Lost My Way

by elluvias

Summary

Bilbo Baggins was a respectable hobbit of the Shire. He knew the world was nothing at all like his home. He had grown up suitably warned about how Outsiders would view him. So why did he run out his door?

Notes

This was written as a weird thought of 'what if hobbits were in their own way more progressive than dwarves in terms of gender and sexuality?'. I wholly place most of the blame for this idea on hobbitdragon's beautifully thoughtful work 'Lessons in Dwarven Culture'. Go, go read it! You'll find it does a better job with gender, sexuality, and the like than this.

Note that Bilbo refers to himself as a 'he' for the first chapter. It will likely change as the work
goes on. You'll understand why if you read through this. Just thought it'd be a good head's up.

- Inspired by Lessons In Dwarven Culture by hobbitdragon
The Thing About Hobbits

Any respectable, unrespectable, and sometimes respectable but sometimes not respectable hobbit would tell you that being called a ‘halfling’ was an insult. Not in the way that most people said it nowadays. Not when they were trying to say that hobbits were half the size of men, or that they were half useless because they were soft and small. No. All hobbits knew the true origins of the insult, all hobbits felt its sting no matter how kindly it was said, or how the other party thought it could possibly be a term of endearment. Using such an insult as a term of endearment made no sense to most hobbits, even the wild Took who spent a great deal of time in the Outside or the Breelanders frowned when the term ‘halfling’ came up.

For as any hobbit would tell you they were not ‘half’ of anything. They were not half of each sex, thank you very much. They were, as far as the hobbits themselves could tell, neither sex at all. Which often posed a problem when dealing with Outsiders. It had always been a problem, if the hobbits cared to think about it. Having people coming up to them and shoving them into roles that didn’t fit them, and then never understanding the gentle and intricate nature that was the gender identity of hobbits. It was a complex issue, one that took time and care in trying to understand and express.

Which most Outsiders didn’t. It was vexing to the point of madness for the hobbits. Which was why, long ago, though no one knows exactly when, the hobbits came up with a system. It was easy enough to watch and learn what Outsiders expected, to take note of what they thought was culturally acceptable. Then the hobbits took the list and carefully began to find ways to emulate it as loosely as they could.

Children dressed whichever way they wanted, whichever way felt comfortable to them. How was a child to know what they wanted without trying it out, without exploring? If a child wanted to wear a dress one day and pants the next who were they to stop them? Children needed to learn what they wanted before they Chose afterall. Choosing was always important. It was the point in which one became an adult in the eyes of the community, pointing themselves down the general path that they wanted to take in life.

‘Lad’ or ‘Lass’ was the declaration one made at their Choosing. Though more often than not, by the time they were 33, most knew which way they wanted to go. It wasn’t concrete, mistakes happened or circumstances forced someone to choose one way or another. It didn’t tie them completely down to Outsider gender roles either, but it was a rule of thumb, a general idea to help keep Outsiders from sticking their noses too far into hobbit business and go mucking everything up again.

Hobbits had tried, even with giving everyone general guidelines to follow that hadn’t been there at the beginning of their culture, to keep their own personal freedom and choices. So if sometimes a lad ended up pregnant because his wife couldn’t bear more children but could sire them instead no one batted an eye. That child’s mother simply was a lad. For mothers always bore the children and fathers always sired them, and the hobbits weren’t going to negotiate on that because how else were they going to keep track of everything?

Bearing children didn’t change your gender to others, well within the bounds of the Shire at least. If you had chosen lad, dressed as a lad, looked like a lad, spoke like a lad, and behaved in general like a lad you were entitled to all the lad titles. Just as the reverse happened for lasses. Outsiders were not quite welcomed to stay long enough to notice the handful of lad mothers or lass fathers. Relationships outside of hobbits were frowned upon, because they never ever seemed to end well. The other races often mired and stuck within their preconceived notions of sex and gender that they almost always seemed to treat their hobbit lover as a novelty or worse as a freak. All hobbits knew of
at least two or three others who had tried, who had scoffed at the thought that Outsiders could be so rigid and backwards and ended up nursing broken hearts and broken self-esteem.

Which is why, when Bilbo Baggins of Bag End found himself entertaining thirteen burly hairy smelly dwarves, he was at a loss. Bilbo wanted nothing more than to scream and tug at his short hair. He wanted to stomp his foot and wave his hands like a lunatic. He wanted to throw these pantry pillaging invaders out of his home and go back to the peaceful quiet of monotony. His home was being besieged and ransacked like a village being attacked by musical bandits.

He did not scream. He did not cry. He did not throw the dwarves out of his home. Long buried instincts rose up in the face of the three youngest dwarves. They were young, young enough for Bilbo’s usually quite controlled mothering desires to rear their ugly treacherous heads and spur him into action. He wasn’t even thinking, not really, as he made sure the youngest dwarves had the best rooms aside from his own. Really just because he gave that stuffed shirt Thorin Oakenshield the room with the biggest bed did not necessarily mean Bilbo gave him the best room.

Bilbo did his damndest to tamp down on all the urges that told him to follow the children the next day. That was certainly Gandalf’s master plan, having the dwarves sing such a painful song of yearning and knowing, without a doubt that the youngest dwarves were singing too. That they had such painful longing in them, wanting, craving a home stolen from them.

Yet he had to ruefully smile at himself as he ran after the dwarves. Of course he followed the children. Any self respecting hobbit would. Children were life, children were the future, children were to be protected and cherished and not sent headfirst into death and danger. Bilbo couldn’t very well abduct Fili, Kili, and Ori, but he could do what most of the other dwarves were not intent on doing (seemingly) which was take care of their precious youngsters.

How Gandalf knew Bilbo was unattached, without a lover or family to call his own when he ambled up Bagshot row Bilbo certainly didn’t know. But perhaps it hadn’t been such a surprise for Gandalf to have guessed, when Bilbo had been sitting on the front bench with short hair and trousers, smoking a pipe, and looking decidedly exactly the opposite of how everyone imagined Bilbo to go. Well at least when Bilbo had been a child. He’d had two names, as was proper for all children to have, Mirabelle and Bilbo each reflective of his parents and each reflecting the potential future he could choose.

Though as Bilbo reflected quietly now, away from his people, surrounded by darkness and dwarves that he hadn’t actually been given a chance to choose. Not freely, not like everyone else. His hand lingered on his scarred stomach, lips thinning in displeasure as he remembered being cut down by an orc while trying to defend his home as a tween during that horrid Fell Winter. He had been injured, then the wound got infected, and it was a miracle he even survived it at all. But surviving had a price, and he’d listened in shocked silence as the healer carefully laid out that he was barren. That the internal damage was too great and he was infertile in the full sense of the word. He could not switch, he could not decide to sire instead of carry. He was barren. A social death sentence amongst hobbits. Children mattered, children always mattered, and no one would want him. It was never explicitly said that he couldn’t choose to be a lass, that no one could love him because what could he give that well and truly mattered, that he would be shunned because what if the infertility was contagious. Yet it was implied with looks and body language, it was implied in tone and carefully picked words, it was implied in all the stories he had been told as a child.

And so Bilbo found himself putting Mirabelle away in a box to be ignored and forgotten. What had being Mirabelle given him besides a desolate future? How could he be Mirabelle when he no longer felt brave or bright? How could he be Mirabelle? So he became Bilbo, cut his hair short as was proper for a lad, stopped running off looking for adventures and elves. He declared his Choice on his
birthday, though no one was surprised and there was approval from all around. They wouldn’t have
to keep a closer eye on him when strangers came about, or worry on whether or not he’d be
mistreated by Outsiders if he dared to go to Bree or be around not hobbits.

Except Mirabelle was not so easily thrown away. Not when Bilbo realized that being surrounded by
thirteen male dwarves would kickstart a Shift. It didn’t happen often anymore because hobbits were
so insular and when amongst their own kind hobbits tended to be quite similar to each other
physically. In towns of men Shifting unfortunately happened if there were too many of one gender.
Hobbits reacting instinctively, their bodies shifting to one end of the spectrum or another. Well
relatively speaking at least.

If Bilbo could have stern words with his instincts and body he would. Except talking to himself
would only make the dwarves think him decidedly insane rather than just a bit odd. So he ranted at
his body inside his head, trying to vainly convince it that no he really didn’t need to shift and look
more feminine. No, breasts were not a welcome addition for he did not plan on bearing dwobbit
babies and therefore nurse them. No, his hips did not need to get wider for as said before he was not
planning on bearing dwobbit babies. He couldn’t bear dwobbit babies, body, and he would be very
appreciative if his body stopped trying to make itself more suited to being the baby making machine
he couldn’t become.

Tailoring his vest to be thicker, to help mask his shifting body, and to hide his slowly growing bosom
Bilbo muttered dark and terrible things to himself during their two weeks in Rivendell. The elves had
been perfectly pleasant, in fact the knowing faintly amused looks on some of their faces told Bilbo all
he needed to know on whether or not the elves remembered the delicate issues of hobbit sex and
gender. Yet they were kind and even if a few stared at him with blatant curiosity none of them were
rude enough to start digging for answers to the questions they obviously had.

The further they went, the more Bilbo felt the war within himself growing in pitch. He had been
Bilbo for eighteen years, moreso because he had chosen (without really getting a choice) to be Bilbo.
But the dangers and the wildness, the laughter and the companionship, brought Mirabelle from the
shadows as she clawed and fought for supremacy. And by the Green Lady he sounded utterly insane
to anyone who wasn’t a hobbit or perhaps Gandalf but Bilbo wasn’t going to talk to the wizard about
the problems the wizard had brought down on his head.

Really he should have known he couldn’t hide it forever. That the dwarves for all their endearing
obliviousness when it regarded anything and everything regarding Bilbo and hobbits could not be
fooled forever. Even though it wasn’t a true deception, not really.

“Take off your shirt.”

“No.” Bilbo knew he was delaying the inevitable, being obstinate and fighting with Oin. He was
bleeding and had a cracked rib or two, he was bruised, limping, and favoring his right arm. Bilbo
was without a doubt injured and in need of medical attention. He was going to need to be inspected
thoroughly and he couldn’t play off his bound bosom as hobbit softness. He knew his petulance was
going to get him nowhere save in a great deal more trouble.

“Dwalin.” Oin snapped out the order and Bilbo couldn’t stop the terrified squeak as he was suddenly
held still by Dwalin. His heart pounded in his chest, fear and denial bubbling up in his throat as he
flailed uselessly, whimpering in pain. Oin was gentle as he carefully undid Bilbo’s shirt. The old
dwarf paused when he got Bilbo’s shirt open and stared.

Then Oin did the most blessed thing that Bilbo did not expect him to do.

“Oh quit your flailing. I’m a healer, of course I know about your hobbit-y strangeness. Hold still.”
The mostly deaf healer griped at Bilbo, causing the hobbit to splutter but stop flailing.

“‘Hobbit-y strangeness’?” Dwalin rumbled behind Bilbo and the hobbit could practically feel the narrowed eyed look of confusion that the massive dwarf was giving him. Dwalin shifted his steady unbreakable grip on Bilbo and looked down to inspect what Oin was talking about, and froze. There was several moments of shocked silence from Dwalin before a strangled noise escaped the dwarf.

“You’re a lass?”

Those surprised words seemed to echo through their makeshift camp. Ceasing all conversations and training all eyes on Dwalin, Bilbo, and Oin. The healer at the very least didn’t seem to notice what was going on as he pressed his fingers gently against Bilbo’s cracked ribs, causing the hobbit to whine and squirm. But Bilbo felt his cheeks flushing and Dwalin was muttering foul curses in Khuzdul and everyone seemed to have frozen in shock. Well except Gandalf, but Gandalf wasn’t there, he was somewhere further ahead trying to make sure his hunch about his acquaintance living nearby was correct.

“I am not.” Bilbo spluttered and wondered what the queer mix of anger and elation was truly called.

“Your breasts say otherwise.” Dwalin countered sharply.

“Burglar?” Thorin’s voice was dark again, filled with anger that had only just been taken away by Bilbo’s recent descent into insanity that had him attacking orcs. Bilbo wondered if it’d be appropriate to cry right then, because he’d thought he’d finally gotten through the thick emotional armor surrounding Thorin but now it seemed it had come back with a vengeance. It probably wouldn’t be good. It would probably only cement their beliefs that Bilbo was in fact a lass and not a lad and confound all these gender notions and ideas!

“Hobbits are… we’re not like you folk. We don’t have two distinct sexes. We’re all the same sex.”

“That’s impossible.” Thorin’s voice was stormy and Bilbo was thankful Dwalin had him pinned enough to not be able to turn and see the expression on Thorin’s face.

“It’s just as impossible for you to have two sexes, a shortage of women, and a stable population in our eyes. Honestly we’re not sure how you manage it but I don’t go poking around things that aren’t my business.” Bilbo said crossly, keeping his eyes trained in the distance and steadfastly refusing to even attempt to look at anyone.

“This is my business, Halfling, when I have brought what seems to be a woman on a dangerous quest. I could be damning an entire clan’s existence with your death. I would be bringing shame and a curse on my line if you died.”

Bilbo let out an angry but pained noise as Oin began to clean the not too shallow cut on his chest. Dwarves how they infuriated him!

“I am **barren** Thorin Oakenshield, son of Thrain, son of Thror, King Under the Mountain. I am considered male by my people, it was my Choice, and when I wasn’t surrounded by overly hairy male idiots I was more masculine. Yet here I am with thirteen men and my body, through no choice of my own, began to Shift as our bodies sometimes do to be more appealing and accommodating towards bearing children. If you were all women I’d become more masculine so I could be a better sire. And that is all the necessary information you’re getting so you and everyone else can get your big dwarvish noses out of my personal business!”

Silence reigned for almost five minutes after his outburst. Then Thorin took in a deep breath.
“Very well. I apologize for causing you distress *Master Baggin*s.”

“You’re forgiven Thorin.” Bilbo couldn’t help the exhaustion in his voice or the remnants of the bitterness that came with bringing the unpleasant truths out into the open. It was a wound that had never fully healed. A choice taken away from him, many choices, and it hurt. “Just please don’t pry further into this.”

“As you wish.” Thorin’s promise held the ring of truth and finality. It was a promise, Bilbo could tell from Thorin’s tone, that encompassed the entire group.

Oin finished with Bilbo’s wounds soon after. The healer patted Bilbo’s head and muttered a comforting word that he had in fact seen and dealt with things stranger than hobbits and to not worry. That left Bilbo and Dwalin sitting together, with Dwalin still holding him firmly in place.

“Dwalin? May I…close my shirt now?”

“What? Aye.” The giant dwarf’s grip loosened just enough to allow Bilbo movement. He had just begun to carefully rebutton his shirt when Bilbo felt Dwalin gently touch his uninjured arm.

“I’m sorry.” The dwarf mumbled softly, almost endearingly.

“Well it…I always knew it was coming I suppose.”

“Not about this…well I mean it is about this but I meant it for…more.” Dwalin carefully squeezed Bilbo’s arm, a sign of affection, of camaraderie he had never had before with the warrior. “I mean for how I’ve treated ye. From the moment we met I’ve treated you with disrespect. I and my kin have not been the companions you deserve. I willfully ignored your good qualities, I intimidated ye on purpose on more than one occasion, and I never actively tried to keep you from harm like I have with the others. Yet you, the one who has the least reason to be here, the one who has been belittled and scorned, have been the one to save us time and time again. You have saved Thorin’s life two times now, when I could not. I’m sorry for how I’ve treated ye, Bilbo Baggins. I hope that from now on I can work on a way tae build trust between us. Ye have nothing to fear from me, I swear.”

Bilbo couldn’t help but feel his heart stutter in his chest, his cheeks growing warm. He focused his gaze on the ground before him, fingers shakily finishing up buttoning his shirt. Just like Thorin’s apology, Dwalin’s words brought a slow pleasurable heat in his belly. They soothed some of the hurts that Dwalin had inflicted, and really Bilbo couldn’t keep a grudge going for long.

“I forgive you Master Dwalin.”

“Dwalin.”

“I forgive you Dwalin.” Bilbo reiterated his voice gentle and warm.

Reaching up Bilbo laid his hand over the dwarf’s. They were both so very different, but in a way they were the same. They’d give up anything and everything to protect Thorin from death. Then a sliver of doubt crept up into Bilbo’s mind. What if Dwalin was saying this because Dwalin assumed that Bilbo was a woman? The hobbit tried not to tense and instead took in a deep breath.

“I hope your apology doesn’t have anything to do with my gender.”

Dwalin tensed behind him and Bilbo felt before he heard the rumble of denial.

“No! Lass, lad, whatever it is ye are that has no weight at all in this besides my blunder with outing you! I am apologizing because you, Bilbo Baggins, have been treated wrongly by me. I’ve
undermined your trust in me. I’ve hurt ye here.” Dwalin’s hand moved, coming to gently tap Bilbo’s chest where his heart lay. “And ye did nothing to warrant that. So I am going to fix it. However I can.”

Dwalin had never used so many words in Bilbo’s presence before. The dwarf had always seemed to be less verbose. Yet maybe, Bilbo mused, Dwalin had simply been saving them up? It seemed likely in a fanciful sort of way. If people had only a certain amount of words to use in a given lifetime and then they saved them up.

“Thank you.” Bilbo leaned back into Dwalin’s chest. Then froze, because he had leaned back into Dwalin’s chest. Dwalin, right hand of Thorin. Dwalin, massive intimidating warrior. Dwalin, who Bilbo had seen kissing Thorin one night when everyone else was supposed to be asleep. A soft squeaking noise of embarrassment escaped Bilbo’s throat before he scrambled out of Dwalin’s lap and hold. His face was red and so were his ears and Bilbo very studiously kept his eyes fixed firmly on everything that was not Dwalin son of Fundin. “That’s the most you’ve ever said to me at any given time. Thank you. I hope we can become friends. And look I do believe I see Bofur needing help with something.”

It was the lamest excuse Bilbo had ever come up with. He turned and tried to walk but found his ankle protested the weight. Thankfully he did not stumble or limp too badly as he tried to escape Dwalin’s amused and concerned gaze. He managed to not so gracefully collapse next to his friend.

“Pretend you need my help with something.” Bilbo muttered to the miner.

“Alright.” Bofur said with a grin.

Bilbo realized he should have clarified somehow or given a rule or a line or something the moment he felt Bofur’s arms around him. Hauled up and back Bilbo found himself on Bofur’s lap with the miner holding him firmly.

“I’m so cold and lonely. Warm me up you sweet soft little hobbit.”

Bofur accompanied his words with an affectionate nuzzle to Bilbo’s cheek. A strangled noise escaped Bilbo was he tried to fight off the wave of embarrassment. Really he should have known Bofur would pull a stunt like that. The miner had always been physically affectionate with Bilbo. It had been a comfort to have someone so willing to touch him after so many years of social isolation. Yet having everyone staring and laughing over Bofur’s antics and hearing catcalls as if Bofur was actually flirting with him rather than just teasing made Bilbo uncomfortable.

No one wanted him. Not dwarves who didn’t like soft mostly hairless hobbits. Not hobbits who wanted someone fertile and undamaged. Bilbo was not anyone’s choice in lover or mate. And he had to make his peace with that. He had to come to terms with the fact that he was not, in fact, desirable to anyone. It was a lesson he had been learning and relearning since he was a tween and had gotten his fate handed to him apologetically by a kindly healer. It was a lesson that he’d fought against for the first ten years. It was a lesson he had to remind himself that he had learned in the presence of the dwarves.

Because while they didn’t seem to hold stock in the fertility of their partners, they did set them by dwarven beauty standards, their bravery, and their prowess in some sort of craft. Bilbo already knew he wasn’t beautiful by dwarven standards. He already knew he wasn’t particularly brave. And all his skill seemed to be centered in being quite unremarkable in every way. That and Bilbo did still remember all the stories of his youth, he remembered seeing the hurt and haunted look in others eyes when they came back to hide in the familiarity of the Shire when their relationships failed with Outsiders.
Convinced of the sheer impossibility of his own sexual appeal Bilbo eventually relaxed in Bofur’s embrace, lulled to sleep by warmth and comfort of another person for the first time in almost two decades. He did not wake when Bofur moved him into a more comfortable position, neither did he stir when Oin began to explain in improper impolite terms at a volume that should have woken the dead what hobbit gender was to the rest of his companions, nor did he twitch when Gandalf came back in the middle of said educational lesson to add his two cents. He did protest faintly when Thorin began to shout at the wizard for bringing him along and Gandalf argued right back, though quieted when Bofur took his hat and put it on Bilbo’s head, muffling the sound. No, Bilbo slept deeply and dreamed sweetly for the first time in months, a weight no matter how small lifted from his shoulders.
He Loved Her Once

Chapter Summary

Once upon a time Bilbo had a betrothed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I can walk.”

Bilbo grumbled as he rested his chin on Dwalin’s shoulder. The dwarf snorted and Bilbo could tell without even having to look that Dwalin had rolled his eyes. Glaring at Dwalin’s ear Bilbo harrumphed and turned his head, resting his cheek now on Dwalin. He wasn’t going to win the fight, not when Oin had said that Bilbo was to ‘keep off his leg if he knew what was good for him’. Almost as soon as the words had left the healer’s mouth Bilbo had found himself lifted up by Dori and unceremoniously placed on Dwalin’s back.

Bilbo felt like a fauntling all over again. Save that it wasn’t his father, Belladonna, carrying him back from the Party Tree pleasantly tired after a good party.

Thinking of his father and his mother Bilbo felt pain rip through his heart. How he missed them. How he missed them so much. When they had died he had been well and truly alone. There was no prospect of easing the silence that pervaded every corner of his smial. There was no hope that he’d even have a set of regular visitors to come around for tea.

No, there had been one. Only one who had dared to visit him regularly.

By the Green Lady how he missed Lobelia. She had been his betrothed, once, long ago when they were children. Bilbo had loved her then, all fire, quick wit, and biting tongue eased by the gentleness of her hands and the genuine love she offered Bilbo. No, it hadn’t been Bilbo who Lobelia had loved back then, but Mirabelle. They had been wild and free and full of laughter, but their laughter had been taken from them when Mirabelle had gone and done the foolish brave right thing and gone to fight. When the betrothal contract had moved from Mirabelle, barren useless Mirabelle, to Otho. And Mirabelle had become Bilbo and Lobelia married Otho one fine spring day under the party tree.

Bilbo could confidently say he loved Lobelia still, with her sharper edge and fiercer temper. Yet it wasn’t the same love he had once held. It was a comfortable companionship, a friendship as unshakeable and fierce as that between Dwalin and Thorin. It was unspoken that Lobelia hated seeing Bilbo, seeing Bilbo’s hair respectably short, with respectable shirts and pants. Lobelia hated that her dearest friend and once love had been reduced to a shadow, a shell, of who they had once been.

“I can feel the melancholy dripping out of your head and staining my clothes, Burglar.”

Dwalin’s rumbling voice brought Bilbo out of his head. Bilbo snorted and huffed out a laugh, closing his eyes.

“I was thinking of my former betrothed.”
Bilbo could feel Dwalin tense beneath him, just as he caught Thorin’s quick and sharp glance to the side.

“Former?”

“Yes, former.”

“What made them break it?”

The way Dwalin asked made Bilbo’s heart ache. He could hear the confusion and the doubt that any reason could have been legitimate. Those five words were laced with a protective tone, and even the implication that it obviously couldn’t have been Bilbo’s fault that it was broken. That they were the ones at fault, not the burglar on his back. How sad it would be for Bilbo to break Dwalin of that notion.

“I’m barren, Dwalin.”

It was all Dwalin needed to know about that. Honestly, it explained everything didn’t it? It should have. Bilbo was defective, of course no one was going to saddle themselves with him. The contract was voided between them, because what was the point if children weren’t going to come of it? What would be the point of receiving companionship, loyalty, love, if it didn’t amount to anything? Of course Lobelia went to Otho, and she was happy now. With Lotho as her son. Bilbo wouldn’t deny that there had been pain and heartache between them, but Lobelia was happy in her married life now. She honestly did love Otho, and that was all and more Bilbo could ever dare to hope and dream for her. Lobelia deserved the best, she deserved all the happiness in the world. She had it, and it was enough to keep Bilbo content.

“And?”

Dwalin asked voice full of incredulity. Like he couldn’t comprehend how that could break a betrothal.

“There is no ‘and’, Dwalin. I’m barren. That was more than ample reason for her parents to renegotiate the contract between the Bracegirdles and the Bagginses, to have her given to another. She’s happy now, with Otho. If she wasn’t I’d have killed him or she would have. She’s not one to suffer unhappiness quietly.”

“Do you love her still?”

"Of course I do. She's my only friend."

Bilbo didn't have to think about that. No matter what had happened they still loved each other. Even if neither wanted more than friendship with the other now, even if there was no longer a spark of romance, there was trust there. A comfortable ease as they threw insults and harsh words back and forth over tea. The knowing smiles in their eyes as they kept their faces blank as they discussed unpleasant unrespectable topics of conversation as they sipped their tea, watching as their company's face turned varying shades of white and green.

"When we retake Erebor you'll have enough gold to your name to smooth any rough patches you might have found in your way of reclaiming your former betrothed."

Thorin's added two cents surprised Bilbo. The hobbit stared wide eyed at the king for a long moment, uncomprehending for a moment what he'd said. Then a smile found its way to Bilbo's lips, his eyes growing amused.
"I don't love her like that. Not anymore. It'd be rather awkward if I did, considering I am the Watcher for her son. No. She is my best friend now. Much like Dwalin is yours...no wait bad analogy. Like...Balin and you, Thorin."

There was a moment where Dwalin tensed once more underneath Bilbo and now Thorin was giving him such a perplexed and surprised stare.

"What?"

"You know? How?" Thorin's voice was sharp with confusion.

"...you were really trying to hide it? I would say you'd need to work on your subtlety but you're dwarves so I supposed that what you're doing really is considered subtle. I caught you two kissing one night before Rivendell. Though I suspected before then."

"Did you tell anyone else?"

There was now desperation in Thorin's voice. Dwalin seemed equally worried if the grave silence that emanated from him was anything to go by.

"No. Why would I? It didn't concern me, didn't seem to be hurting anyone, and was soundly none of my business. I'm not one to gossip over others' personal lives."

Both Thorin and Dwalin seemed to relax at that. Bilbo felt a knot inside him easing when he felt Dwalin's stiffness ebbing away. The large dwarf seemed to snort in laughter.

"You're a strange one. Anyone else would have told the others so everyone could settle their bets."

"Well I've been the subject of enough gossip, Dwalin, to know I don't much like it. I feel as if others would also feel the same. Besides, who would I have told? Bofur and Ori are nice to me, but I didn't know if I could safely call them my friends. Gandalf already knows, because he knows everything, even if you haven't seen or spoken to him in two decades."

"I'm beginning to see, Bilbo, perhaps it wasn't just us who has treated you unfairly."

Dwalin tightened his grip on Bilbo's legs as he said it. Thorin shot Dwalin a strange look, it wasn't a quelling look, nor was it confusion. It seemed to hold a great deal of meaning, meaning that was lost on Bilbo. Still Bilbo felt a thread of anger curling in his stomach.

"I already forgave you all for it. I know you doubted me, I hadn't done much at all to inspire trust or confidence. Certainly I accept the fact you all took it a bit far, but I didn't help matters. I know I'm soft and weak and almost useless. And everyone else had a good enough reason to treat me as they did."

"Lad, they didn't."

Dwalin rebutted Bilbo's claim softly but with a firm voice.

"They had no right to, if I'm gathering what you've been saying correctly, treat you as a diseased leper for not being able to bear children. They've all hurt you, and convinced you that it was entirely your fault to be treated such. That just because you cannot have children your worth as a person was voided. You are a person. You are our burglar. I'll also be a cold day in Mahal's forge before we let you go back there."

"Y-you can't just decide without my permission that you're never going to let me go home! I'm not
Dwalin let out a rough bark of laughter. Bilbo could practically feel the sharp and wicked grin that curled Dwalin's lips upwards. It was more of a snarl than a smile, a warning that Bilbo had often had aimed at him. Though strangely enough it didn't quite feel like it was aimed at him this time.

"They're welcome to try and take you from us, lad. Resign yourself, Bilbo, we're keeping you with us. We dwarves covet and guard our treasures jealously. Those fools in the Shire don't even recognize the value you have. Of course we're not going to let you go back and let you gather dust and lose your shine hidden away in shadows. No, you're going to be out in the open. People are going to see you and recognize your worth."

"Thorin Dwalin's going insane. Please snap him out of it!"

The usually solemn dwarf king cracked a smile at Bilbo's plea. His bright blue eyes shone brightly with mirth. Bilbo was struck with how painfully beautiful Thorin was when he smiled. Nothing in Bilbo's life ever seemed to compare to how lovely Thorin was in that moment. Where he smiled so freely, where his eyes sparkled, where the years of pain and torment slid off his shoulders and he stepped out of the cloak of dour duty he usually wrapped around himself like armour.

"Sapphires set in silver or mithril. We'd need it to stand out against the gold of his hair. Obviously he'll wear Durin's colors, if he belongs to our family no one will dare try to speak out against him. Though you're welcome to wear anything you'd like when there aren't official functions going on." Thorin added the last bit, tactfully directing it at Bilbo.

"Belong to your family? I don't even know how we got here! There are several leaps of logic in this conversation I have failed to make."

It felt like a punch to the gut when Thorin reached over, tucking a golden curl behind Bilbo's ear. His brain turned to mush, filled up with clouds, as his fair cheeks turned red. Thorin's fingers were rough, calloused, and they felt so exotic against Bilbo's skin. How long had it been since someone had shown him such tenderness? Really he should be protesting this. He should be trying to get away. Not staring wide eyed at Thorin who seemed to be smirking at Bilbo's dazed expression.

"You'll be ours."

It was Dwalin who spoke. The words seemed weighty and filled with promise. It brought up images of being held by Dwalin with Thorin in front, kissing his lover before pressing heated kisses to Bilbo's lips. It brought up images of tangled limbs and beautiful warriors. It brought up images of safety and warmth.

Such strange foolish fancies filled his head, Bilbo wondered. They didn't mean it like that. Of course they didn't. They were simply trying to make up, in their bizarre dwarven way, for their earlier treatment of him. Bilbo wondered how often he would have to repeat that he didn't need them to go out of their way to make him feel included. That they didn't need to say such wonderfully (painful, because oh how Bilbo wished they really did want him in their family) impossible things. He was a hobbit, plain, and simple. He was no warrior, no great being of courage. He was Bilbo Baggins, of Bag End.

He steadied his heart against the inevitable pain at the end of their journey. That Dwalin and Thorin would forget this lovely and queer conversation, their promises of keeping and holding him captive forever, when they were confronted with the realities of their duties and responsibilities in Erebor. It would come. The time when they forgot and Bilbo would have to pack his things and return home to the Shire. Even though, now, it didn't feel so much like home. It felt like a prison, a beautifully gilded
cage.

Perhaps when he left he'd just return to Rivendell? Lord Elrond seemed to enjoy his presence and there had been few places Bilbo had ever felt so safe. Yes, he would be close enough to the Shire to where he could go visit Lobelia every now and again, but still far enough away to where he wouldn't be caught up in the shadows of his shortcomings.

With that plan in mind Bilbo full relaxed. It was always easier to look ahead, to plan for the inevitable misfortunes in life so they didn't catch you unawares. He would take this kindness for as long as it was offered to him. He would bask in the camaraderie and friendship until he was forgotten, because it would happen, it was inevitable. Yet knowing that such good things never lasted forever let him treasure it even more as he was given it. It made each gesture infinitely more precious.

He would carve this memory into his heart, cradle it close, and let its warmth seep into him when times got dark. When he would inevitably be alone again, he would have this to comfort him and keep him company.

Chapter End Notes

If you would like to see some sketchy expressions of Bilbo in this fic I have put it up on my tumblr note it does sort of contain spoilers if you squint. http://elluvias.tumblr.com/post/48795798491/various-expressions-of-bilbo-baggins-from-my-new
Uncovering Wounds

Chapter Summary

The dwarves learn a little bit more about their burglar.

Chapter Notes

This chapter may be triggery for some people with mentions of gender dysphoria, sexism, and misogny.

Bilbo was pleasantly drunk. Not the sort of drunk where the world turned into a hazardous death trap that was intent on making your life miserable. Nor was it the sort of drunk that was filled with very bad ideas. It was the happy drunk. It was the drunk where Bilbo's earlier reservations about physical contact were pleasantly dead and buried six or so feet under a layer of alcohol soaked dirt. It was the drunk that made it okay to touch other people, because the dwarves certainly didn't think that Bilbo was some repulsive defective plague rat.

Ori's cardigan was very soft and smelled clean. Nice and clean, no longer dirtied or foul scented from their time in the Goblin caves. Leaning up and pressing himself as close to Ori as was physically possible Bilbo made a happy noise as he clung to the youngest dwarf.

"Well someone's a cuddly drunk."

Bilbo cracked an eye open to see Bofur smirking at him. The hobbit deigned to stick his tongue out at the miner turned toymaker. Then when he was certain Bofur had gotten his message he turned his face back into Ori's sweater and closed his eyes once more.

"Ori needs hugs. Lots of hugs, all the hugs I can give. It's important. I can't tell how he's not going insane with all the space everyone's giving him. For all the good points you dwarves have, I never expected you all to be so mean in this."

There was a lull of conversation around Bilbo as the dwarves seemed to focus their attention on something. Oh well whatever it was must be important. Not as important as giving Ori his cuddles though.

"So hugs are important to hobbits?"

Sighing Bilbo turned to look at Bofur again. Resigning himself to sadly accept that he was not going to get quiet cuddles with Ori.

"Of course they are. Just as important as singing. I can't sing to Ori because he's not my family so it'd be very improper, though you already know this. Few things are more intimate than sharing Soul Songs audibly, and while I know I'm a friend now we're not that close. But hugging him lets him feel mine a bit and it can help stabalize him, and once he's stabalized I'll go hug Fili and Kili and get them calm."
"Bilbo...I don't quite understand what you're talking about but I don't think dwarves work that way."

Ori's voice was soft and Bilbo could practically feel Ori's flush. Frowning Bilbo tilted his head upwards to look at Ori's endearingly sweet face filled with embarrassed confusion. Poor dear, he'd been so deprived of hugs that he didn't even notice his song's off key notes and strange melody. Bilbo was going to have to have words with Dori. Shifting up and onto his knees Bilbo crooned as he pet Ori's hair.

"Oh sweet. I knew I should have followed my instincts back in the beginning and just kept you all safely tucked into my smial and not let you go on this journey. It is working, everything's getting back into tune. Slowly though."

Bilbo was about to go on, to keep reassuring Ori that everything was going to be alright, that Bilbo would help fix all the bad things when Bilbo felt a large hand on his head. Blinking owlishly the hobbit stared up into the wizened face of Gandalf. The wizard looked endlessly amused, though sad.

"Bilbo I think it best if you stopped trying to tune Master Ori right now. Go sit a bit closer to the fire to keep warm."

There was a moment where Bilbo opened his mouth to argue. He could tune Ori if he so pleased, thank you very much. Didn't Gandalf understand how thoroughly vexing it was to feel the songs in the dwarves always in flux from deep and beautifully resonating to stuttering discordant notes? Didn't Gandalf know how much that would affect the dwarves? The others were too old for Bilbo to be able to tune with just cuddling, but Ori, Fili, and Kili could be salvaged if Bilbo spent enough time with them. He could help keep them from...from...ending up entirely like him.

But the fight left him as he stared into Gandalf's eyes. Of course Gandalf knew and somehow Gandalf had come to the conclusion that Bilbo shouldn't tune Ori. He knew his own Soul Song wasn't perfectly tuned, but it was a good sight better than the dwarves for the most part. Flexing his fingers for a moment Bilbo realized that he would have to let Ori go. He did his best to keep the trembling of his fingers to a minimum as he lifted his hands off Ori, trying his best to not look as distraught as he felt. Bilbo hadn't been allowed to touch many children back in the Shire. He hadn't been allowed to touch many people back in the Shire. Lotho had been the only child who hadn't shied away from Bilbo, who had smiled up with bright adoring eyes and curled into Bilbo's chest, humming notes of his own song.

It hurt so much to realize he'd have to become more conscious of his supposedly long latent instincts. Blinking back a wave of tears Bilbo focused his entire mind on the fire in the hearth. The fire was safe. The fire had nothing to do with children he couldn't have or help. The fire didn't judge. It was simply there, warm and comforting as it always had been when Bilbo began to feel too cold.

He must have passed an hour or more that was, focused on the fire and regulating his breathing. The ache hadn't fully passed but it was managable by the time he felt a solid presence beside him. He was coaxed from his meditations by a large comforting hand on his shoulder, beckoning him to focus on them instead of the flames. Blinking owlishly he found himself staring at Balin.

"Are you alright? You haven't been responding to our questions, laddie."

"What? Oh! I'm sorry Balin. I was thinking about...things. What were your questions?"

Turning his body more towards the dwarves he realized all of them had various looks of concern. He must have been quite far in his own head to not hear whatever they had been asking. Fighting back a wave of pink that tinged his cheeks Bilbo realized Balin's hand was still on his shoulder. Part of him wanted to lean further into the hand, lean closer to Balin's body and curl up around him. Yet another
part, a stronger part, remembered Gandalf’s kindly words to remind Bilbo to keep his space. Shying away from Balin's hand Bilbo scooted to a mostly empty space closer to the dwarves.

"We'd been talking about coming of ages and rituals and we’d then realized we knew nothing about how hobbits are deemed an adult. We’d started asking you questions only to realize you hadn't been listening to a word of the conversation, Mr. Boggins!"

Kili's words managed to soothe and wound Bilbo all at once. Looking around Bilbo noticed that Gandalf was nowhere to be seen and he bit back a sigh. Weighing his options he almost said that it was none of the dwarves business how hobbits determined who was an adult and who wasn't. Yet that would be rude, it would be unfriendly, and the dwarves had just recently started to accept him.

"A hobbit comes of age on their 33rd birthday." Bilbo began at the easiest place. "It's a very big deal, because it's when we Choose which gender we’re going to emulate for the rest of our lives and who we will be as adults. As children all hobbits are given two names, a feminine one and a masculine one. Children are given a lot of freedom about what they’d like to look like or sound like, they experiment around finding out what suits them best. Most of the time everyone knows what a hobbit is going to choose on their birthday, because by then they’ve settled into an obvious preference and have already started to Shift to which gender they want to be.”

“Oh! That sounds like dwarves and their Crafts. When we come of age we usually get our apprenticeship in our chosen Craft. Though sometimes there’s a few of us who just know and everyone else knows and so they can get their apprenticeship early. Like me.” Ori smiled at Bilbo from where he sat, worn leather journal in his hands. “I’m already considered a Journeyman and I’m hoping that our Journey will help fulfill the requirement to become a Master.”

“That’s incredible Ori! I knew you were talented but that’s just amazing.”

The younger dwarf almost preened under the praise. He looked caught between puffing out his chest in pride and turtling up into his cardigan. It was adorable and Bilbo knew Dori and Nori must be proud of their brother.

“So did you know you were a man since you were young? I’m sure you did.”

With that innocent question Bilbo felt the cheer draining from him. He tried to school his expression into something more neutral, something less open. Yet he knew that the dwarves all caught his wavering expression. The hesitance and the shame.

“Ah…. No, Ori. I didn’t.”

It wouldn’t do to lie to Ori. Or the others. It seemed to be wrong to do so. Yet it was hard, too hard to keep his gaze up. Letting his eyes fall down to the wooden floor he curled his tones absently.

“You didn’t? Then why are you a man?”

Bilbo felt his breath hitch at the words Ori spoke. The scribe seemed confused and no matter how much it hurt, he needed to explain.

“We first started Choosing hundreds of years ago because all the other races said it was the way things were. That there were men and there were women and that there was no in between. They… never understood us. They didn’t want to understand that we weren’t either of those choices there was no dichotomy for us. We’re something else. T-they took our people and would hurt them or… sometimes sell us into slavery because we were novel. These were during our Wandering days, before we had a home of our own. It’s why ‘halfling’ is a common term all around Middle Earth,
because Men called us that because they liked to believe we were half man, half women. It’s…

terribly insulting and hurtful to have people call us that, even though by now the original meaning is
mostly gone because we still remember why it came about and…I’m rambling but I meant to say…
We Choose so we don’t draw too much attention to ourselves. We learned to mimic gender roles and
what is generally accepted and expected of both. I mean it doesn’t stop ‘male’ hobbits from being
mothers or ‘female’ hobbits being fathers, we usually don’t let Outsiders stay in the Shire long
enough to notice the discrepancies to what they think and believe. But…we’ve also learned…”

Bilbo bit his bottom lip as he tried to carefully figure out how to phrase it. Weighing his words he felt
his hands clench in his battered shirt.

“We’ve learned that a lot of others races don’t treat women properly. That…that Men especially
view women as lesser or that they’re property or toys or something else equally bad. We’re small
folk to begin with, we don’t like fighting, we’re not particularly intimidating even when we’re males.
We have to be extra vigilant with our ‘women’ because Outsiders don’t stop when they say ‘no’. We
have to make sure they don’t get hurt or are put in dangerous situations because it isn’t their fault that
Men can be beastly and we can’t very well change the Men so we try our best to keep incidents from
happening. Part of why we’re so insular, we’re so afraid of what others will do to us because of
what’s happened before.”

The dwarves seemed injured by Bilbo’s words. Their eyes all shrouded with pain and sympathy,
anger lining underneath for what hobbits had to do to survive. That they changed and tried to
conform to others’ standards so they’d be safe from harm, from ridicule, and ignorance. Perhaps they
had their own stories, their own memories, of what they’d had to change about themselves so they
could walk in the world of Men without ridicule and fear.

“Lad, you still didn’t explain why you’re a man.”

Bilbo felt the small amount of hope in him die when he heard Dwalin’s observation. He tried to hide
the guilty expression on his face, but Dwalin still caught it. Their eyes met and Dwalin pursed his
lips, realizing that it had been entirely intentional on Bilbo’s part trying to skirt the original question.

“I’m **barren**.”

The words came out choked and filled with pain and poison.

“I’m **BARREN**! I don’t have any **use**! I’m not valuable! I’m **broken**! **Defective**! I am a stain on my
family’s line! I’m a disgrace! I can’t be a woman! I couldn’t be a **woman** because why put myself in
a potentially dangerous situation? Why waste other people’s time worrying about my potential
wellbeing when Strangers are about? It’s **sensible** that I Chose to be a man! It was what was best! It
was what was expected! Being Mirabelle…I couldn’t. Being her was what got me barren, being her
was what got me isolated and alone because all I had wanted to do…I just wanted to protect my
home and my people! I didn’t go out to fight asking to be run through by a sword or the infection
afterwards! I-I didn’t…”

Bilbo curled in on himself as he tried to muffle a hysterical sob. His body shook with his effort to
shove his emotions back down where they belonged. Growls and curses filled the air, though Bilbo
paid little mind to them. No he had to calm down. He had to be presentable and respectable once
more.

A keening whimper was startled from his throat when he was bodily picked up and pulled back into
a warm embrace. Blindly he turned into the body holding him, fingers curling into fabric as he clung
to the solid presence. A warm hand began to soothingly run through Bilbo’s curls, words were
murmured to him in a low soothing voice. He felt safe being held. Comforted by the surprising
gentles of whichever dwarf was holding him. Bilbo wasn’t sure how long it took for the dwarf to bring him back and calm his riotous emotions. Sniffling pathetically he tilted his head up to give his comforter a grateful but watery smile and was surprised to see Thorin looking back at him.

Warmth and gentleness almost masked the biting fury that flashed in Thorin’s eyes. The dwarven king cupped Bilbo’s cheek and gently wiped the tear tracks away. Pressing a kiss to Bilbo’s forehead the king then pulled Bilbo closer and hugged him close.

“They had no right to do that to you, Burglar. It was your Choice, your Fate, your Destiny. Ori was right, to liken your Choice to our Crafts. Denying you yours did nothing but hurt you. Mahal’s Forge will grow cold before I or any of my Company let you go back there alone. When we retake Erebor and get it settled you will be allowed to return to your Shire to gather your things to bring back….perhaps even that won’t be necessary. I will ask Dis to gather your things, you can make a list if you wish…though I do believe Dis will simply empty out your…burrow and bring all the contents therein.”

“’s not a burrow. It’s a smial. I don’t call your kingdom ‘a rather well decorated cave’ and you shouldn’t call my home a burrow.” Bilbo’s voice lacked any bite or heat it could have had and he could feel the faint smile on Thorin’s lips.

It was nice, being held. He’d missed it. Hobbits weren’t really made to be solitary; to be undemonstrative or untouchable. It wasn’t unusual for multiple children to pile into the same bed or to casually brush against one another as they interacted. Dwarves were tactile in a different way, separate from how hobbits preferred it or went about things. It was nice to just cuddle, even though a part of Bilbo told him it was highly improper to be curled in Thorin’s lap and into his chest. Especially since Dwalin was just across the way and staring at them. Yet Dwalin’s gaze held no hint of jealousy, the only anger found in the warrior’s gaze didn’t seem to be directed at Bilbo or Thorin. It was aimed somewhere else, and Bilbo had a feeling that it was likely aimed at the Shire.

The conversation seemed stilted from then on. No more questions were directed at Bilbo, though he could feel them weighing the atmosphere and in the nervous worried glances that Ori and Bofur kept shooting him. They all danced around his outburst, at his words, each dwarf reflecting privately what had been revealed to them.

Bilbo remained in Thorin’s lap for a long while after. Even when Bilbo was certain that it was time to move away and probably go crawl into his own bed, Thorin kept a firm but gentle hold on him. None of the others remarked on it, a strangely easy acceptance of a rather peculiar behavior in their leader. It was only when most of the rest of the Company had decided to retire, did Thorin let Bilbo go. Muzzily making his way to the bathroom Bilbo didn’t see Thorin wave the two of the youngest dwarven members of the Company over to his side, nor did he hear Thorin’s instructions to ‘keep their hobbit safe’.

He was aware something had happened when his bedroll (it was his because he had placed his meagre belongings on it when they’d arrived in Beorn’s hall earlier that day) was suddenly combined with two others. He was only allowed a single moment of confusion before he was ushered to the bed by Fili and Kili, unceremoniously dragged into the middle and suddenly becoming a hobbit sandwich between two dwarven pieces of bread. He didn’t even have the emotional energy to protest being cuddled for forcibly. It was soothing, being piled together like puppies. It reminded him of long ago, when Bilbo had been a child. Warm and safe and loved, basking in the unsung melodies of his numerous cousins. He fell asleep feeling the warm resonating harmony of Fili and Kili’s soul.
Bleary eyed and rumpled Bilbo crawled out of his dwarf cocoon with a pounding headache and several dead and decomposing invisible wooly creatures in his mouth. The light was evil, the noise was evil, everything was evil. A muted whimpering groan escaped him as he tried to figure out what he could do to fix his aching head.

Getting up he scuttled to the darkest corner he could find and wrapped himself up in the shadows as best he could.

A warm muzzle nudged his leg and Bilbo looked up to see one of Beorn’s sheep staring at him in the eye. It was a large sheep, but kindly in the face. It looked quite concerned after his wellbeing, which was strange because usually sheep unacquainted with him wouldn’t give him the time of day.

“Baa?”

Blinking Bilbo’s fuzzy aching mind took a moment to translate what had been asked. Running his tongue over his teeth a look of utmost concentration stole across his face.

“Baaa.”


The sheep nodded its head sagely. Quite a nice sheep. Much smarter than the ones Bilbo had known. It moved away from him intents on the polite request Bilbo had posed to it. Well Bilbo had hopefully politely requested ginger mint tea. He’d find out, soon enough, if his particular Shire dialect of Sheepish was intelligible to Beorn’s sheep servants.

A broken whimper alerted Bilbo that he had company. Looking up he half glared at the intruder who was invading the sanctity of Bilbo’s shadow only to see Kili. Kili who was looking at Bilbo with wide dark eyes and terrified face. Kili who looked like his entire world crashed around him and that he was the one entirely to blame. Kili who looked like he was about to burst into tears at any second.

Bilbo didn’t even have time to ask what had happened before Kili was in his arms and wrapped around Bilbo. Bilbo wheezed at the force of the hug, unable to move his arms to get Kili to let go or loosen his hold.

“I’m so sorry! I’m sorry! I didn’t meant to break you! It’ll be okay, I promise! We’ll go to Gandalf, he’ll fix you!”

“Baa?”

Bilbo couldn’t help the confused bleat that he made. It always took him a second after starting up a
conversation in an animal’s tongue for him to get his mind and throat to cooperate and speak in Westron or Hobbitish or Sindarin.

“Shhhh shhh just don’t speak! We’ll get you fixed. Don’t panic! Just. Don’t. Panic.”

Kili had been frantically petting Bilbo’s hair in an attempt to keep Bilbo calm. Though when he finished his panicked babbling Bilbo was lifted upwards by Kili and run across the room cradled to the youngest prince’s chest. Bilbo could feel his headache increasing tenfold and his mind couldn’t connect the dots as to what in the Green Lady’s name Kili was going on about.

Bilbo was deposited in Gandalf’s lap at the breakfast table unceremoniously. Grumbling like a wet angry kitten Bilbo glared weakly at Kili before staring up at Gandalf.

“Kili what is going on?”

“I broke our burglar! I didn’t mean to! I don’t know how! I woke up and he was gone and I wanted to find him and I did but he was making sheep noises and he can’t speak and I DIDN’T MEAN TO I SWEAR!”

There was resounding silence at the table after Kili’s panicked explanation. The dwarves all staring at him in obvious concern while Gandalf was trying to smother a laugh into his beard. All Bilbo could do was groan and hide his face in his hands. The silence reigned for several minutes, no one quite sure what to do with a hobbit who had apparently been broken by a bad night of drinking (or a young dwarven prince). It was almost suffocating, at least until Bilbo felt a nose nudge his arm again and he managed to lift his head from his hands.

“Baa. Baaa.”

The sheep from before with a lovely tea set balanced on its back. Another sheep stood beside it and carefully placed the tea tray on the table next to Gandalf. The lovely scent of ginger mint tea wafted towards Bilbo and he smiled in thanks.


The sheep bobbed their head in turn and walked away. Pouring himself a cup of tea he blew on it twice before sipping it gratefully. Feeling a mite more fortified for dealing with the dwarves while hung over Bilbo swallowed then cleared his throat.

“Kili I’m not broken.”

Sighing he looked back at Gandalf who was smirking and rolled his eyes. Clearly certain wizards hadn’t been entirely forthcoming about what sort of skills hobbits possessed to a particular company of dwarves. Bilbo hadn’t even thought to go through the basics, if only because he thought the dwarves knew.

“Hobbits can speak learn animal languages. All fauntlings are taught to speak the common animal tongues, Chicken, Horseish, Sheepish, Goatish, Dog, Cat. It isn’t like we often get in depth and titillating conversations out of most of our animals, some are obviously smarter than others. It doesn’t always mean we can talk with all animals or identify all animal calls, it’d be like having you lot go to the far East and then asked to identify all the various languages the tribes and kingdoms of Men use there. I’m lucky that Beorn’s sheep are uncannily clever and speak a dialect close to what the Shire sheep use.”

Moving off Gandalf’s lap Bilbo settled on his own seat. Reaching for a piece of toast Bilbo daintily
took it and nibbled on it, staring at all the dwarves with a brow carefully raised and eyes challenging. It was a look his mother had perfected to an art when other Bagginses had come around calling and dared to even infer that Belladonna was not the most beautiful, wonderful, amazingly brilliant wife in the entirety of the Shire. The Bagginses had always had a bit of a hard time swallowing the fact that Bungo had married one of the wildest Tooks to ever exist, let alone decide that he was the one who was going to carry the baby even though Belladonna was perfectly capable of doing it. Now Bilbo was silently asking if the dwarves had a problem with his knowledge of animal languages.

“Durin’s line can speak to ravens.”

Were Thorin’s words on the matter and the silence that had overtaken breakfast was killed with a majestic glance around the table. Conversation started up once more and Bilbo turned to look at Gandalf, his eyebrows now drawn together in a look of annoyance.

“What did you tell the dwarves I could do?”

“Burgle things my dear hobbit. You are in fact a burglar, are you not?”

“Gandalf I am a respectable hobbit. I am no-“

“Old Took’s birthday.”

Bilbo’s mouth opened in shock then closed fast enough to where the wizard could heard Bilbo’s teeth clack together. Surprise then horror then annoyed embarrassment flitted across his features.

“Father didn’t!”

“Oh she did, my dear, she did. She and I kept up a lively correspondence throughout the years. She was quite proud of your skills, and laying the blame on your Uncle Isengrim, so clever.”

“Yes, well, he’d been mean to Mother so of course I had to seek retribution and Grandfather certainly…No, no I swore I’d never talk about it again. Gah fine, one instance of thievery does not make me-“

“Daffodil Cotton, Ambrosia Proudfoot, Mungo Baggins, a couple of nameless men in Bree, let’s not forget Farmer Maggot-“

“Fine, you’ve made your point I’ve burgaled more than just a few things but when those instances happened I was a child and a tween. I’ve grown up, become less wild. Respectable.”

Bilbo was not pouting. He did not pout, even if he was drinking his tea rather sulkily now. Trying to seem like a responsible clear headed adult around Gandalf was about as easy as trying to seem like a responsible clear headed adult around the Company. Logic rarely worked and sometimes ‘because I said so’ was uttered with little to no extra justification because all previous attempts at logic had been ignored or outmaneuvered.

“And yet here you are with a Company of dwarves having breakfast at a shapeshifter’s home.”

“Some days I really just hate you Gandalf.”

“You sound just like your Father when you say that.”

“I’m not her, now, am I?”

“No, you are not. You’re someone greater.”
Blinking Bilbo turned to look at Gandalf. The wizard was serious. The wizard was completely serious. His brain stuttered and stalled, unsure what to do with such a declaration. The wizard had obviously lost all traces of his sanity if he thought Bilbo could even be a smidge greater than the infamous Belladonna Baggins nee Took. Nobody was greater than his father. Father was…Father had been amazing. She was a legend in her own right. Bilbo couldn’t compare to that, compare to her. He was…not quite nothing but definitely not the *something* she had been.

Furrowing his brows he opened his mouth to say that, except Gandalf was gone and there was just empty air next to him.

“**BUNNY!**”

The thunderous voice of their host was the only warning Bilbo got before he was picked up and cuddled to a massive chest. Bilbo’s feet kicked under him uselessly for a moment before he resigned himself to being held like a stuffed rabbit by a man over twice his size and several times his weight. In fact Bilbo likened Beorn to a massive oversized dwarf, he was built more like one than he was of Men or Elves, despite his…ridiculously unnatural size.

“You didn’t tell me you could talk to my animals!”

“I’m sorry? It never came up before.”

Bilbo found himself being turned around and held out so he was now facing Beorn. It was better looking at Beorn’s face than the barely contained murderous looks the Company was throwing at their massive host. Honestly! Even Ori had been reaching towards the silverware to arm himself. *Dwarves.*

“Doesn’t matter! Little bunny, you are going to help me today with my chores. You will be far more helpful than your little badger counterparts.”

“Master Beorn we were hoping to be able to use our Burglar today. The Burglar was going to help us take stock, mend clothing, and the hobbit needs to be taught how to use that letter opener properly.”

Beorn looked at Thorin consideringly for a moment, then looked back at Bilbo. The giant shape shifter had a thoughtful look on his face. Bilbo could practically hear the wheels turning in his mind. Glancing down at Thorin Bilbo couldn’t help but feel a little grateful that he was trying to save Bilbo from what would likely be a day spent being carried around and cuddled. Beorn began to lower Bilbo towards the ground and everyone began to relax.

Until Beorn quickly brought Bilbo back to his chest.

“No! You have had Bunny to yourselves for far too long. I will return him by suppertime.”

With that Beorn bounded out of the Hall chuckling lowly as the dwarves clattered behind him trying to follow. Bilbo could hear their curses as they were waylaid by animals. Groaning Bilbo rolled his eyes and prayed to the Lady of Mercy for patience and deliverance from fools and dwarrows.

Unfortunately that day he was given neither.
Thorin makes his move.

There was dirt on his hands and smudged on his cheek. The bees buzzed lazily about him as Bilbo knelt in the oversized garden, carefully weeding. It was the closest Bilbo felt to home in the entirety of their journey, kneeling in good dark earth and tending to plants. This was the true passion of hobbits, encouraging life and settling roots, it was bringing something good to the world. Why build a massive monument when you could just plant a garden? Why start a war when weeding was to be done?

“I’ve never seen you so relaxed.”

Thorin’s voice was low and amused. The king under the mountain settled himself on the ground close to Bilbo, watching the hobbit’s expert movements. Bilbo glanced out of the corner of his eye to take in Thorin’s appearance before turning his gaze back towards the plants.

“I’m doing what I’m meant to, what my blood tells me to do.”

“Hobbits are meant to garden?”

“After a fashion, yes. We’re the Green Lady’s children after all. We desire to give gifts, and what better gift is there to give than greenery? The flowers help bees make honey, the grass gives protection to rabbits and birds that we eat, vegetables and fruits feed us, cotton clothes us, trees give wood to help build our homes or tools we need helps give us fire in the winter. As ineloquently as he asked, Beorn wanted my help with his garden in repayment for lodgings here for all of us.”

“I didn’t know hobbits were Yasithul-Mahal’s children.”

“Ya…no, not even going to attempt it.”

“Yavanna. That is what we call her.”

Was it Bilbo’s imagination or had Thorin moved closer? Blast it, he was probably still fighting off the effects of the hangover coupled with near crippling humiliation over losing his cool. There was a reason why he didn’t drink. It loosened his tongue too much, it peeled away the binding that Bilbo had put on his own heart to keep it where it needed to be. Quiet and out of the way, where it wouldn’t bother anybody.

“Yes, we’re hers. Though we’re her second born.”

“I wonder if that’s why…”

Thorin trailed off looking distant for a moment. Bilbo could see a wistfulness on Thorin’s face, pain well covered, and a desire for something. It was almost the same look Thorin gave to Dwalin or
when the King decided to think of Erebor in its glory days. Something in Bilbo’s heart twisted at the sight of it. He didn’t want the king to hurt, to want something he apparently couldn’t have.

“‘Why’?” Bilbo prompted.

“Why I think you’re the most beautiful being I’ve ever met.”

Bilbo couldn’t breathe. All the air had left the surrounding area and left nothing but a vacuum. He felt weightless and dizzy. Confused beyond belief.

“‘Beautiful’? Thorin did you hit your head too hard? You’re addled!”

The wistfulness was gone and in its place was fury. Bilbo squeaked as he tried to move away as Thorin moved towards him. The dwarf king grabbed Bilbo’s arm and tugged, sending the hobbit sprawling onto the dwarf’s body. Flushing a bright red Bilbo stared at Thorin in confusion and utter disbelief.

“I will work every day from here on out to help you see what I see whenever I look at you.”

Those words should not have sent a flutter of giddy warmth through Bilbo. They should not have made him flush even brighter and almost squirm in delight. He was not a tween. He was far past the age of being courted by anyone, well age had little to do with his lack of courting prospects. Yet the principle was the same. This should not be happening. For more reasons than one.

“Dwalin.”

Bilbo’s voice was soft but there was an edge of steel in his tone. He would not participate in anything, nor give anyone permission, to do anything that would hurt his newfound friend in the slightest. If it meant making Thorin retract the statement, then so be it. Besides Thorin and Dwalin were so possessive of each other’s company Bilbo was surprised the other warrior wasn’t lurking around.

“Oh I suspect he’ll work hard at it too. Between the two of us we’ll have you convinced of your loveliness, my dear Burglar.”

His mind went blank. There was no way around it. His brain had suddenly been overloaded and overheated and now there was nothing left in his skull but overcooked goo. The concept subtly presented to him was far too great and grand for comprehension. All that Bilbo could do was try to put out the fires and slowly reconnect the undamaged parts of his brain.

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

The words tumbled out of Bilbo’s lips as he stared at Thorin’s bemused face. He couldn’t even find it in him to move away when Thorin’s hand came up and gently wiped the smudge of dirt from his cheek. Fire and electricity rushed through Bilbo at Thorin’s touch, he could feel the deep mournful rumbling of Thorin’s soul song. A painfully perfect match to his own.

It brought back memories of the first night when the dwarves had arrived at Bag End. Bilbo could remember with perfect aching clarity the first notes of the song of the Lonely Mountain. He had wanted to scream then, scream and scream and scream til his screams drowned out the dwarves voices and their singing stopped. He had wanted to fly at them and claw at their faces. He had wanted to drive them out. Because how dare they sing so beautifully the song that made up Bilbo’s existence. Not that there had ever been words before, Bilbo had never had words to his soul’s song. Yet there the dwarves had given words and a literal voice to his soul. They had taken his soul and the distant fever dreams of his youth and given them voice and words and clear images, memories of
things he had never lived through.

There had been such longing in their voices. A deep burning love for something so lost. And children, children had been singing his soul and how could he not have followed? How could he have stayed in Bag End, in the aching echoing silence that suffocated him like a pillow crushed to his face. The dwarves had sung Bilbo’s soul and they had laid their claim on him as surely as if they had taken his name into their possession.

“I think you do.” Thorin’s voice was amused. “I know you feel it too. The draw between the three of us. We’re tied together and you are aware of it. You saved my life even after I hurt you so terribly, you stubborn idiot. Mahal sometimes I wished I never let you sign the contract. I thought you would be safer in the Shire, Dwalin did too. We both erroneously believed you’d be happy there. Happier, and when we reclaimed Erebor we would come back for you.”

Bilbo watched with wide eyes as Thorin’s hand moved up to run through Bilbo’s messy curls. The tenderness on Thorin’s face was something Bilbo had never encountered before. Not directed at him at least. He’d seen the same expression on his Mother’s face when he looked at his Father. He’d seen the same expression on Lobelia’s face when she stared at Otho.

“But we undermined your instinctive trust in us. We hurt you intentionally emotionally and intimidated you and made you afraid. If you had managed to leave that cave, gotten back to the Shire, you’d have died. Not physically…but your soul. How blind we were to not see it. Forgive me ghivashel, for not helping you sooner.”

“T-thorin.”

“Burglar, you are our One. Dwalin and I knew that from the moment we met you. We’ve known we shared a One since we were children. Dwalin is my best friend and my lover.”

“Then why do you keep it a secret? Your relationship with him. Will that happen with me too? Will I be one more secret?”

Thorin’s hand cradled the back of Bilbo’s head before he pulled and brought Bilbo forward. Brushing their foreheads together Thorin took a deep breath as Bilbo steadied himself by placing his hands on Thorin’s chest. Bilbo didn’t mind at the moment that his hands were still covered in rich earth and were now transferring that dirt onto Thorin’s clean shirt. There was only peace between them as Bilbo tried not to bask in the closeness of Thorin’s body or the warm rumbling of Thorin’s soul echoing through their touch.

“No, I will not keep you a secret. When we get to Erebor and reclaim it Dwalin’s relationship with me will be announced as well. Right now it’s just improper. He is a warrior sworn to my service and my bidding, the power I theoretically wield over him would make it almost impossible to prove that what is between us is made with consent of both parties without obligations or duty muddying the waters. I also need to be able to send him in harm’s way, to almost certain death, without flinching or shirking my duties as King. You exist outside the constraints of Dwarven law and society. There will never be fear or doubt on anyone’s mind if you say ‘yes’ to me.”

“That’s a lot less dire than I imagined the reason for keeping your affair with Dwalin a secret.” Bilbo smiled faintly, his hand curling in Thorin’s shirt. “I am allowed to say ‘no’ to you?”

“Yes. If you said ‘no’ I would honor that. Any dwarf worth the air they breathe listens to their One’s decisions on such matters no matter how hard it might be.”

“And what am I to do about Dwalin? I know you’re a packaged pair.”
“Discretion until Erebor.”

Bilbo thought for a long time, pressed close to Thorin. He weighed his options and ran through scenarios both good and ill in his head. He tried to imagine what it would be like, to be with them. His imagination failed him spectacularly on that, coming up with no images and just a simple warm safe feeling that seeped into his bones. Taking in a deep breath he pulled back.

“I can’t give you children nor am I… I’m not physically built like you or Dwalin or any male. Not even when I hadn’t Shifted. Now I’m…” Bilbo struggled for words feeling embarrassment fluttering in his stomach. “Well I’m closer to a woman, more curves than you’d think but with things you wouldn’t expect a woman to have but not as…” He made a painfully embarrassed noise as he tried to fumbling explain his own body to Thorin. He gestured inarticulately, having finally let go of Thorin’s shirt.

The dwarf stared at Bilbo intensely, waiting for the hobbit to get over his emotions. When he did finally calm down enough, though his face was still flaming, to get his voice back Bilbo found his words were long gone now.

“Oin and Gandalf explained.” Thorin’s voice was low and steady. It was like a caress, smoothing down ruffled feathers and bristled fur. It soothed Bilbo’s fraying nerves. “Dwalin and I discussed it and we came to the conclusion we simply just want you. We will take what you will offer us. Having children doesn’t matter in the end, for I already have heirs. While I cannot say I will know entirely what to do when your clothes finally come off, ghivashel, I will learn if you stay honest and teach me what you like and don’t. I want our bed to be a safe place for all of us.”

“I…” Trails off Bilbo cleared his throat, realizing that his voice had gone up in pitch. Consciously making it lower, closer to what the dwarves would recognize as masculine. Looking at Thorin’s face Bilbo came to his decision. Darting forward Bilbo pressed his lips against Thorin’s, kissing the dwarf chastely before moving back. His face heated up as he saw the pleased and joyful look on Thorin’s face.

“Yes. I… I want to try.”

Weeding was soon completely forgotten when Thorin moved closer and pressed his lips against Bilbo’s. The kiss wasn’t chaste. It was gentle, it was tender, it was everything Bilbo had never had before. Not even Lobelia’s strawberry flavored kisses from over a decade ago had been this good. It was like having a puzzle piece finally slide into place, creating a picture he had never known to be incomplete before. Not in this way. He didn’t know he found the rough scratch of Thorin’s beard to be essential, or that being so obviously smaller than his partner was comforting. It made him wonder what it would feel like to be kissed by Dwalin. Would it be as good? Would it feel as safe? Would it feel as right?

Yet he didn’t wonder long as he was soon preoccupied with Thorin’s tongue. He gasped and mewled mutely into the kiss, painfully aware of his own inexperience now but not enough to pull away. He couldn’t stop, not now. Not when he was being so sweetly devoured by his king. Not when he could elicit such beautiful sounds from Thorin in return. Not when he could practically hear their soul songs blending together in near perfect harmony.

When Thorin finally pulled away Bilbo was happy to see that Thorin’s mouth was kiss bruised. A mark, no matter how faint it was, was made on the king. It was a small reminder that he had been allowed to do that. That they had done this. It was probably a dream, because how could reality be so close to perfection? The sun was shining brightly, the air was warm, and Thorin was cradling him so gently that Bilbo could almost believe that he was the most precious thing in the world to Thorin.
They spent the rest of their afternoon there, soaking up the sun and exchanging kisses. A small slice of peace stolen between them. Greedy and desperate, in their own way, to create a memory for the days to come where they both knew safety would be a fleeting dream and privacy a laughable illusion. They knew they had more days here to rest and recuperate, to build up their strength. Yet they wanted this moment, this perfect almost secret moment between them. Something to share and fall back on, something to treasure in the upcoming trials.

For a few hours that day they stole peace and privacy as they exchanged sweet kisses and murmured words of affection. They were happy and that was all that mattered for a time.

Chapter End Notes

I have made a cover for the story. Well one at least: Here you guys go:
http://elluvias.tumblr.com/post/49340906616/and-suddenly-i-have-made-a-cover-for-the-fic
“This isn’t funny anymore! Whoever it is stop humming!”

Kili’s voice in the darkness of Mirkwood was edging close to panic. They’d all been there for a week, at least, walking through the suffocating darkness that was the sickened forest. Bilbo hated it here. There was no other emotion that could describe the sheer unadulterated dark feeling that welled up inside his chest as he thought about this wretched place. What he wouldn’t do to just raze this horrific mess to the ground and begin again. There would be no healing this place, not even if ten hundred hobbits decided to come and work for a hundred years with the Ents to try and fix this mess. It was too sick, too tainted, every single sense in Bilbo’s poor body was telling him to get out because no good things dwelled here anymore.

“Lad no one is humming. No one has been humming for the last week.”

Gloin’s voice was gruff, as it always was, when trying to point out the perceived madness of the youngest member of their Company.

“I hear it too.”

“I-I…”

Fili and Ori’s voices rose up in Kili’s defense. The other two had never spoken of it before. Of hearing the mysterious humming that was driving Kili up the metaphorical walls. It made Bilbo frown and itch to reach out to the youngest members to soothe what was troubling them.

“NO NO NO NOT LOUDER! LOUDER IS NOT BETTER!”

“HALT!”

Thorin is authoritative as he calls his Company to stop. It’s the sort of tone, the one that Bilbo wasn’t certain he should find such a ridiculous thrill in hearing. Thorin’s voice in general could make Bilbo blush at the slightest drop of a hat, could make warm pleasure curl in his belly, and it brought forth all sorts of sweetly wicked memories of their days at Beorn’s house. The brush of Thorin’s rough beard against his neck, the delicious slide of Dwalin’s hands grasping his hips.

It had only been two stolen moments alone where they had all been able to be together. Yet contrary to what Bilbo had initially expected; Dwalin and Thorin had been endlessly patient and gentle with him. They had explored Bilbo’s body in tandem, eyes full of wonder, lust, and what Bilbo could call…perhaps…love. They had treated Bilbo like he had been the most precious gift given to them, they had enjoyed and encouraged Bilbo to explore them in turn. Nothing had seemed to heat the blood of his dwarves more than the trust Bilbo had placed in them, the sweet way the hobbit had surrendered to them. Bilbo couldn’t help but remember nothing had ever intoxicated him more than knowing he could trust Dwalin and Thorin with his body, that they asked before each piece of clothing had been shed, that they had asked before each new touch had been given. They had made it safe. Safe in ways Bilbo had never thought sex with Outsiders could ever be.

Sex though should not be on his mind, even when he’s standing right next to Dwalin and carefully holding onto the large dwarf’s tunic because it made him feel safe. Right now there are more important things to worry about than his admittedly complicated relationship with The King and his Guardsman.

“Kili calm down.” Thorin’s voice was a mixture between commanding and soothing. It was the same
tone Thorin had used on Minty when the pony had started to startle at something on the road. “What does the humming sound like?”

“It…it sounds like the song of the Lonely Mountain.”

Kili’s voice was full of purely abject misery. Bilbo could practically hear the tears in the dwarf’s young voice as he held his head in his hands as if that would stave off the music that only the youngest dwarves could hear.

“Oh.”

Was all Bilbo could manage to muster in the wake of Kili’s confession. It made sense now, why only the youngest could hear the humming. It also made sense that Kili was the one most affected by it. Blast it and bebother dwarves making mountains out of molehills and scaring years off of Bilbo’s already short life.

“Kili, Kili you aren’t going insane.”

“Burglar.”

“Oh hush Thorin I know what’s going on.”

It took a little bit of maneuvering, to make it to where Kili and Thorin were near the head of the line. Bilbo kneelt on the ground and carefully took Kili’s hands in his and crooned soothingly in the back of his throat. The shaking in Kili’s hands ceased for a moment and Bilbo could hear the dwarf swallow as Bilbo carefully reached through the physical contact and soothed the warbling terrified notes of Kili’s song.

“W-what?”

“Explain.”

Kili and Thorin spoke at the same time and it took all of Bilbo’s restraint not to roll his eyes. For the love of the Green Lady how did they not know about Song Sharing? It happened all the time in the Shire, when young children were scared and reached out for comfort from their Parents or Watchers. It had happened a handful of times since Lotho had been born. When the young hobbit had been staying at Bilbo’s that he (for Lotho almost always preferred to be a male and Bilbo was going to respect that choice) had reached out and tugged Bilbo’s song around him like a blanket. The innate trust required for such an action, for it to work, was monumental. Kili trusted Bilbo more than Fili or Ori did (not that the other two didn’t trust him, they had to to still hear his song). Kili always reached for Bilbo first when it came time to sleep, the young dwarf jealously guarding his hobbit sized cuddle toy from his Uncle which was simultaneously amusing and exasperating. Fili always joined, always helped sandwich Bilbo between him and his brother. Because while Kili always made the first move, it was Fili who whole heartedly supported hobbit cuddling.

“He’s scared. All of them are scared so they’re looking for comfort. They’re finding it in my song, except I guess they didn’t realize it was me they were reaching for. So as they got more confused and frightened the more they reached, the louder my song got, and therefore the more terrified they became.”

“Song? They’re hearing you? But you aren’t humming.”

Bilbo couldn’t help the eyebrow that arched at Thorin as Bilbo shot the dwarf a look. Honestly. Dwarves. So surprised and confused by the simplest things.
“The Valar sang Arda into existence, Eru sang life into all his creations. There are songs within all living things and sometimes probably even in the inanimate objects as well. I’m theoretically always humming because I have a soul. The boys have spent a lot of time with me, all the times they’ve spent physically close to me has allowed their songs to recognize mine. Part of them understands I care deeply about them, that I would do anything to keep them safe. They trust me, and unconsciously they’re reaching out for the trust and comfort I represent. Yet they didn’t recognize what it was, don’t dwarves do something similar? It’s possible because Kili, Fili, and Ori are all doing it right now.”

“No…” Thorin paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. His hand reached out to gently grasp the back of Bilbo’s neck, seeking contact. “No, dwarves do not do something similar. Not that I’m aware of. Our…songs are different than other races. We were made outside Eru’s plan. This is the first time I’ve ever heard of such a thing.”

“You can’t be too far outside Eru’s plan.” Bilbo’s voice was gentle. “Because your songs aren’t bad, they aren’t like the dark things in this world, or even this blasted forest. A little out of tune, which I always wondered about to be honest, but nothing terrible. I guess that’s why Gandalf stopped me from tuning Ori? I can’t understand why though, especially since everyone’s gotten a lot better since that first night.”

“Why does…why does your Song sound like The Lonely Mountain Song?”

Kili was looking at Bilbo with wide dark eyes. Confusion rang in every note of Kili’s normally fast paced complicated jig. Bilbo took a deep breath, knowing that all the eyes of the dwarves were now trained on him and Kili.

“Because it is. Sometimes it happens, a Soul Song mimics a ballad. It usually is a sign that they’re tied to it somehow. I… I have a very unusual Song for a hobbit Kili. I didn’t even know that it was… it was an actual song until you all walked into my smial and sang it. It didn’t have words or voices before, my Song. Now it does. I felt it all, I knew what that song meant when you sang it, images, impressions, things I’ve never encountered, never known were suddenly being pressed into my mind and wrapped into my soul.”

Thorin’s hand tightened on the back of Bilbo’s neck. He could practically feel the wheels turning inside his lover’s mind. Starting to piece together why Bilbo had run out the door so frantically. Bilbo hadn’t come for treasure or even the adventure like he initially tried to play it off. No, the words on the Carrock had been closer to the truth of it. Bilbo had wanted to give them a home, wanted to give them back what the dwarves loved and longed for with a fiercely aching desire. The way he doted on the youngest members, they had touched his soul too. They had all touched the hobbit’s soul when they sang, and combining that startling intimacy with the fact that Bilbo obviously cared for and had wanted children…

“Now that we know what it is…do you feel better now Kili?”

Thorin asked his nephew. Bilbo watched as Kili nodded.

“Yes. It’s more comforting now that I know what and who it is.”

“Good. Now everyone get ready we’re moving out!”

Bilbo stood up with Kili, smiling at the younger dwarf. Thorin moved to the front of the line once more but Kili lingered next to Bilbo.

“Will I…stop hearing it? Now that I know that it’s you?”
“No, my dear boy. You’ll stop hearing me when you’re no longer so afraid.”

“Ah…so likely not until after we get out of these woods then?”

“Probably not.”

Bilbo admitted though he patted Kili’s arm comfortably. Kili looked down at Bilbo and nodded before he reclaimed his spot beside Fili just behind Thorin. Letting himself fall back to the rear position with Dwalin once more, Bilbo reached out automatically and caught the hem of Dwalin’s tunic once more. There was a comfortable companionable silence between them for half an hour, well as comforting as silence could be in the suffocating darkness of Mirkwood.

“Do only children get to hear Songs?”

The question was soft but Bilbo heard it.

“No, lovers do too.”

“Then why can’t I hear you?”

Bilbo couldn’t help it, reaching up he grasped Dwalin’s hand in his own. Of course if any of the dwarves decided to look back at them they’d be able to see it which would defeat the whole point of the lovers discretion. Yet the saddened tone Dwalin had when he had whispered the words broke Bilbo’s heart and he couldn’t help but wish to soothe the sadness.

“Because you aren’t afraid. I know you’re uneasy here but being uneasy and being terrified are two different things. If it makes you feel better Thorin can’t hear me right now either.”

“It doesn’t.”

Bilbo could hear the faint smile in Dwalin’s tone even if he couldn’t see it. Hobbit eyes weren’t meant to deal with the dark like this. The eternal gloaming that was Mirkwood’s daytime would confuse even the sharpest of hobbit eyes if left here too long. How the dwarves could withstand it Bilbo didn’t know.

“If… if you want I can actually hum it for you. Just… when I hum or sing I don’t…well I sound like a woman which is why I’ve never sung before now b-but…”

“I wasn’t asking for you to hum for me, Burglar. If it makes ye uncomfortable then don’t.”

Sucking in a fortifying breath Bilbo glanced at Dwalin out of the corner of his eye. Thorin and Dwalin had been…kind, safe, sweet. They tried not to push too hard or take too much. Most days, as he spent more time in their company they made him want to…well they made him want to be Mirabelle again. They made it safe to entertain such thoughts in his head. It was freeing to know that even if they didn’t understand fully they would support whatever decision Bilbo…or perhaps Mirabelle would make.

“I want to. I’ve been given little chance to sing aloud for a long time. I can’t think of a better reason than to let my Song-Sharer hear my part.”

“Song-Sharer?”

“Yes, we all share the same Soul Song. Different parts but…it’s the same, and when we’re together it’s complete and beautiful. Did you think Thorin’s words alone about being his and yours ‘One’ would convince me?”
“Yes?”

Bilbo chuckled softly and shook his head. Yet he didn’t speak. Instead he cleared his throat gently before breathing deeply. Then he began to hum, the sounds barely audible because it was private. It was intimate and it was painfully taboo with the rules Thorin had set down about their needing discretion. Yet Dwalin heard it. Bilbo knew it when the warrior’s hand clenched around his tightly, a shudder going through his body. Through their contact Bilbo could feel it, the rumbling of Dwalin’s song growing louder, twining with the notes Bilbo hummed in perfect harmony. Dwalin was barely breathing, yet he kept walking forward, kept his gaze ahead, even if his expression was bare and filled with a beautiful longing Bilbo had no specific name for but understood all too well.

There was no way that Bilbo could have truly gauged how long he hummed for Dwalin. It was cathartic for them both. Dwalin hearing a voice he had only heard in his distant dreams, sweetly soothing and meant for him and Thorin alone. Bilbo finally finding a reason to hum, to let music flow out of him for once in almost two decades.

He only stopped when he heard Thorin call for camp. Dwalin had to move away and Bilbo couldn’t keep the pitch of his voice hidden when they all began to cluster together. Shuffling off to the side Bilbo was surprised when two hands found his, holding onto him. Turning his head he noticed an Ori shaped shadow (that was surely becoming more blurred as the sun began to set and Bilbo lost his ability to see) beside him.

“Thank you.”

Ori’s words were soft and sincere.

“For wha…oh. Yes. Well…Ori I know you have your brothers, yet I want you to know I do care about you too. You’re one of the biggest reasons I ran out my front door.”

“Really?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you about that. You’re not a child, not really. You’re quite obviously old enough to make your own decisions and you are a decent fighter, much better than I am at any rate. To my hobbit-y instincts though I feel a drive to protect you, to keep you from harm. While I know more often than not you’re probably going to be protecting and rescuing me, I can’t ignore them. I’ve never had an outlet for them so…they got all pent up inside me and you lot accidentally released it. I’m glad you did. Having you come to my home, to help coax me on this adventure, it was probably the best thing that’s ever happened to me. So thank you Ori.”

Bilbo couldn’t see Ori now. Not even a shape. Yet he knew Ori was flushing brightly, he also knew Ori was probably trying to hide his head in his cardigan. Chuckling he dragged Ori closer by the hands and carefully felt around until he managed to position the young dwarf in a way that made it easy for him to give him a hug. Ori returned it, the strength in his arms was almost surprising if Bilbo had’t long become used to the dwarves being even stronger than they first appeared to be.

Opening his mouth to say something else Bilbo found himself cut off by an angry growl. Startled Bilbo tensed up, ready to drag Ori backwards into the main congregation of dwarven voices until he realized that the growl had come from that direction. Only an embarrassingly high pitched squeak left Bilbo when arms wrapped around him and pulled him back. Bilbo flailed for a moment until he realized he knew which dwarf was holding onto him possessively.

“Thorin.”

“No. I am claiming you this evening. My nephews and Ori have enough of you already.”
“Are you really jealous of-“

“Yes.”

Bilbo huffed out an exasperately amused laugh as he was carefully, and somewhat forcibly, moved across camp to where Bilbo was certain Thorin’s bedroll was located. It was easier to be affectionate with Thorin. They had announced at Beorn’s their relationship, Thorin daring anyone to disagree with his choice with a simple look while Bilbo had flushed under everyone’s gaze (especially Dwalin’s distinctly possessive and predatory one). There was a certain amount of physical affection expected, which Bilbo didn’t mind fulfilling.

When he was directed to sit down Bilbo reached out and blindly tugged Thorin down with him. It was awkward, more than a little clumsy, as Bilbo searched for Thorin’s lips with his own. A few soft giggles escaped him before he finally found his prize and pressed their lips together. The kiss was short, but it was sweetly reassuring.

“Silly dwarf. What I feel for you is vastly different than what I feel for Ori, Fili, and Kili.” Bilbo chided gently.

“I should hope so.”

“Stop being an eejit.” Dwalin rumbled as he came to sit near them. The large dwarf carefully handed Bilbo his ration for supper before handing Thorin his.

“I am not being an ‘eejit’. ”

“Ye are.”

“I agree.”

Bilbo chimed in with amusement clear in his voice. Eating his dinner he leaned against Thorin while stretching out his leg, letting his foot brush against Dwalin’s thigh. Even though the darkness was suffocating, was wrong, and it felt like a thousand different eyes were watching him all at once, Bilbo found peace in the comforting presence of his dwarves. The easy banter between them fended off the darkest parts of the shadows and allowed Bilbo to once again entertain the thought of potentially reversing his Choice.
There are many things in Belle’s life that she regretted. Beginning to change her Choice is not one of them. It’s so freeing to admit that everyone else was so very wrong about her. To sit and think however privately to herself that she had made the wrong choice in bending to everyone’s wills. Throwing in the towel without a fight.

Her fingers reached up to tug nervously at the braid in her hair. Thorin and Dwalin had woven it last night, placing her firmly between them in front of the small fire they had made in the Treasure Room. It wasn’t how she’d envisioned their ‘Coming Out’ going. It wasn’t that it hadn’t been sweet or that it didn’t warm her heart, but there had been an edge there. Something… it had been a challenge to the other dwarves, with Belle in the middle as less than a partner and more…just simply one more object of treasure. Just one more piece being claimed.

*They’re gone. They’re all gone. Where have my dwarves gone?*

Uneasiness creeped along her senses. Belle knew she could pinpoint the moment Smaug died. It was as if the dragon’s life had been tied with the lives of her dwarves. They were gone. All gone. All being tugged and tangled down into this horrible gold madness. Some suffering worse than others.

Carefully she clutched Ori’s hand in hers. The young scribe looked at her, young face warring between concern and enraptured. Only Ori fought it, and Mirabelle thanked every last star in the sky that she could hold him. That she could draw him to her side and hold him close, murmuring soft musical words into his strawberry hair, weaving what little protection she could. Thank Yavanna all Ori lusted for were books and scrolls, knowledge that couldn’t be found in glittering gems or cold pretty metals. If there had even been the barest hint of a bookshelf Belle knew he would have been utterly consumed too. Yet he wasn’t, and she clung to him, because she could hear his song warbling high and frantic as it fought against the sickening inky black notes that pervaded everyone else’s songs.

She forced hers to be all the louder, practically screaming in her own mind the lines of the Lonely Mountain Song. Ori would not be lost. She would not lose this child like she had lost Fili and Kili.

“I don’t understand Bil…Belle.”

Ori’s voice was soft and shaking, trembling as it came out barely above a whisper.

“Neither do I. But I swear I will keep you safe, all of you safe. The Men and Elves will not kill you nor will I let a war begin.”

It had been those beautiful moments in Laketown that had carried Belle through her betrayal. Carefully taking out the braid at the edge of the Camps, rearranging her clothes and making certain that she looked like Bilbo. For Belle knew that she would have to be brave and firm and drag everyone’s attention to her and her bargain. She knew that they would have to think her a man, because obviously only men knew the workings of politics (which in reality hobbits could
outmaneuver any petty human, dwarf, or elvish lord if they wished to put their minds to it, one did not navigate the families they did without everyone having a good deal of political sense). She brokered a deal, she traded the trust, love, and camaraderie she had gained over the last year all formed in a soulless glittering gem and in return she was assured that her family would live.

It was the acceptance and the raucous laughter of the dwarves when after she had gotten them all out of the barrels, miserable and wet, looking like a half drowned cat that she declared ‘I am a lass and any of you who find offense in that can go back in their blasted barrels and drown’. It was all the good times. It was all the bad times. It was the fear and the anger. It was the warmth and the love. This was their home. This was their place and by the Valar she would not let them lose it.

“How dare you? Thief! Betrayer!”

Thorin’s words were like physical blows. Yet she would not bend beneath them. Shaking she swallowed, tilting her head high as she faced the hurricane of his fury. There were tears in her eyes as she felt the trust between them shattering, she stifled her sob when she realized that Dwalin’s trust was gone too. It was broken between them. Just as she knew it would be. Her hands fluttered protectively over her stomach before she shivered again and simply wrapped them around herself.

“You prefer my enemies over me? You prefer their hospitality over the protection of the Mountain? Go then! Stay with them! You are banished from Erebor for the rest of your miserable days. Should you return you will face execution for high treason.”

Mirabelle didn’t blanch at the words nor did she lose her supper. Flinching she wiped the spittle from her face as she looked up at Thorin. She loved who he had been, she loved who he could be. Her eyes went to Dwalin, taking in his fearsome cold face and felt tears slip from her eyes and down her cheeks. She missed her gentle giant, the man whose sense of humor was dry and warm. She missed the trust that they had shared. What she missed most of all was hearing their Songs free of the darkness plaguing them.

“Watch after the children.”

I love you, I love you all. I wish it had never come to this. Stay safe, all of you, stay safe. Ori, sweet Ori I will sing to you until I cannot sing anymore.

As she carefully climbed down from the wall she felt a single strand remaining. It lingered between her and Ori, thin, but unbroken. She could tell he clung to it as tightly as she did and she forced herself to ignore his wail, his shouts to please come back, don’t leave me alone, Mirabelle.

There was nothing that made her feel more wretched than ignoring Ori’s cries. It didn’t matter that he was older than her. It didn’t matter he was technically an adult. Ori trusted her still, needed her still, was calling out for her to come back and protect him from the darkness within Erebor. She’d had to make a choice, a horrible wretched choice, one she knew would have her leaving Ori.

Well at least she thought she was leaving Ori.

There was a scuffle overhead. A fight and Dori cursing up a storm and Thorin bellowing out in Khuzdul. Mirabelle was on the ground by then, her eyes wide and perplexed as she stared up feeling her heart thudding erratically in her chest, tears still streaming down her face. Then a form was coming over the wall, repelling down at an alarming speed. Ori stood before her, his back straight his dark brown eyes wide with fear but he flung himself at her and held onto her like she was a raft in a river and the only thing to save him from drowning.

“Ori, oh Ori you’d be safer in the Mountain.”
“No. No I won’t be and you know it. It’s…I’ll take my chances out here.”

“Well Master Baggins, Master Ori come with me and you will find shelter.”

“Mistress.” Ori bit the word out, hugging Belle tighter to him and glaring at Gandalf. “Mistress.”

“Ah, ho-hum, well. My apologies dear Mirabelle. You were presenting yourself as Bilbo when you brokered the trade.”

Belle didn’t sigh nor did she look up at the Mountain Gate, knowing Thorin was there as well as probably both ‘Ri brothers. She and Ori rearranged themselves, Ori keeping an arm around her shoulders and keeping her firmly at his side. The horrible side effects of being short, she supposed, even when she wanted to be the bigger one to shelter she couldn’t.

“I transitioned in Laketown, though only with the dwarves. Everyone thought it’d be safer if the Men thought I was male. Men respect men more, I knew they’d listen to me more closely if I was male in their eyes.”

“Ah….yes Men do work like that I’m afraid.”

“They’re stupid.” Ori muttered.

“They’re different.” Belle corrected gently.

“That’s just a nicer way of saying you think they’re stupid.”

Belle couldn’t help the giggle that escaped. Half amused half hysterical. She could barely believe Ori was with her. Yet it made sense, this was not the home he dreamed of. This empty hollow place that was everything and nothing like what Thorin had described. This dark place where the scent of dragon still lingered and where darkness and sickness bred and took hold. This was not his dream but a nightmare he never imagined. He needed safety just as much as she did and for once, once in his life, Dori and Nori weren’t going to provide it. How strong must he be, her sweet Ori, to be able to leave now, to run while he could before the madness got him too.

They were taken to the elven encampment, where they tangled together and clung to each other through the night. And when they cried during the night, waking from nightmares that were more like memories than dreams, they held each other and comforted each other. Hopefully it would get better, it would be better.

Then the battle came.

No words could adequately describe it. There was no way she could find a way in any language to encompass the depth of madness and pain that the Battle of Five Armies was. She stayed, most of the time, with Gandalf and Ori in the elven ranks. Then the chaos grew, the orcs and goblins kept coming. She took an arrow close to her neck near her collar bone, one of the few places the mithril shirt (the first gift given to her by Thorin, and the only one that had seemed genuine) did not cover for Thranduil. She should have been down then, but she clawed and screamed with all the feral shrieking rage the hobbits were not known for anymore.

How Thranduil had jerked, shock open on his features before she bared her teeth and dove back into the fray. Mirabelle knew that was why her kind never fought. Hobbits now, Fae before, long ago in the Wandering days with more forms, more powers, and more wildness. Stories were still told of them then, only a quarter true, but the smidge of truth that always stayed the same was ‘never make them mad’. It was much like with their creator, The Green Lady, for she was sweet natured, she was soft, she vlued gifts and kindness and peace, but she was also wild and fierce, her forests were as
dangerous as they were beautiful, they took care of their own and punished those who hurt them. That this chaotic horrible battle had brought out the wildness, the madness, the ferocious rage that had driven her kind crazy before, where it fueled and brought forth The Wild Hunt.

Mirabelle was just a lone hobbit, closer to her original kin than most, but still far from being a full Fae.

Yet she was a wild thing now, filled with all the fury of a mother bear, for the orcs had cornered Fili and Kili (and Thorin). Azog, Azog, dared to strike them down within her purview. He dared to try and take their precious lives. So she ignored her body’s warnings, ignored the pain, ignored all common sense and dove at the Orc almost three times her size. Her dwarves were down, her children lay bloody and broken on the battlefield. She hacked and slashed at him, ducking his swings, and focusing on him with wild almost iridescent eyes. She climbed him like a rabid squirrel, biting him, clawing him, trying to cause him pain and focus on her.

Azog finally caught her, grabbing Belle and throwing her down to the ground. The air left her lungs and she gasped, her teeth bared at him and his black blood painting her lips. She spat at him, even as she could barely breathe. Her leg was broken, having hit a rock or a helmet. Belle had barely anything in her lungs when he swung his mace down, connecting with her body with a sickening crack. Her scream was almost soundless, pain blossoming everywhere. She was going to die, and Belle couldn’t be certain if she didn’t want to.

Her potential immediate demise was delayed. A war hammer came crashing into Azog with brutal force, knocking him to his knees. The orc barely had time to recognize he was being attacked before it crashed into his head and pulverized it. Then for good measure it hit Azog again before Belle could focus enough to look up.

Ori stood with a borrowed war hammer, his face twisted into a look of pure fury.

“Don’t touch my Namad!”

Belle smiled at Ori, though she felt so woozy. She could see Beorn behind Ori, ripping out the throat of Azog’s warg. He didn’t look very different from his man form, she thought muzzily. Her head fell back but her eyes didn’t close. Everything hurt, everything hurt from her body to her soul and Ori was roaring in rage and anguish or was that Beorn? Belle couldn’t tell at this point. But she saw something, she saw something miraculous and wonderful.

“Eagles. Ori….Eagles…The Eagles are coming.”

She wheezed out, unable to lift her arms now to point. Ori shouldn’t have even heard her over the din that was happening. Yet he seemed to anyway as he took up her words, shouting and pointing towards the sky before having to take his hammer again and kill an orc that came too close. The world began to slip and slide, trickling away from her like too much water in a bathtub and someone started moving. She was being lifted into the air, placed on Beorn’s back beside the Durins. Reaching out despite the pain, despite the fact that she shouldn’t be able to, she grasped at Thorin, touching his hair and smiling.

“I love you both…so…so much.”

And her world went black.
The Aftermath Of Bravery

Chapter Summary

There's some triggery topics in this new chapter. If you wish to see what they are (and end up being a bit spoiled) go to the end notes. Everyone else...get your tissue boxies

Chapter Notes

Mentions miscarriage and permanent injury and touches on potential substance abuse problems.

She was in a cave. A well decorated, finely furnished cave, but it was a cave nonetheless. If Belle never woke to see a cave again in her life she would be far far too happy to care. A put upon sighed escaped her before she realized it hurt. Everything hurt. There was not a single inch of her physical or otherwise that did not twist in agony.

“Drink this.”

A cup was brought forth to her lips and she drank. Which really she shouldn’t have because she woke up in a strange well-furnished cave in an unknown location and the liquid in the cup tasted utterly foul on her tongue but warmed her inside and out. Even the nagging voice in her head that told her she should be panicking was quieting down into something more akin to meaningless sound. That was better, even if her mouth tasted like Gloin unwashed hairy nutsack.

The thought of Gloin’s unwashed hairy nutsack brought forth a giggle before she looked to her right and saw who sat beside her.

Thranduil.

The Battle of Five Armies hit her like Azog’s mace, her eyes widening as she gasped in pain and fear. Yet it was dulled, all dulled, and Thranduil really was a sneaky bastard for drugging her. She wasn’t nearly as upset as she should be and she fought to glare at him.

“You were injured gravely. Mithrandir stabilized you before my son took you back to our Halls so we could try to save your life. We did not know how any of your dwarves besides Ori would…react to your continued presence and we did not wish to jeopardize your safety, m’lady.”

“Are they alive? Are my children safe? Are Thorin and Dwalin safe?”

Thranduil’s mouth went into a thin line, his dark eyes flickering into something gravely sad. It was a strange gesture, when Thranduil touched her hand and held it.

“Your company is alive. Thorin and his heirs are being tended to by my healers and everyone else of your eclectic Company came through with only minor scratches. Ori is being hailed as a hero and there is no doubt that he is no longer exiled from Erebor.”
Something was wrong she knew it. Deep in her bones. There was something that Thranduil wasn’t telling her. That he was hesitating in telling her. She might be mentally impaired to whatever Thranduil had given her to drink, she might be in pain, but she was still smart. She was clever and she knew the look in his eye, even if she could not recall where.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

Her words were slurred but still sharp. Thranduil winced almost imperceptibly.

“I’m sorry we did all we could. Mithrandir and myself but…we were unable to save the child.”

Belle stared at Thranduil like he had grown a second head or perhaps he had just declared himself to be the High Queen of Mordor. Something ridiculous. Something impossible. He was obviously addled. Perhaps he’d been hit in the head during the battle.

“I’m barren Thranduil.”

Her words were measured and calm, helped in part by whatever foul concoction he had given her.

“No, you’re not. Why would you believe you were?”

“I…The scar, my abdomen…Orcish blade it went through me. It scarred up everything inside and the infection afterwards…the infection…Thranduil I’m barren. I’m barren! There was no child! THERE COULD BE NO CHILD! I AM BARREN!”

She was screaming. She knew she shouldn’t be screaming because it wasn’t true. It was a lie. It had to be a lie. There was no way…it couldn’t have been. No no no! This was a dream. This was a nightmare. There was no way, this couldn’t be her reality. She didn’t care that Thranduil was telling her to calm down. She tried to fight the arms that wrapped around her carefully as she wailed, because this was a lie. It had to be a lie. A hand carefully petted her curls as she sobbed into the solid warmth of Thranduil’s chest. It wasn’t as comforting as Thorin or Dwalin’s, it wasn’t dwarvish enough, it wasn’t… But she’d never have that comfort again now, would she? She’d never be held by them because if she tried to come close she’d die.

Perhaps she deserved it. Perhaps she deserved to be executed for betraying them, even if it was trying to save them. She knew she definitely deserved it because she had killed their…she had…

She lost consciousness to the sound of an old elvish voice speaking words she could not understand, cradled in the arms of a King that was not hers, lost in the grief and pain that she could not deny.

*Four months later*

“Hello Bard.”

“Hello Lady Belle.”

The new lord of Dale looked at her with an almost somber expression. Mirabelle said almost because his mustasche twitched upwards ever so slightly when he spotted her. She had found Bard to be a very taciturn man, with a facial expression set close to brooding unhappiness. But he was a kind man, a fair one. One who kept her existence a secret.

“Bard, I’ve told you before: Just Belle. There is no need for ‘Lady’ ‘M’Lady’ or any of that nonsense. I’m below you in rank and count you amongst my dearest friends.”

“We owe you a great deal.”
“Bard.”

The tall dark haired man sighed but his mustache twitched again. It made her smile in return. Smiling was…a little bit easier now. Even though she still hurt so much, inside and out. Even though she had so many dark and painful memories…she couldn’t dwell on them. Nope, dwelling on them meant that she would start thinking on all her failures that…they weren’t entirely failures. Her dwarves were alive, recovering, in Erebor. Ori had been welcomed back like the hero he was. Her actions saved many lives, the lives of the people she loved. Thorin and Dwalin were even happy together, Belle knew, because she had heard they had announced their upcoming engagement.

“Fine, pushy little thing.”

Belle rolled her eyes at him and smiled again.

“I’ve come to ask and see if my home is getting built to the specifications I made.”

“Belle you shouldn’t be out there by yourself. We could build you a perfectly good home here in Dale proper.”

It was an old argument now. One that Bell was tired enough of that she carefully balanced the weight of her body on her left leg before reaching out with her cane and smacking Bard in the shin. The grim man grunted partially in pain and partially in amusement. His dark eyes warred between irritation and the desire to lock her away someplace safe.

“I can’t stay in Dale proper. There’s too much of a risk that The Company will figure out I still live, let alone remain in the East when I should be in the West. Your relations are still shaky with Erebor, you need Thorin’s goodwill. Besides I miss the green, and having a farm of my own will be beneficial to Dale. Ori’s already sworn he’ll come check up on me when he can, and I know Legolas is going to be a frequent guest. I also know you’re going to send people to check up on me if your gloomy self doesn’t show up at my door. I am only slightly crippled, not an invalid. I can look after myself well enough.”

Bard sighed now. He reached over and carefully patted Belle’s shoulder.

“Your home will be one of the first finished, I swear. Do you have need of any livestock? It’s never come up in our discussions before.”

“Beorn is giving me two cats, two dogs, a pony, some sheep, some chickens, three goats, and a cow. They’re going to help me with the farming.”

“That’s quite a generous gift but I don’t see…”

“Beorn’s animals are…special. Extraordinary really. When he heard I couldn’t really travel home and that I was staying here and going to start up a farm he insisted. They’ll help me with most of the chores I cannot perform on my own. They’re smarter than some people I’ve met, certainly more intelligent than trolls and far more sanitary. None of them will be for eating though, they’re too smart to be killed in good conscience.”

“I shall take your word on it then until I see them for myself.”

Belle laughed softly, a mere ghost of the laugh she had once had before but it was better than the fake haunted sound that had plagued the minds of all who knew her the first two months after the Battle. Elvish medicine had helped heal Belle faster than she would have mended on her own and far better than if she had been left to her own or dwarvish healing devices. The fact she could walk, when she should rightly have lost her leg (so strange now to think that just the force of hitting the
ground had broken her leg so completely, but Thranduil had told her that all her bones had become quite brittle because of her pregnancy and the starvation she had endured in Mirkwood) was a miracle. It hurt every day and would hurt her every day for the rest of her life. All she would be able to do would be to manage the pain, to try and work through it, and when it became far too intense she had potions and teas to drink to help lull her into a place where the pain couldn’t touch her so much.

If she was a weaker person she’d probably have started taking the pain tonics to make all her pain go away. Yet…it didn’t seem right to run away like that. She had made mistakes and she was paying for them. There was nothing quite left to do about it other than endure.

The brief meeting was over soon after that. Bard going down to his knees and hugging Belle. It had been an interesting discussion, when she had come from Mirkwood at the beginning of Spring when all the men of Dale left the protection of Erebor. When she had to explain to Bard that she was not ‘Bilbo Baggins’ but ‘Mirabelle Baggins’ that she had always been Mirabelle Baggins inside even when she had called herself Bilbo and a man. Bard had been perplexed, but not in a hostile way. The man had been much like the dwarves, not understanding but not rejecting the idea or notion outright. Instead Bard had taken the switch of names and the change of clothes in a stride.

He had even made sure that all the dresses he procured her were always long enough to hide her feet. A few touches of makeup and her hairstyle changed she could pass, if one wasn’t looking closely enough, like a peculiar lady-dwarf.

Now for the second order of business on her list. She clutched the envelope in her hand and tried to calm her racing aching heart. Mirabelle had put off sending a letter to Lobelia long enough. It had been since the arrival in Laketown that she had sent her last letter, explaining what had happened on her Journey so far and what she was about to do. At that point even if someone intercepted the letter they could do little to nothing to stop her and the others from going to the Mountain.

It had taken her months to craft this new letter. Wrestling with how to put into words the things that had happened, the dragon, the battle, her injuries, losing the child she didn’t know she’d even had, and the fact that she would never be able to return to the Shire. She’d never be able to go back to Bag End. She’d never be able to see her books or her maps, she’d never be able to curl up in the warmth of the quilt her Father had made, or to wear her favorite sleeping robe. All the creature comforts, all the little things that had made being alone so easy to bear were now far beyond her reach.

She had drafted the letter, instructing Lobelia how to dole out her belongings and asking that Lobelia send at least the few treasured heirlooms that Belle didn’t know how to part with forever with some sort of dwarven caravan. If Lobelia didn’t want Bag End then she was to give its ownership to Drogo. Lobelia was to make sure Hamfast was to be employed for as long as he lived as well his offspring. That Lobelia could finally have the silver spoons that she’d always wanted and that they had made a game of ‘could Lobelia actually manage to sneak off with the spoons before Belle noticed’ (and the answer was Belle always noticed). She had had to rewrite it when tears had started falling onto the page and smearing the words of ‘I love you so much my beloved blue fool and I will always miss you’ as well as ‘Tell Lotho I love him so much too and that I know he will grow up to be the most spectacular hobbit in the entire Shire’.

Her tears were held in check as she went to where the Dunedain lingered. The first one she found she handed him the letter as well as a small pouch of gold.

“Please deliver this to the Shire when you can.”

“I will, m’lady.”
The Ranger tilted his head at her, a far deeper bow of respect than she deserved. She had almost told him so but he was already striding away, heading out of the hustling business that was the slowly reconstructed ruins of Dale. Belle watched him go, longing in her heart, twisting painfully knowing that she would never be able to follow him. She would never be able to make the Journey back to the Shire. Even if she could have, what lay there besides mostly ghosts and an emptiness that would never be filled? It was a double edged sword, the choice of staying here or trying to go on a suicidal errand to go to a place that really wasn’t home.

For all that she had helped her beloved family find and reclaim their home, she found she had quite lost hers in the process. Turning she carefully made her way back through the crowd to the small shanty she was now calling ‘home’. Hopefully, this time, she wouldn’t lose herself on the way getting there.

But that was, as much as everything else, a fool’s hope.
Letters To Lobelia pt 1

Chapter Summary

The first two letters Bilbo sent to Lobelia during the Quest.

Dear Lobelia,

So as you have probably heard by now I’ve run off on an adventure with a band of dwarves. Oh don’t give me that look. I know you’re doing it, that unamused frown with your eyebrows drawing down that stopped working on me when we were ten. I feel I am lucky that I ran off when you were off visiting your parents on the other side of the Shire and now it’s too late for you to come to Bree to drag me back home and lock me in my smial until you’re positive this ‘madness’ has left me. I know that your issue isn’t even that I’ve run off, but that I’ve run off with dwarves and Gandalf.

No, you won’t make it in time to catch me before we leave. I’m actually waiting to post this letter until the very last minute just to make absolutely certain you won’t be able to follow. Yes I know I’m being a cheeky clever brat, but I’m your favorite cheeky clever brat despite the fact I am of a respectable age.

Ha even I couldn’t keep my face straight while writing that and I bet you just snorted in amusement. You always do whenever I try to insist I am respectable. I know I never will be in your eyes, far too many memories between us that end up with me in some sort of mischief and you dragging me home by the back of my shirt.

I know you’re wondering why I left now of all times. I know you think I should have gone on an adventure sooner to get the ‘silly Tookishness out’. Something small but exciting, something that would have only a little bit of danger and I’ll come home a bit better off than I was before I left. I know you far too well Lobelia, I know how you think.

I didn’t actually want to come on this adventure to begin with. I told Gandalf ‘no’ when he showed up at my door inquiring. He didn’t leave even when I feigned ignorance as to who he was. No, bold as brass he declared who he was and that I was to be chosen for it would ‘do me some good and amuse him’. I tried to shoo him off, I told him no again, and then went to hide in my smial. As you know from my Father’s stories Gandalf is not one so easily deterred. So you know what that blasted wizard does? He carves a rune onto my door, which made my quite angry when I realized that because dear Lotho had just painted it a week ago, and toddles off to go tell his travelling companions to come to my home for dinner.

Lobelia I never wish you have a party of thirteen dwarves show up on your doorstep unannounced. They pillaged my pantry, tracked mud into all the carpets, and I’m still not exactly sure what they did to the plumbing but they all but destroyed it. They made fun of me for being frantic and ‘fussy’ when they came in unannounced, invaded my space, and played games with Father’s crockery. It was a most unexpected and unwelcome party. Oh how I wanted to hit them all! To throw them out! Except, well, they were all so much bigger than I and all armed to the bloody teeth.

I know what you’re thinking now Lobelia. ‘But if these dwarves were all so horrid why did you go on an adventure with them?’ It is because at the end of the party, when I had hidden myself in my room trying to calm down from a particularly unhelpful and graphic description of ‘incineration’ (I
think Bofur, the dwarf who described it to me, didn’t know I had actually seen two fire related deaths and that I’m terrified of going the same way so please don’t hit him if you two ever meet), they Sang. Not just a song, but a Song, my Song Lobelia.

This is one of those times, my dear, that I’m ever so thankful we never married. For this was probably always bound to happen. They didn’t know, I don’t think. If they did they’d be far crueler beings than I think they are. Thirteen voices sang my Song, three of them children, they put words to my soul, they gave me clearer images of the painful fever dreams I have whenever I drink too much or get too ill. I am bound to their destiny Lobelia. Two in particular more than the others. There are two dwarves in this Company who have the missing pieces of my Song. Neither seem to recognize me though, in fact I bring out a certain hostility in them both that often makes me wonder what is so terribly wrong with me.

I’ll show them my worth though. I’ll make them see that I am needed here by their sides, that I was always meant to be here. At the very least even if I don’t manage to convince them I do have three tweens to look after.

I will not and cannot tell you where I am going. I signed a contract, I made a promise to keep this secret for as long as possible. So a secret it shall remain until the terms are fulfilled. I think the dwarves do not hold much stock in my signing. How terribly wrong they are at that, but I promise I will not tell them that I cannot break the contract without a penalty to myself. I know how much I must keep secret from them, it is probably just as much as they keep secrets from me.

When or if I get a chance to write you next I will describe my companions for you. I haven’t known them long enough yet to give you an accurate description of them besides their physical appearances and how loud they snore. I hopefully will rectify that soon.

Love,

Bilbo Baggins.

**

Dear Lobelia,

Rivendell. I am in Rivendell! Oh how I wish you could be here with me. Elves, Lobelia, elves. I know I’m sort of stating the obvious that there are elves in Rivendell but if you were here too you’d be just as muddled in your awe as I currently am. Perhaps moreso since I’ve just lived through perhaps the most ridiculous set of circumstances anyone could think of.

There’s no easy way to say this but I almost got eaten by three mountain trolls. No! Don’t you dare start packing to take me home, first off I have a contract binding me to this Company and secondly by the time you get this letter I shall be far from Rivendell and you won’t be able to catch up with me. It was mainly stupidity on my part that made me an almost troll snack. They had stolen our ponies you see, and I couldn’t let poor Myrtle (my mount) be eaten by them. She and I had come to a lovely understanding and friendship at this point. So I perhaps let two of the tweens, Fili and Kili, convince me that since I am to be the burglar of our Company I should go and burgle our ponies back. I was doing well, sneaking up on the troll camp, you know how hard it is for anyone to catch us when we’re in a wooded area and wanting to sneak. Then when I got to the enclosure that held our ponies it was tied off with thick rope and me being me had forgotten to bring a knife with me. So I got one of my brilliant ideas and decided to try and steal a knife from the trolls. I will not go into great detail as to what happened next, let’s just say it was an embarrassing night for everyone except Gandalf.
You may use me as a lesson for Lotho in a ‘you must always be prepared lest you end up in a sack about to be eaten by trolls and covered in troll snot’. I promise I’ll tell you the full story when I get back to the Shire where you can tut at me and glare over the rim of your tea cup while using said tea cup to hide your amused smile. It’ll be easier when I’m farther away from the incident.

A few good things happened after the incident. I got a sword! An elvish sword made in Gondolin. It glows blue when orcs and goblins are near. Well everyone else says it’s a letter opener, but I still think it is a sword and that is all that really matters. I didn’t get to use it on the orcs and wargs that ended up chasing us though. Which happened right after the troll incident. As I keep saying I’ll go into more detail when I get back, but suffice to say today has been utterly wretched whose only high points include elves.

I don’t think the dwarves would be quite pleased at hearing that. The tales of dwarven and elven animosity towards each other have not been overstated, in fact I think that the tales that have reached our ears in the Shire have in fact been watered down. They’d actually be quite cross and likely see it as a betrayal that I am fond of elvish things. I cannot help it if they are kind, polite, and are gracious hosts. I also cannot help the fact that the elves have such a marvelous library. Yes, I know you’re rolling your eyes at me right now for falling utterly in love with the library. I cannot help it, books are one of my greatest weaknesses.

I didn’t mention it in my last letter but I would like for you, Otho, and Lotho to keep a bit of an eye on Bag End, reassure Hamfast that I will be back and to make sure he gets his pay on time. Running out the door like I did made me forget quite a few important things, namely taking care of my estate and bringing my handkerchief. I know I can trust you to keep everything in running order and take care of the Gamgees in my absence (as well as the other tenants on my properties). I’m sure you’ve already started doing that the moment you realized I had forgotten to do it myself earlier, but at least you can show this to the Thain to show him you are authorized by me.

Before I forget to do so I made you a promise in my last letter, didn’t I? To describe the dwarves in detail for you. If not I meant to. I’ll write descriptions of each of them so when my next letter arrives you will have a hand dwarf reference guide.

Thorin Oakenshield son of Thrain, son of Thror, King Under the Mountain: Thorin can easily be summed up as majestic. His hair is dark and thick with gray streaks inside making him seem more on the distinguished end of growing older as opposed to just withering away. You cannot mistake him for anything other than nobility, he has an air about him, this overwhelming presence that takes up all the space in a room. He demands loyalty and respect without verbally asking for it. He gets it too. He is also unbearably insufferably handsome. He can be covered in dirt and muck, winded and a bit bloody, and you still get struck by how blastedly beautiful he is. No he doesn’t know I fancy him. He dislikes the very air I breathe and he is grumpy and condescending towards me. I wish I didn’t feel such a drive to please him, to make him value me. I want him to respect me, but I fear that is quite like asking for the stars in the sky Lobelia. How it hurts to realize most of the time I have no use in his eyes and that I am a fussy delicate burden that he must suffer through carrying.

Fili son of Dis, Sister of Thorin, Daughter of Thrain, etc: Fili is a Tween in our reckoning. He is in his eighties but by dwarven standards he is not entirely of age. He is a calmer presence amongst our Company, though he is prone to all the mischief of youth. He is golden, which looks quite lovely on him. I have no doubt he has broken many hearts. He is haughty and tends to think himself invincible, but he often miscalculates his plans and ends up leading himself and his younger brother headfirst into trouble. Fili is Thorin’s heir apparent and I pray that Fili has many more years to grow into himself before he has to take the throne.

Kili son of Dis, etc (I am not writing that out again): Kili is the youngest member of our Company.
He is dark haired and dark eyed, and has inherited the Durin ability to always remain attractive no matter what is happening. He is a giant puppy, one who is always looking for attention, one who has almost just grown into his paws. Kili is painfully adorable and pure mischief. Honestly if I didn’t know for a fact he was a dwarf I would have pegged him as a Took or a Brandybuck just for his inability to let things stay orderly. He is pure chaos, adorable chaos, but chaos nonetheless. He’s a bit odd for a dwarf in his choice of weaponry, his preferred weapons being a bow and arrow. Yet he is quite good at it. I also thank every day that he is not heir apparent, if only because he is far too young in mind and soul to take up such responsibility and weather it well.

Balin son of Fundin: Balin is a very crafty dwarf. He is one of the oldest in the Company and is a cousin to Thorin. Balin is our tactician, I believe. He is completely white in hair, with no braids that I have seen yet. His long beard is forked and he looks to be a jolly old soul. That is unless he’s fighting and then he is a master in his art of war. He is quite genial and a scholar the rest of the time and has taken it upon himself to help educate me in the ways of dwarves and their history. He is very well read, even in temper, and I suspect he may be Thorin’s top advisor.

Dwalin son of Fundin: Dwalin is the younger brother of Balin. He is almost as big as a Man and is perhaps the second most intimidating dwarf in our Company (Thorin ranking number one in that category). He is missing a good hunk of his right ear, it seems that something might have bitten it off. He is a warrior, strong, fierce, indomitable, and the bloody first dwarf to show up at my smial. Even you would be intimidated by him Lobelia, if that gives you any hint to his presence. Where Balin is Thorin’s advisor, Dwalin is Thorin’s hand. No matter where Thorin goes Dwalin is not far behind. His loyalty is unwavering and while he may dislike me with as much passion as Thorin, when he is not actively glaring at me or trying to intimidate me he is a nice presence. Comforting even, though I have to be extremely careful when I try to come close because as I’ve said he doesn’t like me. Dwalin also has a fondness for cookies which amuses me to no end.

Oin son of Groin: Oin is our healer. He is a bit crusty and irritable and has a hearing problem much the same way that Granny Took has a hearing problem. It is present, it exists, but sometimes it isn’t as severe as they like to play it up to be. Oin likes to pick and choose what he hears and has a hearing trumpet to actually aide him most of the time. He is loud and I cannot tell if it is because he is hard of hearing or if he just wishes to be loud. He is a good dwarf and is quite fond of his brother.

Gloin son of Groin: Gloin is bombastic. He’s the first to reach for his weapon and the last to quiet down. He is without a doubt the loudest member of our Company. I know Gloin is a warrior but apart from that I know very little about what he does in general. He has a wife and to him she is the loveliest woman in the world. I’ll never argue with him on that front because to most your spouse should be the loveliest person in your world. He also has a son Gimli who was just barely too young to come on this quest with us. He is proud of them both and while every other member of the Company is sick of hearing about his family I can’t stop listening. He loves them both so much and it’s obvious he misses them fiercely. I can hear it in his Song sometimes and if having someone lend an ear to listen helps him then at least I have some sort of use in this Company. Gloin is a good and loyal man who would without hesitation step between any person he calls friend and danger. You’d probably get quite sick of him Lobelia, for he is very loud and very dwarvish. Yet he is charming in his own way.

The above dwarves are all officially of the line of Durin and therefore are considered nobility amongst their kind. They all belong to the ‘Longbeards’, which is a very respected clan if what Balin tells me is true.

Dori son of Kori: Dori is a very proper if grouchy dwarf. He reminds me of you, actually, being almost adorably curmudgeon. He is silver haired with very intricate braids and has very refined tastes. Despite his propriety and almost fussy nature he is the strongest member of our Company.
You wouldn’t think it at first glance because he isn’t the biggest, but I have been assured that he is without a doubt extremely strong even amongst the dwarves. I’m not sure what he did before he joined the Company, no one has deigned to tell me, but he is very well educated. He is also the oldest amongst a set of three brothers and he loves to cluck and mother the other two, especially the youngest.

Nori son of Kori: Nori is an interesting fellow. He is quiet and clever with a skillset that probably has him constantly on the other side of the law. From what I gather he’s been estranged from his two brothers for many years now and that being on this quest has been an opportunity for them to all reconnect. I doubt Nori realizes how similar he and Dori are, they both share the two most complicated hairstyles of the group. Lobelia his eyebrows are braided into his hair. Yes you read right, Eyebrows. Braided. Into. His. Hair. I didn’t know it was possible, but apparently with dwarves anything is possible when it comes to body hair. He is rather flippant and sarcastic and it isn’t easy to ruffle him unless you decide to do something to his brothers and then a reaction from him is almost guaranteed.

Ori son of Kori: Ori is perhaps one of my favorites amongst the Company. He is the last tween of our group. He likes to knit and we have bonded over what our favorite patterns are as well as what stitches we despise. He shares my love of books and we have decided that we are going to set up our own little camp in the library for the duration of our stay in Rivendell. Ori is allergic to nuts and is a bit of a fussy eater. His hair is a light brown with strawberry highlights and he is very handsome in the dwarvish standard of beauty as opposed to hobbit-y standards. Not many in our Company take him seriously, which is a waste because he is perfectly capable of holding his weight. He is much more capable than I at least.

Kori is their mother and not their father. From what I have learned all of the ‘Ri brothers have different fathers, which is extremely unusual in dwarven culture. I’ve also learned that they are related to the line of Durin except that they were born on the ‘wrong side of the sheets’ and as such their lives have been quite difficult.

Bifur: Bifur likes vegetables and refuses to eat meat. He has a grey and black beard that is braided quite interestingly and I often find myself entranced by it. Bifur is a good and sweet soul even if it is hard to communicate with him. I’m told Bifur is a very good toymaker. He had an accident that left him with a...well an axe in his forehead. I’m told it doesn’t hurt him anymore but it has affected him. He can only speak in Khuzdul and the dwarven sign language. Trying to talk to him unaided is a very interesting game of charades on his part. He and I aren’t particularly close because there is such a language barrier between us but I am fond of him and often will give him my vegetables in trade of his meat some nights if the stew doesn’t have many vegetables in it. I wouldn’t want him to go hungry if I could help it.

Bofur: Bofur would drive you up the wall Lobelia. There’s no way I think you could stand him. He is a bit of a good natured scoundrel and adores flustering people. He is often very unhelpful with his various descriptions of things and adores being endearingly silly and the butt of a joke. He also wears this ridiculous floppy hat and I’ve only seen him without it on when he’s gone to go bathe. Surprisingly Bofur doesn’t have much of a beard, instead he’s got a scruffy stubble and a bit of a patch underneath his lip. What he doesn’t have in beard he makes up for in mustache. Bofur was a miner before he became an adventurer and if you believe what he says he mainly came on the quest for the free beer. I know you’d be annoyed with his crass language and constant innuendos but he’s one of the few who I could count as a friend. If you two ever meet please play nice, Bofur has done quite a few things for me and has taken it upon himself to be my protector.

Bombur: Bombur is a very very quiet dwarf and doesn’t like speaking. He has a bit of a stutter that Bofur has told me that has made others make fun of him for his whole life. It has gotten better as
he’s gotten older, Bofur assures me, but the shyness and reluctance to talk has remained. Bombur enjoys food as much as a hobbit does. In fact I might make him an honorary hobbit because Bombur is so good natured. He has a family, a wife and a surprisingly large brood of children, and his main reason for coming on the quest was so he could give his family a better life. Bombur and I share cooking duty most of the time. He has red hair and a very interesting hoop beard. I think out of all my companions you’d like Bombur the best.

Bifur is the head of the ‘Ur clan, while Bofur and Bombur are his younger cousins. Those of the ‘Ur clan do not actually have any ties to Durin or the line of Durin and they actually all hail from the Blue Mountains.

There’s so much more I could fit into their descriptions Lobelia. I could tell you who snores and how loudly and the exact rhythm of it. I could tell you who often is the first to wake and the last to wake. I could also tell you more about their histories but if I did this letter would get far too long. Also it would potentially break my secrecy clause in my contract. So I have given you the barest descriptions of my companions. I hope by the next time I write my letter to you that I will have become a full member of the Company and that everyone will like me. I do not hold my breath on that account because I am just a hobbit. I am not skilled warrior no matter how many times I’ve fought and nearly died. I am no great burglar (which is what Gandalf claims I am). I am just Bilbo Baggins of the Shire and if I didn’t know my Song would end up being broken if I ignored this quest and stayed behind I would have. I am not the hobbit I was in my youth, she is gone and has been replaced by me. Someone who is not as brave, not as clever, nor as stubborn, nor useful. I don’t know what I can do for these dwarves Lobelia. I don’t know why I was tied to them. I am though and I will not ignore my duty to Fate, even if I don’t know what it will end up being.

I will write to you when I can.

Love,

Bilbo Baggins
Dear Lobelia,

I honestly don’t know what to write. You know how I get sometimes, when so many things have happened all together and my head gets filled with all these thoughts and images and snippets of sentences that aren’t adequate enough to convey what has happened. This is one of those times right now. I’m so sorry for that for this will be rambling and potentially nonsensical and I’d put off writing this if I thought I could get away with it. Yet I cannot, for if I do not write this right now than I will not get the words out potentially forever. Then you’d never forgive me.

Perhaps I can start with that?

As I am now too far away for you to even come to me in time I shall tell you where I am. I am in Esgaroth or Lake Town, far in the East. As everyone here is aware of the mission and Thorin has told the Men of Esgaroth what the quest shall be I am now allowed to tell you what it is. I was contracted to the burglar of this company, and don’t you dare laugh at that. I know you are smirking and chuckling, laughing at the irony of it all. Besides Father you are the only other person who was aware of my less than reputable adventures and deeds of childhood and my tween years. Well Father told Gandalf and that is why he came to me to help. Yet I also think Gandalf can hear Songs like we can and perhaps he knew that I was fated to come on this Journey. I am trying to distract myself from telling you the purpose, is it working well? No? Fine. I am a burglar contracted by Thorin to help him steal back his kingdom or his treasure. The plan hasn’t been outlined for me yet as to what exactly I am supposed to steal. Perhaps he will tell it to me soon. It would be dreadful to come all this way and to have no concrete plan in place.

By the Green Lady I just realized that that was entirely possible. Dwarves! Bebother how did I not see this before? Lovely. Lobelia I am going to be incinerated or eaten. Well not before I have some very choice words with Thorin. I think I will go yell at him after I finish writing this letter then go talk to Balin in hopes of coming up with something other than ’send the burglar in, something happens, PROFIT’. Oh I am getting a headache now.

You can’t stop me from this. By the time you get this letter I will either be dead or victorious. I hope for victorious, yet if I am dead or to die I must tell you some things. Important things.

I love you. I know you already know this. I know I have said it a million times before to you. Yet I must rewrite those words. I love you Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, my beloved blue fool. It is not in the way that would lead to romance between us. I have not felt that sort of love for you in many years just as you have not felt it for me. I have to reiterate to you that I love you because you are my oldest friend, my dearest friend. You are the sister I never had. The confidant I so sorely needed. You have loved me flaws and all, you have seen all my scars and thought me beautiful. You have told me I was beautiful even when I could find nothing in myself that could hold beauty. You gave me the gift of being Otho’s Watcher, of helping to teach him his letters, to whisper stories to him, to let me sing my Song to him so he would know that I will always love and protect him. I love you for all you have done for me. I love you from the top of your head to the tips of your toes. Otho was so lucky to have
you and to win your heart. You deserve all the happiness and care in the world.

I know you knew all the dark broken sick pieces inside me that never healed after the Fell Winter. I know how you hated my Choice. You did not wish me to bow to societal conventions, to lock away a part of me and hide it seemingly forever. I want to reassure you that you were right in the end, I was not happier doing the right thing. All I did was willingly go into a cage rather than fight against it. I want to tell you now that I have reversed it. I Chose again and this time I am me once more. I am Mirabelle. I am **Mirabelle**. Even writing that has me smiling and giggling.

You can guess, I suppose, why I did so. I was surrounded by thirteen male dwarves and began to Shift. I was annoyed at first. Shifting to be more ‘appealing’ to the dwarves even when nothing would come of it. I bound my chest, made sure my clothes covered me and fit me to help keep my outline seemingly more masculine. Yet I felt more comfortable with the changes deep in my heart, even if I railed against them or tried to. I wasn’t convincing myself well at the time.

That is not what made me change my mind. The dwarves for all their thickheaded and backwards ways did what I did not expect them to. When they learned of my sex they were quite willing to let me keep masquerading as a lad. They were confused of course, they were a bit nosy, but after the initial explanations they settled down and treated me as always, well better than always as at that point I had managed to save Thorin’s life from a hook handed giant pale orc named Azog the Defiler. Nothing earns respect faster than jumping between a king and a painfully imminent death. I protected Thorin, I truly became one of them in spirit and that earned me a degree of loyalty and friendship I didn’t expect to be found outside the borders of the Shire. They made me feel safe Lobelia. While I presented as a man they did not misgender me once. They let me do as I pleased.

Perhaps I would have stayed as Bilbo if two things hadn’t happened. First I fell in love. No, that’s implying I wasn’t already more than half in love with Thorin and Dwalin before this letter. I cared deeply for them all the way back in Rivendell. My need to please them stemming from my affections and the painful hope that they would once someday return them. They did. They simply went about the most idiotic way of showing it that anyone could think of. They thought that sending me back to the Shire, making me break my Contract, tucking me away someplace safe was how they could how they loved me. I haven’t explained to them yet how unpleasant breaking a written contract can be for us. They did their best to scare me back, thinking if I was safe I would be happy. They did not know of my history in the Shire then, they did not try to truly get to know me for they were afraid if they did they would never let me out of their sight. It seems dwarves are like us. They can tell who they share a Song with. Though they hear no music most of the time. Dwalin tells me a dwarf simply knows, from the first moment they look at each other, that they are each other’s Ones (or if they are Ones but also have someone else somewhere). They finally pulled their heads out of their asses after a combination of nearly losing me, finding me, and then watching as I put myself between Thorin and mortal danger despite the hostile treatment Thorin had been giving me. They vowed to be better, to protect me, to care for me though when they first did that (and apologized too) it made it seem like they simply wanted to be friends. Then a night later after I got drunk and some things came to light Thorin came to me when I had sobered up and apologized once more, explained their thinking, and then asked if I would join him and Dwalin. As my lovers they have been nothing but unendingly patient and kind. They don’t take without asking and I’m not always the focus. Sometimes Thorin and I team up on Dwalin, sometimes Dwalin and I team up on Thorin. Sometimes we just try to touch who we can, when we can, just because we love each other. I am a part of a relationship, not a shiny toy or bauble, not some exotic sexual object. I am simply their beloved vexing troublesome hobbit and they want me no matter which gender I am.

The second thing was just multiple brushes with potentially horrific deaths. If I am to die, especially if I am to die retaking a Mountain from a dragon, then I am going to die with the fewest amount of regrets as possible. When we finished escaping from Mirkwood’s dungeons and I perhaps stole
thirteen dwarves from the elvenking Thranduil and had gone through our rather uncomfortable ride down river in barrels. Well the dwarves were in the barrels I was sort of... on the barrels. PLEASE DON’T HIT ME WHEN YOU SEE ME NEXT IT WAS THE BEST PLAN I COULD COME UP WITH I SWEAR! I declared to my dwarves that I was a lass and if any of them had a problem with that then they could promptly go back into their barrels and drown. None of them did and Kili, my sweet Kili (who I have decided is becoming more my child than my nephew), came up and hugged me tight and asked me for my name. I told him and they have all taken to calling me ‘Belle’ now. Though while in Esgaroth the dwarves and I considered it prudent that I pretend to be Bilbo during my stay. The Men could potentially treat me ill if they perceived me as female, especially a ‘single’ female in a group of thirteen men. Yet when we are alone my dwarves insist on calling me my name, and never misgender me now when we are in private. I still have one dwarf as a shadow at all times, I cannot tell if that is because of this horrific cold I have or if they simply want to make sure I’m safe.

I know you will have words for Dwalin and Thorin if or more likely whenever you meet them. I know you will give them the ‘talk’ just as I gave Otho a ‘talk’ when he was to marry you. I think I might sit back and giggle as I watch their reactions. Dwarves love to think themselves the masters of terrifying people with their hostility but they have not lived with hobbits for long. They do not understand the depth of terror we can inflict upon a being when we wish to protect our loved ones. It will be amusing to watch.

Lobelia I will come back to the Shire after this if I am alive. Not forever, mind you, just long enough to settle my affairs properly, to pack up a few keepsakes that I cannot do without, and to try and convince at least a handful of hobbits to come with me. This land needs help Lobelia. It needs our help. I can see why I was fated to come here, for if I survive the Green Lady wishes for me to wake the land up, to bring her presence back to this place. It would take far too many decades if Men and Dwarves did it by themselves and the elves don’t have the knack for this sort of thing, they can of course take something that’s already alive and make it more, but to wake the earth like it needs to be done? That is the job for hobbits and ents. As I know I cannot wake our sleeping siblings in the Old Forest and Fangorn is far far too far away they will have to make do with solely hobbit help. I hope I can convince some to come with me, it will go much faster if I had multiple hands helping, but it will still happen even if I do it by myself. I will not let the dwarves and men starve, not after all the pain they have gone through since the dragon came.

If I die though, I leave Bag End in yours and Hamfast’s care. I think that Drogo should inherit it if I do not come back. Lotho already is in line to inherit yours and Otho’s smial, he doesn’t need to worry about such things but Drogo does. So unless Drogo has utterly changed and has become someone who you believe I would not love or care enough for to leave my smial for then it goes to him. You already know what items go to who and where my will is kept. I hope it does not come to that. I will do all in my power not to die, but it is better to be safe than sorry.

May the Green Lady watch over you and your kin til the world turns to darkness.

Love,

Mirabelle Baggins

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