves from Mirkwood.”

“They came to claim the gold?”

“They had not expected any of us to still be alive. All they wanted was gold. Gold, gold, gold!” the hobbit shouted to the stars. “It was always about the gold,” he said calmer. “The men wanted their gold Smaug had taken from them all those years ago to rebuild Dale again. Thranduil!” Bilbo threw up his hands. “Elves and Dwarves are the most infuriating groups to deal with at once.” Arathorn nodded slowly, recalling his own experiences. “Thorin felt spite toward Thranduil for the lack of aid when Smaug took Erebor. The gold madness had already taken a strong grasp of Thorin.” Bilbo felt the despair he felt years ago surfacing again. “There would be no peace.”

“He must have been mad to think 14 can take on an army. Even if they managed to seal off the entrances.”

“Which is why I took the Heart of the Mountain, the very object of greed, the Arkenstone, and stole away into the night down to Thorin’s ‘enemies’ and I gave it to them.” Bilbo sniffed. “And as you can imagine Thorin was not happy when he found out.” Shaking his head even more Bilbo clutched his head and leaned over his lap. “He banished me, marked me for death if he saw me again, but then a new army came: 10,000 strong orcs and wargs.”

“The Battle of Five Armies.”

“So you’ve heard?”
“I have and so have others. Many perished including the Orc leader himself, Azog.”

“Interesting tidbit about his death.” Bilbo uncurled himself and finally looked at Arathorn. He tapped Sting at his side. “My letter opener, as it has been called by many, took the Defiler’s head.”

Bilbo would have laughed had he been in a better mood at the stunned look on Arathorn’s face. The man blinked several times before he opened his mouth. “And what do you call your blade?”

This time Bilbo did smile. “Sting.”

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The next day, despite Bilbo’s protests, Arathorn continued to call the hobbit Bilbo. It went on like that for a few days before Arathorn brought up the battle again.

“What happened after the Battle of Five Armies?”

“Not much, I didn’t stick around too long. Fili caught me before I left. Tried to get me to come back but I was done. Not to mention my body had taken all that it could. Beorn found me on the way back to his glade and he took me there. After I healed up, I went home…”

“No, you would have stayed in the Shire if it was home.”

Bilbo sighed for what seemed like the thousandth time in his travels with Arathorn. The man never stopped questioning the world. “No, it wasn’t home. Not anymore.”

“It’s in Erebor, isn’t it?”

“It can’t be in Erebor. I’m banished.”

“But it’s there. I heard Théoden tell my son something. That you don’t hate Thorin for what he did to you. It was because you loved him that you were willing to let him hate you and kill you for your betrayal.”

“Yes,” really that Princeling needed to learn how to keep his mouth shut, “Thorin and I became close after the first incident with Azog.”

Before Arathorn could ask another a question, an arrow flew in from the back and struck his left shoulder. “Agh!”

“Arathorn!”

“Speaking of Orcs,” he gritted out. There was a small pack of five, no six, Bilbo counted, heading toward them on wargs.

“Should we try to outrun them?”

“No,” Arathorn took up his sword, “we’re already in firing range, they could easily strike us down.”

Just as he finished his sentence a barrage of arrows fell down from the sky. Another struck Arathorn and two hit Bilbo’s horse sending the animal into a frightened frenzy. The orcs were closing in fast so Bilbo took his chance at the first rider and jumped off his horse and onto a warg’s back, impaling its rider with Sting’s ever sharp blade.

Bilbo managed to slit the beast’s throat before it shoved him off. He was vaugely aware of the desperate winnies of his horse as it went down. Arathorn was still uptop his elvish horse, Strider. They galloped through the pack, the Ranger lobbing off heads or nicking the foul creatures as he
Deciding to take the low route, Bilbo slashes at his foes’ ankles and warg’s throats as they were getting distracted by Arathorn’s presence.

One orc sought to end this by taking aim upon the Gondorian heir. Bilbo tried to call out but it was too late, the arrow had launched. At the same time however, Strider had bucked up and instead of piecing his heart, the arrow passed through the edge of his side. It was such a shock the Ranger fell over and off his horse. There were only two orcs left and one was advancing on Arathorn, the other smirking down at Bilbo.

He didn’t give his opponent time to react and Bilbo ran through the orc’s legs and twirled as he delivered a deep gash to the orc’s back. It howled in rage and brought down its own blade but Bilbo was quicker and cut the blade wielding arm off before quickly beheading him. Bilbo had no mercy for these creatures. They poisoned everything they touched and killed for fun.

Arathorn was barely holding his own, trying to get up off the ground while defending his person. When the orc facing down Arathorn leaned over the man, blade to blade they were, Bilbo leapt up on the orc’s back and stabbed him through its black blooded heart.

Realizing the orcs and wargs were defeated, Arathorn slumped over.


Dropping down by his friend’s side Bilbo saw the full extent of Arathorn’s wounds. He had two arrows in his back from the first shots fired. He was clutching his side and there were obviously a few attempted slashes on his legs. “Don’t you dare die.”

“I’ll be fine.” He grunted. “Ah! Easy!” Bilbo huffed and ignored Arathorn’s protest as he pulled out the arrows.

“I’m wrapping you up,” Bilbo took a few deep breaths, “and you’re going back.”

“No,” he tried to stop Bilbo’s motions, “I will accompany you to Mount Doom till I die.”

Letting out an aggravated growl, Bilbo stopped and shoved Arathorn onto his back. Crying out in pain, Arathorn was stunned momentarily. When he opened his eyes he was met with a very angry hobbit pointing a finger centimeters from his nose.

“You listen here.” Bilbo’s voice was low and even, and to Arathorn, the scariest no nonsense tone since his late wife. “You have a son.” Bilbo jabbed his finger closer, “He’s thirteen and far too young to be going without a father. There is nothing, you hear, nothing you have to prove to me or all of Arda. Arathorn, you will die if you are not given proper help and rest.”

“I won’t make it back in time then–”

“Yes, you will, because Strider is an elvish horse.” Bilbo turned to the dusty gelding. “You can ride for a long time without stopping much. Can you take him back?” The horse which Bilbo was talking about came forward at his name. He knickered and snorted while he bobbed his head. Bilbo took that as a yes. “Arathorn,” he turned to the man again, “live to see your son become King one day.”

Though his breathing was labored and he could hardly keep focus, he took hold of Bilbo’s shoulder and shook it slightly. “As long as you’re there with me, with a crown of gold upon your head. For even the line of Gondor, will have to bow to your great deeds, Bilbo Baggins.”
Shaking his head, Bilbo muttered, “You’ll never call me anything but Bilbo will you?”

The man gave him a weak but cocky grin, “I can’t make any promises. You know that, but I will do my best to survive.”

Bilbo cleaned and bound Arathorn’s wounds the best he could. Strider got down low so the hobbit could help Arathorn on top of his back and strap him down.

“Bilbo, you know I would have followed you into the very fires of Mount Doom, right?”

The hobbit nodded, “Thank you, for everything, Arathorn. Now live!” Bilbo clucked and Strider took off to the north west back toward Rohan.

As the elvish horse and Arathorn grew smaller and smaller a part of Bilbo twinged, aching to go with them toward the greener land and forget this. However, standing amongst the dead orcs he knew that wouldn’t be possible. For the heart of the courageous had to go on. The Hobbit did not understand by what design of fate that he had to go through facing the trails of evil time and time again only to be rewarded with punishments of death, injuries that bit deep beyond his psychical self, and isolation. The one thing he did know was the weight of one simple looking gold ring hanging off the chain around his neck felt heavier than all of Middle Earth. Facing south, the jagged spires of the Ash Mountains lining the border to Mordor loomed ever closer, but Bilbo knew there was still far to go.

Shouldering his pack, he placed one foot in front of the other.

How exactly he was going to get in—he and Arathorn hadn’t gotten their chance to figure it out and none of his maps had given him any insight to this matter either.

Then one night, it came to him quite literally. He was between Noman Lands and the Dead Marshes. He had had the feeling of being watched since he and Arathorn skirted The Wold. Just outside the firelight, whose warmth was welcomed in the fading summer nights, a creature sulked about. Bilbo had forgotten how much companionship helped ease the burden of night watches.

Sting never glowed its ethereal blue whenever the mysterious creature rustled close by. If ever he were by a stream a few fish spines would be found strewn about in the morning. It kept him up at night. Small murmurs reached his pointed ears, almost in a conversation they spoke. It was growing bolder and bolder, for more than once Bilbo had woken to see a figure dashing into the shadows and Bilbo was getting fed up with the waiting and unease he got whenever he felt eyes on him in the dark. He couldn’t sleep properly and was irritable at everything. Finally, Bilbo called out to it, unsheathing Sting, tired of this stalking nonsense.

In the shadows a pair of gleaming eyes glared at Bilbo. It was a set the hobbit could never forget. “Gollum.”

“Baggines, Bagginses,” came a mocking coo. “What has it gots—” it snarled, “in its pocketses?”

Chapter End Notes

I WAS NOT EXPECTING FOR THE LINE OF GONDOR TO SHOW UP.
Seriously. I had just planned for Bilbo and Theoden to go look for stuff on magical rings, find it, Bilbo being oh noes I have to get rid of this, leaving by himself and ending with Gollum….NOPE. This is why it took me longer than expected to update…..also I
didn’t want Arathorn to die….I just, Aragorn gets a Papa in this timeline. This was a very trying chapter, but it is finished!

Also, I NEED TO STOP JINXING MYSELF GOOD GOD. I’m sorry for the long wait, summer school has been kicking my ass all over the country. I’ve been doing a lot of traveling and writing on my smart phone isn’t very practical and 9/10 I get car sick trying to focus on my little screen. I hope this super longer chapter made up for the wait!

/hides under quilt/

/peeks out from under quilt/

A shout out to hitagashi for her lovely Arathorn characterization in her gift to me “Two Bagginses and Their Grand Adventure”
Use Well The Days

Chapter Notes

Fair warning: Sad little ones ahead

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The lush green fields of the Shire hills had faded into a shimmering golden sea. The trees soon followed, leaving the four farthings ablaze in copper colors, bright yellows, fierce reds, and muted browns. A multitude of foods was just starting to be harvested.

Harvesting the main crops however, would start another day; today there was a large party celebrating the ten-year anniversary of marriage between Lobelia Sackville and Lotho Baggins. She was making a grand fuss over it and sweeping up Hobbiton in her excitement.

Frodo wouldn’t let the party pull the wool over his eyes to the true face of Lobelia. He was still silently seething over her attempts at getting into Bag End. It was only just after teatime and Hobbits were already drunk on the wine served freely under the party tree. Wanting some peace from the rowdiness that comes from drunk hobbits(even the teens had snuck some to drink) Frodo set off toward the east farthing forest with a book in hand.

“Frodo!” He turned to his mother’s voice. She beckoned him over to where she and a few other Hobbit couples were.

“Yes, mum?”

“No thanks, I want to go boating with me and your da? We’re racing!”

“No thanks, I want to read my new book today.” He held up the second hand book. Lotho, the kind and timid hobbit, had gifted it to him. He was kinder and much more in tune with his fellow Hobbits’ emotions than his wife. The book was a small apology Frodo knew, for Lobelia’s actions. Everyone in the Shire knew Bilbo and Frodo had been close.

Alright, if you’re sure. Come right home after the evening fireworks."

“Alright, if you’re sure. Come right home after the evening fireworks.”

“Yes, mum. Have fun!” Primula kissed her son’s cheek. A hand came up from behind and ruffled Frodo’s black locks.


“I will, promise.” With a final smile his parents turned and set off down the sunny lane, hand in hand.

Pleased to know he wouldn’t be bothered the rest of the afternoon, Frodo set off toward the forest. The leaves were still attached to the trees and would be at least till the end of the week. The few that had fallen were still soft underfoot. It was easy to find a spot under the foliage to settle down and begin reading.

The wind tussled his hair, and the sunlight twinkled merrily between the foliage. The air was cool
enough that the bugs weren’t bothering him. It was a perfect day.

~*~*~

A rider rode in to the borders of Rohan. Even with the man slumped over the back of his dusty colored horse the border patrol recognized him and sent word to the King.

Arathorn son of Arador had returned. Far too early and gravely wounded.

News reached Aragorn and Théoden by Morwen, Théoden’s mother. She gathered the boys up close to her as they cried. No, Arathorn wasn’t dead but he wasn’t awake either. Tears flowed in innocent fear of death. Fear of the darkness and its minions, but Théoden cried most of all for the untold fate of his friend.

King Thengal came into the infirmary as soon as he could. Out of breath he came to see the sight of the deep infected wound on his friend’s side. It was worrisome when the man didn’t even flinch as the healers drained and scrubbed the wound.

“How is he? What happened!” the King nearly yelled at his staff.

“He was unconscious when he came in, sir,” one Healer replied.

“Did he come in with a companion?”

“No, sir, he rode in alone.”

~*~*~

The west winds blew in, rustling the brittle leaves that were not quite ready to fall off. A soft almost inaudible tune wafted through the afternoon of the east farthing forest, the hum of nature blending in and smoothing out the notes as it carried.

A steady pounding of hooves interrupted the serene setting. The noise didn’t even register to Frodo until they were nearly next to him.

“Excuse me, lad,” the rough looking ranger hailed the faunt, “do you know a Frodo Baggins?” His once bright green and sturdy cloak was dull and in tatters and it looked as if the Ranger could do with a week’s worth of sleep.

Sounding braver than he felt, Frodo stood forward. “I am he.”

A great relieved look came upon the Ranger, shoulders sagging and sighing gratefully. “Thank goodness.” He broke out into a smile.

Frodo responded with a tentative smile of his own. “Who are you?”

“I am Boar, well, that’s what my buddies call me anyways. I’m a courier Ranger and I have a package for you.” Frodo stiffened. He didn’t dare hope—“From your Uncle.” That’s all the words he needed to hear. He rushed forward as the Ranger drew forth a cloth wrapped object. Nodding his head in thanks was all the child could do. All ability to form words had been lost as the package was given into his care.

Staring down at the tag, tears threatened to fall on the familiar handwriting of his Uncle. To Frodo Baggins of the Shire. Love- Uncle. It had been two--almost three--long and lonely years without a word from his dear Uncle.
“I had hoped to get here before your birthday.” Frodo’s head snapped up. “He paid me handsomely to try to get this to you before the 22nd of September. Unfortunately, I lost track of the days while I was traveling.”


“I hope you enjoy your present little one, that Uncle of yours spoke fondly of you. Babbled on and on.”

Frodo giggled. “Uncle tends to do that when he’s flustered. Do I owe you anything?”

“Nope, your Uncle paid me more than enough. He wanted me to give this to you in private too. Said it was for your eyes only.”

“I think,” he started, fingering the cloth covering, “I know what it is then.”

The Ranger nodded giving him a fond smile. “I best be off. Enjoy your day.”

“Won’t you come and eat?” Ever the polite Hobbit.

“Nah, I have a few buddies back at the Green Dragon I’m gonna meet up with. Thanks though, kid.”

“Wait--” The Ranger turned back. “I have one more question. Where did you ride from?”

“Rohan.” The Ranger grinned at Frodo’s dumbstruck look. When the faunt nodded in thanks the Ranger took his leave.

~*~*~

It was two days of grueling work for the healers before there was nothing else they could do but wait on the Ranger to awaken. Most of the infection had been drained but it left a strong fever to fight the rest.

Aragorn was not happy being kept away from his father’s side. Théoden tried to distract his friend with horse riding and games, but there were times he knew he had to let Aragorn simply stand outside of the infirmary, waiting to be let in or hear news of improvement from the healers. It was times like these Théoden just stood beside his friend, silent but there.

It was five long and tense days before Arathorn stirred. He was weak and slightly delirious upon waking up but the moment his son was let into the room his eyes snapped to the boy.

“Aragorn.” His voice was just a rasp.

“Papa!” Aragorn didn’t waste anytime running to his father’s uninjured side and latching himself there. “You’re alive. You’re alive,” he chanted, sobbing into his father’s chest. Théoden and Thengel came in at a slower pace, letting the family have their reunion.

“I would not leave you behind so easily, Estle, my child of hope,” Arathorn reassured. Thengel brought a cup of water to his friend’s lips and let him drink slowly. “Much thanks, Thengel.”

“The healers say you’ll recover fully, but it’ll take some time.”

“Yes,” the Ranger breathed out, “it shall.”

“You are not leaving until you are healthy.” Thengel gave his friend a smile and a soft pat on the shoulder. Glancing at the children, Thengel wondered if he should ask another question, but
Arathorn saw his apprehension and knew what he wanted to know.

“He lives,” Arathorn weakly chuckled. “The Hobbit lives and it is because of him I live to see my son.” Théoden, who was beside his father, started to sniffle. Bilbo was alive!

“He travels alone then?” Thengel asked. Théoden’s stomach dropped.

“Aye,” Arathorn nodded solemnly as he squeezed his son closer, “he bears his burden to Mount Doom alone.”

“May the Valar protect him.”

~*~*~

Frodo ran and ran all the way through the twisting lanes of the forest and Hobbiton to get to Bag End. He didn’t even go around back to get into the house, he unlocked the front green door his Uncle had locked and rushed inside.

He plopped down in the dining room, right across from the map of Erebor where his usual spot was. It took him a few minutes to light a candle, his hands were shaking so bad he couldn’t hold the match close enough to the candlewick to light it. There was still a good amount of sun filtering in for it was only the end of the afternoon.

Once he was ready to open his gift he paused. The urge to rip the paper and oilskin off was great. Instead he slowly and reverently undid the rope and unfolded the cloth, setting the tag his Uncle had written off to the side. Next the paper was unfolded just as carefully. The faunt gasped at the bright red book sitting before him. The gold embossed design made it look truly elegant. Oh so carefully Frodo untied the leather thong holding the book shut and let the cover fall open. Upon the first page neatly written in small font was, “There and Back Again: A Hobbit’s Tale. By Bilbo Baggins.” Frodo just let himself stare at the title page for good long while, trying not to cry.

This was his Uncle’s story written out for him to read. Slowly turning the pages, it became clear to Frodo that this was everything about his Uncle’s adventure to the letter. There were drawings of the various creatures they saw, the weapons his companions used, tidbits of Khuzdul written and explained. The book was masterpiece and he hadn’t even started to read it.

He kept turning the pages, not reading but admiring the craftsmanship that had gone into it and the superior level of detail shown. Frodo skipped the last chunk of the written text so as not to spoil the ending. Upon arriving at the very back, Frodo paused. For there was a letter inscribed in the folds of the book to him.

Smoothing down the pages Frodo began to read.

My Dear Frodo,

You’ve asked me many times about my adventure. I can honestly say I’ve told you truth, but we both know I haven’t told you all of it. This is the only complete version that shall ever exist by my hand.

I wish I could have been able to tell you more about the fates of my companions, but the simple truth is I was too much of a coward to face them after the battle. I ran and I’ve been running since. Trying to escape the pain of being labeled a Betrayer.

Frodo frowned, this was not the happy letter of correspondence he had been hoping for. What had happened?
I’ve been going by a different name for sometime. Sting. Perhaps I chose it after what I named my sword or maybe it’s because I still feel the sting of hate and scorn I endured. Either way it’s fitting.

I must warn you nephew, this story does not have a happy ending. Nor do I think my own ending will be a pleasant one.

A nervous tendril spiked up Frodo’s back. Was his Uncle in trouble?

Something has come up, Frodo. A rot has taken hold of the earth here in the east, of a dark and ancient power. I felt it last time I was over here, but I didn’t have much of a chance to pay attention to it as most of my senses were dulled from using my ring that long month in Mirkwood. It holds the land in a vice grip, deep down in the roots.

It lurks in the shadows, refusing to show itself, but it can’t fool a Hobbit. It’s an age-old evil, the one I fear that initially drove our people away from the west. The rot has grown, slowly, but it’s still spreading and trying to infect. Thankfully I believe the Misty Mountains’ own lurking evil has stopped this from penetrating farther east.

I’ve found the source of this but I won’t tell you much for fear of someone getting a hold of this before you.

With the fires by which it was created, can it be destroyed and sever this evil’s final link to our world. It would be all too easy, to cast this suicidal quest aside with the source, but I can’t go on knowing this great evil still lives while the inhabitants of Middle-Earth go about peacefully. Letting this be would certainly shatter that fragile peace farther down the road. More blood would be spilt and it would be my fault. I would never be able to live with myself, I hope you understand.

I am not a weary traveler yet, and if I could face down orcs, wargs, goblins, and a dragon, well—I should like to think I can face down a mountain.

This may be my final adventure. As I plan to head straight for the heart of this. Mordor and on to Mount Doom.

Frodo had to reread the last line over a few times to make sure he wasn’t misunderstanding anything.

I’m sorry. So truly and deeply sorry, my lad.

Do not mourn for me, for my life has been a happy one. I’ve met Kings and Queens, blacksmiths and toy tinkers, warriors and healers and you know what? They all make for splendid company. Perhaps not all at once mind you, but it does not matter if they are man, dwarf, elf, or hobbit. The goodness in this world will live on and I will make sure of it.

If I should fail, there is no doubt in my heart the people of Middle Earth shall rise together and finish what I could not.

Frodo was having a hard time trying to finish off the letter with the tears clouding his vision.

I do not regret anything, except perhaps failing to send you letters. I haven’t been the best Uncle and you might have forgotten me by now, or think me dead.

The fauntling shook his head. How could his Uncle think like that?

Turn your face to the green world beyond the Shire, Frodo. Never be afraid to leave home behind, for the world lays ahead in all its splendor and wonder. Take the hidden paths. Use well the days and tarry on till your soles are weary. Be vigilant for this world has a dark side to it. Keep close a
blade but your friends closer. For evils lay just outside of the campfire light, but do not let them enter your dreams. Finally, remember the simple acts of everyday kindness will keep the darkness at bay, like it has done for so long.

Chin up little hobbit, it’ll be okay.

With Love Forever More, Your Uncle

Below the Baggins crest was pressed cleanly into green wax.

There was a moment of silence before Frodo closed the back of the book. The faunt could practically feel the words, the history, the glory, and the triumph thrumming beneath his fingers waiting to be read.

Reading would have to come another day.

Tears came streaming down Frodo’s face. He felt like he had just lost his Uncle and he very well could have already he realized. No, it wasn’t fair! Frodo’s screams were silent. His chest was constricted too much to make any actual noise until he let out a breath and the sobs came shaking his body to the core.

Bilbo wouldn’t be coming back from Mordor, Frodo thought. It was a place where things died and nightmares thrived. Frodo slammed his tiny fists onto the book, cursing it for bringing him such awful news.

Birds chirped outside the window, the grass whispered amongst itself, and the merry making of Hobbits down at the party could heard. How was it fair that their perfect little world could go on laughing as others fought against the world for them?

Slumping over on the bench Frodo curled up onto his side. Suddenly the halls of Bag End felt like maze and the house too small to breathe comfortably in.

Through his choked sobs there came a loud shriek echoing over the hills, the truly terrified kind that can halt the world, coming from the Brandywine riverside.

Chapter End Notes

I’M SORRY FRODO BABY FOR MAKING YOU SUFFER.

//RUNS TO GO HIDE WHILE SCREAMING OVER HER SHOULDER// THE NEXT CHAPTER IS ENTIRELY DWARVES. LOOK FORWARD TO THAT!!

//DISAPPEARS INTO THE SHADOWS//
Darkest Day

Chapter Notes

Here are the dwarves, as promised!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Erebor.

The Lonely Mountain.

The last of the great dwarf kingdoms of Middle-earth.

Many years ago the great fire drake Smaug came out from the north. Scorching the earth and halls of the Dwarrows, they had but no choice to flee or face the fires of their inevitable death. Broken, they scattered. And it was the broken that came together. Forming a Company of 14 aided by a wizard, they traversed Middle-earth in a quest to kill the terrible beast and regain something they all wanted, needed.

Home.

It was not long after their arrival that the dragon fell to the arrow of a man. Straight and true, it hit its mark and down, down, down the drake fell. Down fell the orcs, wargs, and down went the King of the Lonely Mountain. However, for the King, there had been someone to pick him up.

Thorin Oakenshield gazed down at the streamers and banners, bright and festive, decorating the entrance of his Kingdom. It was Durin’s Day. Three years ago to the day he had used his father’s and grandfather’s key to open the backdoor and let his people in. They would all be celebrating for the week, up till the anniversary of the Battle of Five Armies where the Company would be official recognition for the first time for their contribution to reclaiming the mountain. Though there wasn’t a dwarf, man, or even elf in the region who didn’t know the names of the 14 who came to take back what was rightfully theirs.

The past two years had been a remorseful affair, many were busy repairing the mountain and some were even still recovering from their wounds. Though they all knew the real reason they didn’t come together and celebrate more than drinking deep into the kegs of ale.

The 13 dwarves were well known but there were always whispers about the fourteenth member. The smallest one of all, one of the West. A kindly creature, a Hobbit, had come a great distance, wielding a glowing sword, Sting. The rumors never stopped about his fate, for it was known he had been seen on the battlefield, but they also knew he hadn’t been seen in the end.

Fili had spoken with Bilbo as he had been leaving and tried to get him to come back but there had been no reason for him to. Thorin had banished him with the threat of death upon his return. The Company hadn’t spoken up in any defense, too shocked, too loyal to the King, even in the throes of madness. It was both a blessing and a curse that the Orcs and Wargs decide to plunder the mountain. It stopped an unessicary war between the Dwarves, Elves, and men. Though death and blood still bathed the mountainside, the war had been won. The tides had turned in their favor when the Pale Orc had been slain.
That was another mystery yet to be solved. Who had slain the Defiler? The last thing in battle Thorin remembered was Azog standing over him, Orcrist a hands length too far away again. He had been clubbed in the side with a mace that not even his armour could soften. Fili and Kili has disappeared a while ago, separated from him by a wave of orcs. Thorin had lost sight of Dwalin early on.

It had just been him and Azog.

The blow that knocked him down had left him on the verge of blacking out. His vision had faded out when a rage filled cry came from the Defiler, but that was the last him or anyone had heard from the Pale Orc.

Four days had passed before he awoke to be told his Company lived, the Mountain was his, and his foe vanquished. Beheaded even. That had brought a smile to the King’s face.

King.

He now had a mountain. A throne to sit on before his people. Though the Arkenstone did not rest atop the throne like it had before. It had been agreed upon by all parties to lock the stone away deep in a burial tomb, where no one would think to look.

It had first been handed to him by Balin upon being able to first sit up. It was only then he was reminded of a certain little Burglar. He had asked for Bilbo but no one knew where he was. Not the elves, men, or dwarves had seen him since the battle. Gandalf had even expressed his worry, not sure if the Hobbit was alive or not. It was only then Fili had come forth and told of Bilbo’s parting from the battle. Thorin was crushed.

Gazing into the Heart of the Mountain that day was supposed to feel like triumph, like home, but he had felt empty.

His chest hurt, but it wasn’t from the bruising or cracked ribs. The void reached farther than words or time could heal. Bilbo was gone. Just like that without a goodbye. Though the King could not, and would not, fault the Hobbit for leaving so soon. He, Thorin, was the real Betrayer. Betrayer of his own promises not to fall into madness like his grandfather, his vow to protect his Company, and most importantly, his friendship with Bilbo.

It had been a huge relief to hear that Bilbo had not looked seriously injured as he had left the battlefield, but that was the only a small reprieve.

A crown of silver rested upon his brow for he could not even bear the sight of gold. He had been coronated officially a month after the battle, without his dear Hobbit friend beside him cheering with his people.

Many had come back from Ered Luin in the West. Droves of dwarves had flocked back to the mountain to begin repairs.

All the people who shuffled below Thorin’s balcony knew the story of the Mountain’s reclaim revolved around the Company’s missing member.

How Thorin wished his people could meet and praise his dear friend for the hero that he was.

Bilbo Baggins the savior of Erebor.

~*~*~

Nori didn’t have to steal anymore, which was a blessing the dwarf thanked Mahal everyday for, but
there were days such as this when people were milling about in joyful clusters that just begged to be pickpocketed. He was the eyes and ears for His Majesty in the underground circuit. He kept uprisings down and tipped off his friendly neighborhood Guard, Dwalin, if something serious was happening.

For the most part, though, Erebor was peaceful and, quite frankly, it was dull. Pickpocketing was some harmless fun to pass the time. He had no need for any coin or knickknacks and so the items stolen were usually found on the same dwarf by the end of the day or week with a few more coins with it. It felt nice actually to give rather than to take but old habits and muses die hard.

Nori would never admit it but he had a soft spot for the little kids who were in need. He might have tripped a guard or two to help them out but other times he taught them tricks of the trade. Dwalin was the only one who knew of this because now Nori had a small network of dwarrow children amidst Erebor who would occasionally come to the Head Guard with a message from Nori. Dwalin didn’t exactly approve but Nori told him it kept the kids out of trouble for the most part.

The children were also usually outfitted in knitted wear. Ori’s hobby was taking off now when the scribe wasn’t in the library. Ori wasn’t in the library at the moment though, nor was he knitting. He was currently weaving through the jubilant crowds in hopes to avoid his two mischievous friends. Fili and Kili were taking this week with a little more enthusiasm than should be allowed.

Princes they were with all their responsibilities and crowns but tricksters they were to the end. Ori refused to join in on their prank war between them and the Prince of Mirkwood, Legolas, and his friend Tauriel.

Passing the vendors, Ori spotted Dori arguing over a price for a bolt of cloth. It looked like a pattern meant for his tea shop. He ran the tea shop with ease and a relaxed demeanor Ori had never seen before. Gloin was right beside Dori, no doubt looking for something extravagant for his wife to wear on the anniversary of the Battle of Five Armies.

Briefly, the scribe wondered where Gimli was but most likely he was with Bofur. They were good drinking buddies. Often they’d drink till they both passed out in fits of ‘manly’ giggles.

The memory of their last drunken stupor made Ori’s mouth twitch into a smile. Everyone was doing well and everyone was happy. Bofur whittled all day beside Bifur while Bombur puttered around the kitchens. Gloin was in charge of the treasury. Oin was training a new set of healers while Balin was, as expected, the King’s advisor. His only advisor. Thorin had abolished the council of old cronies on his coronation day and replaced them with the Company.

Ori was working in the Library. He was in charge of restoration of old texts and creating a tale of their adventure.

He was having the greatest difficulty with that last bit. Something just felt off every time he sat down to write it. He would get fidgety and find little things that bothered him in his workspace and proceed to clean it, which eventually led him on a cleaning spree up and away from the blank pages on his desk.

Bilbo would have been a better candidate to write the story down. The stories he had told around the campfire were magnificent and vivid. It was a shame he was not here. Ori had contemplated sending out a letter to make sure he had made it home safely but the same issue with writing their adventure came up when he tried.

It was affecting everyone in the Company that their Hobbit wasn’t there. No one said anything and it showed in the late nights they got together and ate like they used to around a campfire. Bombur
always fixed an extra plate of food and sat it out with the others. No one said anything about it.

“Hey, is that Ori?”

Drat. Ori did not want to be involved in any schemes today. He ducked into a glassware stall. There was no way the vendor would let the Princes in. They had a habit of leaving broken things in their wake so he slipped out the back of the tent and into another tumbling out from under a table.

“Oh, hello there, Master Dwarf!” a man chuckled from his seat in the corner.

“Hello.” Standing quickly, Ori tried to right himself. “Terribly sorry about that. My friends like to make mischief when I do not.”

Book in hand, the man gestured to his wares. “Feel free to hide amongst my books. They might provide better company.”

“Oh!” It was a small book stall, crammed to the brim with tables, crates, and shelves of new and old books alike.

“I can tell by yer eyes that you’re no stranger to books.”

“I’m a Librarian in Erebor.” Ori flitted about excitedly. “I’ve actually been hoping to expand the selection we have with some Westron or Elvish.”

“Elvish!” the man exclaimed. “Never thought I’d see the day a Dwarf of all beings wanting to read Elvish.”

“A good friend of mine started to teach me it. I hope to keep learning and perhaps if I see him again I can impress him.” Ori smiled fondly.

“Well,” the vender stood up and walked over to a table, “this is all Elvish, as is most of the stuff on this left wall. The rest is Westron. None of your language unfortunately. Never can find any of those.” Ori would be shocked if he ever did. “My name is Remmy if you need my help.”

“Thank you!”

Ori hummed happily as he combed through the books. He started a pile to buy by Remmy and put the man’s worries down about paying for them when he held up his large coin purse. Normally he didn’t carry around so much but he had hoped to purchase a few things here in the markets. People from all over were coming to attend the celebration here and the items they brought along were very unique.

Elves were coming tonight to stay the rest of the week in commemoration of their fallen and to celebrate the treaty between them and the dwarves. Bard, the poor man, was coming as well, but mainly to keep peace between Thorin and Thranduil.

A bright flash of red caught Ori’s eyes across the next table. He tried to ignore it till he made his round to the table but something called to him. Maneuvering easily around the tables he came around and lifted a worn brown book. Under that, a bright red book merrily greeted him. It was new. Very new, but it wasn’t embellished or fancy.

“Ah, that has recently come into my collection, Master Dwarf.” Remmy called out. “I got it in Rohan, from a Hobbit of all people.”

“Hobbit?!” Ori squawked. “What was his name, do you know?”
“No, the bloke never gave me his name, just said he needed a lighter pack for his journey.” Ori ignored what the man had to say after that and opened up the cover. He stared at its title for a few brief moments.

Wasting no time, Ori flipped to the first page and began to read. A few minutes of silence passed as Remmy curiously watched Ori read the first pages of the book. Without warning the book snapped shut and the Dwarf looked up with tears in his eyes. “How much is this book?!”

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“Fili! Kili!” The Princes startled at the desperate cry of their names. They had been sitting on a bench eating some dumplings wondering where Ori was. He had gotten good at escaping them. (Secretly they thought Nori had taught him that.)

“Ori?” Fili called out, he and Kili looked around for the distraught sounding dwarf./

“Here.” Ori popped up from the crowds, out of breath and tear tracks down his face.

“What’s happened, Ori!?” Kili moved into to check the scribe over for injuries but Ori shook his head.

“Get the others and meet in our Common room. I have something everyone needs to see.”

“What about–”

“Bilbo.”

No more needed to be said. Those two syllables sent the Princes sprinting through the market. It was also that one word that got everyone together in less than half an hour. Ori would not tell a soul what was going on till the last dwarf arrived.

Thorin threw the door open to the Company’s Common room. He stormed in decked out in his Kingly clothes. He had been preparing for the Elves and Men’s arrival when Fili had burst into his chamber, out of breath and stuttering out Ori’s request. The Prince came in behind his Uncle and thus the Company was gathered.

“What is going on?” Thorin demanded. He did not yell, but the force behind his voice was just as terrifying. Ori turned to him and brought forth a small red book from his jacket. The others quieted down as the shaking Ori pressed the book into the King’s hands.

“A vendor bought this in Rohan.” He paused to compose himself. Many shot Ori a confused look. “From a Hobbit.” Thorin’s piercing look snapped down to the book in his hands as many gasps were drawn.

“Read the title.” Ori’s voice was cracking.

Thorin looked as if he had been struck by Ori’s words. Silence in the room was near unbearable while the King opened the cover. The title was branded into Thorin’s mind the moment he saw it and could only gape. It was an all too familiar handwriting that wrote out the words. With reverence greater than what he used to hold for the Arkenstone, Thorin traced the name of one he thought would be lost to him for all the Ages.

“What does it say, Thorin?” Balin asked quietly.

“There and Back Again,” his voice was raw and unshed tears threatened to spill down his cheeks,
“A H-hobbit’s Tale.” He choked on the last words. “By Bilbo Baggins.”

For once, the Company was silent.

They all stared with a mixture of awe, confusion, and worry toward the little book.

“What is–” Bofur cleared his throat, “what’s the book about?”

Ori turned to the hatted Dwarf. “It’s about our quest. I’ve only read the first few pages but it’s definitely about us. He describes Erebor and Dale, before they fell. The sickness of Thror and Erebor’s fall that followed.”

“We’ve only ever told the lad stories about that.”

“It’s scarily accurate, though.” Ori gestured to the book for Thorin to read from. Thorin turned to the first page. He scanned the first few lines before he took a seat, his eyes never leaving the cream colored pages. “I think it is time for people to know what really happened,” Thorin began, “to a Company of thirteen Dwarves and a Hobbit and our adventure to travel across Middle-Earth in hopes of reclaiming a kingdom long lost, far over the mountains.” Looking up Thorin saw his friends had gathered around taking up any available spot close by to sit and listen.

“Well, go on Uncle, what does he tell us next,” urged Kili, coming to look over Thorin’s left shoulder. Thorin held the book away from the archer.

“I will continue reading if you do not look over my shoulder.” Thorin scowled. Nori pulled Kili back as Thorin found his spot. “It began long ago in a land far away to the east, the like of which you will not find in the world today. There was the City of Dale…”

Reading out loud to his companions, Thorin read Bilbo’s secondhand account of the passings and goings of Dale in its glory. The splendor of Erebor and her wealth, “and in great seams of gold, running like rivers through rock.” No one mentioned Thorin’s wince as he read that. The precious metal truly reminded Thorin of how low he brought himself and the near destruction he brought down on Erebor.

Bilbo’s writing went on marveling at the skills of dwarves. When his words led to the Arkenstone the Company shared a moment of silence.

“But,” Thorin pressed on, “the years of peace and plenty were not to last. Slowly, the days turned sour, and the watchful nights closed in.” There had been a darker side to his home; Thorin knew the older dwarves remembered it as well. A shadow had passed slowly over the mountain that most of the time one wouldn’t notice it. It was deadlier than darkness and lurked in the crevices and cracks. Many nights Thorin had felt its cold presence lingering just out of sight. “Thror’s love of gold had grown too fierce.” It had ensnared his grandfather. “A sickness had begun to grow within him; it was a sickness of the mind.” Fili and Kili looked at Thorin with worry. They had known the sickness of their great-grandfather but Bilbo’s words had silenced Thorin and left his hands shaking.

“Thorin,” Dwain gruffed out.

That is all his best friend had to say to get through to him. Nodding his head once, Thorin swallowed before reading the last line of the paragraph, “And where sickness thrives, bad things will follow.”

“Smaug,” Dori stated. It was confirmed with the next line.

“It was a fire drake from the north. Smaug had come.”
The older dwarves relived that fateful day as the words rumbled out and wove the images of fire and
fear in their minds. The story went beyond destruction, and told of the plight they had suffered as
homeless craftsmen without a means to live. Aide never came from the elves and the tale went on
about a young Dwarf Prince who took to laboring in the villages of men.

“…but always he remembered the mountain smoke beneath the moon, the trees like torches blazing
bright, for he had seen dragon fire in the sky, and his city turned to ash, and never forgave, and he
never forgot.”

“Hey, he took that from the song we sang to him at his house!” exclaimed Bofur with a grin,
nudging Dwalin.

“Indeed,” Balin smiled, “it seems our Hobbit has an impeccable memory and is a master of words.”

“The beginning.” Ori whispered in awe. “I would never have thought to start all the way back before
Smaug came.”

“It’s dark,” Gloin tipped his head to the book.

Thorin read ahead quietly to himself, “It’s about to get lighter, Bilbo is coming into the story.”

“Well, then everybody hush! I wanna hear what our Burglar has to say.” snapped Gloin.

“That, is where I come in. For quite by chance, and the will of a wizard,” smiles were exchanged
for they all could easily remember Gandalf’s ways, “fate decided I would become a part of this tale.
It began, well, it began as you might expect.” It was easy to imagine their friend speaking this. “In a
hole in the ground, there lived a Hobbit–”

Three loud knocks came from the door. Bifur, who stood closest to the door, answered it.

“Sorry to interrupt,” it was one of Dwalin’s subordinates, “but the Elves and Men are arriving. Your
presence is needed my King.”

There were many grumbles coming from the Company but Thorin stood and closed the tiny red
book. “I will be there momentarily.” Bowing, the guard took his leave and closed the door.

“I want to know what happens next,” moaned Kili.

“You know what happened, lad, you were on the journey!” Oin laughed.

“Yes, but not how Bilbo saw it.”

“We will meet here again.” Thorin held up the leather book. “Tonight after the welcome feast, and
continue. Agreed?”

“Aye!” they chorused in agreement.

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Thorin and his nephews went to greet the arriving parties and led them to the welcome feast in the
great dining halls. Thorin and Thranduil stiffly greeted one another but at least they were civil, much
to Bard’s relief.

“Please, follow me to the banquet hall.”

Bard warily eyed the Princes, but Kili and Legolas were already comparing bows again. No honey
and feather pranks this time around. Good.

“You look a bit stressed, King Bard.” It was Balin who came to step in stride with the man.

“If by King you mean glorified babysitter of Kings, then yes.”

“Ahhh,” Balin chuckled. “They’ll behave. Least in front of their people they will. They’ve been getting better.”

“Four years is too long for me to be between their cutting glares,” Bard nearly groaned.

“Well. we have ale to help you through the week, my lord.”

“Thank the Valar for that.” Bard had been in enough meetings and dinners over the years with the Elven and Dwarf Kings to know he was unofficially appointed peacemaker. Many who knew Bard took pity on him and tried to behave for him. It was no secret that years of past hatred was hard to look past.

Dinner was a tense affair. Not only because of the two stubborn Kings, but the normally jovial Company of Thorin Oakenshield was abnormally quiet and when dinner was signaled to an end they all but rushed out of the room, their King following at a slower but still brisk pace.

Evenings, the Company found, were the only time of the day they could meet. Many were in the weapon tournaments during the day and others were showing off their skills with other vendors and guilds. The Royal line of Durin was stretched out everywhere for appearances for some reason or another, so after dinner every day of the week the Company left as one to gather in their common room to listen to Bilbo’s story. They each took turns reading out loud from it.

As the story progressed, they realized how isolated Bilbo had felt at the beginning of their journey. By the time they had fully welcomed him into the group they were being hunted or captured.

It did not take long for them to finish the red book. However, the ending left them with more questions than answers. The tale ended with Bilbo’s account of seeing Azog’s head on the ground, Beorn taking Thorin into the mountain, and a vague ending declaring Erebor home to the dwarves again.

Thorin had flipped from the last page written onto the back of the book where a small excerpt was. There, Bilbo briefly described taking his journey home around Mirkwood, to Beorn’s, on to Rivendell where the elves engraved his sword, and his return to the Shire.

“I will not pretend to know if they Company lived or not. I left the battlefield knowing I could never return to Erebor. I am banished, cast away to go back to my green prison, for the Shire is no longer my home. Gandalf was right, when I returned I was not the same. I don’t think I even returned as Bilbo Baggins. There is an itch to keep moving, walking down the lanes less traveled. I don’t know where I’m heading but not all who wander are lost. I hope with all my heart, my dear dwarves lived, and they found peace in their halls of stone.”

The entry ended and there was no more. It left a sour note hanging in the air around their heads. It raised the question, was Bilbo even in the Shire? The book had been bought from a Hobbit. Had he been so close to them, but so far away because he thought they hated him still? Embers of the fireplace grew cold before any of them moved from the room. One by one they left with their own thoughts.

It was the night before the anniversary of the battle and dinner was in full swing. Thranduil was not blind, he had seen the Company leaving at the same time every night in the same direction. Steadily
over the week their moods had grown somber, even grave. Thorin snapped at him less for his snarky comments and that’s when the Elven King knew something was up. But he would not snoop around the halls like some thief so he outrightly asked Thorin.

“I’ve noticed,” Thranduil started, forcing Thorin out of his thoughts, “that you and your Company have skittered off every evening together.” The Dwarf King looked up from his plate to face the Elf. “Are you so genuinely repulsed by my kind?”

Shaking his head, Thorin sighed. “No, I am not, Thranduil.” He was tired of bickering.

The Elven King arched a single eyebrow, in disbelief or skepticism Thorin did not know. “A plot?”

“No. Be reassured when I say I really do,” he fought for the right word for a moment, “value your alliance with us. Over a hundred years of grudge is a hard thing to let go,” he admitted, “but a kindly child of the west has changed me.”

“You mean the Hobbit.”

“Bilbo, yes.”

“Where is he?” the King swept his eyes over the room, “I recall you were looking for him after you woke.”

“We did not find him.” Thorin looked down the table to where Fili was discussing the finer points of blade sharpening with a young warrior elf. “Fili met him on the edge of the battlefield, leaving. He was done with us.”

“He was broken.” Icy blue eyes met sky blue ones. “You did not see him weep the day you cast him out. He tried to hide himself away but he knew there was something much more precious to him that mad him to set aside his despair and join us in a war council meeting.”

“What moved him?”

“I had implored him to stay behind the battlements during the fight, but he would not hear of such a thing.” Thorin smiled a little at the Hobbit’s stubbornness. “I asked him 3 times to stay behind but on the third he whipped around. For a moment, I thought he might brandish his sword at me, the fire in his eyes was great.” Tilting his head ever so slightly, Thranduil gave a ghost of a smile. “He told me he had come so far, that it would be all for nought if he gave up now. Yes, he had fulfilled his contract. But he wanted to see you,” he gestured to Thorin, “in a crown. Safely under a mountain.” He opened his palms up to the vast hall they were in. “You were his friend, and he loved you and your Company very much.”

Setting down his cutlery, Thorin went back to staring down at his plate of half eaten food. Thranduil waited patiently. He knew it took dwarves more time to sort through their emotions, but he did not move.

“Ori, our scribe, found a book in the vendor stalls.” Reaching into his fur jacket he extracted the book. “The vendor bought this book in Rohan, from a Hobbit.” Thranduil held out a hand for the book and, reluctantly, Thorin handed it over. “It’s a written account of our journey.”

“By Bilbo Baggins,” Thranduil read.

“It lacks a lot of his achievements and heroism.” Thorin gladly took the book back when offered. “We haven’t heard from him since the battle. This is the only evidence we have that he’s still out there. Alive.”
“He has not come through the forest. My sentries would have notified me. Perhaps he’s been through Rivendell? I’m sure Lord Elrond would be kind enough to help you locate him.”

“We have not sent any letters out.” He held his ground under the exasperated look of Thranduil. “I know. We should have. I hope to send a letter out by raven to the Shire so that next year we would be able to celebrate all together here.”

“You would have him travel across Middle Earth again, alone?”

“No, he would be able to catch the last caravan from Ered Luin to Erebor in the spring. My sister is leading it.”

Thranduil nodded. “I would have them stray away from the forest like the previous caravans. The spiders have become a problem in the northern part of the forest as well as the south.”

“I will send her notice. I do not believe she means to enter the forest but thank you.”

“Did I hear what I think I just heard?” It was Bard, the man was slightly drunk, sitting on the other side of Thranduil. “Thorin Oakenshield thanked the Elven King.”

“Go back to your drink,” grumbled Thorin. Bard just grinned and turned back to chatting with Balin.

“My attempts to keep evil out of Greenwood failed,” Thranduil said softly. Thorin turned a curious gaze to him. “The day Smaug came, I feared for my forest.”

“I know,” Thorin uttered just as softly. “The forest holds more than just elves, but your home, food supply, and all the animals that dwell there. Fire…would have decimated it all.”

“I’m sorry.” Thranduil didn’t have to say what for because they both knew why.

“So am I.” Though Smaug had not descended on the forest, a different evil had and neither knew anything about it.

They sat in amiable silence, sipping their wine. Through the room laughter rang out, dirty jokes and ridiculous story snippets could be heard through the noise. Men chortled alongside Dwarves. Dwarves shared ale and sat by Elves. Elves traded quips and tricks with the Men. The peace, long sought after, had come full circle under the Lonely Mountain.

“Will you speak of him tomorrow?”

It was a moment before a response came. “Yes, everyone will know his name. His great deeds and what he means to us.”

“Good.” Thranduil took a sip of wine. “Or I would have to toss your thick skull into one of these stone pillars.”

“Oi!”

“Don’t start you two,” Bard called out.

Some things would never change.

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It was the anniversary of the Battle of Five Armies.
All day memorial fires had been burning across the field where the battle had taken place. Dain had made his speech to his men on the slopes of the Mountain at noon were there after they sang in memorial to their fallen. Families and friends of every race mourned for their loss but also celebrated for the lives of the warriors who had survived and the victory they won. Somewhere along the way a competition of sorts started. Trying to out sing each other with overzealous accounts of heroism, or silly sonnets of their enemies.

The finals of the many different weapons tournaments that had been going on all week were finished off with much cheer. A couple fights broke out, but that happens when you involve alcohol with a huge mass of people. Not all could forgive or forget past prejudices, but any incidents were quickly quelled.

When the mountainside started to turn orange with the setting sun, it was time for the final address of the day. All three Kings stood upon the balcony at the entrance of Erebor.

“My fellow Dwarves!” Thorin’s voice rang out over the crowd. He stood in his kingly regalia. “My fellow Dwarves,” he said again as the crowds hushed themselves. “We stand on the edge of our mountain with our friends and allies.” He gestured to both Thranduil and Bard on either end of the balcony by him. “Today marks the fourth year of our victory against the Orc and Warg armies!”

A near deafening roar rose up from the crowd below, hats and confetti were thrown up into the air. Thorin let them go on for a few minutes before he called for them to quiet down.

“This is the first time we come together to celebrate our victory properly. For in these years much of our heritage have been brought up again to their glory. Under the rule of King Bard we have been rid of the great serpent Smaug and gained an old ally. Dale now stands higher than it ever has before.” The white stoned city gleamed in the sun down on the footsteps of the Lonely Mountain.

Bard inclined his head toward the Dwarf King, taking his cue to speak. A small crown of gold contrasted with the man’s dark hair. Simple it looked from afar but up close on the sides were visions of Laketown, Bard shooting Smaug, and the new city. It had been given to him as an apology from Thorin. He knew the Bowman did not care for excess so it was well received, though with reluctance.

Bard had been named King quicker than Thorin but took on his role later. He stood on the balcony in leathers and furs, nicer than his normal set, but he would never wear velvet or silk. He simply refused.

“Friends,” Bard addressed everyone for he was truly well liked among the different races. He paid the dwarf stone masons handsomely, for their work for he could with the share of gold Bilbo has given him. His people lived better lives now and ate comfortably, and the elves loved the man for his spunk and talent with a bow. “We not only come here in cheer for our victory and glory. There are those who fell for our cause, for better days.” Many nodded in agreement. “It is with a heavy heart I recall all those men, who were like my brothers. I bet you though half of them would tell me to quit being melodramatic and have an ale in honor of their memory.”

Shouts of agreement and laughter came from below. More than a few tankards of ale collided and were gulped down at that.

Giving a smile to the crowd, Bard opened his arms wide, “This celebration has been many years in the making. We’ve been hard at work rebuilding what was lost. Peace has settled among our lands. Though,” he chuckled and side eyed the other two Kings. “Peace in the council room is hard to come by when you’re stuck with Dwarves and Elves who are either as stubborn as the stone they mine or as stubborn as they are old.”
The Company and crowds laughed along with Bard who gave the other Kings a well meaning wink.

“Along with Dale,” Thorin shot Bard a side look, “the Elves of Mirkwood have joined us in peace.”

“It is a good day when we can stand side by side in arms,” Thranduil spoke, holding his head high, “but it is an even better day when our kin can prank and tease one another without a threat of war.”

all the Princes pointedly did not looked at their Kings. “Though table manners are vastly different, and we nitpick at each other,” Thorin disguised his snort as a cough, “in the end we are able to sit side by side and toast to new bonds.”

“And to the future,” added Thorin.

“Hear, hear!” called out Bard.

“There is also, of course, the Dwarves to thank. My cousin Dain,” the Dwarf raised his hand on the farthest side of the balcony, “and his warriors of the Iron Hills were there for everything I asked of them and they gave it their all. None were my men but they fought with the ferocity and conviction like Erebor was their home. For some it has become home.” There were scattered shouts of happiness throughout the crowd. “I would not be here today if it weren’t for my kinsmen.” It didn’t matter if a dwarf was from the Iron Hills or not, they cheered for their people and Thorin.

“There is a last group of people I would like to acknowledge today.” The afternoon sun glinted off Thorin’s crown. “Our new treaties, this peace that has settled upon our new homes would not have been possible if 12 brave dwarves had not followed me on my quest to slay a Dragon.” Dwarves below started to cheer. “Many of you know us already, but I would like to formally present to you the Company of Thorin Oakenshield.”

Dwarves cheered the loudest but even the Elves and Men rooted them on as the Company became visible on the balcony. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder in the finest clothing and armor they were comfortable with. Some like Balin and Gloin chose more extravagant styles to show off their Lordship while those like Bofur and Dori liked simpler garbs. Oin had scoffed at the layers of clothing, complaining too many would finally do the old dwarf in. Dwalin wore newer versions of his normal clothing, his battle axes on his back as per the usual, their newly sharpened edges gleaming like his armor, always at the ready for a scuffle. Nori was at the ready too, but his knives were hidden among his sleeves and layers of clothing. Bofur wore his fuzzy hat with a wide grin while Bifur sported some flowers in his unruly mane, his clothes matching his cousin’s simpler styles. Bombur, however, had chosen his garb with many hidden pockets to put food in. Ori was in his new scribe robes and was much happier in his robes than Fili or Kili were. They had been shoved into their most formal clothing upon Thorin’s blackmail that had something to do with their mother, who was not yet in the mountain.

“I would not have traded these brave dwarves for any army.” Thorin smiled at his friends, his brothers in arms. “They came to me with a willing heart, honor, and loyalty. I could ask no more than that.” He took a moment to bow his head. Raising it up high again he gestured for his friends to come forward. “My sister-sons, Fili and Kili, Princes of Erebor. The finest swordsmen and bowman we have.’ The brothers walked forward, strutting in their Princely garbs. They bowed in unison to the crowds before falling to the back of the line.

“The Fundinsons, Balin our wisest and Dwalin the best axeman in two centuries.” Balin gave his cheerful, wide-arms-splayed bow, while Dwalin gave his low, stiff-backed bow. They too fell back and into line.

“The Ri brothers. Ori, our chief scribe,” the smaller dwarf gave a quick, polite bow, “Dori, the strongest dwarf,” Dori smiled politely and gave a flourished wave of his hand as he bowed low to
The star-haired redhead gave a nearly as frivolous bow as Dori but with a cheshire grin adorning his face.

“Groinsons Oin, our healer,” the eldest dwarf gave a shallow bow but dipped his head close to his chest before he stood straight again, “and Gloin, the best fire maker in all of Arda.” Gloin waved and grinned before he bowed low, his bushy beard almost reaching the floor.

“The Ur family.” The trio stood forward. “Bifur,” stepping forward he bowed quick and deep before stepping back by his cousins. “Bofur,” the hatted dwarf tipped his hat off to the crowds as he bowed for his acknowledgment, “and Bombur, our finest chef on or off the road.” The biggest dwarf bowed shallowly before waving to his wife and kids below.

They all got in a line once bow and taking ahold of each others; hand they raised them up high, taking in the unyielding cheers, and bowed all together as one.

“And there is another,” Thorin continued as the cheers died down. “My Company’s fourteenth member. Our Burglar.” Murmurs went through the crowd. “A Hobbit. He was the bravest of us all. For when all odds came against us, a meager group of misfits, he stood up against trolls, goblins,” his voice grew louder, “and faced down the Pale Orc, single handedly saving my life. One time after another he proved that even the smallest of creatures could be the bravest and mightiest of us all.”

The crowds cheered louder than before.

“He did not want glory,” Fili stood by his Uncle, his voice just as strong as his King’s. “We asked why he came with us, why he did not forsake our suicidal mission.” The Prince and King shared a look. “Treasure was not his goal, no,” shaking his head Fili gave a nostalgic smile, “he came because he missed his home. His books and armchair, all the comforts of home and he wished that we,” he gestured out to the crowd and then to the Company, “would know that comfort as well.” By now the crowd was in a hushed awe.

Kili came forward on Thorin’s other side, “He faced the spiders of Mirkwood fearlessly and after that he hid away for a month, undetected in the Elven King’s halls.”

Thranduil smiled, “I have never met such an excellent Burglar in all my life. He stole away thirteen dwarves in the middle of the night, right out from under our noses. Then, he came later to apologize for stealing food while he was in my halls.” Many chuckled at that.

“Smaug was our Burglar’s next obstacle.” Kili moved a few steps as he imitated the Dragon. “He lay under the gold for years undisturbed. Then came along someone brave enough, smart enough, to go about the Dragon unseen and talk his way out of being turned to a pile of ash!” Taking his brother’s goblet in a swift motion he held it up high, “Stealing away a cup from the hoard.”

“Friendly advice he gave us,” Fili slapped Kili on the back, “never laugh at a live dragon.”

“Then the beast came to fall by the heir of Dale. Bard the Bowman.” The brothers flanked Bard who rolled his eyes at their dramatics, but a smile stayed on his lips.

“Finally, our Burglar faced his worst enemy yet.” The Dwarf King’s voice was losing its strength, its pride. “A friend. Myself.” Placing a hand across his heart, he took a few steadying breaths, “In the mad throes of the goldsickness that I had sworn never to fall to, I unjustly casted him out.” Even the crown of silver upon his head grew heavy with his words. “I banished him, called him Betrayer.” Once more the crowds were silent, not in awe but horror and sadness. “Back then I could not see the great struggle he had gone through. He was worried for us for there was an army at our gates.”

“We all could not see the strife he had internally battled with,” Fili continued. “The treasure of
Erebor had ensnared us all. We were all, once again, weak.” Behind them the Company was bowing their heads.

“Driven to protect us, he went behind our back with the knowledge of our fury to come and gave the Arkenstone to the Men and Elves.”

“Aye.” This time it was Bofur who stood forward. Taking off his hat, he stood by his friends. “Not a single one of us listened to him implore and beg to make peace. It was supposed to our shining moment, having the mountain back,” he looked down to his boots, “but it was our worst.”

“He fought alongside us though, his letter opener blazing blue in the field of misery,” Dwalin spoke up, his voice gruff and mean, like he was daring anyone to think otherwise of their friend. “Our Hobbit fought well. We taught him to kill and kill he did. He didn’t have to stay and fight, but he came down from the battlements and faced the slimy, black-blooded bastards.”

“He left Erebor right after the battle,” steady was Fili’s voice. “We broke him in the end. All the blood, sweat, and tears we shared. It had been too much and he wanted out. So he left and we have no idea where he went. Home to the Shire, hopefully. There he will not be praised, for his people are simple in life and in the heart. So we raise our glasses now!” He thrust his goblet into the air.

Thorin raised his up high by his nephew’s. “Let it be known here and now and all the way back to the West,” boomed Thorin, “that our Burglar, Savior, and Friend–Bilbo Baggins–is pardoned and Erebor opens her arms to him. To the bravest Hobbit of them all!”

“Bilbo!” cried the Company.

“Bilbo!” echoed the crowds.

Just as the Men, Elves, and Dwarves came together and clinked their goblets together a low rumble came up from the ground. A shock wave came and rolled through the ground, knocking many down.

“What is happening!” many screamed. For a moment, Thorin was brought back to the last day Bilbo had confronted Smaug. The rumbling stopped soon after the initial shock wave but the people were already running about in fear.

“The sky!” For a brief moment Thorin was truly terrified Smaug had miraculously come back to haunt them on their day of victory, but there was not a red beast in the sky.

“By the Valar—” cursed Kili. Everyone was staring to the south where rapidly growing, dark, and looming clouds were building up. Nature stilled around them as the dark column kept rising up and up. Lightning flashed faintly in the clouds, the white light competing against the red undertone of the clouds. People started to panic more and tried to talk all at once.

“That can only be from one place,” rose the Elven King’s voice above the chaos. Thorin turned to meet the Elf’s eyes. He wore an expression far graver than Thorin had seen before on the Elf King. “Mordor.” Thorin’s eyes widened. “Specifically—”

“Mt. Doom,” Thorin breathed out.

Chapter End Notes

I kinda fudged this last bit. I know Mt. Doom is about 600 miles away and they
probably couldn’t feel or see Mt. Doom’s eruption (least maybe not any ash for a few days?), but you know *flashes badge* artistic license and all that. I hope it doesn’t bother too many of you and so...I’m just gonna leave it here.

//backs away slowly//
Across Arda news traveled as far and as fast as birds could fly. Missives and messages clouded the skies in the confusion and fear of what had happened. Mount Doom had erupted and no one knew why, save for a select few in Rohan.

Thengal knew the day the volcano had erupted. All the horses had been spooked, something stirred in the air that felt very much like when heavy layers of dust were disturbed. It was choking even as the wind blew furiously over the lands, as if nature was trying to dispel the disturbance. Théoden had come to him immediately for he was aware of the unpleasant feeling as well.

Taking his son into his arms all they could do was stand above the lands and watch the grasslands shudder. Flags came tumbling down and windows were blown wide open. Every nook and cranny the wind touched. The winds howled and roared for only a few hours soon passing on to the West and over the Mountains. When the air settled and the day calmed down, it felt lighter somehow. That choking feeling was gone and left a crisp late fall scent in the air.

Théoden did not speak a word. He would not ask if his friend was alive, because the odds were greatly against Bilbo. So he clung to his father and cried.

Arathorn had woken when the windows to the infirmary had burst open. Healers bustled about trying to shut the windows. He had asked Aragorn to help him to a window, for he was not yet fully healed. They looked out to the East. The Ranger would not hide the few tears that crawled down his face.

Aragorn clutched his father’s arm closely, because he knew his father could have been out there that very moment. He’d be forever grateful to the Hobbit that his father was right beside him, and was not left to wonder of his fate.

A Raven came from Erebor a few days later, calling a council of the leaders of Middle Earth. It was the same day those roaring winds had come to the Shire, yet now they were naught more than another gentle breeze amongst the rest.

“What will you do?” Arathorn asked Thengal.

The breeze swept across all the four farthings and ruffled the tiny curls upon Frodo’s head. The faunt looked up from the large book in his arms, his eyes were red and glistening with tears as they had been a lot lately. He felt a knot loosen up in his chest and he didn’t know why. His breath came out in puffs of white steam as he sat atop Bag End. Facing the east, he saw his shadow stretching down the hillside. Frodo was not the only one to look toward the east. Every Hobbit paused as the earth sang from deep below and heralded new life.

It was not spring so everyone was confused. One by one they all stopped and came out of their
smials and stared away from the setting sun. Hairs rose on the back of Frodo’s neck as a realization dawned on him. He stood up, his face was blank in shock.

Bilbo had finished his quest.

Thengal turned to his friend. “We will offer to host the meeting.”

Frodo looked to his book. Bowing his head, he rested against the red cover. He took in a deep breath, it was clean and light. The air held a sweet taste not found in the late season.

“That’s not what I meant. What will you tell them?” prodded Arathorn.

With a sad smile the King said, “Nothing. For it is not my tale to tell and our friend…he may yet live to speak it.” Arathorn nodded in acceptance.

Frodo nodded in attempts to reassure himself.

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It was a few weeks before the meeting happened. Surprisingly, Lord Elrond came from Rivendell first with an escort, shortly followed by Lady Galadriel her entourage. Théoden had never seen an elf before and watched from a balcony as they came in riding tall on their horses their long hair floating behind them in the gentle winds. Aragorn had rushed down to greet Lord Elrond and who Théoden guessed were his sons. It was a happy reunion to watch; no doubt Arathorn would have been down there to greet the Lord himself if he was well enough. It had been several months since his return but the wounds had been deep and recovery was slow.

By the end of the first day with the elves in the castle halls, Arathorn was up and walking with Lord Elrond thanks to his healing help. Though the Lord was slightly put off that his friend would not tell him why he had been attacked by Orcs south of The Wold.

Denethor’s father, Ecthelion, came a day later from Gondor with a letter for Théoden. The Steward didn’t want his son to make the trip to Rohan so close to winter so Denethor had been forced to stay behind.

It was two more days until the last large party arrived at their doorstep. The Elven King Thranduil and Bard King of Dale had come along side the King of Erebor, Thorin Oakenshield.

The Prince of Rohan stared at the dwarf from his balcony spot. He wore no crown but Thorin was exactly how Bilbo had described him. Though he was Théoden’s height the Dwarf King seemed to stand taller than everyone. His fur coat alone dictated his authority as he wore it with an air of regality. Orcrist was strapped to his side and his clothes were that dusky Durin blue Bilbo had more than once spoken about. Following him were five dwarves whom Théoden assumed to be of the Company.

They all looked healthy and happy.

Théoden felt a sudden flare of anger at the King Dwarf. He had no idea what he had done to their Hobbit or what he, Bilbo, had done for them. A part of him wanted to run down to the Dwarf and tell him everything Bilbo had told him.

Thorin felt a tingling sensation on the back of his head. He knew he was surrounded by friends and allies but the feeling of being watched generally ended unpleasantly. Casually looking up he tried to find the source of his unease. He spotted a flash of blonde amidst the grey castle stone. There was a boy up on a balcony above the entrance. He wore such a serious face for one so young, but the
moment the child realized he was staring back the expression melted from his face and he jumped out of sight.

Nope, Théoden decided when he jumped away from the banister. He would wait and see. If they truly cared for their Hobbit he might tell them of a Hobbit called Sting, but that would have to wait. It was early morning upon the arrival of the last three Kings and the meeting was to commence immediately. He was already dressed in his nice court clothes. Technically his father hadn’t told him he could join in on the meeting but there wasn’t any way to find out if could if he didn’t try to go in.

By the time he ran from the balcony down to the meeting room on the far side of the castle, the adults were already entering the room. His father was talking to a new stranger outside the room when Théoden came up to the door. He was tall and old, and was cloaked head to toe in grey.

“Gandalf,” Théoden spoke out loud before he could stop himself. Upon hearing his name the wizard looked down.

“My my, and who is this young man?”

“I’m Théoden, son of Thengal,” he recited, but then he decided to add, “At your service, Master Wizard,” and finished with a slight bow.

This appeared to amuse Gandalf, but he responded in kind. “It’s nice to meet you, young Prince of Rohan.” He swept off his hat. “I am Gandalf the Grey.” He bowed low till his face was even with Théoden’s. “But you know that already.” There was a curious and scrutinizing gleam in the wizard’s eye but Théoden didn’t look away. Silently he thought Bilbo’s gazes were more chastising. Gandalf didn’t often come to the Kingdom of Men to gain any sort of reputation big enough that a young Prince would have heard of him. That would have to be a mystery solved on another day. The wizard had a council to attend.

When Gandalf stood up again, and put his hat upon his head. Théoden tried to enter the meeting room. Before he could slip in a hand caught his shoulder. He looked up to find his father giving him a stern look that clearly said no.

“Father–” Théoden began to protest.

“Théoden, this isn’t a meeting for someone so young.” Thengal gave his son a meaningful look. The Princeling huffed but did not disagree with his father. Aragorn had warned him his father would say no. Not even the young Ranger was allowed into the meeting and was away with Lord Elrond’s sons, Elladan and Elrohir.

Kili looked on with empathy. He knew what it was like to be young and excluded from “bigger people” talk. He traded a look with his Uncle who nodded. Grinning, Kili turned to the Rohan Royalty. “I can keep him company.” Théoden looked at the Dwarf in surprise. “That’s if young Master Théoden doesn’t mind.”

Thengal nodded in thanks to Kili and patted his son’s shoulder. “Well, what do you have to say to that, Théoden?” Opening his mouth in shock, Théoden gaped for a moment or two before nodding and speaking his thanks.

“Excellent, it’s all going to be dark and dreary adult talk anyways.” Kili offered his arm to the blonde Prince.

“Yeah,” Théoden mumbled. Kili hooked their arms together before the taking the lead despite not having any idea where he was going. Kili knew Fili would fill him in later tonight so he wouldn’t
miss out on much. So he waved goodbye to his brother and friends before turning a corner.

With that problem solved, the adults all moved into the room Thengal had prepared for them. Chairs were arranged in a circle, one that meant equality amongst all parties. Small tables were placed between every other chair with food and drink, for this could be a long council session. Thengal took his seat first, opposite of the door.

Others sat down together in their own groups but Thranduil sat away and across the room from Lady Galadriel and Lord Elrond. The Mirkwood King was not fond of either Lady or Lord of Elves. So he sat between Bard and Thorin. On the other side of Bard was Ecthelion. Arathorn was sandwiched between Ecthelion and Thengal. To the Rohan King’s left was Gandalf then her Lady Galadriel and then Lord Elrond who sat by Bifur, the start of Thorin’s group, completing the circle.

Once everyone was seated, introductions were made. Arathorn passed himself off as a representative from the Rangers under the alias Sancus.

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Kili wandered around with Théoden’s arm locked in his until they decided to stop in an alcove where a window seat was; it overlooked the courtyard of the castle. Kili tried to ease Théoden into a simple conversation but found it to be difficult when the younger Prince replied with short answers so he tried to so catch his attention another way.

Looking at the windowpane, Kili spoke softly, “We just celebrated our fourth anniversary of the battle, when the earth shook.”

Théoden gave Kili a curious look. “You celebrated a battle?”

“Our victory of the battle, yes. We also mourned our dead and honored our kin and kith that fell.”

“Did,” Théoden paused, wondering if this was an appropriate question, “any of your friends die?”

“No.” The brunette Prince shook his head. “I was lucky. None of my friends died.”

“Did you get hurt?”

Kili nodded and touched his left shoulder. “Warg got my shoulder when I was preparing to fire my bow. It’s healed now.” They sat in silence for a few minutes, watching the guards make their rounds in the courtyard. Frost coated the windowpanes. With a small smile Kili breathed heavily on the window, fogging it up even more. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the young boy watching him with interest as he started to draw on the window. “None of my friends died but I did lose a friend in the end.”

There was Théoden’s chance to test them. “What was his name?”

“Bilbo.” He made small swirls for the Hobbit’s hair. “He was a Hobbit of the Shire. Do you know where that is?” Turning, he sent a fond grin to the younger Prince. The Shire’s beauty and bounty had been amazing to Kili.

“It’s a green land out to the west.”

“That’s right!” Kili grinned wider.

“What happened to him?”
“He left right after the Battle of Five Armies.” Théoden nodded in acknowledgement. There really wasn’t anyone who had not heard of the battle, it had been the bloodiest of the Age. “None of us blame him though.” Kili’s face fell. “We have this, er, stone. Pretty thing it was.” Théoden tilted his head to the side in confusion. “The Arkenstone. Prettiest rock you could ever find, even glows a bit.” Kili scrunched his face up in distaste and wiggled his fingers for effect. “We thought it was a divine sign to my lineage that we should rule Erebor.” Shaking his head, a scowl developed on Kili’s face. “It was just a rock, lifeless and cold, and Bilbo took and hid it away because we were all mad.” Looking up, his face softened a bit. “The thing about dwarves, you see, is we’re very possessive and greedy. The mountain we reclaimed had hills and valleys of gold within and we all lost ourselves to a very dangerous world of glittering gold.”

“All that glitters is not gold,” Théoden said. It had been something he heard Bilbo mutter when he was writing poetry. Kili looked stricken for a moment before he gave a crooked smile and hung his head low.

“That’s what he screamed at us one day. In fact it was the day he stole away into the night to trade the Arkenstone for our safety.”

“Safety?” Théoden was satisfied with the Dwarf’s story. It was in line with Bilbo’s so far.

“There was war upon Erebor’s footsteps. We were but 14 of us but 13 of us thought we could handle them.” Kili laughed at Théoden’s disturbed look. “I know, I know, but we were enchanted, but that doesn’t excuse the slander and hate we sent toward Bilbo.” Wrapping his arms around his legs, Kili propped his chin on his knees and sighed. “I want to see him again. Hug him. Beg for forgiveness.”

The Prince of Rohan watched the Prince of Erebor, who had faced wargs, orcs, spiders, and every other evil of Middle Earth had thrown at them, scrub away tears from the corners of his eyes.

Letting out a shuddering breath Kili gave Théoden a sad smile, “I just really want to know he’s okay.”

Théoden bowed his head. The day Arathorn had awoken his father had sent out several Riders in pairs to scout along the Ash Mountains to provide Bilbo some assistance in getting back to Rohan should he survive. None of them had come back yet.

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Once everyone was settled, Thengal started, “This council has been called to meet for the sole reason that Mount Doom has erupted unexpectedly.”

Ecthelion scoffed, “It’s a volcano, that’s what it’s meant to do.”

“Yes, but it has not erupted in many many years,” Lord Elrond interjected. “Have you not noticed how lighter the air is since its eruption?”

Ecthelion grumbled a bit but Thengal and many others nodded. Gesturing to the windows, Thengal recounted the day of the eruption. “We knew here in Rohan something had happened for winds howled and raged through our lands, windows flew open, and reached every crack and crevice of our homes. When it left, the earth seemed to hum in contentment.”

“Similar reports come from Mirkwood,” Thranduil added. “They say the trees bent and groaned in winds that were fiercer than the spring thunderstorms. It stirred up the spiders and everything else evil.”
“Evil?” asked Arathorn.

“Yes,” was the cool response from the Elf King. “Evil has had a foothold in my forest for a while now. Stirring up every foul thing that leeches off my forest can only be done by an evil force.” Galadriel, Elrond, and Gandalf exchanged looks. They had defeated a faint flicker of Sauron in Thranduil’s forest only a few years ago. Surely, they all thought, looking at one another, that the Dark Lord wouldn’t have returned so soon.

“What could be so evil?” asked Thorin, even though he knew the stories of old. “If Mordor is linked to it, then we have much to fear.” For Mordor was a place where nightmares thrived and bred.

“Well, you know the answer to that,” rebuked Thranduil. “Sauron. Could it be possible his forces are at work?”

“It is unlikely,” Gandalf spoke, “for the air would certainly not be lighter if he were returning.” His tone was grave and his posture was slightly slumped over in weariness from just thinking about the Dark Lord’s return.

“What if it’s like the calm before the storm?” Fili asked. “To catch us unaware.” Many looked to the blonde in surprise. The rulers and leaders turned to one another in contemplation.

“It could be possible,” Thengal reluctantly agreed. He couldn’t confirm if Sting had succeeded in his quest to destroy the Ring. For all he knew, the blast could have been Sauron reuniting with his Ring of power. That was not something Thengal wished to think upon.

“We need to get a report from the inside of Mordor,” Ecthelion stated. Many turned to him wide eyed and sputtering.

“Do you know how dangerous that is?!” exclaimed Gloin.

Nodding in agreement Elrond added, “Not to mention a very difficult task to accomplish.”

“I thought your people were the best?” asked Thranduil loftily. It was barely noticeable but Lord Elrond did in fact narrow his eyes at Thranduil. Others started to blurt out suggestions or nominate a group to go. Bifur caught Gandalf’s attention and asked him if the Eagles would let someone do a fly over.

Gandalf sighed and tilted his head in a moment of contemplation, “While that is a remarkably good idea, Bifur, I’m afraid the Eagle of Mawae aren’t fond of being errand birds, or flying over Mordor for that matter.” He ended in a mutter.

“But the eagles would be perfect, Gandalf,” urged Dori. “Quick and no one would get fried or eaten.”

“Now, Master Dori—”

“There is a book,” interrupted Galadriel, her crystalline eyes were murky, unseeing to those around her, “big and red, in a young child’s hands.” Lord Elrond held up his hand to silence the others. “He is crying—sobbing—tears are falling on words written in the very back. Only a few pieces are clear, ‘Something’, Galadriel’s eyes narrowed in concentration, “Something has come up, Frodo.”

Whispers started to spread, what kind of name was Frodo? “A rot has taken hold of the earth here in the east. Of a dark and ancient power.” Many murmured about the works of Sauron but Lord Elrond hushed them. “I’ve found the source.” The vision was fading from her sight. “This may be my final adventure.” Whose final adventure many wondered. ”As I plan to head straight for the heart of this. Mordor and on to Mount Doom. I’m sorry. So truly and deeply sorry, my lad.” And
then the vision was gone.

All were attentive and quiet now. Arathorn took in a deep breath and said. “Someone has traveled to Mordor then?”

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Kili was truly sorry, Théoden could tell. The little fog picture was slowly fading from the windowpane. They both watched it face back to a foggy blank slate, though a faint outline stayed.

Fidgeting on the stone ledge, Théoden turned to Kili once more. “Did you ever try to find him?”

Kili was jolted by the sudden question. “N-no,” he replied sheepishly. “We thought he wouldn’t want to hear from us, and we were busy with repairs.”

Huffing, Théoden pointed a finger at the Dwarf, he was getting tired of this emotional tirade everyone was spewing. “How could you think that?” Théoden felt angry, with Kili and the Dwarves for not owning up to their mistakes, Bilbo for shying away from his past, and himself for not doing anything till now. “He spent an entire journey traveling from the Shire to Erebor for you to face a dragon?” Slowly uncurling himself, Kili was in shock of the child’s outburst. “Do you really think he would have stuck around for a battle that wasn’t his to begin with?”

Kili started, “I--”

“No. You listen. He left his home, and traveled through some of the worst conditions in Middle-earth. He became one of your Company and he knew the consequences of his actions and chose to do what was best and right for everyone, but especially you Dwarves! He loves you all too much for words and where words fail, he had to take action.” The elder of the two looked properly chastised. Kili remembered the desperate pleas of Bilbo to get them to reconsider. They still haunted his dreams. “Take action, because your words and excuses do nothing right by him.”

Staring wide eyed at Théoden, Kili didn’t even dare breathe for a few moments. “I never mentioned any of that stuff. That’s...how is that--” Kili trailed off not sure if he wanted to hope. “Have you seen a Hobbit here in Rohan?”

He wouldn’t outrightly give the Dwarf satisfaction of the knowledge he wanted to know. “I have seen a Hobbit. He spent the winter in the Library. Told lots of stories.”

Kili bolted upright. “Have you met him then?” Théoden nodded. “What was his name?!”

Internally, Théoden smiled, “He called himself,” the hopeful look on Kili’s face told him every word he had spoken about wanting repentance was true, “Sting.”

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The solemn moment was broken with a muffled exclamation outside the door. “Let me through, you hooligans!” Fili perked up, it was a familiar voice. Suddenly a very windswept and excited Brown Wizard burst through the entrance of the meeting room.

“Radagast!” exclaimed the blonde Dwarf. They hadn’t seen the wizard since he bolted off with his rabbits in hopes of luring away the Orcs. He stood tall very much like Gandalf but he had a wilder edge to him. That might be attributed to the various twigs sticking out of his hair and the dried waterfall of bird poop going down the side of his face.

“Radagast?” This time it was Gandalf who spoke.
“Gandalf! Thank goodness I found you.” Radagast fluttered about the room to get to his friend.

“What is it?” the Grey Wizard stood. “Did something happen to the forest again?”

“Oh, yes.” The Brown Wizard smiled, a twinkle in his eye. “Something has happened to the forest but ‘tis a good thing.”

“At least something good is happening.” muttered Gloin.

“What are you talking about, Master Dwarf?” snapped Radagast. “Wonderful things are happening all around you now!”

“Mt. Doom erupting isn’t what I’d call splendid,” was the dry retort.

“You fools!” admonished the Brown Wizard. Many were surprised, not expecting the weird wizard to snap like that. “The rot that has been slowly choking the land from deep within the earth is leaving!”

“What are you saying, Radagast?” spoke Lord Elrond.

Before the wizard could open his mouth another cry came from the doors, as they yet again burst open. “Milord Thranduil!”

The Elven King turned to his subject, “What is it?” His voice was clipped and tight. A plague of spiders had just attacked his home when he had last skirted his woodlands. It was only the pressing incident of Mt. Doom that forced him to attend this council and leave his son Legolas in charge.

“Word from the patrols” the messenger paused to catch his breath. Thranduil was impatient but he didn’t so much as twitch while he waited. “The spiders. Are being found dead. Everywhere.” The council started in wonder, gasping as the elf continued. “They are retreating. The rivers are starting to clear. The forest is producing green, healthy plants all around!” Radagast nodded, a triumphant smile on his face. Thranduil felt a weight lift off his chest as the messenger handed him an official letter from his son. Alone, he and his people had faced this looming darkness, why now? What drove it away?

“As I have been trying to tell you all.” Radagast looked immensely pleased with himself. “The rot is leaving. The greatest evil,” he looked Gandalf in the eye, “has been vanquished.”

“You mean someone,” Gandalf slowly rose from his perch and started forward, “has destroyed the last link of—of—”

“Sauron.” Radagast smiled wider, ignoring the gasps and jolts of surprise. “Someone has destroyed the One Ring.”

“One Ring?” questioned Ecthelion. “The heirloom of the line of Gondor?” Arathorn gave the man a weary sideways glance. He had not been recognized as the heir of Gondor here but the tone at which Ecthelion spoke in wonderment of the Ring had his gut growing cold. Arathorn exchanged a worried look with Thengal.

“Can you be sure, Radagast?” Galadriel asked. Gandalf stood very close to his friend, peering skeptically at the eccentric fellow. They had to be absolutely sure.

Nodding solemnly, Radagast reassured Gandalf, “With absolution. I can also be sure that Saruman has lied to us.” The smile of the Brown Wizard fell.
Many of the older beings looked on at the wizard surprised. “Those are some heavy accusations,” Lord Elrond said, his tone even.

“And I have proof!” shook the wizard. “Isengard,” he rumbled low. “There his men take the ancient trees of Fangorn Forest, grinds them up into a muck, the smoke is thick in the air and the scars on the earth are great.”

“What is he doing with this muck?” Dori asked.

Radagast shook his head. “I do not know, but I hear churlish cries from the fissure around his stronghold.”

“Did you not care to see what he was doing?” Thorin asked. “There could be people there who need aid.”

“I am not here to watch over the people of Middle-earth, Master Dwarf. I am here to watch the plants, the animals, and my Lady’s children of the earth. Who you all should know fled these lands long ago, long before the rot got so bad.” Radagast scowled. “No one would listen.” He gave a small shake of his head. “Not the dwarves, not the men, not the elves.”

“What are you talking about, Master Wizard?” interrupted Thorin.

“I’m talking about Hobbits!” thundered Radagast.

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“Sting?” It was naught more than a whisper when Kili repeated it. “Sting,” he said louder, a look of disbelief on his face. Then a grin split across his face, “Sting!” he exclaimed. “Sting!” Kili laughed and he hopped up and hugged Théoden tightly. The young Prince was startled but knew the Dwarf had gotten the hidden meaning behind his mentor’s alias.

“K-Kili, can’t,” Théoden gasped, “breathe.”

“Oh,” the Dwarf promptly placed Théoden on the ground again but clasped his shoulders. “Sorry, but this is good news. He carried a sword on him, yes?” Théoden nodded slowly. “Of Elvish make? Leaves on the hilt, looks like a dagger or short sword for your folk? Curly hair on his bare feet?”

“Yes—”

“That was Bilbo!” Kili jumped up and down. “He was here!” He paused. “What was he doing here?”

“Like I said, he spent the winter here. In the Library.”

Rolling his eyes, Kili’s grin never left his face, it seemed to only grown wider. “Of course he did. He’d live in a house of books if it were practical.” Théoden laughed, for it was true. “When did he leave? Which way did he go?” Kili gasped and grew serious. “Is he still here?”

Shaking his head no, Théoden watched the dwarf deflate. “He left in spring, south bound. Toward Gondor.” Which wasn’t a complete lie. He’d still protect Bilbo and his reasons for going to Mordor. It was slightly sickening, telling Kili about Bilbo’s pass through when their friend might be charred ashes on the side of Mount Doom, but right now the Dwarf Prince seemed so elated.

“This is the best news since we got his book!”
Théoden paused, “Book?”

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All the Dwarves flinched. “My Lady’s smallest creatures. The ones, who like me, can sense the Earth’s health. That one that travelled with you no doubt could hear nature’s anguish all around him. That’s why his kind left the West an Age ago!”

Dori looked perplexed. “Hobbits used to live this side of the mountains?”

“Aye, that they did,” said Gandalf, bowing his head.

“Indeed,” added Thranduil. “They were the peace and merry makers between all of our kinds. Tillers of the lands. One with the earth and sky.”

That couldn’t be right, thought Thorin. Surely Bilbo would have told them something as big as that. “Why aren’t there anymore Hobbits over here?”

“One day,” started Thranduil, sitting up straight, staring down at the map of Middle-Earth as if in a trance, “the merrymaking stopped. They wouldn’t leave their homes, not for weeks. Then—they came in a big group, first to the dwarves, closest to the ground.”

“They asked for help,” said Balin, and they turned to the white haired dwarf. “The records are patchy but a group of small creatures came. Asking for help. Speaking of a darkness, not yet gone, living beneath the earth.”

Locking eyes with the elder dwarf the Elven King continued. “The dwarves didn’t have the same oneness with the earth and felt nothing.”

“We were prosperous,” nodded Balin, “and it was foolish we thought. How can the earth be sick when our Mountain was giving us so much. Still they begged for help.”

“And none came. For the dwarves knew not of the evil that the Hobbits claimed lived.” A deep shuddering sigh left the Elven King. “They came to us next. We can hear the trees, they speak to us. Guide us, warn us, provide for us and we in turn help them—” Blonde locks floated gently on the wind coming from the window cracked open. “The Hobbits were so in tuned to nature, not even the trees whose roots were deep could feel or sense the evil, for it had not spread to Greenwood yet. So we thought nothing of their claim either. Thus turning them away, with a promise we’d help if a true evil ever did actually arise.”

“The hobbits,” continued Radagast, much calmer this time, “made one final plea to the Men, but they were laughed at.” Bard winced. “As one they packed up their bags, their belongings, and set out toward the west.”

“They just upped and left?” Gloin said incredulously.

“No one believed them at the time. I was away on business far to the north, so imagine my surprise when I come back and find my Lady’s people gone. I demanded an explanation for I thought surely they had been killed.” The dwarves blanched, the Hobbits were an innocent race. “No, they had been turned away. Everyone knew they were one with the Earth and yet,” he stared at the Kings and leaders of the races, “they weren’t believed. Granted, I myself could not truly sense the evil, but something—was most certainly off.” He scowled. “Saruman thought the Hobbits were foolish, said evil was gone, done, and passed. Ha,” he spat out.

“The One Ring,” chimed Galadriel. “He said it had been tossed into the sea. Lost for all the ages.”
Radagast shook his head, “I should have realized whose power was growing under the earth. If someone had not destroyed the Ring, I have no doubt Sauron would have come back, full force, and taken us all by surprise. Saruman aiding him I suspect.”

“And we shall deal with Saruman as soon as we can,” Thranduil spoke up again. “I do not like the idea of a wizard of all people preparing something massive that is unknown to us.” Many murmured in agreement.

“Yes, Radagast and I shall go visit Saruman after this council,” Gandalf spoke. Radagast gave a short huff but nodded. “We shall find out what our friend is up to.” The other leaders nodded in agreement.

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“Yes, Uncle always carries it on him. It’s a small, red leather book.” Kili vaguely made the size of the book with his hands. “Ori found it from a vendor, he said he got it from a Hobbit in Rohan. It was a story about our adventure. Horribly inaccurate,” Kili tsked. “Bilbo underplayed his role in the Company.”

Watching the Dwarf Prince get so animated about a book that his friend had written, was a punch of guilt to Théoden’s gut.

“We found it just in time before our memorial day. We told the crowds what he had done. Bilbo…. He was hailed as a hero.” Kili slowed down, gave a huff and a laugh. “I want him to come back, come home to Erebor. Live amongst us as an equal. He told us long ago he would be seen as odd if he returned to the Shire.” Though he was the same height as Théoden, he placed a hand on the blonde’s head and ruffled it. “He’d always look out for us. Scold us, pinch us when we were being prats. I’d give anything for a chance to call him Uncle Bilbo.”

“I’m sorry,” was the only thing Théoden could say.

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“But we do know the last link of Sauron’s power in this world is finally and truly gone.” Gandalf smiled.

“That was the eruption,” said Thengal.

Lord Elrond nodded, “Only by the fires of Mt. Doom, where the Ring was forged can it’s powers be undone. The question that remains is--”

“Who destroyed the One Ring,” said Thorin.

“And how,” said Gandalf, “were they able to resist the dark whispers and promises of the One Ring.”

Arathorn looked up, hands gripping the arms of his chair, and solemnly said, “And if they survived.”

Chapter End Notes

I PROMISE FRODO WILL GET LOVE SOON. PLANS ARE IN MOTION AND GANDALF ISN’T AS BLIND AS HE APPEARS TO BE.
I AM BACK AND READY TO GO AGAIN! HUZZAH!

AND ALSO. Special thanks to my editor who putting up with my horrid grammar and name spelling.
Remember Remember

Chapter Notes

I’m alive, I swear, and I’m not abandoning this!! I took too many credits this semester(18 *cries*), two of them are my cornerstone foundation classes, which has led unfortunately to a never ending supply of homework. But I’ll stop yammering about that before I go off on a rant or burst into tears.

Alright, time to find out the fate of our dear Hobbit. So we’re gonna back this up a bit. /cackle /

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything was wearing Bilbo down. The ground was filled with sickness so vast and anchored into every brittle blade of grass it made Bilbo ill most days and the traveling slow. The air was dry and cold. Winds whipped around Bilbo till his face turned red and chapped as they writhed furiously at the base of the Ash Mountains for not even the winds could climb above the steep slopes. It didn’t help that he had to shoulder everything he needed on his back. Though the pack got lighter by the day as his supplies diminished.

Gollum had changed since the last time Bilbo had seen him and not for the better. He was more skittish than Bilbo remembered him, and switched back and forth between his two personas more often. Knowing that the creature had been under the Ring’s influence for what Bilbo assumed was many years, he was worried how Gollum would continue to act considering the Ring was so close again to him. The creature knew he had it and Bilbo constantly had to watch his back lest he get a rock to the head.

As they traveled on together, Gollum constantly pestered Bilbo or caused a ruckus and it took empty promises surrounding the ‘precious’ to calm Gollum, for in those lands, on the edge of the Ash Mountains, was a dangerous business. Looming and jagged, the Ash Mountains were a tall and impossible ridge to climb over.

“Bother it all,” grumbled Bilbo. “There is no way around these cursed mountains.” Sitting down on a withered stump and tossing his bag down in front of him, he paused for a moment and let a wave of dizziness pass. He dared not drink much more water that day, for he had a limited supply and he knew he would have to travel back north at least a day or so to replenish it. He had been up and down the western border of Mordor for a few weeks trying to find a break in the mountains, but it had proven fruitless.

Pulling out his map, he studied the mountain range surrounding the black land. Even if he were to continue south and farther east to get around the back bend of the Mountain range it would take another month or two. And time, Bilbo felt, was not something he had a lot of. It had only been a recent development, since the first time he laid eyes on the Black Gate, a massive and foreboding structure it was. Gates as dark and cold as a cloudy winter’s night, taller than the spires of Rivendell, and as solid as the earth herself, the Black Gate stood guarding the entrance of the dark lands. Personally, Bilbo wasn’t sure if it was meant to keep people out or other things in. There had been a new weight dragging down on him.

Sighing, Bilbo leaned over his map, the One Ring on its mithril chain, dangled down mocking him
between his limp curls. Swaying with the ever present winds, the sunlight glinted off the edge of the Ring, just briefly, like a flirtatious wink.

The Ring, Bilbo feared, was awakening.

In his dreams dark creatures in billowing black cloaks, rode on horse toward him, screeching like no other creature Bilbo had ever encountered before. He didn’t know why, but he knew they were coming for him and ultimately, the Ring. And the Ring was calling back out to them. It tugged on the chain with an unseeable force. Pressure would build up in his head if he thought about destroying the Ring for too long and his chest would ache leaving him breathless. A subconscious thing to do to try to alleviate the pain was to rub the spot over his heart when his chest ached. Though it wasn’t his heart that truly hurt, but his soul. It resisted the Ring’s powers. Sometimes when the pain or illness grew too great he would stop and think upon his friends and family. They were his reasons and strength, and nothing, not even a stupid Ring, could distort his love and devotion for them.

Théoden’s wooden pendant helped keep the whispers at bay, and Bilbo found it more effective in his breast pocket by his heart than on the chain around his neck.

“Splashes and splashes!” exclaimed a voice Bilbo was far too tired of hearing, but ‘splashes’ by Gollum’s vocabulary meant water, hopefully. So with a weariness that’d become a second skin, Bilbo pushed himself off the stump and shoulders his pack once more. Light was already growing scarce in the early evenings of late fall.

He should have known better, but Bilbo walked between two boulders in the direction of Gollum’s voice and almost didn’t manage to dodge the rock that nearly bashed in his temple. With ease near to that of a well trained solider, Bilbo flicked out Sting and turned to the defensive.

“Gollum,” he scowled, dodging another rock, this one aimed poorly and in frustration. “Gollum!” The lanky creature was perched on top of one of the boulders Bilbo had just passed.

“Gives us the precious now!” Gollum snarled. “Nasty Hobbitses thief stole it. Belongs to us!” His face was contorted in a feral snarl. Bilbo sighed with slight resignation, he knew empty promises wouldn’t satisfy Gollum eventually.

“No,” he sounded like he was scolding a fauntling, “it belongs in a smouldering pit of fire.” And like a little fauntling Gollum threw a hissy fit, chucking rocks in random directions, before leaping and advancing on the Hobbit. Bilbo had come a long way since his first meeting with Gollum with skitterish talk, fumbling sword flailing, and riddles in the dark caves. Now he stood his ground, not even twitching when another few rocks clattered to the ground by him. Sting was held steady in scarred hands from that fall years ago that had led to their initial meeting.

However Gollum’s reaction to Sting had not changed. When the blade touched the creature he skulked back and hissed, but his anger fell to a whimpering stream of mutters. Rocking back and forth huddled in on itself muttering, the creature didn’t turn his head toward Bilbo. Keeping Sting out for a few more moments, Bilbo eyed Gollum. What sort of sad creature had Gollum become, then, Bilbo blinked. What had Gollum used to be?

The scraggly creature certainly was no elf for Gollum was too short. But then again, Bilbo was keenly aware of the Ring’s presence around his neck, he had no idea the true extent of the Ring’s power. Going off Gollum’s size alone though, he had to have been a Dwarf or Hobbit. Bilbo swallowed thickly, that was not an idea he wanted to think of. Swallowing reminded Bilbo of his thirst and he finally sheathed Sting and looked to where Gollum was before he kneeled down to fill his water skins. Light was fading fast from the horizon and Bilbo decided to camp there for the night.

There was no fire, for foul things traversed these lands, and in the darkness questions about Gollum
lingered in his mind.

“Gollum?” he tentatively asked, when the sun had well and truly set.

“What’s it want, Bagginses?” Bilbo could barely make out Gollum in the dark, he was across the clearing by the water’s edge.

“What are you?” He hadn’t meant to be so blunt but it caught the creature’s attention. “I-I mean are you a Dwarf,” he cautiously suggested, “or a— Hobbit?” His voice raised in pitch. Gollum’s reflective eyes narrowed at him.

There was nothing but the lull drone of the wind for a while before finally, “Hobbitses.”

“Excuse me?”

“Hobbitses like you. Smeagol and Deagol out on a fishing trip. Fishes, fishes,” chanted Gollum. With his eyes adjusting to the darkness better, Bilbo could see Gollum more clearly. He was staring down at the water’s surface. “We went for fishes, but Deagol founds it. Founds the precious.” That word, precious, made Bilbo’s insides curdle and crawl every time he heard it now. “Fall into the water we did and on land we fought. Only one lived to win the precious.” Now Gollum, no, Smeagol, started to shift agitatedly. “Ran away, far away, till we couldn’t no more.” The Misty Mountains, thought Bilbo. “Gollum, Gollum,” the former Hobbit started to convulse, as the angry demented Gollum came out. “And we wants the precious back.” It was a snarling growl.

Bilbo drew out Sting, and stood up. “Now, Smeagol,” he tried to reason, “that is a—” A screech rang in the air. But not just any screech, the one that echoed across Bilbo’s nightmares. “No,” he whispered, eyes widening.

Gollum tried to find the noise’s source, head turning about. When he turned to Bilbo’s spot, there was no one there. Anger rose up in Gollum and he screamed out like he did years ago, “Bagginses! Bring back my precious! Bring it back! Bagginses!”

But Bilbo was out of the clearing, wearing the Ring he swore to never use again. These creatures, he looked back down from the rock face he was climbing, there were nine of them. Terrifying and ghastly the dead were, for he could easily tell that’s what they were. They were upon Gollum quickly, riding their horses, swords at the ready, around and around they circled him. Gollum was in such a fit of rage by Bilbo’s disappearance he tried to lash out at the dark creatures. But neither horse or rider were deterred by the little creature.

Bilbo fled the clearing on instinct, and it now lay below him. Pestilence poured from these henious beings and if Bilbo had not been so accustomed to the ravenged and dying lands already he would have nearly died from meeting even just one of these foul things. He watched Gollum’s mad attempts to free himself from what one would assume a mocking ploy as they trotted around Gollum, but no, it was only a cold resolution and plan to keep the lesser Hobbit ensnared. Finally they stopped their trot. Edging closer to get a better view of what they might try to do to Gollum, a few rocks came loose and tumbled down the way.

Immediately, Bilbo ducked down to hide himself behind a rock. Despite being invisible there was a nagging inkling in the back of his head, if these were creatures born of dark magic (for how else could those petrifying creatures have been spawned), they could see past its defenses as well.

Here was the veil between the world, and all was murky; Bilbo could hear the hiss of the creatures tenfold. They were calling out, crying louder than Bilbo had heard in his dreams. He fought the urge to cover his ears and writhe, the noise was so distraughting. Instead he ripped off the Ring and tried
not to gasp too loudly as the colors come back and the pain in his head suddenly dissipated. It felt as
if he’d almost been drowned.

Crawling on hands and knees, he peered around the edge of his shelter just in time to see the dark
riders ride off with a squirming bag in tow. Heading back North.

Rolling onto his back still trying to catch his breath, Bilbo muttered to himself. He shook his head no
while he said to himself, “No, no, no, I can’t.” Dragging his hands down his face, he had to decide
what to do. Follow the riders in hopes he’d be able to sneak into Mordor behind them, or try farther
south once more to see if he could possibly find a break or save system that went into Mordor.
Another sigh passed his lips, an overused habit he’d gotten into. The world was a very frustrating
place for one such Hobbit on a mad quest. He could risk being caught by the black riders if he did
follow them through the Black Gates, and that meant a nasty end to himself, his quest, and quite
potentially his friends and family strewn across Arda. Deep in his bones he knew that was his only
choice, time was short and choices were few.

It was with heavy trepidation and a resignation to his end, that Bilbo Baggins stood up, readjusted his
backpack and took off, gravel flying behind him. His feet pounded across the dead and cracked
ground. Rocks didn’t cut into his travel calloused soles, and all the forces of the land urged him
forward. The fates of all twisting around every step he took.

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It was not an easy thing. Keeping up with the tireless riders of Mordor but he managed it, mostly
thanks to Gollum who managed to escape from his confinement twice. They made haste toward the
north. The gates themselves were vastly more impressive and imposing when Bilbo was hunched by
their edge. Peering up he nearly fell onto his back his neck tilts so far back. Upon sight of the
Nazgul--Bilbo remembered their name finally, it had been written in one of the many book he and
Théoden had poured through--the gates were ordered open. With such a massive weight, Bilbo
wasn’t surprised when the ground trembled as the gates opened. Their vibrations hardly stood up to
earthquakes Smaug had made just by merely roaring but when these gates opened up some foul
presence slipped out that caused the hairs on the Hobbit’s neck to stand on end.

Finally he could see it, the lands in which lay his final destination. Adrenaline coursed through his
body and his nerves cooled down. “You can do this,” Bilbo whispered to himself. “You,” he
chuckled nervously, “are literally going to run into Mordor.” He crouched ready to launch from his
hidden corner by the gate’s far edge. “One does not simply walk into Mordor. Oh no.” His voice
was still low but biting. “You’d have to be Eru-forsaken-Sauron-dark-lord-of-all to do that.” It would
be a close call. “You are a Hobbit,” he swallowed a whimper, “and you’re going to finish this.” With
the One Ring upon his finger for a final time, he prayed to the Valar it was so, and upon the last back
of the Nazgul facing him, he sprinted.

When the last rider passed through the gates a horn sounded and Bilbo knew he had little time before
the massive gates would actually be closed.

Already the doors were groaning as they inched their way back to their original position. The wind
worked for him, and the ground was smooth from the gate’s previous years of opening. With each
new step, the ground grew greyer and withered. There was only a few more feet of space left in the
gate’s opening and Bilbo was still many meters away.

His curls, grown out a bit, flew behind, his red coat tails in similar fashion. He held onto his bag with
both hands clenched tightly around its straps. He couldn’t afford to lose any provisions he had. His
years of traveling paid off and the deed was managed, if only by an a centimeter or two. Bilbo’s heel
nearly got clipped when he passed the initial front of the gates. They were near 15 feet thick and
when he passed their entirety the air stifled him but for a moment, until he was knocked forward by the push of wind accompanied by the gate coming to an abrupt halt.

The gate closed with a finality that sounded like the last nail in Bilbo’s coffin.

There was no turning back, so he set his jaw, and looked forward. With one foot put in front of the other, he stared down the black land, followed its distance all the way to another lonely peak. That of Orodruin, the Fiery Mountain, Mount Doom.

Veering off to the side behind a pile of rubble, he wrenched the cursed Ring off, which seems to be humming pleasantly, and set out to find Gollum the best way Hobbits knew how. Go unnoticed.

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From where he was, Bilbo could see a tower in the distance at all times, tall and rigid. By some dark magic Bilbo just knew, a flickering ball of what appeared to be fire was perched up top the tower. It glowed an unearthly blue, darker than Sting’s helpful glow. From time to time the blue fire flickered to life in furious reds and oranges. The longer he was in Mordor, Bilbo was more aware of the reds and oranges coming forth. Every time they did, the Hobbit fought the instinct to hide and never come out. It was the source of evil in these lands, it was a void of life and it made him sick to think about who could have left such a black imprint on the world.

Sauron, his mind would never let him forget who he was defying. The greatest foe to Middle-Earth.

Gollum’s cries called Bilbo back to the situation at hand. He had tracked them to where they had taken the gangly creature. A straight shot into Mordor, on the route to Mount Doom. As badly as Bilbo wanted this quest of his to be over, he felt compassion once more for Gollum and decided he couldn’t leave the creature to whatever horrible fate Sauron’s men surely had in store for him. They were torturing him, and from Bilbo’s perch, he couldn’t discern what exactly they were doing to him. Their lips moved in the same snarl formation over and over.

“BAGGINSES HAS PRECIOUS!” That cry rung out through the hazy air and Bilbo froze in his crouched position behind a pile of rocks. Silence fell on the area for a moment before the hisses of the Nazgul started again joined by the grunts of orc-like creatures. Even being crossed by Gollum, Bilbo’s good conscious couldn’t leave him here to die.

Continuing on with his original plan, Bilbo silently crept closer to the back of the platform they had tied Gollum to. One of Sting’s downfalls in stealth was its ever present glow. So he kept his elvish blade tucked away in its sheath and improvised. There was a bounty of large swords at the ready for the orc-like creatures, though the blades were much too heavy for Bilbo to carry around easily. The more he was around the orcish creatures, the less he thought they were actually orcs. From what Bilbo could hear, they actually spoke Common tongue, still in a churlish and rough accent but there was no mistake about it.

With stealth only known to Hobbits, he trailed behind a hulking pair of those odd creatures, using their bodies as a shield from other eyes till he departed from their trail by Gollum’s area. Being on the road allowed him to keep up the pickpocketing skills Nori had taught him with much enthusiasm. In his hand he held a large knife (by hobbit standards), pickpocketed off of one of the creatures he had shadowed to get there. The poorly constructed scaffolding was easy to maneuver for a small Hobbit. He reached its edge and peered out. The nine were nowhere to be seen, only a few blundering orc-like creatures. They were easy to slip past and Bilbo finally reached his destination.

Now he could see what they had done with Gollum. They had tied down his limbs to different bars so that when the handle cranked on either end, would stretch the gangly creature unnaturally
lengthwise. Hoping the blade he nicked was sharp, Bilbo started cutting the bonds at the ankles.

It took about ten solid forward and backward motions to cut through the rope but Gollum didn’t stir till his feet were free, and when he did wake it was with a jolt.

“No, no!” Bilbo whispered harshly at the surprised and excited look on Gollum’s face. “Don’t–”

“Bagginses!” it cried. Bilbo flinched and cursed Gollum in every way and language he knew how. It was a futile hope but perhaps no one had heard Gollum’s cry. Quickly turning around, it was already too late.

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What came next all happened so fast. A bright light shined upon him, and while he was blinking away at the light that came from the bright flaming ball on the distant tower, the Nazgul screeched. He was spotted.

Bilbo’s stomach churned more when the light shining down upon him turned a bloody red. Somewhere in the back of his mind he could hear the triumphant cry of the Ring.

Its Master had found it.

With one swing, Bilbo cut one of Gollum’s wrist bindings and left the knife wedged in the wood; he turned on his heels and fled the area. He cursed at himself for not going straight to Mount Doom, Gollum for getting caught, and this thrice damned rocky land he was running over. It was hard for a small Hobbit like himself to scrabble and run properly over the boulders and leap the occasional random fissures.

It was a deadly game now of cat and mouse, and more than ever Bilbo felt so incredibly small and vulnerable under the imposing light that followed his every move. It’s bright, brighter than anything Bilbo has seen in awhile, because daytime is relative in Mordor, for always the volcano was smouldering and the dark clouds loomed over with their eternal shadows. With time distorted Bilbo had no idea how long it actually took him to reach the volcanoes’ base. He was so weary, but the call of the Nazgul spiked his adrenaline and the will to go on rises with it.

Rocks here were sharp against even the tough travel-thickened soles of Bilbo’s feet as he pushed his way up the side of the volcano. He couldn’t stop, not even for a moment to catch his breath, to pick out the pebbles embedded in his skin, or to calm his erratic heartbeat.

They were so close, the black riders. Their hisses echoed in the back of Bilbo’s skull chanting out for him to fall, a call for his death. It was not an option, dying that is. He was so close. Slowly the air got hotter the farther he ascended and the path got rockier and steeper.

He heard something small scrabbling up behind him, probably Gollum, somewhere between him and the Nazgul. The bright furious light from what Bilbo could only describe as an eye, bore down on him leaving him an easy target for all. He could not hide from it. Sensing the excitement going on around it, the Ring tried to choke Bilbo with the mithril chain but he was having none of that and took off the necklace, fisting it tightly in his hand, making sure the Ring could not slip away.

Finally, the ground plateaued off, and Bilbo, the bravest Hobbit of them all, found himself at the front of Orodruin’s entrance. It was simple, tall and black with charred stone archways. Standing since the First Age, few have passed through the archway.

But once Bilbo did pass them and into the volcano’s fiery pit that it was named after, his senses were engulfed by the volcano’s energy. All he could hear was the roar, the blistering winds whipped
around the crater that was alive with magma, and the ground thrummed with raw energy. It gave
Bilbo a sense of awe as he walked forward over the bridge to the edge of the boiling magma. He
could see the end of his quest. It was only a few yards away.

His fists quivered by his sides. One clutched the Ring and the other the last strap still attached to his
pack. Giving one look to the entrance of the cavern, Bilbo made sure he wasn’t in danger before
holding out the Ring on the chain in front of him.

Closer yet, he edged toward the broken bridge’s end. Finally, the hot air drafted directly up into
Bilbo’s face and matted curls flopped in the wind as he stands on the edge. Here, in Mount Doom,
he would end the greatest evil of all. The Ring called out to Bilbo as he held it over the fiery chasm
of Mount Doom. Sparks flew up with the dry air that whipped around. Blinking back at the pain
pounding into his head, Bilbo could actually hear the Ring whisper promises to him. The voice made
him shudder and tremble from the promises of vengeance to all who had shunned, forsaken, and
spurned him, but his conviction to destroy the Ring did not waver. It only intensified.

“No, musn’t destroy!” and suddenly Gollum was on Bilbo’s back. Though taken by surprise the sane
Hobbit managed to keep the chain and Ring out of Gollum’s reach. Spindly fingers wrapped around
Bilbo’s neck and it was all he could do to stay upright. Crying out for his precious, Gollum’s voice
echoed over the pit.

“It will,” Bilbo grunted, trying to breathe through the strangle hold Gollum had him in, “be,” he
threw his torso forward, tossing Gollum off his back, and with the momentum, toward the very end
of the cliff, “destroyed!” With a final frustrated scream Bilbo launched the Ring into the air and
down, down, down it went.

Gollum reached out for it, but it was too far out and he fell off the cliff side. Bilbo lurched forward
but it was too late and Gollum was lost. Bilbo could see it mid air, Gollum caught the Ring, but all
too quickly he was consumed by the magma, and Bilbo knew the moment the Ring was too, for
Mount Doom roared to life.

Red was everywhere and it was blistering hot. Rocks were falling from the sky as the ground
shuddered. He wasn’t sure how but he’s running and his legs were on fire. He could hear the cries of
the wretched creatures that managed to live on that land. They were trying to flee too. Bilbo could
hear the anguish and fear, but could not find it in himself to care. He was done. The quest was
finished and he wanted out. The Black Gate had been blasted open by boulders falling from the
initial blast. As he passed through the shredded gates, a blast of wind knocked him off his feet, and
he fell–

Chapter End Notes

aaaaaaaand that’s where I’ll leave you in suspense (again) about dear Bilbo’s fate. New
characters to come in next chapter (which will come sooner than this one, im so sorry
for delay, I want to cry because of all the stress this stupid semester is giving me) and
more dialogue, but onward we go!
Sorry for the shortness! Much love dear readers!

/whispers/ o.m.g the new trailer released today. I was in tears.
Wow, I did not update when I said I would. This took me so long because I’m in that state where everything I write sounds like it came from a caveman’s mouth. But this is my late birthday present for me and all you readers :D I’ve taken this school break for myself mostly and I return to school but it’ll be a much lighter semester (/crosses fingers/)

I apologize for the chapter, it was a tough one, but after this chapter, we’re going to start to connect a lot of dots!

A scream ripped from Bilbo’s throat, and he bolted up from his bed. His breathing was quick and shallow. It took him a few moments to realize he was okay, he was not on fire, there were no black creatures chasing him, or any gleaming eyes in the distance.

The rickety interior of the room he was in reminded him that Mount Doom was far away. And looking through the curtains showed him he was in the Ettenmoors, a small city west of the Misty Mountains.

It had been a few months since his run in with Mount Doom and her darkness.

The human sized bed creaked softly when he slid to the edge, and he threw the sweat drenched blanket back as he sat up. Closing his eyes, still trying to calm himself, he could see the fires still burning. Pressing his palms to his eyes only made the fire burn brighter and he had to open them.

Sunlight barely poked through the curtains but there would be no more rest found that morning. Slipping to the floor, the cold was a much welcomed feeling. He doesn’t ever think he’ll be able to be around fire again without memories of the Nazgul haunting him through the flames. Padding over to the much repaired pack, traveling clothes were taken out and exchanged for the sleeping clothes he was wearing. Going about his morning routine pushed the dark thoughts back. That was, until he went to brush the hair on top of his feet. There wasn’t much there anymore, patches where burn marks weren’t present. He hadn’t been able to run as fast as the lava. Running alongside the boiling streams, more than once the liquid earth spurted up and branded his legs. The burns went as high as the top of his knees. They were still pink and if he walked too much in a day they ached.

It was sad to him, that the hair on his feet would never look proper again. Though he had given up the notion of ever being “proper” again by Hobbit standards, he still liked to keep well groomed.

“But,” he mumbled, “if losing a bit of hair from my feet saved Middle-Earth,” he wiggled his toes, he couldn’t feel much with his feet anymore, “then it’s a small price to pay.” He smiled and shouldered his pack like he did every morning. Stepping out into the dewy spring air he could feel the earth hum with new life below him. By now the sun was visible on the horizon. The smell of the fresh baked goods drew him to the south of town where the market stalls were awakening.

Bilbo needed to stock up on supplies before he left the Ettenmoors that afternoon. His wandering was leading him back west, as far away from Mount Doom as possible. It was just a whim for now,
but he had thought about going to Ered Luin to see the former home of the Company. And he’d swing down and visit Frodo. Bilbo smiled, he had sent the lad a letter a few months ago confirming he was alive, back when he was recuperating at Beorn’s.

A neighing caught his attention; passing a stable he was reminded of his rescue by the Rohan Riders. After he had escaped Mordor, he was out for awhile. He’s not sure how long but when he was shaken awake, he could barely talk and everything was painful. Apparently he had begged them to take him to Beorn’s. After that he only remembers a brief stop in Rohan with people talking all around him. Distinctly he remembers small hands on his face but nothing again till he found himself slowly waking up under a familiar roof.

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When he blinked awake the world was still in a dense fog, his hearing was muffled, like there was cotton stuffed in his ears. He heard something calling out to him, a presence all encompassing, but the fog prevented him from feeling it. Yet he was aware of the small creatures scurrying about him. A mouse, for it was small and fuzzy, wiggled its way under the rough, calloused hands of Bilbo and he took in a sudden ragged breath. Life. He was surrounded by life once more. And the rush of it all beared down on him with such a clarity he was left gasping for breath.

The creatures around him jolted with surprise but they chirped and crooned at him, for the small child of the earth was awake once more. “You’re awake, little Hobbit.” Beorn came into his line of vision. The burly skinchanger smiled down at him. Bilbo tried to talk but his throat was so dry all he managed was a wheeze. “Now, stay still there. You are still very weak.” Bilbo blinked, a sudden sensation of vertigo when Beorn eased him up to a sitting position. “You’re very lucky to be alive. If it weren’t for the animals I wouldn’t have known what to do with you.” A large mug was pressed to his lips and only a few sips of honey flavoured water was given to him, it was cool and utter bliss, quite possibly the best thing Bilbo had tasted in all his life.

“Beorn,” Bilbo managed to rasp out. His eyes flicked around the room, it was the same as he remembered it. A large and sturdy home, filled with hay and utilities essential for a man of Beorn’s stature.

The skinchanger chuckled. “I see the stubbornness of your friends has worn off on you.” He knew right then that wasn’t the right thing to say. “I have some food, soft foods, but good for you,” he said to divert the subject. A plate of steaming carrots, mashed potatoes, and broth was placed in front of Bilbo. The creatures of Beorn’s land scuttled about happily. “Good food, good company.” He picked up one of the many hedgehogs trying to clamber up upon Bilbo’s bed, and set him down by the Hobbit’s feet. Bilbo tried to wiggle his feet to play with the creature but jolted at the spark of pain that shot up his spine.

“Oh,” Bilbo muttered. He then started to notice all his aches and pains. When he started to shake from the amount of pain, the animals began scurrying about uneasily. Beorn frowned and gently laid Bilbo back into his pillows. “It hurts, everywhere,” he wheezed, suddenly floored by the pain.

“I have some poppy milk for you to drink and some salve for your burns--”

“Burns?!” Bilbo exclaimed as he winced. The giant man gave him a sad look and turned up the end of his bedding to show the bandages running down the course of his shins and wrapping around his feet. With ease and gentleness Bilbo had only seen Beorn use with the animals, he held up Bilbo’s right leg and started to peel back the protective layer of cloth. What happened next Bilbo couldn’t fully recall, because he passed out from the sight of the burns. And he thought he had moved past fainting at things, though Beorn assures him it was the pain.
It took several intensive days of broths, soft foods, sipping water, and sleep before Bilbo could really stay awake for more than a few hours but even those waking hours were hazy from the pain reducers Beorn fed him.

“How have you been since the battle?” Beorn asked him one day when he brought lunch over. “You must have enjoyed relaxing after all that you did at Erebor.” He set the tray of food over Bilbo’s legs. “I didn’t do much at Erebor, just talked my way out death a few times while avoiding being burnt to crisp or shot with an arrow,” the Hobbit muttered as he set aside the human sized book he had been reading.

“Of course you did a lot, little bunny!” Beorn’s naturally loud voice boomed. He plopped down into a chair by Bilbo’s bedside. “Bilbo--”

“Don’t.” He shook his head in warning. “I have won Erebor back, but it will never be for me.” Beorn sat silently beside him. “No, there is no place for a wayward hobbit like myself.”

“What has happened to lead you to a life on the road?” Bilbo gave him a quizzical look. “You had numerous holes and dirt rubbed into the clothes you were brought to me in. Your smell was masked by soot. Gandalf also stopped for a visit. He was looking for you.”

“Me?” sputtered the Hobbit. “When was this?”

The chair beneath Beorn groaned as the man sagged back into it. “Around three months ago he came through, wondering if I had seen you since the battle. Told him you spent the winter with me.” He shrugged. “Then I told him I had not seen you since. I knew something was off because he entered my lands from the west where you hail from.” Beorn gave Bilbo a wide neutral stare. “What’s the cause of your travels, small friend?”

Sucking in a long breath, Bilbo collected his thoughts. Beorn had become such a good friend over that first winter that he had actually stayed well into spring and summer. They had spent their time tending the gardens and animals. Many of the skills Bilbo had come to use on his travels in the past few years had mainly come from Beorn’s careful instruction. Little Bunny was now a term of friendly endearment, even if it had taken three months for Bilbo to finally give into the name. “I’m quite lost,” he started. “Gandalf warned me the very first night he came with the Dwarves I wouldn’t return the same.”

“But?” prompted Beorn.

“I--Bilbo Baggins never...never really returned. He was lost in the battle...at least I think.” He shook his head. “My new family, my new friends, they cast me out without a word against the gold madness that ran so terribly deep in Thorin.”

Beorn growled. “What did the greedy Dwarf King do?” His voice had dropped to a snarl and Bilbo could feel the rumble of a building roar waiting to spout forth from the skinchanger.

Bilbo waved his hand in general dismissal to try to put his friend at ease. “He succumbed to the gold sickness that laid within his line, but I’ve found that wasn’t entirely his fault.” Beorn snorted. “No, no, hear me out. The Ring I carried was the One, created by the evilest being Arda faced head on. It has the power to manipulate those around it, to instill and grow the darker ideas of desire for power, wealth, you name it. I was around him, with the blasted thing in my pocket.”

“You believe it influenced the gold sickness in him to a greater degree, then?”

“Yes, which is why I can’t hate Thorin for banishing me. I also snuck out behind his back. Even in
the throes of madness he still believed me to be on his side.” Bilbo sighed. “Though in the sickness I never thought for a moment it was Thorin. Just some evil creature controlling his body and Bilbo wanted nothing more than to protect his good friend.” He blinked back his tears. “I--Bilbo was banished and I knew the dark creature that ruled Thorin’s body would get him killed so we went to battle.” Subconsciously he rubbed his temple that had been nearly smashed in, the scar hidden mostly by his curls but a small thin gash line had continued across a third of his forehead. “I killed and killed and killed and then,” he paused, “Azog. He was going to kill them.” His voice cracked. “I just--he didn’t even see me coming till the last second.”

Nodding, Beorn said, “You were a valiant fighter. I witnessed Azog’s beheading. He knew true fear in his last moments.”

Unclutching the blankets in his hands Bilbo made a noise of discontentment. “I don’t know what happened really during that day. It’s all,” he tried to find the right words staring at his shaking hands, “a blur. Like I was detached from my body. I wasn’t Bilbo Baggins of the Shire anymore I was...” he tilted his head. “A warrior? A killer? I--I just wasn’t--”

“You?”

“I wasn’t considered a friend, or foe, I wasn’t dead or pierced through, I just was.” He let his hands flop into his lap again. “The Shire even, my home for 50 years, a bland and far too quiet land only filled with the whispers of gossip and the groggy mumblings of drunk Hobbits. After seeing so much chaos in the world, it was as if I was constantly dreaming. The peace was too unsettling, I had to leave. For even the Hobbits there said I was not Bilbo Baggins anymore! So I upped and left, I’ve been trying to find who I am ever since.”

“This weighs heavily on your soul, little bunny.”

Bilbo clenched the bed sheets with a tight grip. “It does.” His voice was cracking, “It hurts.”

Beorn eyed where the the bruises around Bilbo’s neck where Gollum had tried to choke the Hobbit still were. Gently, the oversized man place a calloused hand on Bilbo’s shoulder. “You,” he shook Bilbo’s shoulder a little, “have saved us all. No matter what you feel like or call yourself now. Twice you have ended a great strife that has plagued the innocent. You are Kingsaver, The Defiler's End, Dragon Talker, Ringbearer, Wizard Taunter,” Bilbo smiled at that, “Eater of Many Potatoes.” They both laughed. “And my friend,” Beorn finished warmly, “you have quite a tale to tell, little bunny.”

“That’s the thing, though. Who’s going to believe that? A Hobbit, a small creature whom many outside of the Shire do not even know of, took a gold ring that was just a tiny thing as well, and I just walked into Mordor.” He cleared his throat. “More of a dash really but nonetheless I went through the front door.”

Beorn threw his head back with an uproarious laughter. “I’m glad your humor has not left you, your soul is weary but time I think time shall heal all your ailments.”

“Time,” Bilbo hummed. “I think, it is time I return to the Shire, just for a little bit.” He wiggled his fingers atop the blanket covering him. “Visit my nephew. I should pen him a letter,” he mumbled.

“Your homelands will heal you faster than mine will, but it’ll be awhile yet before you can stand. For now,” the great man stood up, “stay as long as you like. You are always welcome in my lands.”

The white bandages did stay on Bilbo’s legs for much of the winter he stayed at Beorn’s. There were days when the scabs would drive him to near insanity but salves and soaks in warm water eased his pain. When his hands didn’t shake so violently he sent forth a letter by bird out toward the Shire,
destined for Frodo.

The letter, however, would never make it into the faunt’s hands.

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“That is an outrageous amount of money for those supplies!”

Bilbo jolted from his reverie, and dropped the potato he had been inspecting.

“It’s not our fault if you cannot pay for the supplies, Lady.” Bilbo’s keen Hobbit ears picked up on the conversation a few stalls down by the edge of the market. In the past few years Bilbo had seen a Dwarf here or there, perhaps in the distance as a caravan, but looking up from the food stall he was at, he realized there were quite a few Dwarves in the market of the Ettenmoors.

“100 coins for such a small load of supplies is hardly worth getting!” the Dwarf, more specifically the Dwarrowdam, whose voice has raised above the market bustle, had caught Bilbo’s attention. She was no taller than Ori in height but she carried her person as if she were as tall and imposing as Dwalin.

“Well, if you’re like your kin going East to the Mountain, I’m sure you’ll have plenty of riches awaiting you,” sneered the man. Ah, thought Bilbo, they were from the caravans of Ered Luin.

“But if you can’t pay now, there are other ways going about paying for goods,” a man said from a near by crate. He gestured obscenely to his loins. A few of the other men laughed or made a noise of disgust.

“Oh, this won’t end well,” muttered Bilbo with cynicism as he started to make his way over to the end of the row. Bilbo’s ears kept up with the conversation as he passed a group of haggling adults.

“Are’t they a furry kind of creature?” another merchant supply said. He could see the Lady Dwarf ready to give the men a taste of the blades by her sides. “I mean, c’mon, even the ladies have beards.” Oh, there would be blood on the ground soon, mused Bilbo, but it would do no good for the Dwarves and Men to be at ends with one another. That was always a disaster.

However, let it be known that Dwarrowdams are by no means pushovers, they were just as fierce and stubborn as any male Dwarf. Their temper, however, might be a bit shorter and Bilbo could tell when Dwarves were on the edge of their rope. And when it came to the end of that, axes were sure to fly soon.

“I will pay,” Bilbo stepped up to the side of them both, “only 60 gold coins for the supplies, boys.” He nodded to the supplies, ignoring the dual glares. “And you and I,” he waved his hand between himself and the man, “both know that’s more than fair. Fair enough to which I think you can personally deliver the goods to the caravan. Without too much trouble either.” His voice was light, and he wore a amiable grin, however his hand rested loosely on Sting’s hilt and his sharp pointed look could cut through iron. He honestly had no idea what he was doing bluffing his way into buying supplies he didn’t even know about, but he held his smile against the withering looks directed his way.

The head merchant hesitated, for Bilbo himself was not a stranger to the town. He had often come through the Ettenmoors in his previous crossings of the Misty Mountains. His first visit he had shown a group of bandits he wasn’t meant to be taken for a pushover. “Yes, of course.” The man reached out and shook Bilbo’s hand. “That’s a reasonable deal.”

“You’ll receive the other half of the payment upon delivery,” Bilbo said, before he released the
man’s hand. He pulled out a small coin purse and pressed it into the man’s hand. With a stiff nod and a not too concealed huff, the man spun on his heel and stalked away.

When Bilbo turned to face the Dwarrowdam she was not pleased. Her hands were crossed over her chest and she had a sharp, amber colored glare fixed on him. She had no beard but long side burns that were braided up into her hair to where the braids continued to a back clasp. She had another set of braids in the back completing what Bilbo knew to be the four Durin braids. In that instant Bilbo knew who this Dwarrowdam was before she even spoke.

“Not that I am unhappy or ungrateful about the supplies or lack of blood, Halfing, but I have to ask, what is your ulterior motive?” This was Dís, sister of Thorin, and mother of Fíli and Kíli, Princess of Erebor.

“I have no underlying motives, not of any nature.” Bilbo tried to reassure her, but she still looked unconvinced.

She raised an eyebrow. “60 gold coins spent on people you don’t know and you have no ulterior motive? Master Hobbit, I am no fool in the ways of the world,” she gestured to the grimy men behind her, “and I do not like to find myself in someone’s debt.”

“Well,” Bilbo started, and instantly the she-dwarf tensed, “I am rather fond of stories. I don’t suppose you have a few you could impart upon a Hobbit?” His smile was honest and he knew he caught her off guard; Dwarves, he had learned with his time with the Company, were naturally suspicious of everyone not of their species, for kindness had not been something readily given to them. “Besides, gold doesn’t mean much to me. Too heavy to carry around.”

Her look of distrust turned incredulous. “And yet, Master Hobbit, you carry enough to feed a large caravan of dwarves. Where might I ask, did you get such a hoard?”

“Troll Cave,” he replied honestly. Her eyes lit up in surprise. “It’s a dingy, dreadful smelling place, but there’s plenty of treasure under the muck. If you know where to look of course. I don’t like to go there often as you might imagine the putrid smell is really not something pleasant, so I just took what I could.”

“You are,” she scrutinized him up and down, “the oddest creature I have met.”

“I assure you that I could name a few stranger,” he said as her gaze found the curling burns on his feet and legs. Her eyes met his, brow still pinched in confusion and a bit of wonder.

“I’m sure you could indeed, Master Hobbit. Well,” she uncrossed her arms and started to circle him, “your price is stories then?” Bilbo nodded and waited as she finished circling him. She had noticed his worn clothes, the burns and frays in the bottom of his pants, still yet to be replaced, the careful stitches on the backpack to ensure it wouldn’t break open again, smells of smoke on the blue oversized jacket, oddly edged with ridiculous lace, sleeves rolled up to accommodate the Hobbit’s stature, and a large belt to hold it closed. His hands were weathered and rough, scars littered everywhere told her of many scuffles and fights, from what she didn’t know. She saw all of this and more in a few moments, but what told her she could trust him was the open face he wore and how he met her eyes unafraid and bold. “By the looks of it you have quite a few good stories as well.” She gestured to him. Bilbo looked down at himself.

“I don’t clean up very well now do I?” he tugged on the end of his pant legs.

“Nah, you’ll fit right in.” She waved him off, a small smile on her face.
“Fit in with what?” It was Bilbo’s turn to be confused.

“My people. After all, stories are best told over food and I think a meal is the least we can do for you.” She tilted her head to the men sorting out supplies.

“Ah, that’s very kind of you.”

“Master Hobbit, Mistress Dwarf.” The merchant leader who had struck the deal came back. “Where is the caravan situated?”

“On the north-eastern edge of town.”

“Up by the forest clearing?”

“Yes,” she nodded sharply, “just a little ways south.”

The man nodded. “We’ll follow you when you’re ready then.”

She turned to Bilbo. “Do you have anything else you need to get?”

“Nothing I can’t get tomorrow. I was planning on heading out west again today, but I’m not on any time schedule.” Tilting her head in admission she gestured for all the men to follow her.

The supplies were delivered to small camp of 20 and Bilbo though it was a rather small group but once the men were gone the Dwarves jumped up and carried the supplies further in along a path up to a waterfall where the real camp was. New supplies were well received among the dwarves back at the caravan. There were a lot more than Bilbo had thought, he vaguely wondered as he watched the men unload the supplies if that was enough. He turned to ask Dís if they need more but she had already veered off to direct distribution. A gaggle of giggles was Bilbo’s only warning before something crashed into the back of Bilbo.

“Oh sorry, mister,” the dwarfling apologized. He or she, it was a bit more difficult to tell the children apart, had brilliant red hair.

“That’s alright.” Bilbo smiled down at them.

“Ha!” Another slightly older dwarfling with brown hair crashed into the littler one, making both of them fall onto the dirt. “You’re captured now!”

“Ugh,” the littlest one smacked their head on to the ground. “No fair.”

“Yes fair, it’s not my fault you weren’t paying attention to where you were running,” the elder said before huffing. “Besides you always stink at being the Dwarf King.”

Bilbo tilted his head a little a curious little smile creeping onto his face. “What are you playing?”

“The Road to Erebor!” the brunette exclaimed. “I’m the Elven King Thranduil, can’t you tell by my flower crown?” Bilbo held back a laugh.

“Yeah and I’m T’orin Oakenshield!” The littlest gave a toothy grin, only missing their front two teeth. He thrust up his bundle of sticks Bilbo assumed to be Orcrist. He couldn’t believe the story of the journey had reached the western colonies.

“Wait, Embur, he might not know who that is,” the second said glumly.

“He looks like the Hobbit momma read about, Regmur.” Marvel already started to spark up behind
young eyes. “Are you a Hobbit?” Bilbo’s eyes crinkled in mirth.

Though the question went unanswered. “Who on Arda are you two talking to?” A plump and sturdy Dwarrowdam came walking over, a babe on her hip. She was stout and imposing with all the traits of a mother as she all but marched up to him.

“Now, Brendi,” Dís came over, “he’s the one who purchased our supplies. Brendi, this is Master——” she gestured toward Bilbo and stopped. “Oh, How rude of me,” Dís said, “I haven’t properly introduced myself.” She held herself up high and proud, like a true member of the royal line of Durin. “I’m Dís, daughter of Thrór. At your service, Master Hobbit.” She bowed low. The children whispered excitedly to each other. A real Hobbit was in their midst. Even Brendi seemed to straighten up a little.

“Mhn,” he straightened up, disappointed in himself for forgetting his manners. “Sting,” he said before bowing as well, “At your service, Lady Dís.”

“Sting?” she deadpanned. “What kind of name is that?”

Bilbo looked affronted. “It’s my name!” Dis snorted but her face had a small smile on it. Aloofly, she waved her hand as she shrugged. “Whatever you wish it to be, Halfling.”

“Oi!”

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Dinner with dwarves was always a merry affair even in the dank woods, so it was no surprise when after being told he was the provider of the food he was quite literally snatched in by his blue lapels and given a mug with a hearty slap on the back.

Brendi, as it turned out, was the wife of Bombur and she could cook as well as he, better even, if he dare say. The elder Dwarves there were a fountain of tales. Most were spoken in Khuzdul in which Bilbo didn’t let on he knew broken bits and pieces of. When Dís spoke of how it was rumoured Dwarves were born out of holes in the ground that led into Bilbo telling them the tale of the Old Took.

“I have a story to top all your shenanigans and golfer Took stories!” boasted Dís as the laughter died down from one of Bilbo’s stories about his cousins Meriadoc and Peregrin and their many unintentional disasters. “One that is not just legend or ancient history. Dwarves that had gathered around the area shushed each other. Bilbo had a feeling they knew what was coming. ‘Tis a true story. The greatest of our Kingdom! One filled with molten forges, a terrible sickness, a war of all wars!”

“The Bravest Hero who faced down the Elves!” Embur cried pumping up her little fist.

“You are forgetting the the greatest evil ever!” shouted Regmur. “The Giant Wyrm Smaug!” He rose up both his hands and rawred. Bilbo was flabberghasted, he had not expected this tale to crop up, but he supposed it did make for a great story, after all he had found it appropriate to write it all down.

“Yes, far across the hostile terrain of Middle-Earth, Master Hobbit, lies a single peak, rising far above the others.”

“Erebor!” came the whispered awe of the children. Bilbo’s lips twitched into a smile. Their faces he knew would light up like the sun once they first laid eyes on the mountain.
“Yes!” confirmed Dís as she scooped up Embur and settled the lass on one of her legs. “This is the greatest story of not only our kingdom but of the Age! Thirteen dwarves--”

“And a wizard!” Embur exclaimed.

“And a hobbit by the name of Bilbo Baggins.”

Bilbo’s eyebrows shot up. “A--a hobbit?” Bilbo couldn’t help but stutter. He never thought word of his contributions to the Company would be passed on. “Are you sure? They don’t leave the Shire all too easily.”

Dis smiled. “Have you looked at yourself, Master Hobbit?” Bilbo flushed. “But, yes, my sons tell me he was a hobbit, furry toed creature and all, came from a place called Bag End apparently. Cozy, they described it. My sons don’t know if he made it back.”

“How come?”

“My oaf of a brother, King of all idiots under the Mahal Mountain, banished him.”

“Excuse me, what?”

“My brother, Thorin Oakenshield, the new King of Erebor,” she rolled her eyes at Bilbo’s shocked expression, “fell under the sickness that has plagued our line for generations. The Dragon sickness.”

“I don’t know if you should be telling anyone who you’re not related to—”

“Don’t give me that.” She waved him off easily. “You have an honest face, and you’re the only one who doesn’t cower.”

“I’m so blessed,” deadpanned Bilbo before he took another gulp of his rather strong beer. The other chuckled and Regmur scrambled to sit by him.

Dis smacked Bilbo’s shoulder. “Anyways, all that gold went to my brother’s head and he refused the Men of Laketown their share that Smaug had pillaged from them, and the Elves came to support the Men.” She stopped and sighed, staring into her cup.

“What happened? Did a fight break out?”

“Oh yes, Master Hobbit.” The children nodded furiously with Dís. “A fight did break out but not the one you think would have happened.”

Bilbo sat silently, waiting to hear what Fili and Kili had said. He would have been lying if he said he hadn’t been nervous. Fili had wanted him to stay, but Bilbo hadn’t been too sure if he knew all that had transpired between him and Thorin.

“Bilbo,” she started with a laugh, “had apparently found the Arkenstone. When Thorin refused gold to the Men and Elves,” he noticed she could say Elves without disdain or malice, “he snuck down, a burglar in the night, and gave the stone freely to them to bargain with Thorin for a share. A fourteenth,” she laughed louder, “of all the riches in Erebor and he gave it up so willingly, all for their sakes.”

“Their sakes?”

“They had been threatened with a siege.” She didn’t need prompting to go on. “Thorin almost threw the poor hobbit over a cliff face in his anger. Called him Betrayer.” Bilbo couldn’t help but flinch.
“Banished him. Told him, if he saw him again,” she looked up to the stars above, “he’d kill him.”

Bilbo stared down at the ale in his cup, a white knuckled grip on the sturdy cup to hide his shakes and quakes.

“I hope I can meet him some day.” Bilbo looked up in surprise, Dis still looking at the stars. “I owe him my thanks for preventing my brother’s earlier death. Although,” she chuckled darkly, “there might be a new Queen under the Mountain when I get a hold of the King next.”

Unable to help himself, Bilbo smiled. Dís was a Dwarf not to piss off. At this, many had left their Princess to her story telling and inevitable seething. She took a small stone out of her pocket and flipped it into the air. It caught the firelight and with keen Hobbit eyes, Bilbo saw the exact rune carvings that Kili’s had.

“Like the stone?” She caught and tossed it to him and he barely caught it without spilling his tankard over. It was warm in his hands despite not being handled much by the Dwarrowdam. “Feel its warmth?”

“Yes, how does that happen?” Setting aside his drink Bilbo finally got a close up look of the stone he’d seen Kili toss up and down for months.

“It’s actually a stone from Erebor by the hot springs that naturally well up there. It’s perpetually warm by the natural magic in it. My mother gave that to me when I was really little. It’s a protection charm. It saved me the day the Dragon came and I passed it down to my youngest, Kili, when he went with Fili and Thorin to reclaim the mountain. He sent it back to me before I started my journey in order to keep me safe.” She smiled affectionately at the stone handed back to her.

“The Misty Mountains are a dangerous place; I’ve crossed them several time these past few years. You’re smart in passing up here.”

Dís perked up. “Have you traveled up North here?”

“Yes, I’ve actually only traveled up through the Moors here. Much safer and faster than heading south around the bend to the Gap of Rohan. Though I have been down there too, only once, but I imagine much too far out of your way to reach Erebor.”

Steepling her hands, she leaned into closer to Bilbo. “I hate to ask Master Hobbit, since you seem to be going the opposite way of us, but this is the last caravan of my people to Erebor and we have a lot of the older folk with us.” She swallowed reflexively. “I have a map, but I would feel a lot better if we had a guide through these parts. We could pay you.”

He gave her a curious look. “Haven’t your people been through these lands before?”

Dís nodded. “Yes, but each caravan has been attacked by stray Orc or Spider colonies. Though I was informed about two weeks ago the spiders are no longer a problem but the Orcs know this is an easy route for us to go through and they’ve gotten bolder in their attacks. I’d like to be in the best position possible if such a thing were to befall the caravan.”

“I can get you through the Moors and Mountains but beyond the Woodland Realm I have no knowledge of what lies there,” he lied.

“Any help would be appreciated; I assume you’re skilled with that shortsword of yours.”

Bilbo looked to his elven hilt. Here he was again, asked once more to help a group of Dwarves. Here was the last of Durin’s line, yet to be reunited with their home. Dís must have thought he was uneasy
of the prospects of Orcs for she spoke up again.

“If you don’t feel easy guiding us—”

“No,” he interjected, “it’s not that.” A wry smile found its way onto his features. “I’ve fought Orcs before, Goblins, and the like. I was just thinking, it’s been along time since you’ve been home, hasn’t it?”

“It has.” She sat up a little. “So long my boys who are barely of age never saw a single pathway of Erebor and we live much longer than your kind.”

Bilbo nodded in understanding. “Well, I will help you get home to your boys.” He owed them that at least, making sure the last of their family made it back safely. “Family is to be treasured above all else.” Out of habit he brought out Frodo’s handkerchief, it had been with him though everything. One corner was slightly singed, and the cream color was wilting, but the blue stayed as vibrant as ever, the bold F.B. still neatly embroidered on a corner. He ran his thumb over the letters soothingly. Just a little while longer, Bilbo silently promised the faunt.

“F. B. are those your real initials?” His head rose up and found himself on the receiving end of the Princess’ intense but neutral stare.

“Ah, no.” Bilbo quirked a smile at her. Fondly he said, “This is a parting gift. The initials are actually my nephew’s. Frodo Baggins.”

Her eyes lit up in surprise.

Chapter End Notes

In other news. I WAS PARTIALLY RIGHT ABOUT HOBBITS AND THEIR SENSES. (among a few other small things) /slams textbook down and walks out of room/
A horn blast rumbled deep into Erebor, shaking the King Under the Mountain out of his concentration with the papers in front of him, not that he had really had much anyways. Standing up, Thorin gave a grunt, his back cracking from the abuse of hunching over the desk since breakfast. A soft knock came at his door and he turned to see Balin poking his head in, hesitant and nervous Thorin could tell. That was worrisome in itself as the older dwarf never lost his calm nerve.

“Balin.” He nodded in acknowledgment, grabbing his crown from a drawer. “What is cause for the horns?”

“The Grey Wizard has returned,” was the tepid reply. This was...most unexpected. Gandalf had stayed to help negotiate terms between the new King Under the Mountain, Bard, and Thranduil. After those particularly painful weeks Gandalf had asked him if he had seen Bilbo. Just receiving the Arkenstone merely minutes ago brought back unpleasant memories of betrayal and he had snapped at the wizard, more or less growling that the only business he had with the Halfling was to throttle him for making him barter for his birthright. To say Gandalf was livid would have been the biggest understatement of Thorin’s life. After much thunderous yelling, shaking the very stone halls of the mountain, Gandalf swore he wouldn’t step forth into Erebor again until the “Idiot Under the Mountain” realized his perception of the Hobbit was a mistake and apologized to said Hobbit. Not that Thorin could have anyways, for Bilbo Baggins had left weeks earlier at the start of negotiations. They didn’t even know if the Hobbit had come unscathed from the battle. Bofur and Dwalin had seen the Hobbit on the battlefield. They only knew he lived because Fili had told them that he had bid the Hobbit farewell. He refused to speak about what had been said, even to Kili. He had only described the lackluster look in the Hobbit’s eyes right before he left. However, the brief period of silence directed at his Uncle once he was well had been telling enough. Thorin had a lot to repent for toward his heirs. They hadn’t heard from him in years.

Though there had been a raise of hope when Kili came up to him after their meeting in Rohan and exclaimed to him Bilbo had been definitely been spotted around the area. He told them all Prince Théoden had told Kili, which wasn’t much but enough to get the Company riled and wanting to scour the city. It had attracted the attention of the wizard, who gave Kili a curious look. He had asked him how long ago this had been. Kili had deflated with words that Bilbo had headed south in spring. Spring. They had missed him by months, and Bilbo was long and far-gone. To imagine he had been there that very winter Thorin had toasted to his deeds. A hollow feeling was left in his chest. Gandalf had just nodded at the news solemnly and left them without so much of a word or reprimand.

So Thorin had no idea what to make of this visit Gandalf was bestowing upon them. Fastening his fur cloak a little tighter he followed his advisor down the refurbished and gleaming halls. Upon entering the throne room, he saw already the Company was greeting the wizard happily. They had seen the wizard at the meeting in Rohan not more than a few months ago, but they knew as well the promise Gandalf had sworn to uphold against Thorin. Many were taking their turns to hug the tall being, but what caught Thorin’s eye, as well as his eldest nephew’s, was a little child hiding in the back folds of the grey robes.

Kneeling down by Gandalf’s side Fili smiled. “Well, who is this?” asked Fili in a voice Kili knew all
too well. It was one reserved for little dwarflings, and he caught on to whom his brother was talking to. It was a child, not a dwarfling, but a Hobbit youngling, if the furry patches on the top of their feet were anything to go by.

“It’s a Hobbit child!” Kili exclaimed, tilting his head to the side in question as he circled Gandalf to inspect his brother’s find.

“They are called fauntlings, Master Kili,” corrected Gandalf as he let go of Bofur.

“Kili?” This was the child speaking, soft and curious. “You’re Kili?” he--the Princes were sure it was a boy--questioned the young heir. The older dwarves blinked in surprise, noticing the faunt for the first time. It seemed all Hobbits truly did have the tendency to go unnoticed.

“Yeah, my name is Kili. This is my brother--”

“Fili,” finished the child. The dwarves were surprised.

“Yes, my name is Fili.” Both brothers give a low bow. “At your service, Master Hobbit.”

Confirming their names seemed to have given the child confidence because he came out from behind Gandalf, and many dwarves gaped. Tight black curls adorned the child’s head and despite the piercing blue eyes, they could see a likeness to their Burglar in the child’s features.

“You are Gloin,” he pointed to the bushy bearded, redhead dwarf, “and Oin,” his finger switching to the oldest dwarf. “Bombur.” The roundest of them all, quickly the child’s eyes scanned them.

“Bifur.” The name came out sounding more like a sneeze. “Bofur.” The dwarf tipped his hat to the Hobbit. “Nori,” he said, a smile lighting up his features the more nods he got. “Dori.” The dwarf straightened up a bit. “Ori.” The faunt smiled at the knit covered dwarf. “Balin.” The elder nodded. “Dwalin.” By now the little Hobbit was smiling at his streak of naming them correctly. Then he turned to the King; Thorin saw his eyes flicker to his crown before looking at him directly. It had to be unnatural for someone so small to be able to make the mighty Thorin Oakenshield feel pinned down by a near matching set of eyes, and the child’s smile fell. “Thorin,” he finished quietly.

Unable to find his voice, Thorin settled for swallowing and giving the lad a small nod. Young, brilliant blue eyes, sparkling with an innocence and curiosity he hadn’t seen in many years. Not since a honey golden pair that had belonged to, what Thorin presumed was the child’s father, Bilbo Baggins. Was this why Bilbo hadn’t spoken to them? Had he a family back in the Shire now? Why was the child here? Many questions swarmed the King’s mind and apparently many others, for they were speechless as well.

“My, my, wee laddie.” Balin smiled at the faunt. He was always good at taking shocking events in stride. “You seem to know us, but who might you be?”

“Oh.” The child smacked his forehead, mumbling something about manners. It was hard not to smile when the child straightened up stiffer than a wooden plank, hands placed behind his back, trying to replicate looking serious, as much as one young as him could pull off anyways. “Frodo Baggins, at your service.” Frodo dipped low, curls bouncing in the air. Gandalf was openly amused at the shocked faces on the dwarves.

“Frodo.” Bofur tested the name. “Nice hobbit-y name.” The emphasis did not go unnoticed by the Company. The pit in Thorin’s gut grew. Galadriel’s vision was still ringing clear in his head.

“What are you doing with Bilbo’s son, Gandalf?” questioned Dori. He had seen the resemblance to the Burglar too.
“Bilbo’s not in trouble is he?” piped up Ori, shuffling around nervously.

Frodo’s mood change was instantaneous. Within a few rapid blinks bright eyes turned dark and stormy. Tiny shoulders hunched over like the weight of the mountain overhead was directly upon them. Small little sobs started to echo in the hall. Before Gandalf could touch the child, Fili scooped him up and held him close, big brother mode kicking in just as fast as any mothering instinct Dori could inflict on Ori. Gentle shushes left the blonde’s lips on small bursts of air as he bounced Frodo.

“What has happened, Gandalf?” There was his voice. Thorin came forward, his eyes shifting between the endearing image of his nephew comforting Bilbo’s child and the weary wizard.

“After meeting Prince Théoden I was curious as to how he knew my name, but when he spoke of Bilbo being in Rohan I was curious as to why he would have been so far out from Hobbiton. Radagast and I traveled to Saurman’s domain and found it in ruins.” The wizard’s face was grave. “Something foul had been brewing there but what ever it was- gone, destroyed. By what I do not know. We searched for Saurman, but he was not to be found.” Gandalf tried to keep the worry form his voice.

“What sort of foulness was he brewing?” Balin asked, narrowing his eyes. They didn’t need to deal with another war.

“That I’m afraid, not even I know. Just that it ended in ruins.” He tapped his fingers over his closed fist. “Though I have requested the White Council to come and investigate it’s still unclear. But, no matters to concern yourself with. Erebor is still recovering.” He nodded firmly. Many weren’t reassured by that but let the Wizard continue his tale. “From there I headed to Rivendell. I assumed, if Bilbo had been on the roads, he would of at least spent some time there.” Gandalf paused and shook his head.

“They haven’t seen him since when?” Ori asked.

“Since your visit to Rivendell.” His voice was low. “Lord Elrond was surprised at that as well and I wasn’t even sure he had made it home till I got into Hobbiton. The Old Gaffer told me Bilbo I found s young faunt in Bag End’s garden. You can imagine my surprise when I heard he was Frodo Baggins.” The dwarves nodded and Frodo whimpered into Fili’s shoulder. “ He was miserable and I asked why he wasn’t with his Uncle well- I just made things worse.” Bifur furiously signed to Gandalf.

“Very astute Master Bifur, Bilbo was indeed not there. Hadn’t been for months, and I thought well--he’s very close to Bilbo so-”

“So you took a child halfway across this Valar forsaken land?” deadpanned Dwalin, looking quite off put and ready to tear Gandalf into bits.

“I knew he wouldn’t be here!” wailed Frodo, cutting off any would be fight. Fili’s shirt was in his clutches, a wet stain already present on his shoulder. He looked directly at Thorin. “He isn’t here because he’s banished!” Te turned back into Fili’s neck. “He’s too kind to come back here even though he should be allowed. He did nothing wrong. Nothing! He saved--” Sobs started to overtake his speech. “He saved you all.” Fili leveled his uncle with the same look he gave Thorin in his brief period of angered silence before pacing around the room trying to soothe the fauntling.

Gloin and Bombur frowned at the crying child, the father in them wanting to go and comfort Frodo themselves. It was Gloin who spoke up, “How does the lad know this?”

“Well, it seems Master Frodo has pestered every detail he could out of Bilbo…” the wizard trailed
off. Narrowing his eyes, Thorin took a few more steps closer.

“What aren’t you telling us?” Balin asked.

“Before I answer that,” Gandalf sighed and looked at Frodo, “has Bilbo been back here since the battle?”

“No.” Thorin shook his head. “Fili was the last to see him after the battle died down. He was already leaving.”

A high-pitched whine cut through the air, startling them all. Thorin realized it was Frodo and the boy was flailing around in Fili’s arms who was failing to contain the Hobbit, Kili looking on helplessly right next to them.

“Please don’t take me back to Brandybuck Hall, Mr. Gandalf!” Frodo shook his head, furiously clutching onto Fili’s shirt. “I’m always left alone there! The nights are dark and cold, the shadows move! I promise I’ll be good and I don’t mind travelling! Maybe I can be your assistant, I just can’t go back! I can’t! The other fauntlings think I’m cursed and they won’t play…. First Bilbo, then mum and—” His words were no longer coherent, though they kept tumbling out.

Covering the few paces between them, Thorin came over to Fili and took the curly haired child. Even though Fili and Kili might be far beyond their years as dwarflings, comforting a child was as natural as walking. “Shush, little one.” He coaxed Frodo to lay his head down in the crook on his neck where there wasn’t any hard metal armor. He didn’t mind when tiny hands clutched his shirt and some hair accidentally. “You do not have to return if you don’t want to. I will not turn away a child in need.” Swaying side to side he kept murmuring into tiny pointed ears.

“Gandalf…” Kili started, “where is Bilbo? The last we heard of him was in Rohan. The young Prince Théoden told us he had been in the Men’s kingdom all winter.” Another bout of sobs came from the small faunt. Never before had the Company seen their tallest friend look so old and worn. They all waited as grey eyes scanned the vast room before sighing once more, leaning on his staff.

“Well, that is news to me for I’m afraid no one else has seen head or hair of Bilbo Baggins in nearly five years.”

A ripple of outcries and questions spouted from the dwarves instantly. Normally Gandalf would be pleased they had taken an interest in Bilbo’s well being, but it was far too late for that, many years too late.

“Did he make it back to the Shire?” Nori boldly asked. It had been something they all had wondered over the years, an itch that never really went away.

“Yes, he traveled back to the Shire. Alone,” Gandalf answered, stressing the last word. It had the desired effect and many flinched. “He spent a few months there after spending the winter and spring at Beorn’s. He had a few nasty, deep gashes, most of which he earned protecting you lot on the battlefield.” He paused and collected himself. “Anyways, it appears just before the winter after his return Mr. Baggins left Bag End. Though it was not discovered till spring because hardly any Hobbit ventured out as it was a rather harsh winter.” He looked around gauging their reactions. “Curtains were drawn and doors were locked, it wasn’t until an old friend of Bilbo’s came forward with his letter of departure that we knew what happened.”

“Where did he go? And why did he leave his youngin’ behind? That doesn’t seem like something Bilbo would do willingly..” interjected Kili. His brother and company nodded in agreement.
“Bilbo went to find his peace,” came the soft reply. Thorin looked down at the little ball of Hobbit who had resigned to rest against him, tears still silently pouring down his cheeks.

“Peace?” echoed Dori.

Frodo nodded and rubbed his eyes. “He was restless, always looking East or peeking around the halls of Bag End like he expected someone to surprise him.” Some of the Company flushed. “I don’t think he enjoyed the Shire life very much.”

“What do you mean?” asked Gandalf.

“Well, the older Hobbits don’t like him anymore. Not respectable they said. Going off in an instant, gone for over a year.” Frodo looked at Thorin sternly. “They thought he was dead!”

“Nothing can kill our Burglar!” Oin boasted. Many of the others cheered in agreement, but Frodo still deflated once more.

Thorin frowned at the little faunt, there seemed to be more than he was telling. “Was there anything else to indicate his unhappiness?”

Frodo shrugged, his mood fallen once more.

Thorin shifted Frodo on his hip. “Let’s go to the Commons Room; I’m sure you would like to rest and eat.” He gestured down the hall where the Company and their families lived. At the end of the hall was a common area they all gathered together in the evenings.

“I think that would be a splendid idea,” agreed Gandalf.

Food was brought in and everyone settled down around the large table meant to seat them all. Thorin sat at the head while the others sat where they pleased. Calmer now, Frodo examined Thorin. He let the child do so without a word; he could see the cogs turning in the little one’s head. Frodo huffed and let his head fall on the dwarf’s chest, muttering something inaudible. Thorin let it go. He remembered a time when Fili and Kili were tired and grumpy after traveling. It was best to let them work it out.

“Is it true?”

“Hm?” Thorin hummed, looking at Frodo. “Is what true?” The fauntling was touching and examining his braids. Frodo had such tiny hands; he wondered how old he was.

“About how you got your ep-epi-ep--" His little face contorted as he tried to pronounce a word.

“Epithet?” the King offered. Frodo nodded. “Oakenshield you mean?”


“Well, what do you know about it?” Thorin asked, setting up a plate for himself and Frodo.

“Uncle said he didn’t know all the details about Moria or...Az-anul-bi-zar.” He sounded it out very slowly.

Thorin smiled. “Very good pronunciation. How is that easier than epithet?”

“Bilbo said it was important I know how to say things in your tongue properly or I could insult someone.” All the dwarves at the table laughed.
“Ah, he would know that from personal experience,” Balin said with a merry twinkle in his eye.

“What else do you know about our adventure, little one?” Ori asked, tilting his head ever slightly to the side.

Huffing indignantly Frodo pouted. “I know a lot about your adventure. He told me about it every time I came to see him or asked about it.” Stopping his eating, Frodo tried to stop a few more tears from leaking out of his eyes.

Thorin looked down at the quiet faunt. “What’s wrong?”

“I miss him, a lot,” Frodo sniffled.

“I admit I miss him as well, little one.” Thorin tried to reassure Frodo he wasn’t alone in his sadness. He brought out a handkerchief--he’d gotten into the habit a few months after traders started to return to Erebor years ago. It had been on a whim, but he knew he hadn’t wanted to admit it was because of their Burglar’s moaning about missing his. They were quite handy, and great for tiny noses.

“I might not have been entirely truthful about hearing form Bilbo,” Gandalf said, putting down his fork.

“Has he contacted the elves?” Thorin asked, an edge of restraint in his voice. He knew Bilbo held a fondness for elves and with the way the dwarves had last treated him he couldn’t begrudge Bilbo for going to them, but old habits and hate were hard to let go of.

“No, in fact Lord Elrond has not seen him since his brief visit on his way back to the Shire.” Gandalf rooted through his pockets for some leaf to smoke. “So to hear dear Bilbo has been in Rohan means he’s avoided the elves on his way back East. Not even Thranduil or his patrol have seen him.”

“Bilbo has a knack of not being seen when he doesn’t want to,” Bofur said between mouthfuls of potatoes. He paused, swallowed, and pointed his fork at Gandalf. “Do you know about his little ring that turned him invisible?”

This question caused Gandalf to snort and choke on his dinner. Nori gave the wizard a few thumps on the back. “His ring?” He wiped his face and cleared his throat, looking rather startled.

“You never saw his little gold ring?”

“No, I certainly have not.” The wizard’s frazzled nature disturbed the dwarves.

“I’ve seen it,” Frodo’s small voice said. Eyes turned to the faunt settled on Thorin’s lap. “It’s just a plain gold band but I never saw him wear it, except on a necklace around his neck.” He stabbed a potato, which he seemed to prefer.

Ori leaned forward. “He never showed you how it worked?”

Frodo shook his head. “No, he kept it in a box once, but he didn’t like that so much so he went to wearing it on a leather strap.”

“Gandalf?” Thorin asked, staring at the wizard. “Galadriel’s vision. Could it be?”

“I do not know. Frodo has not let me touch his book.”

Frodo puffed out his chest, looking annoyed. “It’s my book. Bilbo never finished telling me his story and I haven’t read the ending yet.”
“The ending isn’t a pretty one, laddie,” Dwalin said. “Lots of anger, lots of blood, lots of death.”

“Lots of misjudgement,” Thorin added quietly.

Frodo turned to look at the dwarf King. “I know. Uncle told me not to be mad at you.”

“Uncle?” Dwalin parroted, interrupting the child. “Uncle Bilbo?” Frodo nodded. This child wasn’t Bilbo’s, thought Thorin. For some reason that lifted a weight off the King’s chest.

“Uncle sent me your story as a birthday present. He filled an entire big red book.” The faunt set his hand apart, much bigger than the small red book tucked into Thorin’s coat that very moment.

“I wonder if it could be his unabridged version!” Ori gleefully exclaimed.

“Unabridged?” Kili asked.

“This is wonderful news!” chimed Ori, a brilliant smile lighting up his face. “It would mean Bilbo may have written a longer version than the one we have! Would you happen to have it with you?” Frodo nodded tentatively. “May I borrow it for a few days, to translate it into Khuzdul? Many of our people can’t read Westron even if they speak it and they’ve been dying to hear the entire story!”

Frodo took a moment and silently pondered Ori’s request. It was the longest moment Ori had felt in a long time. Frodo could tell Ori’s emotions were genuine, but the book was his most prized possession. He nodded finally. “Uncle said reading was important…So I suppose, but I’m not letting you out of my sight with it!” Ori didn’t hesitate to agree.

“How did you come by the book of Bilbo’s, Frodo?” Kili asked.

“A ranger from Rohan came and delivered it to me. Uncle told me--” He trailed off.

Ranger from Rohan. Thorin caught Gandalf’s eye; that book was sent the same time Bilbo had been so close by.

“Told you what?” urged Fili.

“He had found another adventure.” There was obviously more, but the faunt didn’t look comfortable enough to talk about it.

So Thorin intervened. “When did you receive this gift?”

“September,” Frodo said idly, now picking at his food. “But I think his story was why he left.” Thorin could feel the small thumps of the Hobbit’s heels as he swung his legs back and forth.

Thorin blinked. “Why he left. The Shire?” Frodo nodded and pulled out the white handkerchief he still had, the big bold interlocked B’s in a corner.

Frodo let Thorin take the handkerchief and examine it. The green reminded him of the Hobbit’s front door he had knocked on the first night they met.

“I walked with him to the edge of town the morning he left.”

The dwarves and Gandalf stared at the child. “You never told me this, Frodo,” said the wizard.

“No one else knows it either,” mumbled Frodo. Picking at the small chain around his neck he
withdrew the necklace from within his shirt and produced a key. “He gave me Bag End that morning.” He fingered the key lightly like it was made of glass.

“That…can’t be. Why?” stuttered Dori. “Bag End was his home.”

“He spent half the trip dreaming about it,” Gloin gruffed out. Frodo didn’t look up, his lower lip was trembling and he was trying not to cry again.

Dwalin had had enough and picked the wee lad off Thorin’s lap and held him close, taking his cloth napkin and wiping the tears off his face. “Take heart, little one,” Dwalin said to Frodo, who wrinkled his nose after the napkin was taken away, “you’ve accomplished what your uncle has: you’ve crossed the plains and mountains of Arda and reached Erebor. That’s a grand feat in itself. It took thirteen dwarves, a Hobbit, and a wizard to get here and we barely made it to the doors alive.” He tilted his head to the company. “Though with less orcs and goblins I hope.”

Frodo giggled and nodded. “We stopped and saw the trolls.”

“Would you like to hear how Fili and Kili caused that?”

“Oi!” the Princes protested.

Frodo laughed and nodded, tugging on Dwalin’s shirt. “It’s my favorite story!”

Dwalin gave a toothy grin. “Well, Thorin was in a foul mood...” he began. Thorin huffed and the others laughed. Frodo smiled as Dwalin retold the fight of the orcs; Balin had to prevent his dear brother from using too many obscene words and the other interjected when they had a shining moment.

Frodo was contentedly asleep against Dwalin’s chest by the time he spoke of Gandalf cracking the giant stone. The dwarf didn’t have the heart to move Frodo so the dwarves and wizard all sat in relative silence as the night drew on. Smoke filled the air with the strong musky scent of the preferred dwarvish pipe weed. Lighting a fresh pipe, Gandalf took a deep breath, held it, and let out a steady stream of smoke that furled out into a running horse. “I think I shall pay a visit to the Prince of Rohan. See if he can tell me which way our wandering Hobbit has ventured toward,” the wizard finally said.

“We told you, the young prince said he headed--” started Gloin.

“Yes, I know what you told me, Master Gloin,” Gandalf huffed, “But I think there is more that Prince Théoden knows that he hasn’t spoken about. And King Thengal as well,” he added. There was a brief moment of silence. “I hate to take Frodo on the road again so soon, do you think we could rest here for a few days? For his sake.”

“Like I told the child before, Gandalf, I will not turn him away. A life on the road is not meant for children. I would ask that he remain here, if he should wish it.”

Taking his pipe out and blowing a long stream of white smoke, Gandalf appraised Thorin. Certainly Frodo was a curious child, and having willing caretakers would benefit him very much. However, “Can you promise me no harm will come to Frodo. That scorn will not fall upon him because he is a Hobbit?”

“If you had been here on the fourth anniversary of the battle,” started Thorin, leveling Gandalf with the same look the wizard was giving him, “you would have wept for joy with the progress of alliances between Men, Dwarves, and Elves. Bilbo is not an unsung hero; you can hear ballads of his triumphs and peril resonating in these dwarvish halls. He will be cared for and treated kindly. You
have my word and my crown as promise.”

A chuckle came from Gandalf, then a few more. The wizard beamed at Thorin. “I am happy to hear those words, Thorin Oakenshield. You have come far and learned much, though it might have taken a few orc maces to the face.” Thorin ducked his head, the others chuckling. “If Frodo Baggins wishes to stay in your company while I am out, then he may stay.”

Chapter End Notes

IM SO SORRY FOR LATE LATE UPDATE!!

This semester has been…eventful. Being a Teacher’s Assistant, working a Fashion Show, my own classes, death in the family, I apologize for the long wait. I’ve also reconstructed the entire ending of this story to have a few more chapters and a bit more in depth exploration of the many characters we have. But goodness me I’ve past the year marker point and I’m not sure what to do with myself about that.

Thank you to the readers who wait so patiently for every chapter, I really do this for you. And thank you to the rather large influx of new readers! I hope to pick up the pace now that my school is over. I hope you enjoyed the new chapter!

End Notes

This is my first multi-chapter fic I shall attempt. Sweet mother of pearl I hope I can finish this.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!