The Tale of Two Time-Traveling Hobbits

by Stariali

Summary

Time is not to be trifled with, even by the likes of the Valar. When everything changes from one moment to the next, Bilbo finds himself reliving his life with a tiny, baby Frodo at his side. And though he may wish to live a peaceful life away from conflict, fate and a hobbitling have different ideas.
Bilbo could distinctly remember boarding the White Ship with his nephew, Frodo. He could remember the rolling green fields of Valinor that reminded him of the Shire. He recalled the contentment he felt as he lay upon the soft grass that day with Frodo snuggled up against his side, breathing in the sweet air and enjoying the soft breeze that blew around them.

On thinking on it, he could only deduce that the Valar had somehow intervened for reasons unknown.

When he awoke it was not to clear blue skies or sun-warmed grass although Frodo was still cuddled up against his side, clinging to him like a limpet. Instead he was in his bedroom at Bag End, though he was still disoriented he could tell that much at the very least. That was not the only problem... only he could not gather what the problem was... aside from apparently having traveled from Valinor to the Shire overnight.

The small body pressed against him shifted and Frodo began whining.

_Why is Frodo whining like a child?_ he wondered absently, brows furrowing as he stared at the ceiling. He reached up to run a hand through his nephew's hair. His hand hit his chest the first time and he blindly searched around for Frodo's head.

A sense of horror grew inside him as he ran his fingers through soft, short curls. He did not turn his head from the ceiling as he traced a path down a soft chubby cheek and a small bony shoulder, and down thin, cloth covered arms until he finally grasped a tiny—tiny!—hand in his own. A tiny hand that only had four fingers that he could note.

With that Bilbo looked down upon the sniffling baby that clung to him desperately.

"Oh, no, Frodo," he whispered as he sat up. The baby whimpered and twisted in the sheets, his eyes opened when Bilbo reached down and gathered him into his arms. "Frodo?"

Wide blue eyes blinked at him. There was recognition shining in Frodo's eyes but nothing else. The baby gurgled at him and stuck the four fingered hand in his mouth to chew on hungrily. His other tiny hand reached up to pat Bilbo's cheek as his little feet kicked at the air.

From where he sat on the bed, Bilbo could see himself in the mirror he had propped up on top of his dresser. His hair was brown—not white as he had grown accustomed to seeing—and his skin less marred by the wrinkles of old age, though there were still a few around his eyes. He brought one hand up and shakily noticed that the skin was clear of blemishes and wrinkles, as well.

Frodo reached for his hand and babbled insistently around the fingers in his mouth, drooling all over his and Bilbo's clothes though Bilbo did not notice for he was still in shock.

Bilbo was startled out of his examinations of himself when Frodo began wailing. "What's the matter, dear one?"

Frodo shivered even in the warm summer air that filled the room. There was a familiar pain on his face that sent a jolt through Bilbo.

"Oh, no," Bilbo gasped. He swiftly and gently lay Frodo upon the bed and leaned over him, pushing the babe's shirt aside. He hissed when he discovered the small angry scar on the small shoulder. "Well, this is most definitely not good."
Frodo whimpered in agreement, tears gathering in his eyelashes, and he continued to chew on his four-fingered hand.

"Why would they do this to me?" Bilbo demanded, angry tears in his own eyes. He gathered Frodo into his arms again and held him close, ignoring the drool that dripped down onto his neck. "Why would they do this to you?"

Frodo did not answer him but instead continued to whimper in pain.

In the days following, Bilbo and Frodo slowly acquainted themselves with each other. Bilbo had never cared for a hobbitling before but he had many cousins and he'd occasionally watched them when he was younger. Aside from Frodo's shoulder wound and his four-fingered hand, the hobbitling was a happy child and enjoyed listening to the sound of Bilbo's voice.

Often he sat on the floor and contentedly babbled to himself or to Bilbo. Only growing quiet when Bilbo would speak to him of nothing of real importance, staring at the hobbit with wide eyes as though he could understand what was being said.

The Hobbits of the Shire were rather suspicious of Bilbo when they discovered Frodo's existence. They wondered where the hobbitling had suddenly appeared from and if Bilbo had not stolen the child from an unsuspecting family. Yet no reports of missing children came and no complaints were filed. The hobbits were full of curiosity until a brave young hobbit had finally dared to ask Bilbo Baggins were the child had come from.

Bilbo had been heard to rather coolly explain that Frodo was his son and when asked on the whereabouts of the boy's mother, Bilbo had simply looked pained and no one dared to ask for more. The whispering began then, as people wondered about the mother and that perhaps she'd been an Elf because there was something very strange about Frodo. Aside from his lean stature and fair appearance, there was something otherworldly about Frodo Baggins that put the hobbits ill at ease.

The problems with the other hobbits aside, Bilbo had been chafed to discover that not only had they been sent back to the Shire from Valinor, but they had also been sent back to the past. Never mind that Frodo was not supposed to be born yet and would not be for a long while still.

Thinking of such things would have certainly driven him crazy, so he concentrated on taking care of his nephew—now son—who was an angel during the day but suffered from increasingly terrifying nightmares at night and would sometimes be so cold even in the summer heat that Bilbo would be forced to cover him up in blankets and set him before the burning fireplace, which heated the hole until Bilbo was all but sweating out of his clothes.

The little hobbit barely ate and the two of them hardly slept but still Bilbo tried his best. He would not forsake his little Frodo to the care of others for he could not trust others to watch him in his stead. Not the way he dearly deserved to be watched and cared for.

Thankfully, Holman Greenhand and the Gamgees proved to be far kinder than the other hobbits. Holman would go to the market and buy groceries for Bilbo when Bilbo could not be parted from Frodo, as happened often. The fifteen-year old Hamfast would spend time playing with Frodo everyday and had grown very attached to the hobbitling. Frodo, too, was very fond of Hamfast and would crawl after him determinedly when Hamfast would try to help Bilbo with chores and the like.

Bilbo was unsure of how old Frodo was as the hobbitling had been unable to do anything but lay on a blanket on the floor until a few weeks prior and then had suddenly began crawling all over the place. He still could not speak, however, but would babble insistently at anyone and anything that stood still long enough.
It was on a rare good day during which Bilbo had managed to settle Frodo down for a nap that a certain person from their past showed up at Bag End. Bilbo had been sitting on his bench, smoking his pipe and taking a much needed break from caring for a hobbitling, when a familiar Wizard suddenly appeared before him.

Bilbo only noticed him when a shadow blocked the sun from his face and he was shocked speechless to see Gandalf the Gray standing before him.

The Wizard eyed him with raised eyebrows when he continued to gawk at him in a most unflattering manner.

"Bilbo Baggins, I presume?" the wizard finally asked, when Bilbo made no move to say anything at all.

"You presume right," Bilbo managed to choke out. He mentally cursed himself for forgetting the date and the year and how could he have been so forgetful. It was completely irrelevant at that moment that he had been quite busy caring for Frodo and was even then quite exhausted.

The Wizard hummed thoughtfully as he eyed Bilbo up and down with furrowed eyebrows. Bilbo eyed him back with large eyes, unable to comprehend the fact that Gandalf was standing there in front of him. Apparently with no memories of Bilbo.

"Can I help you?" Bilbo finally managed after clearing his throat awkwardly.

"That remains to be seen," Gandalf said with a frown. "I'm looking for someone to share in an adventure."

Bilbo eyes shuttered and his heart sunk, he mentally cursed his bad luck. He cleared his throat again as he eyed the Wizard, attempting to look apologetic. "I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place, Master Wizard. I doubt anyone around these parts would partake in an adventure with you. Perhaps you should try again at Bree." He stood up from his bench and grabbed his mail—not that there was much aside from the usual.

Gandalf murmured something and did not leave, continuing instead to eye him speculatively. "Is that how you would treat a friend of your mother, Bilbo Baggins? Not even a 'good morning' or a 'how do you do?'"

"I beg your pardon," Bilbo demanded, irked. He glared at the Wizard petulantly and would have carried on an argument if not for the fact that he could hear Frodo stirring inside the burrow. "Listen here, Gandalf! We are not wanting any adventures, not now or later or quite possibly ever. So you can take your ideas elsewhere because they are unwelcome! Good morning!" He did not see the widening of Gandalf's eyes when he spoke the Wizard's name as he stomped back into Bag End and shut the door firmly behind him, going so far as to lock it tightly as well.

Quickly he made his way down the hallway to the atrium where Frodo was resting in the hand-carved swinging crib Holman had thoughtfully made for him. Frodo lit up at seeing Bilbo leaning over his crib and lifted his arms to be picked up.

Bilbo gathered his little hobbit in his arms and rocked him back and forth as Frodo settled his head on one of Bilbo's shoulders.

"Dratted wizard," Bilbo muttered. "As if there would ever be a chance of me leaving you behind." Frodo gurgled at him sleepily. "Not to worry, my dear Frodo. I will never ever leave you and I will always protect you."
He bestowed a sweet kiss upon a smooth little forehead, unaware of the Wizard marking a rune onto his freshly painted door or of the Dwarves waiting for the Wizard to return with news that he'd found a Burglar.
An Unexpected Party of Dorfs

Gandalf's visit was the last thing on Bilbo's mind that night and the following. Frodo's shoulder wound festered and irritated him, leading him to cry incessantly when he could not find any sort of relief. His few teeth bothered him as well and he chewed on anything he could get his hands on, even pulling on his ears until they ached.

He refused to eat anything that was prepared for him and while that was nothing new it still managed to frustrate Bilbo, who was tired and grumpy as it was. Somehow he managed to remain calm, never angry with Frodo, who suffered enough from all his aches without having Bilbo scold him. The hobbitling ran a slight fever and later developed a minor sore throat from all the acid produced from his constant vomiting. Bilbo had resigned himself to losing sleep once again when Frodo continued to cry well into the night and showed no signs of stopping.

Dead on his feet though he was, Bilbo gently rocked Frodo in his arms as he walked all about Bag End. He was positive that all their neighbors could hear Frodo's crying and would not have been surprised if all of Hobbiton could hear him as well.

He was contemplating taking Frodo out on a short walk around the Shire, perhaps some fresh air would do the trick, when a hesitant knock came at the door.

With no small amount of trepidation, Bilbo approached his front door. He was expecting some irritated neighbors coming to complain about the noise level—it happened quite often as of late—and instead he was shocked to find a bewildered dwarf standing on his front step.

An equally bewildered Bilbo stared at the tall, broad dwarf, whose many tattoos roused Bilbo's memory but drew no name to mind.

"Can I help you?" he questioned blankly, continuing to stroke Frodo's back and bounce him lightly in his arms.

"Dwalin, at your service," the dwarf managed to choke out with a sloppy bow, eyes still wide in his face as he stared at the two hobbits.

Bilbo bestowed a swift kiss onto Frodo's head and shifted him about so the little hobbit was able to look at Dwalin. "Look, Frodo. It's a Dwarf."

Frodo sniffled and chewed on his four-fingered hand as he looked up at the Dwarf. His blue eyes full of tears but also full of curiosity. "Dorf," he mumbled around his fingers.

Bilbo sputtered uselessly, much to Dwalin's shock and confusion. "What did you say? Frodo, can you repeat that?"

"Dorf!" Frodo repeated with a petulant glare.

"That's right! It's a Dwarf!" Bilbo laughed gaily. "Your first word and it's dwarf!"

Dwalin chuckled right along as Bilbo laughed happily and cuddled and cooed at the hobbitling, who proudly repeated the word over and over again around the fingers in his mouth.

"Oh, you're growing up so fast!" Bilbo cooed exaggeratedly and made funny faces at Frodo, who blinked at him and sniffled. "You're such a smart little hobbitling, aren't you? So smart!"
Frodo gurgled around his hand and he appeared to be taken back by Bilbo's cooing and the strange faces directed at him. He contemplated the older hobbit with wide eyes before a giggle escaped him. Bilbo did not let up on what he was doing and soon Frodo was squealing happily and squirming around, little lips puckered as he imitated his father in making kissing faces.

Dwalin cleared his throat and shifted his weight, loathe though he was to interrupt the moment. He instantly garnered Bilbo's attention and the hobbit stared at him as though he could not recall why he had a dwarf standing in his doorway.

"Pardon me, Master Hobbit," Dwalin said lowly, bowing in a much more graceful manner the second time around. "I was to meet someone but I am apparently at the wrong place-"

Bilbo heaved a sigh and glared off to the side while Frodo gave a whine as he noticed he'd lost his father's attention. "If you're with Gandalf, you might as well come in." He ventured back towards the parlor where he had left Frodo's swinging crib, Dwalin lingered in the doorway uncertainly. "Please hurry inside! You're letting all the warm air out and my son's health is very frail."

Dwalin quickly entered the hole and closed the door behind him. He saw a row of hooks to the side and shed his cloak to hang it before hesitantly following after Bilbo. The hobbit was pulling at a wooden crib while Frodo lay on his belly beside him, babbling at and drooling over a stuffed rabbit in his grasp.

Handy contraption, Dwalin noticed, very impressed when the crib suddenly shifted into a chair.

Frodo was set up in the chair then with his very chewed up stuffed rabbit, whose ear went right into the babe's mouth once again. Blue eyes sparkled with curiosity as they gazed at Dwalin and Frodo pointed at him, "Dorf!" He squirmed in his chair and held his arms up towards Dwalin, who turned to look at Bilbo questioningly.

Bilbo eyed him thoughtfully before gathering Frodo into his arms again and easily sliding him into Dwalin's.

"Ooh," Frodo cooed as he grabbed Dwalin's braids.

Dwalin flushed happily as he settled the small—so small—body firmly against his chest and then sat in the large armchair that Bilbo indicated.

"I haven't even introduced myself," Bilbo said apologetically, taking a moment to bow at the dwarf. "Bilbo Baggins, at your service, Master Dwalin. The hobbitling in your arms is Frodo Baggins, my very dear and beloved son."

"Well met, Master Baggins . . . Mister Frodo," Dwalin said, chucking Frodo's chin gently with one of his large fingers.

Frodo squealed and tried to shove one of the dwarf's braids into his mouth but before he could Bilbo swiftly reached over and placed a small pacifier into his open mouth.

"I suppose you're hungry, then, Master Dwarf?" Bilbo asked.

"Dwalin is fine, laddie," Dwalin said and shook his head, "and there's no need for that. It seems the Wizard forgot to mention a few important matters."

Bilbo sighed again. "No, I was not very forthcoming with Gandalf either. I should have told him I had obligations. It's no one's fault but my own."
"I'm sure he's more to blame than you, laddie," Dwalin frowned thoughtfully. "The Wizard doesn't seem the type to take no for an answer."

Bilbo snorted derisively. "That's very true . . . How many more should I expect then?" The widening of the dwarf's eyes and slow building horror told Bilbo all he needed to know. "I see."

He left Frodo with Dwalin in the parlor and wandered into the pantry to see if he had enough food to feed a group of hungry dwarves. He did not believe he did. Holman did not stop by with the week's groceries until the Friday of every week and it was only Wednesday.

He also could not recall the order in which the dwarves were to arrive, though he dimly recalled that several of them had arrived in groups. He tried not to linger long on the thought of meeting Thorin Oakenshield once more, but the thought continued to plague him as he fidgeted in the pantry.

Oh dear, he thought worriedly and began to panic. What do I do? What do I do? Oh, soup!

Soup was easy enough to make, he had the water and he had the vegetables and—luckily for the dwarves—he also had the meat. So while Dwalin entertained Frodo and endeared himself to the hobbitling, Bilbo set about preparing a scrumptious soup meal for the dwarves. On the side he baked some cornbread for Frodo and Dwalin to snack on while they waited for everyone to arrive.

Dwalin was very thankful for the cornbread and kept an eye on Frodo who happily nibbled on his own small piece when he saw that the dwarf was eating his. The dwarf noticed that Frodo had only a couple of teeth up front, so far as he could see, and spent more time sucking on the bread than chewing on it, which he decided was all right since the cornbread tended to melt in his own mouth. It truly was the most delicious bread Dwalin had ever eaten.

After finishing off their snack, Dwalin took the worn rabbit handed to him by Frodo. He examined the toy closely, noticing that it was a knitted stuffed rabbit. It was stitched together rather nicely and although he did not have the eye for such things, even he could notice the love that had gone into the rabbit.

Frodo babbled at him from where he sat on the dwarf's lap. Gently petting his chewed rabbit with his four-fingered hand, unaware of Dwalin unobtrusively examining the stub of the missing finger. The dwarf wondered how to bring up the matter of the lost finger with Bilbo, he did not know the man well enough to simply demand answers, after all.

"He likes to have Mr. Nibbles tell him stories," said Bilbo as he collected the dirty plate.

"Mister Nibbles?" Dwalin wondered incredulously.

"It's a very appropriate name," Bilbo defended, blushing furiously. "Rabbits nibble on their food and so does Frodo. He's my little bunny. Aren't you?"

Frodo just chewed on his rabbit's ear.

"You made this for him?"

"I did," Bilbo admitted. "It's not something I've done in a long time, knitting, but I wanted to make something special for him."

"It is really well done," Dwalin said brusquely.

Bilbo blushed again and ducked his head with a shy smile. "Thank you." He ran a finger down Frodo's cheek and returned to his cooking, feeling much more content.
He could hear Dwalin's voice hesitantly starting up a story in an overly exaggerated tone, trying to make it sound as though the rabbit was the one telling it. He laughed softly to himself and shook his head. It was hard imagining the obviously hardened warrior childish playing with a small babe.

He was almost finished with the soup when the next knock came at the door and he asked for Dwalin to get it. The dwarf bundled Frodo up in a blanket he found laying over the back of an armchair and walked to the door with the hobbitling dozing contentedly in his arms.

"Ah, brother!" Dwalin greeted cheerfully but quietly.

Balin was startled and shocked to see his younger brother opening the door while holding a wee hobbit babe in his arms and was more than a little perturbed as well. He opened and closed his mouth, looking for something to say.

"You've gotten wider and shorter since we last met," Dwalin continued, reaching forward to drag Balin into the burrow and closing the door behind him.

"Wider not shorter," Balin managed to say once he'd gathered himself. "Where is our Burglar then?" He eyed the hobbit babe speculatively. "Please tell me that isn't him."

"Are you mad?" Dwalin growled and held Frodo closer protectively, the hobbling merely snuffled and burrowed into the blanket. Balin cocked an eyebrow at the scene but remained silent. "Master Baggins is preparing food for our lot. Despite not having much, he's being kind enough to share what he has with us. So I'll thank you to be courteous, brother."

Both of Balin's eyebrows rose up at this and Dwalin blushed heatedly and cleared his throat.

"Which you always are, of course," Dwalin continued apologetically. "Sorry, brother. Just-"

"Grown a mite protective there, brother?" Balin murmured with humor coloring his voice. Dwalin had reclaimed the larger armchair by the fireplace and Balin leaned over to get a good look at the little hobbit child.

"Perhaps," Dwalin admitted, not the least bit ashamed. "This here is Frodo Baggins. I do not know how hobbits age, but he has few teeth and only today spoke his first word."

"Oh, indeed?" Balin was amused by the pride shining on his brother's face and voice. "What was it then?"

"It was 'dwarf,'" said Dwalin with a large happy smile.

"Oh!" Balin exclaimed, then coughed a laugh into his hand. "How did his parents react to that then?"

Dwalin lost his smile and shifted Frodo awkwardly in his hold. The little one grumbled and waved his hand around before settling down again.

"I reacted just fine, Master Dwarf," Bilbo said as he entered the room with a tea tray and another plate of cornbread. If there was one thing he had a lot of, it was flour and commeal. "A child's first word is a happy occasion no matter what the word is. I think I would have been happy even if he'd said something particularly horrendous."

"I think many parents feel that way," Balin agreed. He bowed at the waist and spread his arms out in the customary Dwarf greeting. "Balin, at your service."

"Bilbo Baggins, at yours," Bilbo replied with a nod. "I hope you like soup. I'm afraid I don't have
much else to offer you. My groceries don't come until Friday."

"It's more than all right, laddie," Balin said. "Do you require any assistance?"

"I do, but not at the moment," said Bilbo, he gestured at the tea tray and cornbread. "You must have had a long trip. Just rest for a while and I'll call when I need help."

Balin was amazed by the hobbit's kindness and sat in the smaller armchair. It wasn't quite a snug fit, rather comfortable in fact. "Thank you."

Dwalin had already nabbed one of the cornbread pieces and stuffed it in his mouth before Balin could protest. The two of them exchanged news and stories while nibbling on cornbread and drinking tea. It was not even an hour when two firm knocks came at the door and Bilbo assured them he could get it.

They listened to two familiar voices introduce themselves to their host.

"Fili," said one.

"Kili," said the other.

"At your service," they said together.

"You must be Mister Boggins!" Kili exclaimed.

"Excuse me?" Bilbo demanded, the indignation clear in his voice.

"Nice place you have here," Kili continued, ignoring Bilbo's sputtering.

"Can you not do that? That's my mother's glory box!" Bilbo growled.

"Be careful with these, I've just had them sharpened," Fili was saying.

"Oh, dear," Balin murmured as he eyed his increasingly reddening brother.

As though sensing something was wrong, Frodo began to squirm and whimper in Dwalin's arms. The dwarf attempted to hush him by murmuring soothingly and rocking him gently but it was too late. Frodo scrunched up his face and began to wail.

The sound of steel clattering to the floor broke through the air and Bilbo all but flew into the room and took the hobbitling from Dwalin.

"There, there, dear one," he murmured to his son. "What's the matter now? Did the rowdy dwarves wake you?" Frodo cried unhappily and at once stuck his hand into his mouth to chew on. "Oh, are your teeth bothering you?" He gently kissed the hobbitling's forehead. "You're much too warm again." He glared at the two young dwarves who had followed him into the room and they had the decency to look ashamed. Bilbo turned to regard Balin and Dwalin. "I require some help in the kitchen."

"Say no more, Master Baggins," Balin interrupted as he rose from the armchair, regarding Dwalin's furious expression with some amusement. He followed after the hobbit but was still close enough to hear the brothers cry out as Dwalin grabbed them both by their ears, barking angrily in Khuzdul. "I see your little one is teething."

"Yes," Bilbo smiled wryly. He searched around for the special ring Holman had made for Frodo just the previous week. It was a leather contraption shaped into a ring that held water safely inside and
when filled it became nice and cool. Frodo enjoyed chewing on it and it was also rather squishy, which delighted him. "He has only grown two teeth, so we have a while to go yet before the teething stops."

"How old is he? He seems rather small to me but I have only ever seen Dwarven babes. Hobbits are smaller so your babes are likely quite small as well."

Bilbo cringed momentarily as he replied, "He's eight months old." In truth Bilbo did not know how old Frodo was but he had heard Hobbit mothers commenting on their teething children and eight months appeared to be about the time the teething began on average.

"Do you not have ointments to put on his gums?" Balin asked when Bilbo gave the filled ring to Frodo, who immediately began chewing on it with great joy. "One of our company, Gloin, has a son and when the boy was teething his uncle, Oin, made this special ointment that he would rub on the boy's teeth. It eased Gimli's pain and discomfort."

"I've never heard of such a thing," Bilbo murmured thoughtfully. "But it would be marvelous to have something like that."

"We can always ask Oin when he arrives," Balin said. He then noticed that Frodo was pulling at his ear with a hand that only had four fingers and he couldn't hold back his gasp of horror, "Laddie, his finger . . . what happened to it?"

"I would like to know that, as well," Dwalin interposed as he joined them in the kitchen. Fili and Kili hovered behind him uncertainly, rubbing at their reddened ears, their expressions a mix of horrified and curious as they gazed at Frodo's maimed hand.

"It was chewed off," Bilbo said with a heavy swallow. The mere thought of how his Frodo had lost that finger brought a sick feeling to his stomach.

"Chewed off?" Kili whispered aghast.

"By what?" Fili demanded. "Not by himself, surely."

"By a monster," Bilbo snarled, holding Frodo closer to his chest.

"It would have to be a monster, to do such a thing to a child," murmured Balin.

"Is it dead?" Dwalin demanded heatedly.

Bilbo frowned and thought Gollum in his cave underneath Goblin-town in the Misty Mountains. "No, that creature still lives." Frodo finally settled in Bilbo's arms and once he noticed Dwalin by the doorway he demanded the dwarf pick him up again, much to everyone's amusement. With a long suffering sigh and an amused smile, Bilbo handed the hobbitling over to an eagerly awaiting Dwalin, who beamed happily at Frodo.

Frodo looked to be wide awake again and gazed around at the new arrivals with curious eyes. He pointed at Balin, Fili, and Kili one at a time while mumbling, "Dorf," around the ring in his mouth. Fili and Kili cooed at him and made funny faces that made Frodo giggle.

In the meantime, Balin helped Bilbo to carry dishes and silverware into the dining room. Setting up enough places for all the dwarves and Gandalf plus Bilbo to eat, though the hobbit tried to protest that he did not require a seat at the table and he'd probably just be intruding. Balin would hear no more of his protests and set up a seat for him nonetheless.
Balin had already noted the bags under the hobbit's eyes and how he moved sluggishly about the kitchen. The dwarf considered it a show of the hobbit's strength of will that he was still standing. He tried to discreetly suggest that Bilbo sit down or take a rest, but the hobbit was too clever by half and saw right through him. Insisting that he was awake enough to manage until his son went to sleep for the night.

After they were done setting up the table Bilbo made sure the stove had enough wood to keep burning for a while. At least as long as it would take for all the dwarves and Gandalf to arrive, so that the food would not grow too cold to eat.

He then joined the dwarves in the parlor again, standing in the doorway and smiling as he watched Fili and Kili make silly voices while Fili made Mister Nibbles dance and Kili played with a wooden horse Bilbo had never seen before. Frodo was squealing with delight and drooling extensively all over his ring.

Bilbo walked back to the kitchen to grab a dish towel before returning to the parlor to wipe Frodo's face clean of all slobber. The hobbitling squirmed uncomfortably and tried to push him away with a whine but resumed bouncing on his butt once Bilbo deemed his face clean. His diaper was another matter, however, and with Fili and Kili watching like overly curious hobbit children, Bilbo changed a very disgruntled Frodo's diaper. Teasingly tickling the hobbitling's feet and kissing his toes to distract him as he was wiped clean.

Fili and Kili reclaimed Frodo immediately once Bilbo finished changing him, sitting the little hobbit between them and starting up another rousing game that Frodo did not understand but giggled over in spite of.

"Can you say my name, Frodo?" Kili cooed. "Say 'Kili'. Come on, you can do it!"


"Dorf!" Frodo insisted with furrowed eyebrows and an adorable pout. "Dorf!"

"Aw, please say 'Kili',' Kili pleaded.

Frodo laughed as Fili tickled his feet. "Fee!"

"Oh!" Fili gasped, then laughed. "Feeeliee."

"Fee!" Frodo patted what part of Fili he could reach and then patted at Kili, who was pouting sadly. "Kee!"

"What a smart little fella," Balin commented.

"He can tell the two apart," Dwalin said with surprise.

Bilbo merely snorted as Fili and Kili attempted to teach Frodo their full names. "He only just said his first word today. I think managing even part of your names is a great feat in of itself. You might want to let up or you'll end up irritating him."

In fact Frodo was already beginning to look cranky, brows furrowing together thunderously and bottom lip jutting out petulantly. Fili and Kili quickly began talking in their silly voices again but Frodo had already lost interest in their game and crawled away from them with great speed and purpose. The two dwarves whined and crawled after him determinedly, much to Frodo's delight as he raced away from them as quick as he could—which was to say, not very quick at all.
"Watch the corners!" Bilbo called after them fretfully. "Make sure he doesn't run into anything! Don't go into the dining room or the kitchen!"

Balin chuckled heartily while Dwalin rolled his eyes and they tried to draw Bilbo into a conversation after he carried a chair into the room to sit with them. Bilbo continuously craned his neck back to look down the hallway from where they could hear Frodo babbling and the brothers whispering. He stopped eventually, finally settling down in his chair with a tired sigh.

Balin and Dwalin skirted around the topic of Frodo's mother, both curious about her whereabouts and why Bilbo appeared to be raising his son alone. The one time Dwalin managed to say something in regards to the boy's mother, Bilbo looked so pained that the two brothers did not bring up the matter again. Though neither was aware that Bilbo was thinking of his dear cousins Drogo and Primula, Frodo's parents in the past—or the future as it may be. Thinking of such things always brought Bilbo a headache, so he quickly pushed the thoughts away.

After that, the brothers decided to stick to safer topics and asked Bilbo about the Shire. Unluckily for them, the Shire was not a safe topic of which to speak to Bilbo about. They didn't know quite how it started but something they asked seemed to have irked Bilbo so much that the hobbit began ranting wildly, his arms waving around in the air as he stamped all around the parlor.

What all Dwalin managed to gather from his rant was that the hobbits of the Shire were no-good busybodies who shunned Bilbo and Frodo. All because Frodo appeared to have no mother and Bilbo wasn't married. The hobbits in the market would overprice everything when Bilbo stopped at their booths or simply refuse to sell him anything. He had to rely on a dear friend of his who lived across the Water to bring him groceries every week.

Bilbo groaned and all but collapsed into his chair, covering his face with his hands. "I never thought I'd come to hate living in the Shire so much."

Balin and Dwalin exchanged wide-eyed looks while the hobbit wasn't looking. Balin decided to start a conversation about dwarves instead, as that seemed to be an easier topic than asking Bilbo about himself.

The hobbit was politely fascinated by everything they said, but there was something about the way he looked at them... it gave them the impression that he already knew everything they were telling him.

They eventually noticed the silence that had befallen the rest of the house. Frodo, Fili, and Kili had grown quiet and Bilbo worriedly went to look for them, returning just moments later with a strange look on his face.

"Is everything all right?" Dwalin asked.

Bilbo blinked at him momentarily. "Quite all right. Seems they tired themselves out and decided to make themselves at home in my bed."

"I can get them out, if you wish," Dwalin volunteered.

"No, no," Bilbo laughed and flapped his hands at the dwarf. "They managed to settle Frodo down between them. So I'd thank you not to bother them for now."

"If you insist."

A couple of hours after that it was almost nine o'clock and Balin and Dwalin were beginning to wonder if the rest of the group had gotten lost. Dwalin was readying himself to go out and begin
searching around when a knock finally came at the door once again.

Bilbo moved to the door while Dwalin struggled out of his coat, having put in on inside out the first time. With a merry chuckle and a shake of his head Bilbo pulled the door open, ready to welcome the arriving dwarves into his home.

He did not know what happened next; one moment he was opening the door and the next he was on the ground feeling as though all the air had left his body. He distantly heard people shouting and then the air was rushing back. He turned his head to the side and coughed, noticing that someone was still laying over him.

The dwarf on top of him moved to get off him and Bilbo again felt as though the air had been knocked out of him. It was none other than Thorin Oakenshield hovering worriedly over him, dark hair falling like a curtain around them.

Their staring contest was interrupted as a piercing cry cut through the air and Bilbo easily pushed Thorin off, sending the exiled king crashing to the floor.

"Frodo!" Bilbo gasped.

"What's with all the noise?!" Kili demanded angrily as he burst into the entrance hall, bleary eyed and with his hair a mess. There was a panicked look in his eyes and he seemed ready to take up his bow and start shooting people. "Some of us were trying to sleep!"

Fili followed quickly after his younger brother, Frodo wailing unhappily in his arms. The hobbitling squirmed and trashed in Fili's hold, reaching out his hands towards Bilbo, who drew him into his arms immediately.

"Did something happen?" Fili wondered in bewilderment, hands making grabbing motions into thin air. He was bleary eyed and looked surprised to see that Frodo was no longer in his arms.

Frodo's cries turned into whimpers and he clung tightly to Bilbo's neck as his father shushed him. Dwalin moved to close the front door, shoving dwarves and wizard alike out of his way. Eventually Frodo's cries tapered off and he leaned back to look at his father's face, bringing one small hand up to pat Bilbo's cheek gently. The two hobbits ignored their audience as they took a moment to reassure each other.

"Did you feel something was wrong, dear one?" Bilbo murmured. He grasped Frodo's tiny hand and kissed the knuckles and then each individual finger. "I'm all right, see? Papa's all right." Frodo sniffled and tucked his head under Bilbo's chin, sticking his thumb in his mouth. "Do you want to meet our guests?" Frodo whined and shook his head. "Do you want to go to Dwalin?"

Frodo lifted his head and turned, looking for the dwarf. Dwalin stepped into view awkwardly, aware of the newly arrived dwarves turning to stare at him in shock. The hobbitling appeared to be considering his options, then finally he shook his head vigorously and tucked it back under Bilbo's chin.

"I was not aware you had married, Bilbo!" Gandalf said joyfully, attempting to get a good look at Frodo, who glared at him suspiciously.

Bilbo stiffened and growled, "I have not."

"Oh!" Gandalf reeled back and then looked about the entrance hall, face full of embarrassment.

Luckily for the wizard, Frodo took that moment to start babbling loudly and pointing at the new
dwarves, his scare forgotten. Bilbo hummed and smiled contentedly as Frodo turned serious eyes upon him and babbled some more. Occasionally the word "dorf" could be understood and there were even a few Fee's and Kee's in there for good measure.

Then Bilbo recalled that he'd pushed Thorin out of his way and turned around with a squeak. "Good heavens, I'm so sorry! Are you hurt?"

Thorin was taken back at suddenly having two hobbits in his space, both with the same expression of worry on their faces. Although the babe appeared to be simply imitating his father in a terribly adorable manner.

"I'm quite all right, Master Baggins," Thorin said, ill at ease. He threw a glare at Gandalf, who had also begun looking uneasy. "If you are Master Baggins?" He was rather hoping he wasn't, but the odds were not looking to be in his favor.

"I am," Bilbo said agreeably. "Bilbo Baggins," and he hefted his son up, "and my son, Frodo Baggins."

"Thorin Oakenshield," Thorin introduced and did not include the custom dwarf greeting, believing it did not matter when introducing himself to a mere hobbit. Balin and Dwalin glared at him disapprovingly, even Fili and Kili looked upset. But Thorin was most surprised when the hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, glared at him with disappointment. "I was led to believe we would be meeting a burglar this night."

"Clearly you are not," Bilbo sneered.

"Clearly," Thorin growled back.

Frodo whimpered and stared at Thorin fearfully. The dwarf reeled back in shock and swallowed heavily against the shame that filled him.

"There, there," Bilbo murmured soothingly, still glaring daggers at Thorin. "I have prepared dinner for your company, Master Oakenshield. I ask that you not touch my pantry, I barely have enough food to feed myself and my son. If there is anything you might require of me, Fili and Kili know where my bedroom is and that is where I shall be. Now, pardon me."

He managed to reach his bedroom before breaking down in furious tears. He had forgotten.

He had forgotten how being on the receiving end of Thorin Oakenshield's dislike and ire and mistrust felt.

It felt a little bit like heartbreak.
Bilbo managed to get a hold of himself by the time someone went looking for him. He had just enough time to thoroughly wipe his face clean of all evidence of tears and was attempting the very difficult task of getting Frodo into his pajamas. The hobbitling squirmed and rolled over, giggling as Bilbo tickled his belly for being unable to hold still. He crawled across the bed and reached under one of the pillows for the piece of clothing he knew was under there.

Thorin hesitated in the doorway as he observed the scene playing out in the bedroom. The babe was attempting to wrestle a bright red hood with long floppy ears onto his head and was becoming increasingly frustrated when he could not manage to put it on. The little one would whine and turn away when his father tried to help.

The dwarf was eventually noticed by the elder hobbit, whose expression immediately smoothed out into blankness, and Thorin found himself missing the bright and happy smile that had adorned that face just minutes before.

"Master Dwarf," Bilbo said flatly, unwilling to turn around and face him. "How may I help you?"

Thorin shuffled his feet and cautiously entered the room. "I wish to apologize."

Bilbo turned to stare at him disbelievingly. "You wish to . . ."

"Apologize," Thorin repeated through gritted teeth. "I was–am–displeased with the wizard. But I should not have taken my anger out on you."

"Oh-" Bilbo stuttered, confused.

"As I said, I was told we would be meeting a burglar this night," Thorin continued and he eyed the hobbit from curly head to hairy feet. "Certainly you do not resemble a burglar at all. You look more like a grocer to me."

In that instant, Bilbo was grateful that Frodo was in the room with them, or he didn't know what he would have done to the so-called King under the Mountain. As it was, Bilbo clenched his hands into tight fists and took several deep breaths to keep himself from punching the dwarf straight on his overly large nose.

"Keep your apologies to yourself," the hobbit hissed angrily, "when you don't really mean them!"

The dwarf sputtered, drawing himself up to his full height and stomping across the room to better loom over Bilbo, who did not look the least bit intimidated by him. "How dare you. Do you know who I am?"

"You are a guest in my home," Bilbo growled menacingly enough that Thorin stumbled back a step in shock. "I allowed your company into my house, I prepared dinner for them despite having very little for my self and my son, and you dare to come in here and insult me?"

Thorin's mouth worked uselessly, searching for something to say in order to defend himself, knowing that everything the hobbit said was true. It did not mean he had to like it.

Frodo whimpered and crawled under one of the pillows, staring out at them with wide frightened eyes. Thorin and Bilbo were immediately contrite and Bilbo took several steps back away from the dwarf after noticing how close to one another the two of them had moved again.
Thorin took a deep breath to steady himself. "I have very little experience apologizing. The apology I gave, however, was truthful, and I am sorry that I showed you disrespect and that I frightened the little one so."

Frodo, with all the attention span of a hobbit his age, was no longer paying either of them any attention, having gotten distracted by the pillow he had chosen to hide under. All they could see of him was his cloth covered behind, which he was sticking into the air as he attempted to stand on his head using the pillow under his knees.

Unable to stop himself, Bilbo covered his mouth as a bark of laughter left him and a deep fondness filled his very being as he observed the hobbitling. He might have worried about Frodo breaking his neck attempting a headstand but the hobbitling could not push himself up further than his knees would allow and was laying his head on the mattress. There was a look of deep concentration and confusion on his little face, as though he couldn't understand why his butt would not lift up over his head.

Thorin turned a laugh into a cough and turned away from the two hobbits to hide the smile that was spreading across his face. It was almost painful in its intensity and he worked his jaw to ease the ache before turning back.

"I am sorry as well," said Bilbo and was aware of Thorin turning to look at him though he did not turn himself, keeping his gaze on Frodo as it was easier to speak with the dwarf that way. "I jumped to conclusions."

"Pray don't mention it," the smile Thorin gave Bilbo was small but his eyes were clear and happy and Bilbo found himself blushing and shifting his gaze rapidly around the room in embarrassment. The dwarf did not notice his discomfort as he was trying to fight off his own awkwardness. "My company is settling down to eat. We would be glad to have you and your son join us. Unless it is too late for you to eat?"

Bilbo snorted and smiled deprecatingly. "I'm a Hobbit, Master Dwarf. I would eat all day if I could and it's never a bad time to feed Frodo, he hardly ever eats as it is."

"Thorin," the dwarf corrected, much to Bilbo's shock—and his own. "Is it because you do not have much food?"

"No, he's . . ." Bilbo trailed off uncertainly, trying to think of something to say. "He's sick."

"What sickness does he have?" Thorin wondered, looking towards Frodo with worry. The hobbitling had given up on his headstand and was laying on his back and grabbing at his feet, pulling them towards his mouth with childlike determination.

"Just something he was born with," Bilbo lied and inwardly cringed. The number of lies he'd told already . . . however would he keep them all straight was a mystery. "It is not something that can be cured by any healer but you need not worry, it is not contagious."

"That's not why I am worried," Thorin grumbled and wondered what kind of sickness it was that it could not be cured. He also wondered if he should ask Oin to check the babe over as he doubted the little one had ever been seen to by a Dwarf.

He grew still and silent as Frodo rolled over onto his hands and knees and began crawling across the bed towards him, his feet caught in his nightgown and he went sprawling across the bed with a grunt. Bilbo quickly helped him to sit up on the bed before he grew irritated and threw a tantrum. The hobbitling refused to release his hold on Bilbo's arm then and with a heavy blush Bilbo helped
him do as he wanted—which was to use Bilbo as a crutch so he could bounce up and down on the bed.

Frodo had yet to decide he was ready to try his hand at walking and had trouble keeping his chubby little legs under him, so Bilbo doubted he'd start walking any time soon. Perhaps in a few months the hobbitling would finally have enough strength in his legs to hold himself upright for periods at a time. Bilbo knew when that time came, however, that he would miss toting Frodo about his in arms.

Amused, Thorin observed the hobbits with a small smile. Frodo wasn't so much as bouncing on the bed as he was pushing against it reflexively. Bilbo was holding him aloft the bed and pulling him up and down, pretending it was Frodo doing all the work.

"Are you not the least bit tired?" Bilbo asked in exasperation but with a fond look.

Frodo made noises at him and continued pushing with his chubby little legs, clapping his hands excitedly.

Not five minutes later, Thorin was about remind Bilbo that the company was still waiting when Frodo finally decided he'd had enough bouncing. He simply stopped bending his knees and attempted to sit down on the bed, which Bilbo helped him to do with a relieved look on his face.

"Perhaps you want to eat now?" Bilbo questioned the hobbitling with a raised eyebrow.

Frodo ignored his father and turned to face Thorin, beginning a very serious conversation with the dwarf. Thorin looked taken back and threw Bilbo a desperate look, not knowing what to do.

"He's a very curious, talkative hobbitling," said Bilbo fondly, swallowing a laugh at the lost look on the exiled king's face. "He usually doesn't take to people so fast, though. I suppose it means he likes you."

When Thorin failed to respond to Frodo's babbling, the hobbitling pouted and began making awkward gestures with his hands. The dwarf was bewildered to notice that he could understand most of them but tried to convince himself it was merely accidental. At least until Bilbo began correcting some of the babe's gestures with a look of concentration and Thorin realized he did understand them.

"Tall," Bilbo said and made the Iglishmêk sign for 'tall', which Frodo easily and eagerly copied. "He is quite tall, isn't he? Practically a giant." Frodo smiled widely, showing off his two small teeth, and made another awkward gesture that Bilbo corrected. "Long." The sign for tall and long were rather similar, but Frodo seemed to have no trouble telling the two apart and repeated the sign for 'long' then patted at his own curly mop of hair. "Ah, he does have rather long hair as well." The hobbitling signed something that made Thorin blush and Bilbo chuckle merrily. "Pretty? You think he has pretty hair, do you? Should I be jealous?" Then Frodo signed something that drew a snort of abrupt laughter from Thorin and sputtering from Bilbo. "Frodo Baggins! You do not ask strangers for gifts!"

Frodo's bottom lip wobbled and his eyes filled with tears. Thorin came to a quick decision; he knelt on the floor before the bed, reaching into one of his coat pockets and sheepishly handing the little hobbit what he drew out. "I'm not as skilled at woodcarving as some of my Company, so I'm afraid this is all I can offer you." Frodo oohed and took the offered wooden toy and babbled happily as he showed Bilbo his new gift; a rather badly carved wooden horse. Or dog. Or perhaps it was a cow. Bilbo could not tell what it was but smiled at Frodo encouragingly nonetheless. "I'm sorry if it is not a proper gift."

"How do we say 'thank you', Frodo?" Bilbo encouraged.
"Not 'blow kisses'," Bilbo said, shaking his head. Frodo cocked his head cutey and looked confused. "But I think that will do, will it not?"

Thorin blinked, startled, and nodded, but his attention remained on the four-fingered hand Frodo had used to blow him a kiss.

Bilbo immediately noticed where the dwarf's attention lay and sighed heavily. "Chewed off by an animal," he murmured, taking the hand and laying a kiss upon it. "I would rather not speak of it."

"Forgive me, I did not mean to intrude," Thorin apologized, though he desperately wished to ask for more. The thought that some wild animal had chewed off a babe's finger was inconceivable and infuriating. It filled Thorin with a sense of need; to go out and kill the beast because despite Bilbo's wording of "animal", Thorin knew the hobbit meant something else entirely and he ached to ask.

"It's quite all right," Bilbo blushed and leaned away from him, noticing once again just how close to each other they were kneeling and the intense look in Thorin's eyes as the dwarf gazed at him. "I imagine everyone is waiting for us. Shall we?"

Thorin smiled crookedly and a mite bashfully, pushing himself quickly to his feet and moving back to allow the two hobbits some space. Frodo was happily babbling to his new toy, lifting it up into the air and pretending it was flying. He made sounds at his father and pointed to his hood when Bilbo made to pick him up.

The dwarf-king was amazed by the adorableness of the hobbitling when Bilbo swiftly pulled the hood onto his little head. Frodo promptly took hold of one of the floppy ears and drew it into his mouth to chew.

Once again Bilbo made to draw the hobbitling into his arms but Frodo shook his head, moving away from his reach and holding his hands out towards Thorin demandingly.

The dwarf sputtered and tried to back away with his hands held in front of him in surrender. Bilbo crossed his arms and glared heatedly enough that Thorin immediately stopped protesting and cautiously lifted the little one into his arms.

Hobbitling and Dwarf regarded each other cautiously but with much curiosity and after a moment a dam broke as Thorin's face eased into a small but happy smile and Frodo giggled. A tiny hand reached up to gently pat a bearded face and Thorin was forced to blink several times to keep the tears at bay. Then Frodo lay his head upon Thorin's fur covered chest with a content coo and began chewing on his four-fingered hand.

Off to the side Bilbo felt as though his heart would burst from his chest.

When they rejoined the rest of Thorin's Company, they were already eating the soup Bilbo had thoughtfully made for them. Several of them paused to profusely thank the hobbit, who blushed and stuttered back. The dwarves were all very surprised to notice Frodo happily laying in Thorin's arms. The hobbitling remained wide awake with no signs that he was tired at all and he clung to Thorin when Fili and Kili tried to draw him away.

The young brothers had set up Frodo's chair in between them with the hope that he would sit with them and sadly relinquished it when Frodo would not. It was passed down the table until it was propped up beside Thorin at the head and a chair was accommodated in place beside it for Bilbo.

He sat in his chair tiredly, expecting to be given a bowl of the soup he had made. Balin vanished into
the kitchen and returned with a smaller pot, not the one Bilbo had used to make the dwarves' dinner.

"I hope you don't mind, laddie. Oin had some mushrooms on him and I know how much hobbits enjoy their mushrooms," said Balin as he placed the small pot before Bilbo on the table, then presented him with two bowls, one smaller than the other.

Frodo drew a jovial laugh from everyone as he immediately leaned back from Thorin's arms, looking at the small pot with wide eyes as he heard the word "mushroom". He began making eating and mushroom signs with his hands and Thorin threw a glare at his Company when several of them looked shocked and gave them a firm shake of his head when they made to ask.

"Thank you," Bilbo said, surprised.

Frodo all but bounced in Thorin's arms as Bilbo prepared the smaller bowl for him. Bilbo then pulled at Frodo's chair until it was standing high enough for the babe to be able to comfortably reach the table. Thorin cautiously placed the hobbitling in the chair, helping Bilbo to pull it forward so that Frodo could reach the table.

Balin handed Frodo a small spoon that had the handle of a cute animal. A sheep, Bilbo thought, when Frodo began making 'baa, baa' noises as he waited for his bowl. The mushroom soup was actually his own soup just with added mushrooms but Bilbo certainly didn't mind and made sure to cut up the mushrooms into smaller pieces for Frodo. The soup was just warm enough that Bilbo didn't have to worry about Frodo burning himself.

"Mm," Frodo hummed happily as he drank his first spoonful, smiling a wide smile at Bilbo. "Umm."

"Yummy, eh?" Bilbo asked.

"Umm!" Frodo agreed and returned to his bowl. His hand was a little shaky as he brought his spoon up to his mouth but there was a very determined look on his little face that Bilbo recognized. He knew the hobbitling would not welcome any help in the presence of so many people.

"You have not been properly introduced to the rest of our Company," said Thorin as he was handed his owl bowl of soup of the meaty kind without mushrooms.

That seemed to be the only signal the dwarves needed as they each stood and introduced themselves with a proper bow. Although in Bifur's case Bofur had to translate and Bilbo was ashamed to find himself staring at the ax embedded in the dwarf's head. Surely something like an ax in their head would make a person memorable? But Bilbo could not recall much about Bifur, who only spoke Khuzdul and the signed language the dwarves called Iglishmêk.

He could remember Balin with certain clarity as the old dwarf had often visited him at Bag End before he fell in Moria. He even remembered Bofur with his silly hat and his wide dimpled smile even in the face of mortal danger. He also remembered Gloin, who was Gimli's father; and wasn't it strange to think that at that moment in time Gimli was only sixty-something, not even of age yet by Dwarf standards?

Aside from them he remembered Thorin the best; had made it a point to remember the Exiled-King throughout the years, even as he forgot the others and even their quest. He could not even recall much of Fili and Kili, aside from the rather unpleasant fact that both of them died.

Bilbo suddenly wished he'd been sent back with his red book. That would certainly have been handy.

"Where's Gandalf?" Bilbo asked, noticing that the wizard was not sitting at the table with them.
"He went outside for a smoke," Balin replied.

"Said he needed some peace and quiet to think," Dwalin snorted and rolled his eyes.

"Think about what?" wondered Bilbo confusedly.

"About what we'll do now that we don't have a burglar," said Kili with a grimace.

"Oh!" Bilbo cringed and ducked his head. "I'm sorry."

"There's nothing for you to be sorry for, laddie," Balin said with a shake of his head.

"Indeed, it is the wizard's fault, not yours," Thorin agreed.

"What will we do?" Dwalin asked, directing his question at Thorin. "We can't spare much time searching for a burglar."

"No, we cannot," Thorin agreed again with a heavy sigh.

Bilbo was remorseful as he observed the downtrodden dwarves. He had no idea of what they could do either. Faulty though his memories of the quest were, he could recall the fact that it had been his own presence that had saved the dwarves many times throughout their journey. If not for him he was sure the dwarves would have died early on in their quest. He couldn't suggest that they forget about getting a burglar if having one would save their lives.

But would any other person do? Did it have to be Bilbo who had to accompany them on their quest or could it be any other Hobbit? Was he sent back for this? To rejoin them on their quest and try to change the fates of those who died? Because he would do so in a heartbeat, if only he did not have Frodo to think about.

"Then what of the meeting in Ered Luin?" Balin asked. "Did they all come?"

"Aye," Thorin replied. "Envoys from all seven kingdoms." The dwarves began murmuring excitedly among themselves but it tapered off as Thorin shook his head. "They will not come. They say this quest is ours and ours alone."

"Perhaps our host would like to know more of our quest," said Gandalf as he joined them in the dining room, taking the small empty seat to Thorin's left at the table.

"Oh, no, it's not-" began Bilbo.

"You do not wish to know the reason for our arrival in your home?" Gandalf interrupted. "Perhaps after hearing their story, you would be kind enough to provide us with some advice."

"It certainly won't make things worse," Dwalin agreed.

While the dwarves argued over the smartness of sharing the objectives of their quest with their host, Thorin was having a small problem of his own and he deftly delivered a kick to Bilbo's knee just as the hobbit was taking a sip of his soup. He grimaced momentarily as the hobbit's lethal glare settled on him, thankful when Bilbo finally noticed what the problem was.

Frodo, looking very determined and not the least bit concerned with the arguing dwarves, was holding up a tiny spoonful of mushroom soup towards Thorin.

"Umm!" Frodo was saying, though he could hardly be heard over the raised voices of the company.
"Frodo-love-" Bilbo tried.

"I'm sure the soup is quite delicious," Thorin said, unaware of the pained look Bilbo sent him. "But I already have my own. See?" He held up his own soup bowl for Frodo to see.

The hobbitling blinked at him with wide-eyes that quickly filled with tears and the dwarves stopped arguing as he began crying.

"Oh, dear," Balin murmured while Dwalin looked ready to take up arms or maybe just clobber Thorin over the head with a hammer.

"He's fine," Bilbo reassured the group of worried hobbits, soothingly rubbing Frodo's back. Frodo hiccuped and rubbed at his eyes with tiny fists, a sight that made more than one Dwarf heart ache painfully. "Thorin hurt his feelings."

"I'm sorry," Thorin choked out, hand hovering uncertainly near Frodo's shoulder. Big blue eyes, not unlike his own, stared at him uncertainly and Frodo reached forward for his little spoon again. He filled it up and shakily held it out towards Thorin, who did not hesitate to lean forward and drink the soup that was offered to him.

Frodo smiled widely, showing off his two small teeth and Bilbo stared at Thorin in surprise. Thorin made sure to keep his dislike of mushrooms from his expression as he smiled indulgently at the hobbitling, who resumed sipping his soup much happier than before. Therefore the hobbitling did not see the face Thorin immediately pulled afterward as he tried to get rid of the taste in his mouth, much to his company's and Bilbo's amusement.

As everyone settled down once again Gandalf drew a very familiar map from his pocket and spread it out on the table before Thorin. Bilbo drew in a sharp breath as he gazed down upon the Lonely Mountain, with its tiny red dragon drawn above it.

"The Lonely Mountain," he whispered.

"Aye," Gloin said from down the table. "Oin has read the portents and the portents say it is time."

"Ravens have been seen flying back to the mountain as it was foretold: When the birds of yore return to Erebor, the reign of the beast will end," Oin said.

Frodo, finished with his soup, leaned forward in his seat to tap his spoon on top of Thorin's map, managing to smear sticky mushroom soup upon it. Thorin easily slid the spoon from the small grasp as Bilbo was paying more attention to the dwarves, who had once again began shouting at each other after Balin made a comment on their lack of intelligence.

The hobbitling was not to be deterred, however, and squirmed in his seat as he tried to grab at the map. Then when he could not reach it, he began stretching his arms out towards Thorin to be picked up.

The dwarf threw a look at Bilbo, who nodded his consent and helped Thorin draw Frodo out of his seat.

"We may be few in numbers, but we're fighters, all of us, to the last dwarf!" Fili was exclaiming.

"And you forget, we have a wizard in our company," Kili added helpfully. "Gandalf will have killed hundreds of dragons in his time!"

Gandalf, who had been paying more attention to Bilbo, Thorin, and Frodo, was startled to hear his
name and turned back to the dwarves, whom he was surprised to notice were all staring at him expectantly.

"How many, then?" asked Dori.

"I beg your pardon?" the wizard managed despite his confusion. Bilbo wandered out of the room into the parlor and searched around for the pacifier he had earlier put in Frodo's mouth.

"How many dragons have you killed?" Dori reiterated slowly.

The wizard began choking on air, unable to think of a suitable response, and the dwarves immediately jumped to their feet and began bellowing at each other much to Frodo's immense shock as he jolted from where he had been happily dozing against Thorin's chest, chewing on his hand.

He let everyone know of his disapproval of their noise by letting out an ear-splitting screech that quickly brought Bilbo running back from the parlor.

"What is it?" the hobbit cried anxiously.

Guiltily, the dwarves looked away from him and quickly retook their seats. Frodo grumbled unhappily and glared at them petulantly, managing to look absolutely adorable even while grumpy.

"I do believe it's sleepy-time," Bilbo said when noticed the hobbitling's drooping eyes and cranky expression. Frodo shook his head and clung to Thorin, burrowing himself deeper against the dwarf king's chest.

"I do not mind holding him until he falls asleep," said Thorin, much to Bilbo's relief as he did not want to cause a tantrum. Frodo had been strangely well behaved so far and he did not wish to chance his good luck.

"Could all of you speak quietly please?" Bilbo demanded irritably of the dwarves. "I'm surprised my neighbors haven't come knocking on my door with their protests. It's very late, you know!"

"Sorry, Master Baggins," the young ones said while the others murmured their agreement.

Balin, ever the rational one of the group, continued. "You forget that the front gate is sealed. There is no way into the mountain."

"That, my dear Balin, is not entirely true," Gandalf said as he magically produced a key from thin air. It was an ornately wrought, dwarvish key that Thorin seemed to recognize.

"How came you by this?" he demanded with awe.

"It was given to me by your father for safekeeping. It is yours now."

The dwarves looked on in reverent wonder as the key was passed to Thorin and Frodo drowsily reached up to touch the dwarf's hand that held the key. He made happy appreciative noises as Thorin squeezed him gently and fell asleep, much to Bilbo's amazement.

"If there is a key, there must be a door," Fili said and Bilbo rolled his eyes right along with Gandalf, who looked most exasperated.

"There's another way in!" Kili exclaimed.

"If we can find it," Gandalf said. "Dwarf doors are invisible when closed. The answer lies hidden somewhere in this map, though I do not have the skill to find it."
"Moon letters," Bilbo blurted out as he examined a corner of the map closely and then stuttered even as he mentally smacked himself on the head. "Umm—that is—they can only be read in the light of a moon of the same shape and season as the day on which they were written."

Gandalf examined the map closely again and threw the hobbit an unreadable look. Then said to the anxiously waiting dwarves, "He's quite correct. On both accounts. These are moon runes and they can only be read at a certain time."

"What time is that?" Thorin questioned.

"I am unsure, I do not have the skills required to be able to tell," Gandalf mumbled, then looked at Bilbo imploringly. "Can you tell, Bilbo?"

Bilbo could not and he did not remember this scene from his own past and despite that he had studied moon runes during his time in Rivendell with Elrond, he had never learned how the Lord of Rivendell was able to tell which moon was the right one.

"No, I cannot," he said and wrung his hands under the table. "But they are moon letters, shouldn't one of the dwarves be able to tell?"

The dwarves looked around at each other in embarrassment and a few cleared their throats awkwardly.

"What are moon letters?" Kili whispered to his brother, who shrugged.

"The only one of my company who would know is our scribe, Ori," Thorin said. The young dwarf meeped and ducked his head as everyone turned their attention towards him.

But Dori was already shaking his head. "For Ori to know, he would have had to have been taught by someone who knows of moon letters. But he has not." Ori shook his head guiltily and was pat on the back consolingly by those who could reach him.

"Well, there are others in Middle-earth who can," Gandalf said.

Thorin scowled and shifted Frodo in his arms, for he knew of whom Gandalf spoke. Elves.

"Elves," Bilbo said to Thorin's surprise. "You mean Elves, of course."

"I will not ask Elves for help," Thorin growled and glared at the wizard. "I've already told you this countless times."

"Oh," Bilbo shifted uncomfortably. Had Thorin always been so distrustful of Elves?

"And why not?" Gandalf demanded snappishly. "The Elves could help us!"

Thorin was gearing up for an argument when—thankfully—Frodo shifted in his arms and let out a rather adorable and happy coo. The dwarf deflated and shifted the hobbitling around in his arms again, running a large hand down the small back soothingly until Frodo settled again.

"And why do you require a burglar?" Bilbo asked then to change the subject.

"The task I have in mind will require a great deal of stealth," Gandalf said.

"What task is that?" Bilbo questioned suspiciously. He recalled his own part in their quest but was unsure whether it was what Gandalf had planned from the beginning.
"Hobbits are remarkably light on their feet," Gandalf explained and Bilbo shrugged with reluctant agreement. "They can pass unseen by most if they choose. And while the dragon is accustomed to the smell of dwarf, the scent of hobbit is all but unknown to him, which would give us a distinct advantage."

"If you had a hobbit as a burglar," Bilbo said. "Have you tried searching around Bree? Even in Tuckborough."

"Hobbits are much fond of their home, whether they live in Bree or Tuckborough," said Gandalf.

"Why did you decide on me then?" Bilbo wondered. "What do you believe is different about me from other Hobbits?"

"I remember a young Hobbit who was always running off in search of Elves in the woods," Gandalf recalled with a smile. "Who would stay out late and come home after dark, trailing mud and twigs and fireflies."

"I bet my father loved that," Bilbo murmured.

"Just as well," Thorin interrupted before the two could continue down memory lane. "If it's a Hobbit burglar we need, then we have no choice but to keep looking for one, though we do not have the time to linger here. You wouldn't happen to have a suggestion?"

"I really don't," Bilbo said apologetically. "If you've already tried Bree and elsewhere. I'm sorry."

"It's quite all right," Thorin waved his apologies away with a grim smile. "Despite all the trouble we have caused you, you welcomed us into your home. We are extremely grateful to you, Bilbo Baggins."

"R—right," Bilbo stuttered and felt his face burning. "I only have a few rooms available, but you're welcome to them."

"We can find other accommodations," Thorin said.

"And leave without saying goodbye to my son?" Bilbo wondered with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, I—" Thorin stuttered.

"Oh, can't we stay?" Kili called out pleadingly. "Just for the night! We can say goodbye to Frodo before we leave!"

"Yes," Dwalin added quickly before Thorin could protest. "That way we do not have to travel to the inn and then back in the morning."

"Oh, indeed," Gandalf murmured with obvious amusement as agreements rose up among the dwarves.

"I see I am outnumbered," grumbled Thorin, but his own amusement was very plain for all to see and Kili's shout of joy was quickly shushed when Frodo stirred again.

"It really is rather late," Bilbo said then. "Could I trouble you to carry Frodo to the bedroom?" Thorin stood and followed the hobbit down the hallway.

"He sleeps with you?"

"He does not like sleeping alone," Bilbo explained candidly. "He often has nightmares and likes
having me close by."

Thorin lay Frodo upon the bed and ran a finger down one of his chubby cheeks. Frodo snuffled contentedly and rolled over onto his stomach.

"Sleep well, little one," Thorin whispered and bestowed a kiss to the mop of unruly dark hair.

Bilbo touched his chest where his heart was beating wildly and left the room with the excuse of gathering blankets for the dwarves, who were most grateful to him and arranged themselves in the parlor to lay down and sleep.

He showed Gandalf to the big guest room, where all the furniture was more his size, then returned to show Thorin to the other spare room and quickly fled when the dwarf began pulling off his clothing and armor.

He returned to his own bedroom and settled himself in beside the drowsing hobbitling, who sensed his presence and cuddled closer to him.

The night had gone much better than Bilbo had anticipated. No dishes had been destroyed, the dwarves were not as rowdy though they were loud, and Frodo had eaten—which honestly, was the most important thing.

Though he worried about the dwarves and their quest, Bilbo was much too tired that night to spend any more thoughts on them. He fell into an exhausted sleep, with the deep voices of the dwarves lingering in Bag End as they sang of their mountain.

In the morning, Bilbo woke earlier than usual as Frodo was laughing brightly in his ear and he heard the low murmuring of dwarves in the hallway.

"Do you think he's awake yet?" Kili whispered.

"Maybe we can just grab Frodo," Fili suggested.

"I don't think we should should bother them," said Ori worriedly.

"FeeKee!" Frodo called excitedly and bounced on the bed, his knee ended up in Bilbo's stomach, and he groaned and sat up.

"Good morning!" Fili and Kili called from where they were peaking around the doorway into the bedroom. Ori was peaking in from the other side and looked very ashamed and worried.

"Good morning," Bilbo echoed sleepily and rubbed at his eyes. "Are you all leaving already?"

"Not for a few hours yet," said Fili as he, his brother, and Ori entered the room. "Gandalf has gone with Balin to Tuckborough, I think."

"Ah," Bilbo nodded with understanding. Gandalf had taken his advice then and gone to the Took's ancestral home to look for another hobbit to join their quest.

"Dwalin and Dori have gone to the market to buy more food," Kili said as he unashamedly climbed on top of the bed and cuddled Frodo, who gurgled happily and gave him a hug.

The three young dwarves stole Frodo away after Bilbo finished changing his diaper cloth and adjusted his hood, not even waiting for Bilbo to change the hobbitling into clean clothes. They gathered around Frodo in the parlor, where the babe proudly showed off his new toy from Thorin,
much to the dwarf's embarrassment and his Company's endless amusement.

Ori, who had not gotten to play with the hobbitling the previous night, was just as delighted as Fili and Kili to play with the little one that morning and was easily drawn into a childish game, much to his brother's amusement.

The dwarves all laughed as Frodo pretended that his badly carved horse-like toy was a monster and chased the younger dwarves around, making little growling noises. Their game of pretend got more exciting after the toy-makers of the group gave Frodo some toys they were carrying around.

Thorin was very pleased when Frodo appeared to have chosen the horse-like toy as his favorite and refused to relinquish it or replace it with one of the nicer carved toys.

Dwalin and Dori returned from their excursion to the market not half-an-hour later, both wearing frowns and looking displeased, though they carried a fair share of food between them. They did not reveal the source of their discontent until Bilbo went off to take a much needed bath and get dressed.

Evidently, they had heard some of the Hobbits in the market making ill-remarks about Bilbo and Frodo. After it had become apparent to the booth owners that the dwarves where guests at Bag End it had take some intimidation on Dwalin's part to get the hobbits to sell them what they wanted.

"How can they live like this?" Thorin wondered to Dwalin in private. Dori and Gloin had taken over the task of preparing breakfast for the company and their host, while the others played with Frodo, who basked under all the attention. It was quite obvious that the hobbitling was unused to having so much attention heaped on him all at once as he looked about at everyone with wide delighted eyes.

"I don't think he's had much choice, Thorin," Dwalin growled. "It's not like he can just up and move somewhere else with a babe. He'd need to find a new home and I doubt anyone would watch the little one while he did so."

"From how the wizard tells it, you'd think Hobbits were the best race on Middle-earth," Thorin murmured with a scowl. "Generous and kind and all-good."

"I think the wizard has realized his mistake," Dwalin murmured back, keeping his eyes trained upon Frodo, who would occasionally turn to smile at them as though he could feel their gazes. "All races have their faults, including us. Including Elves."

"Would we treat a father and his child in such a way simply because we knew there was no mother in the picture?" Thorin asked.

"Nay, but to us children are precious gifts no matter their origin," Dwalin replied. "The Hobbits seem to have children by the dozen. Perhaps they love their own children and not the children of others, as we do . . . I would take them away from here."

"I, as well," Thorin agreed. "But our journey is perilous. Could we guarantee their safety?"

Dwalin shook his head slowly and felt as though a great weight had settled upon him. Their eyes remained fixed upon Frodo, who laughed loudly and happily. "I would try to protect them as much as I could, but our journey is unpredictable. I would not forgive myself if something were to befall them."

Gandalf and Balin returned within the hour with news that they had not found themselves a burglar and it was with much sadness that they all settled down in the dining room to eat. They all tried to appear happy for Frodo's sake but the hobbitling seemed to sense something was amiss and whined and fretted and grumpily ate his food.
Afterward, the dwarves helped to clean all the dirty dishes, throwing them into the air and tossing them at each other while singing merrily. Frodo clapped delightedly at the show while Bilbo appeared most exasperated but did not try to stop them.

Then it was time for the dwarves to leave and they each said their own special goodbye to Frodo. With a kiss on the head, a shake of his tiny little hand, or a hug.

Frodo did not understand, of course, and tried to draw Fili, Kili, and Ori into another game by waving his horse-like toy at them and making growling noises. The young dwarves tearfully smiled at him and then bolted out of the room, unable to stand looking at Frodo anymore, knowing they might not see him for a long time if ever.

The hobbitling made inquiring noises at Dwalin and Thorin, who were the last dwarves to say their goodbyes to the two hobbits. Meanwhile the others packed up their meager belongings, filled their water skins with fresh water, and got themselves ready for their long journey ahead.

"You'll grow up to be a strong lad, won't you?" Dwalin asked Frodo, chucking the hobbitling's chin gently. "And take care of your adadith."

"We'll see each other again, little one," said Thorin, gathering Frodo into his arms and bestowing a kiss upon his unruly hair. "Perhaps not for a long time but we'll come back and visit you."

Frodo finally came to realize that the dwarves were leaving when several of them walked out the door and began crying.

"Hey, come on now," Thorin whispered. "There's no need for tears. It's not goodbye forever."

But Frodo would not be consoled and he began flailing his arms at Thorin, who grunted when one of the tiny fists hit him in the face.

"Frodo!" Bilbo scolded.

Thorin was forced to place Frodo on the floor as the hobbitling trashed and squirmed in his arms. Frodo quickly crawled away from them and vanished around a doorway, his crying echoing down the hallway.

"I am so sorry about that," Bilbo said and made a sibilant sound as Thorin drew him into a gentle but firm hug.

"You have been far kinder to us than anyone has in a long time," Thorin said into the hobbit's hair. "You have our eternal gratitude."

"Take care, laddie," Dwalin said after Thorin had let the disoriented hobbit go, he clasped the hobbit's shoulder and gave him a gentle shake. "Of yourself and your son. If you have any problems, don't hesitate to try to send a message to us at Erebor, though it may be far away."

"Thank you," Bilbo said, rather choked up himself. The two dwarves moved to gather their bags and as Bilbo stood on his front step he watched them saddle up the ponies Gandalf had acquired that very morning. The hobbit continued watching them until they vanished over the hill and then ventured back inside his hole.

There was an emptiness that had settled in Bag End. Everything was back in its place, there were no fur coats hanging on the hooks by the door, and a great silence lingered in every room.

Frodo had likely gone to hide under the bed, Bilbo thought. It was where he often went after
throwing tantrums or if he needed alone time. He would take a nap there and come out when he wanted to be comforted.

In the meanwhile, Bilbo sat in his study and set about sorting out his mail—most were complaints about the noise, though there was a note complaining about the dwarves causing problems at the market that he was confused by.

A couple of hours later, it was time for second breakfast and Frodo had yet to wander out and demand cuddles.

In fact, Bilbo had yet to hear a peep from his usually rambunctious son and with a great sense of foreboding, he left his study.

"Frodo?" Bilbo called out tentatively. He checked his bedroom first and under the bed, where lay Mister Nibbles, abandoned. He drew out the rabbit with much confusion. "Frodo?" He called worriedly. He checked the spare rooms, under every bed, in the bathroom, the kitchen, the dining room. He checked the pantry, the wine and cold cellars, the back room, and the storage room. He even checked the backdoor, though it was locked up tight.

Frodo wasn't in the smoking room, which he was not allowed to go in. He was not hiding in a trunk or in a closet. Nor was he in any cabinet, though most would have been unreachable to him.

Mad with worry, Bilbo tightly held onto Mister Nibbles even as he ran a badly shaking hand through his hair. He prayed and prayed to anyone who would listen as he threw open the front door and stumbled out. Frodo was nowhere to be seen and with a sinking realization Bilbo screamed his son's name into the sky.

But Frodo did not answer. Because Frodo had gone with the dwarves.
Chapter Notes

Warning: You are about to take a few short dives into the mind of an adventurous 8-month (so we believe) old hobbit. While I don't particularly know how the mind of an 8-month old hobbit works, I've been thinking too much about Rugrats. So be prepared for some really silly/strange thought patterns. I have no excuse. Well, my excuse is that I blame Rugrats!

Hamfast Gamgee ran as fast as he could to the home of his distant relative, Holman Greenhand, while his father, Hobson Gamgee, stayed behind at Bag End and tried to keep a hysterical Bilbo Baggins from running off in search of his son, Frodo.

Without care to anything or anyone, he ran up to Holman's hut and began banging on the door while yelling for the gardener.

"Hamfast Gamgee, what is the meaning of this?" Holman roared as he threw his door open. His hair in disarray and his eyes tired, obviously he had been still sleeping, despite it being almost past lunch already.

"It's Mister Bilbo!" Hamfast cried defensively.

Holman froze as he was about to bonk the younger hobbit on the head and immediately ran back inside to brush his hair down and make himself decent. He closed his door behind him and ran after Hamfast, huffing and puffing as he tried to keep up with the younger hobbit's fast sprint across the field.

They both ignored the many calls by other hobbits who demanded to know why they were rushing.

Meanwhile, Hobson Gamgee was having a hard time keeping Bilbo from simply bolting out the door after the dwarves. He had brewed some tea for Bilbo and set him at the dining room table while he ran about Bag End and packed supplies and things the hobbit would need for the journey he was no doubt planning. Bilbo was shaking badly and was in no condition to pack for himself.

Hamfast arrived with Holman soon enough and the gardener swiftly went to Bilbo's side and began whispering to him. Bilbo began frantically shaking his head the more Holman spoke until he finally seemed to have heard enough and stood. He reached forward and grasped the collar of Holman's shirt, beginning to shake the younger hobbit back and forth.

"How can you expect me to be calm?" he screeched rabidly, much to everyone's shock. "My little Frodo is out there in the wilderness with a group of rowdy dwarves!"

"Bilbo! Bilbo!" Hamfast cried and tried to pull the anxious hobbit away from Holman, who began to look a little blue in the face as Bilbo's hold on his collar cut off his air.

Bilbo finally seemed to realize what he was doing and let go of Holman's shirt abruptly. The hobbit ended up prone on the floor as he tried to gasp for air.

"I need you to stay here and watch Bag End in my absence," said Bilbo after taking several deep
breaths to calm himself down and checking to make sure Holman was all right.

"You plan to ride after them?" Hobson asked as Holman sat up, rubbing at his neck with a pained look on his face. "I thought that would be the case, so I packed you a bag."

Bilbo smiled grimly but gratefully. "I don't know how far ahead they've managed to get. But I'll need a pony."

Holman grumbled. "Very well. I'll acquire one for you, but I still don't think you should go alone."

"I'll travel faster by myself," Bilbo said. "I'm leaving Bag End in your name. If I do not return or send message within a year, you're to keep Bag End. Do you understand?"

Holman nodded grimly and left to get that pony.

"Right, first, I'll need to pack somethings for Frodo, too," Bilbo said. He found a small knapsack and filled it with some of Frodo's more practical clothing; pants, shirts, diapers. Nothing duplicate as Frodo had gotten into the habit of throwing duplicate items into the fireplace when Bilbo wasn't looking. Be it clothes, dishware, and even his own toys.

Bilbo didn't want to think about Frodo throwing his things into a campfire but the image lingered and twisted until it was Frodo throwing himself into a campfire, which then morphed into Frodo throwing himself into the fires of Mount Doom, and Bilbo frantically shook his head to rid himself of the image and quickly finished packing.

He grabbed a thick, wooly blanket for Frodo, the hobbitling was sure to get cold out in the wilderness, and also grabbed Mister Nibbles. He almost didn't pack Frodo's teething ring, but as he still could not find the hobbitling's pacifier, he decided to take it at the last minute.

He hoped the dwarves discovered Frodo quickly, if indeed they did not know the hobbitling had sneaked away with them, because if it turned out the dwarves had taken Frodo as Holman seemed to believe then Bilbo would be very displeased.

"Come back soon, Mister Bilbo!" Hamfast said sadly as he gave the hobbit a tight hug. "Bring back Mister Frodo!"

"We'll see," Bilbo said and patted him on the head gently. He allowed Holman to help him up onto the pony after they secured his packs to its sides. "Well, here I go."

"Right," Holman grimaced.

"Good luck, son," Hobson said.

"I already sent post to the Watch that I'm leaving Bag End in your name, Holman, so you should have no problems there," Bilbo said. He took one last look at the three Hobbits who had cared so much for him and Frodo and urged his pony forward as fast as he was able. There was no sadness in his heart as he left Bag End behind, only a deep sense of urgency as he thought of his hobbitling out there somewhere in the cold.

Out in the wilderness, a certain hobbitling was not cold as he snuggled down inside the bag he was hiding in. A bag attached to the side of a pony being ridden by a broad, tattooed dwarf named Dwalin. On the last stop the dwarves had made, one of the ponies had sneaked an apple into the bag for Frodo, who was still nibbling at it contentedly. The warmth of Dwalin's pony seeped through the fabric of the bag and kept Frodo rather warm though he still felt very bored.
He was sad as he thought of having left Mister Nibbles behind. Mister Nibbles was a master storyteller just like his Papa. He was even more sad as he thought of having left his Papa behind.

But Mister Nibbles had scolded him for throwing a tantrum and so Frodo had decided to leave him behind and that was that. He now had Mister Thor to keep him company and tell him stories. Though Mister Thor was just a little horse made of wood, he told very good stories about the dwarf who had created him and Frodo was fascinated to learn all about him.

His Papa would be all right by himself for a little while, at least until Frodo returned home, of course. Why, Frodo was quite sure that his Papa wouldn't even notice he was gone, so Frodo would go on a short adventure with his dwarves and then return.

He only hoped that Mister Thorin wasn't angry at him because he had hit him on the face. Maybe he should apologize? Mister Thor agreed that apologizing would be a very nice thing to do.

So Frodo decided that he would apologize, then. But after he took a little nap. He was getting very tired and his shoulder was starting to hurt but like his Papa always said, "Little hobbits need their sleep!"

Bilbo Baggins rode his pony as fast as the poor creature could manage, it was not very fast but it was still faster than what he would have been able to manage just by walking. It took them eight hours by his reckoning but they managed to reach Bree long after night fell, both hobbit and pony exhausted and wet and hungry and thirsty.

"Bilbo Baggins," Bilbo said through shattering teeth at the gatekeeper, who inquired as to his name.

"Baggins, you say?" the gatekeeper perked up and glanced down at a piece of parchment held tightly in his fist. "Bilbo Baggins?"

"That's right," Bilbo agreed with some confusion.

"Ah, the wizard said you would come! I didn't believe him, of course," the gatekeeper murmured as he opened the gate. "A Baggins traveling to Bree? Unheard of, but here you are!"

"Wizard? You mean Gandalf?" Bilbo asked dumbfounded.

"Of course I mean Gandalf!" the gatekeeper shook his head and muttered under his breath. "He's waiting for you at the Prancing Pony. He was here earlier, left with a group of dwarves, and then came back alone! Imagine. I don't know what sort of trouble he's in this time. Wizards."

"The Prancing Pony? And where is that?"

"Just follow the road there, Mister Baggins," the gatekeeper waved absently at the single road ahead of them. "The inn is just down the road. Tourists."

Bilbo quickly pushed his pony forward. It was late enough at night that the road was mostly clear of people and he easily found the Prancing Pony. He left the pony tied up outside by a water through and ventured into the inn.

Bilbo assumed that the barkeep standing behind the desk was the father or a close relation of Barliman Butterbur, the future innkeeper of the Prancing Pony. Although he did not know much about Barliman either aside from Frodo's stories. The man standing behind the desk was wide but stout and resembled a hobbit but for being so tall.

"Ah, Master Hobbit, how can I help ye?" the man asked.
"Bilbo Baggins, I was told-

"Oh!" the barkeep exclaimed and then began waving at someone sitting at the back of the inn. "Gandalf! Gandalf! Mister Baggins is here! He's here!"

Gandalf appeared from the back, passing curious onlookers who stopped their conversations to watch him approach the hobbit.

"Bilbo-" Gandalf began, only to let out a whoosh of air as Bilbo punched him in the stomach, much to the surprise of everyone watching.

"Where is he?!" Bilbo demanded as he flailed at the wizard. "Where's my son? Where's Frodo? Why isn't he here with you? You dratted wizard! If anything has happened to my baby-

"Bilbo! Bilbo!" Gandalf cried and tried to sooth the angry hobbit. "It's all right. Frodo is with Thorin and-

"Why is he with them?!" Bilbo screeched and all those present—including Gandalf—flinched.

"Come, Bilbo. This is not a conversation that should be heard by others," Gandalf steered the hobbit up the stairs and into a room. "Well? Why didn't you bring him back with you?" Bilbo demanded. "What happened to Frodo?"

"Bilbo," Gandalf began and the seriousness of his expression made the hobbit fall silent with trepidation. "Thorin and his company are taking Frodo to Rivendell."

A few hours earlier the wizard and the band of dwarves had arrived at Bree and taken a very short break to switch their ponies and one horse. They had driven their ponies hard to get to Bree before nightfall and the ponies were exhausted. They transferred their saddles and bags onto their new ponies—and one horse—and continued on their way. Though Gandalf tried to appeal to Thorin that perhaps they should stay the night in Bree before setting out in the morning.

The dwarf refused as he did not wish to linger so close to the Shire any longer. He thought often of the two hobbits they had left in Hobbiton and the more distance put between them the better; although it seemed that the farther they traveled, the more he thought of them. He was not the only one who thought of the hobbits, either.

Fili and Kili were quiet, both wearing dull expressions as they rode at the back of the company. Occasionally one or the two of them would throw looks behind them, as though expecting the hobbits to come tearing up the path to join them.

Dwalin would release a long sigh every once in a while that was beginning to get on Thorin's last nerve. The tattooed warrior had been the first one to arrive at Bag End and had spent more time bonding with little Frodo Baggins than the others.

The others were also quiet; though perhaps that might have been because many of them were sleeping across the backs of their ponies and even Gandalf appeared to be sleeping with his eyes open. Ori appeared to be the only one who was fully awake, with an open book across one arm as he quickly wrote in it.

"What are you writing, lad?" Dwalin asked him quietly as he slowed his pony down.

Ori startled and closed his book, glancing around wildly as if searching for an excuse among the trees. "Nothing. Just, you know, quest stuff."
Dwalin raised an eyebrow disbelievingly. "Let's see then."

Ori held the book tightly to his chest, as though he expected Dwalin to try and take it from him. It only managed to make the older dwarf all the more suspicious and curious.

"You're doing a very poor job of making me incurious," Dwalin murmured humorously.

"It's just . . ." Ori mumbled and then with a sigh he showed Dwalin what he'd been writing. Rather, what he'd been drawing. "I wanted to get it done before the memory left me."

The book, now opened to a marked page showing a very detailed sketch of a pair of sleeping hobbits, was held reverently in Dwalin's hands. The page next to the sketch held a little information about Hobbits that Ori had managed to learn, which was not much at all.

"Do you mind if I add something to this?" Dwalin asked, gesturing at the page with the writing.

"Oh!" Ori exclaimed with shock but feeling strangely pleased as well. "Of course not, Mister Dwalin! You probably know more about them than I do!"

"Not much, I gather," Dwalin grumbled with a pleased sort of smile. "There's many things about these two hobbits, at least, that I don't think we ever managed to learn."

"Perhaps one day we will," Ori said cheerfully.

"Perhaps," Dwalin agreed easily. "Do you mind if I show this to Thorin? He probably managed to learn more about them than I."

"Oh, you don't think he'd mind?" Ori asked fretfully.

"Lad, I don't think Thorin would mind at all," Dwalin muttered and after grabbing the quill that was offered to him he pushed his pony faster to catch up with Thorin, who was brooding more than usual at the head of the company.

"What?" Thorin grumbled unhappily as he noticed Dwalin beside him.

The dwarf grinned at him brightly and shoved an opened book into his face. Thorin was about to bark at him angrily when he noticed the drawing on the page.

"This is-" he began.

"Right," Dwalin agreed.

"But when-"

"I didn't ask," said Dwalin.

Thorin took the book from Dwalin and tenderly handled it as though it were a precious gift. He ran a slightly shaking hand over the sketch, once over Bilbo and once over Frodo. Ori had managed to capture the two hobbits asleep, probably from that very morning, with Frodo on his back but cuddled up against his father, who was sleeping sideways with his arms around the hobbitling. There was a small happy tilt to Frodo's lips and the sketch gave a sense of peacefulness and tranquility.

"Ori dedicated a page to our Hobbits," Dwalin pointed out.

Thorin read over the small passage on the page next to the sketch and somehow mustered up a smile. Ori had written of how they'd gone to Hobbiton on the word of the Wizard Gandalf to find
themselves a burglar, but instead they had found a Hobbit with a babe.

He gratefully took the quill that was offered to him and began writing what he had learned of their two hobbits. It turned out to be more than he had thought he'd learned or perhaps it was because he'd even written in even the smallest details but either way he ran out of ink.

"I'm out of ink!" he called back, startling several of the sleeping dwarves into wakefulness. Even Gandalf was startled and blinked to clear his eyes.

"Oh!" Ori searched around his bag and drew out a small bag along with an empty inkwell. Nori took the two items from him and pushed his pony forward to Thorin's other side.

"Powder ink," he explained to the exiled king. "Just add water." Then he curiously peered at the book in the king's hands and made several motions to Dwalin behind Thorin's back. Dwalin shrugged at him and pointed his thumb at Ori, so Nori returned to his younger brother's side.

"When did you catch Bilbo and his son sleeping?" Nori wondered and Dori glanced at Ori suspiciously as the words carried over to him.

"That was this morning," said Fili from behind them.

"Seems so long ago," said Kili with a forlorn sigh.

"Oh?" Dori questioned.

"Well, we went to wake Bilbo up," Fili explained.

"Yes, it had nothing to do with wanting to play with Frodo," Kili added unhelpfully.

"Of course Ori tagged along to keep us out of trouble," Fili continued, ignoring his brother.

"He does that," Kili added again. "Tag along, that is. Not that we need to be kept out of trouble." His shifty eyes told otherwise, however.

"Bilbo and Frodo were sleeping, all cute and cuddly," said Fili with a fond smile.

"Very cuddly," Kili agreed.

"And that's it," Fili finished.

"Not very exciting, it was more exciting after Frodo woke up," Kili said.

Nori and Dori stared at them disbelievingly, while Ori simply shook his head and rolled his eyes, accustomed to the princes' antics as he was.

Meanwhile, Frodo finished eating as much as he could of his apple and shifted uncomfortably in the small bag space. His shoulder had begun to ache and though the air inside the bag was warm, he was beginning to feel rather cold. Suddenly, going on an adventure with the dwarves did not seem like such a good idea. Mister Thor agreed.

At a much later time, with a Wizard and a Hobbit in Bree. Bilbo Baggins had just discovered that his dear son, Frodo, was being taken to Rivendell.

"What-why?" Bilbo's chin trembled and his eyes burned with tears. "What's wrong with Frodo?"

"How is it that Frodo came to acquire that wound on his shoulder, Bilbo?" Gandalf demanded.
Bilbo's hand flew up to his shoulder, where the wound from the Morgul-blade was on Frodo's own. He worked his mouth, looking for something to say.

"Bilbo!" Gandalf shouted.

Bilbo flinched and drew back away from him but quickly squared his shoulders and pulled himself up straight. "It is none of your business. If the Elves ask, I will tell them. But not you, Gandalf."

The wizard staggered back as though he'd been dealt a heavy blow. "I care about Frodo, as well, Bilbo. He is a charming little fella and-"

"No, Gandalf," Bilbo interrupted. "It does not matter if you care for Frodo. I cannot tell you. I must go to Rivendell. My son needs me."

"You're quite right about that, at least," Gandalf grumbled. "But you won't get there fast on the back of a pony."

"Well, what else am I to ride on?" Bilbo barked.

"You will ride with me, of course," Gandalf said. "On my horse. We must go quickly, too."

"You'll hear no argument from me," Bilbo mumbled as he hurried after the wizard. They both ignored the patrons of the bar, who gazed after them with curiosity. Gandalf bid the innkeeper farewell and did not stop as he continued out the door.

"I imagine this is your pony?" Gandalf approached the dozing creature and untied the reins. Bilbo followed him down the road as Gandalf led him to the stables and stood waiting outside as the wizard switched his packs from pony to horse. Once outside, Bilbo was easily picked up and deposited on the double saddle and he tried to settle himself but it was very uncomfortable. He knew he'd be quite sore by the time they reached Rivendell. "It's about a day's ride from Bree to Rivendell, Bilbo Baggins. So you might as well get some rest."

"We're riding all day? What about the horse?" Bilbo wondered.

"I asked for the horse with the best endurance," Gandalf explained. "They assured me this horse has been trained in endurance and will get us to Rivendell in a day. Why, we might catch up with the dwarves at this rate!"

"You spelled the horse, didn't you?" Bilbo questioned with a roll of his eyes.

"I might have done something like that, yes," Gandalf chuckled to himself. "Do not worry about the horse, Bilbo Baggins. He will get us to Rivendell with utmost ease."

"When did Thorin discover Frodo was with them?" Bilbo asked, breaking the silence that had settled upon them as they left Bree.

"I'm afraid he was not discovered until the company made camp at Weathertop, Bilbo, just under a few hours ago," Gandalf replied sadly. "The ponies, if you can believe this, had been sneaking him food."

"Where was he hiding?" Bilbo swallowed heavily as he thought of Frodo hiding in one of the packs and eating only what was provided to him by the ponies. Though Gandalf was clearly trying to keep the severity of the news minimal, Bilbo still felt as though a great weight had settled in his heart and he feared what he would discover on their arrival at Rivendell.
"In one of Dwalin's bags, quite a sneaky little hobbit you have," Gandalf said with some grim amusement.

"And how did you discover his wound?" Bilbo wondered quietly.

"When Dwalin discovered Frodo, the little one was very pale," Gandalf explained. "At first we thought he was simply cold and attempted to warm him up. We tried to feed him but he remained unresponsive. There were dark circles around his eyes and he gasped for breath. It was when we were getting him out of his dirty clothes that we discovered the shoulder wound. It was black and festering and though I did not tell the dwarves, it was infused with evil. Oin recognized that he could not heal the wound, that they would need Elvish help. So Thorin took Frodo and is riding with him to Rivendell, the others are following though not at his hard pace."

Bilbo reached up to wipe the tears from his eyes, though they did not stop coming. Frodo had been quite devious as a child in their first life but Bilbo had believed it to be due to his parents' deaths, as the little one had mellowed out after moving to Bag End. He had never thought Frodo would sneak away with a group of dwarves he'd only just met.

Although, he supposed he should have seen it coming. Hadn't Frodo tried to do the same after the first time meeting Hamfast and Holman? Luckily, he had chosen to hide in Hamfast's bag and the young hobbit had been shocked at the weight of it.

"Be strong, Bilbo," said Gandalf. "You will soon see your son. Now rest, I can see that it is much needed."

Exhausted beyond belief, Bilbo slept with his back against Gandalf's chest. While Gandalf had assured the hobbit that the horse would get them to Rivendell in a day, he had to stop several times to allow the horse some much needed rest. Gandalf stopped the horse every six hours and let him pasture and drink and during that time, he held the sleeping hobbit in his arms and tried not to wake him.

_It is for the best_, Gandalf thought to himself. He did not want Bilbo to be any more anxious than he already was. Telling him of how unlikely it was that his son would live would not help matters. As he recalled the empty look in little Frodo's eyes and his failure to respond to anything, Gandalf closed his eyes and prayed with all his might that Frodo might survive for many years yet. There was little else to do now but pray and push the horse forwards to Rivendell.
Bilbo came awake with a small gasp and shifted uncomfortably as he felt the soreness of his back. He'd had the strangest dream. He'd been back in the fields of Valinor sitting beside someone who assured him Frodo would be all right. He couldn't recall the face of his companion no matter how hard he tried but there had been a sense of peace and tranquility that he recalled from the time he and Frodo spent across the sea.

"We're passing through the Trollshaws now," Gandalf said and something in his voice drew Bilbo's alarm.

"What is it?" Bilbo demanded.

"I thought we'd meet Thorin's Company here," Gandalf replied with confusion. "Unless we passed them on the way, I do not believe they could be farther ahead of us."

"Then something's wrong," Bilbo realized. Certainly the dwarves hadn't managed to get themselves captured by trolls? He hadn't even been with them! "You should have a look around, Gandalf, and make sure they're all right."

Gandalf appeared shocked by his words. "Are you sure? We could just go."

"No, my conscience would not rest if something happened to them that we could have prevented," Bilbo said, then with much hope: "I just have to trust that Thorin got Frodo to Rivendell and that the Elves are taking good care of my baby."

"They will be," Gandalf murmured, though he did not think all the care in the world could save the little one. "But I will take a quick look around. In the meantime, why don't you stretch your legs and eat? I'll be right back."

Bilbo allowed the wizard to pull him down from the horse and groaned as he had trouble standing on his legs. Gandalf soon vanished into the trees and Bilbo was left stretching out his aching back and legs. When the wizard failed to return within the hour, Bilbo prepared himself a small cold meal and fretted as he took a walk around a tree. Then when the wizard failed to return within another hour, Bilbo contemplated going to look for him.

He waited for another half hour and then, with a most exasperated sigh, Bilbo ventured cautiously through the trees. He was cursing himself half-an-hour later when he still could not find the wizard, dwarves, or even the trolls—if indeed the dwarves had been captured by trolls. Good heavens, had he gotten himself lost?

Not half a minute later he saw a light shining through the trees and he knew he'd found the trolls. He heard the commotion as he ventured closer and peeked around the trunk of a tree. The three trolls were gathered around their campfire and they were just as huge as Bilbo remembered them. Half the dwarves were tied up in sacks near him and the other half were tied to a spit over the fire.

"No good roasting them now, it'd take all night," came a voice from out of the darkness that startled Bilbo, he clung to the tree trunk and looked about suspiciously.

"Don't start the argument all over again, Bill," one of the trolls said, "or it will take all night."

"Who's a-arguing?" the one called 'Bill' demanded.
"You are," the last troll said.

The trolls began quarreling amongst themselves and as soon as they managed to come to an agreement of sorts, the voice would say something again, and the trolls—believing it was one of them speaking—would fall into another argument. So it continued until Bilbo could see the sun beginning to shine through a crack in the boulders surrounding the campfire.

"Dawn take you all and be stone to you!" came the voice for the last time as the light peaked over the hill and the trio of trolls were at last turned to stone, much to the relief of Bilbo and the dwarves, who cheered as Gandalf finally appeared from behind a tree. "Ah! Bilbo, there you are. You came looking for me, I see."

"You failed to return within a reasonable hour," Bilbo said peevishly.

"Bilbo!" Kili cried happily and he squirmed around in his sack like a worm. It made Bilbo and a few of the dwarves shudder as they watched him. Thankfully his brother had no problem giving him a kick to stop his squirming and with an indignant noise, Kili struggled to his feet and bounced towards the hobbit. "Bilbo!"

"Yes, yes," Bilbo rolled his eyes and helped the young dwarf out of his sack as Gandalf helped the ones roasting over the fire. "I find it very hard to believe that you all managed to get yourselves captured by trolls. Do you know how dimwitted trolls are?"

"They took our ponies!" Kili defended.

"No time to waste!" Gandalf said once all the dwarves were on the ground and out of sacks. "These trolls couldn't have traveled in the daylight."

"There's probably a cave nearby," Dwalin said.

While Bilbo helped the three young ones, Dwalin and Gandalf searched about for the troll's cave. Gandalf returned eventually carrying two swords and a very familiar knife.

"Here, Bilbo," said the wizard as he handed Sting to Bilbo and the knife hummed as Bilbo grasped it tightly in his hand. "It's just the right size for a short sword."

"It quite is," Bilbo agreed. He gestured at the two swords Gandalf carried with a nod of his head. "Keeping two for yourself?"

"I figure Thorin could do with a good sword, too, what do you think?"

"That's all well and good," Bilbo said, "but can we please move on now?"

"Yes, we shall, I'll go back for the horse," Gandalf said. "The company has an extra pony, Bilbo. Ride with them towards Rivendell and I'll catch up."

"Why do you have an extra pony?" Bilbo asked the nearest dwarf.

"It was for our burglar," replied Fili.

"Get to Rivendell, he says," Dwalin grumbled after the wizard had vanished into the trees. "How in Durin's name are we to get there when we don't know the way?"

"I know the way," Bilbo revealed, even as he attached Sting to one of the packs on the pony he was given and easily mounted the creature without any help. "If you're coming with me, you'd best hurry
up. I won't be slowing down for any of you."

"Right!" Kili cried and mounted his own pony. The others were quick to follow his example as Bilbo pulled his pony into a trot and then eased her into a run through the trees. He easily guided his pony out of the forest with the company behind him.

It was not even an hour of riding that they came to the Ford of Bruinen and Bilbo knew from there it was but a short time to the Last Homely House depending on how fast they pushed their ponies. They were past the river and beginning the climb up the mountain when Gandalf finally caught up with them. If the wizard was surprised that Bilbo was the one leading the way, he did not say. He quietly joined the company and remained silent as Bilbo led them up the mountain.

Further and further he led them, until the dwarves began to question if he really knew where he was going. There was no sign of any dwelling that any of them could see but eventually the landscape began to change and the dwarves were surprised to see trees below them.

Bilbo led them upon a path marked with white stones, though he seemed not to be looking for them, almost knowing the way already by heart. They followed the hobbit as he began leading them down and down and through trees again.

And at last they knew they had arrived when they heard the sound of elves singing and laughing, which Bilbo easily ignored though the dwarves all looked annoyed. The elves looked at them curiously from behind the trees and though Gandalf wanted to stop and have a chat, Bilbo did not hesitate to continue through.

"We'll be crossing the bridge," the hobbit said to the company and the wizard. "You'd all best get on foot until you cross it."

"What about you, Bilbo?" Gandalf asked at last.

"I'm going ahead, you'll take too long to cross the bridge," Bilbo replied and pushed his pony forward, much to the surprise of the dwarves, wizard, and the elves who were watching. The bridge was quite narrow, indeed, but if a pony could easily walk on it, then it could easily run on it as well. The trick, Bilbo had learned, was keeping the pony on a straight path and running past the bridge fast enough that the creature would not have time to be skittish.

Much to the shock of those watching, Bilbo easily ran his pony across the bridge and disappeared through the opened gates. There was a familiar elf waiting for him in the courtyard, who threw a cautious glance behind the hobbit at the empty doorway before turning to smile widely at Bilbo, much to his surprise.

"Bilbo Baggins," Glorfindel greeted cheerfully.

Bilbo stared at the Elf-lord with much shock and almost fell off his pony as he attempted to dismount. The golden-haired elf swiftly helped him down from the pony and placed him upon the ground, much to the hobbit's relief.

"You're a welcome sight," Glorfindel continued. "Lord Elrond and I planned to wait for a couple of weeks before embarking to the Shire for you."

"What? Why?" Bilbo wondered worriedly. "Frodo?"

"We thought you'd travel to Rivendell eventually, either to search for help regarding Frodoing," Bilbo jerked at hearing the nickname, which had been given to Frodo by the Lady Yavanna during the time they had spent with her, "or as to the matter of your second chance."
Second chance? Is that what this is?"

"You'll have to speak with Lord Elrond about that, I'm afraid," Glorfindel said. Before he could say more, they were joined by Gandalf and Thorin's company.

"Bilbo!" Kili called excitedly and hurried to stand at his side.

"I do wish you would stop shouting my name," Bilbo murmured with exasperation.

The dwarves all clamored around him as they noticed the elf he was standing with, pushing him to stand behind them as they eyed Glorfindel suspiciously. To his credit, the elf merely smiled at them to their great annoyance, not the least bit intimidated by the weapons pointed in his direction nor the glares he was receiving.

"Do you mind?" Bilbo cried irritably, pushing them aside. "Glorfindel is going to show me where my son is!"

"I am?" Glorfindel wondered with surprise. "Of course I am! That's why I was here. Waiting for Bilbo."

"What about Thorin?" Dwalin demanded warily. "Where is he then?"

"Ah, Master Oakenshield has not left Frodoling's side since he arrived," Glorfindel told them with a roll of his eyes. "Despite Lord Elrond having a room prepared for him and all, he insists he must remain with Frodoling until Bilbo arrives. We should hurry along, Bilbo, or I fear Master Oakenshield will faint from his exhaustion."

"I don't care about Thorin!" Bilbo cried heatedly and the dwarves reeled back in shock, staring at the hobbit with shock and apprehension while Gandal unconsciously rubbed at his stomach. "What about Frodo?"

"Frodoling's fine!" Glorfindel assured belatedly. "Lord Elrond is waiting for us and will tell you all about it." He threw a suspicious look at Gandalf, who stared back at him looking quite bewildered. The wizard's confusion seemed to ease Glorfindel's suspicion and he took Bilbo's hand and began leading him into the house. He magnanimously ignored the dwarves' irritated grumbling and the insults they were no doubt directing at his back in their own language. "Nice company you're keeping these days, Bilbo."

"You know each other, then?" Gandalf asked, overhearing Glorfindel's comment.

"We're old friends!" the elf chirped loudly.

"Truly?" the wizard muttered and the dwarves looked between elf and hobbit with great surprise and some with suspicion.

As though being friends with elves was a reason to look at Bilbo with suspiciousness. Yet Bilbo did not bother to defend himself. Truly, why did he have to defend himself? The elves had treated him with far more kindness than the dwarves ever had and while he looked back on his journey with Thorin and Company with fondness, it was not something he'd like to repeat and he fervently hoped he would not have to. The dwarves had no reason to look at him as though he'd committed some heinous act of betrayal.

"Here we are," Glorfindel said as he stopped before a very familiar door. In fact, Bilbo was quite sure the door was his own. A glance at the golden-haired elf at his side confirmed his suspicions. Elrond really did remember, then. It was not just Glorfindel. How else would he know that the room
he was giving Frodo was the same room he had given to Bilbo during his stay at Rivendell? It was too great a coincidence.

"Bilbo Baggins. Long has it been since you last graced these halls. Welcome, old friend," came Elrond's voice as Glorfindel pushed the door open and led Bilbo inside.

Bilbo tried to think of something to say but caught sight of Frodo lying pale and unmoving on the bed and went immediately to the hobbitling's side.

"Seems our Hobbit is full of surprises," Gandalf noted humorously.

"Welcome to you, as well, Gandalf," said Elrond, though he did not spare the wizard a glance. The Lord of Rivendell was sitting on the bed beside Frodo, holding the hobbitling's four-fingered hand. There was a strange faceless doll tucked to Frodo's other side that Bilbo did not recognize. A large armchair facing the bed on the opposite side of Elrond held Thorin, who sat with his eyes closed and his head tilted to the side in what had to be a very uncomfortable position.

Bilbo spared a glance at the exiled king but his attention was immediately called back to Frodo, who was breathing deeply and easily with a small pout playing about his lips. Once Bilbo had climbed on top of the bed without the least bit of hesitation, Elrond pulled back Frodo's shirt to reveal clear and unmarked skin where his shoulder wound once festered.

"You healed it?" Bilbo questioned.

"Not I," Elrond replied. "The wound was almost healed before your return to the Shire, it simply needed to finish healing. I've no doubt it caused him great discomfort because of his small body."

"That it did," Bilbo ran his fingers over the healed shoulder and then through Frodo's hair.

"Perhaps now Master Thorin will decide to sleep in his own room," said Glorfindel as he leaned over the top of the armchair Thorin occupied. The dwarf jolted into wakefulness and was startled to see the elf hovering over him. He was more startled to see Bilbo laying on the bed with Frodo in his arms.

"How long was I asleep?" Thorin asked, rubbing at his neck with a pained expression.

"Perhaps an hour," Elrond replied. "As you can see, Master Thorin, Bilbo Baggins is here now. Glorfindel will show you to the rooms I had prepared for you and your Company."

"I will?" Glorfindel wondered with a pout. "But why can't Erestor do it?"

"Erestor, too?" Bilbo questioned with wide eyes.

"Well, yes," Elrond replied. "Glorfindel. I must speak with Bilbo alone."

"I forbid it," Thorin growled menacingly to the Elf-lords' surprise. Bilbo slowly turned to face the dwarf and something in his eyes quickly changed Thorin's mind. He awkwardly cleared his throat and pushed himself to his feet, moving to join his company as they hovered in the doorway uncertainly. Although most of the dwarves wanted to go in and see Frodo, they followed after Glorfindel and Thorin. "Actually, I think sleep sounds like a fine idea."

"Gandalf," Elrond said and finally looked to the wizard, who took a step back in shock at being addressed in such a brisk tone. "Alone means without you, as well. We will speak at a later time."

"Oh, right, of course," Gandalf stuttered and left the room. Elrond stood from the bed and went to
check that the wizard had indeed left before closing the door.

Bilbo rearranged Frodo upon the bed and drew the soft white covers up to the hobbitling’s neck, leaving a kiss on Frodo’s forehead.

"Bilbo," Elrond said and he drew the hobbit into a very welcomed hug. "There is much of which to speak."

"I think so as well," Bilbo agreed. "I don't understand. Glorfindel said something about a second chance but why do you remember?"

"Glorfindel is correct," Elrond began. "You were given a second chance, Bilbo Baggins. It was a gift bestowed upon you, so that you may live happily with the advantage of hindsight."

"I sense a but."

"But, Frodo was not meant to go along with you," Elrond continued and he threw fond look at the hobbitling over his shoulder. "Frodo was not yet healed from his wounds and nightmares. But he would not let you go when the Valar sent your conscience back. He clung to you and would not be separated from your side. If the Valar had not intervened it is likely Frodo would have seized to exist. His younger self was not to be born for many years and now will not be."

"What does that mean?"

"There cannot be two of him, Bilbo. So the Frodo that was the son of Drogo and Primula Baggins has been erased. Only one Frodo exists now and forever and he is your son."

"Oh, dear," Bilbo covered his mouth with a hand as he begun feeling slightly dizzy. "But he's all right now? Will there be problems for Frodo?"

"I imagine only the problems every child faces as they grow older," Elrond said pleasantly.

"Nothing you said explains why you remember," Bilbo said with a scowl, once he'd gotten his bearings, "or Glorfindel. Or even Erestor."

"That is easy enough to explain, Bilbo," and Elrond seemed much more cheerful as he continued. "I am here to help you with the ring. I volunteered myself to help you in this task and I was not alone, either. Glorfindel and Erestor came along, as well. Glorfindel because he seemed to have the most experience with second chances and poor Erestor was forced to come along for Glorfindel's sake."
Both Elrond and Bilbo took a moment to roll their eyes, much to each others' amusement. They both froze when Frodo shifted on the bed behind them and gurgled happily. "The three of us were not the only ones. I would have thought Gandalf to be one of the few, but apparently that isn't so."

"No, Gandalf had no memory of me aside from knowing me from my childhood," Bilbo agreed. "He actually seems quite suspicious of me from what I can tell."

"That will have to be fixed."

"Right, but first, what do you mean by help me with the ring?" Bilbo questioned with trepidation. "You don't really expect me to go looking for it, do you?" But the look on Elrond's face said all and Bilbo began vehemently shaking his head. "No, no. I refuse. I will have nothing to do with that accursed ring again. You can find someone else because I won't do it!"

"And who else would we find, Bilbo Baggins? Frodo?"
"You leave Frodo out of this!" Bilbo cried and then drew a deep breath when Frodo whimpered and twisted in the sheets.

"Could you continue living your life as you have been? Knowing that the One Ring is out there?"

"I don't understand why we couldn't have just stayed in Valinor," Bilbo argued tearfully. "I never asked for a second chance."

"No, you did not, but it was given to you," Elrond placed his hands on the hobbit's shoulders and waited for Bilbo to look at him before continuing. "It's our one chance at redemption."

"What do you mean 'our'?" Bilbo ventured confusedly.

"I was the one to send Frodo to Mount Doom, was I not?"

"You- you- no! It was Frodo's decision-"

"That I should not have allowed, Bilbo," Elrond interrupted with a grim face. "I was quite sure I was doing the right thing but looking back now I wonder if perhaps we could have found another way. Or sent him with better trained warriors, not children. I sent him with children, Bilbo. Aside from Gandalf, they were all children."

Bilbo sputtered and tried to refute this yet he found that he could not. He did not know how old Legolas had been but the elf could not have been more than a thousand years old and had never wandered far from his own home as far as Bilbo knew. Despite being over eighty years old himself, Aragorn had always lacked a certain maturity though he appeared mature in other matters, such as battle and war. The other three hobbits, well, they had been mere children and Bilbo had never truly understood why they had been allowed to go along with Frodo. Gimli, as well, though not a child anymore by his people's standards, Bilbo had never been able to see Gimli as anything but a child . . . perhaps it was his childish attitude? Boromir . . . good heavens, where should he begin with that one?

Or perhaps it was simply because Bilbo had been rather old himself at the time of their quest and considered almost everyone he met a child.

"I could have sent Glorfindel with Frodo," Elrond was saying. "I could have gone myself."

"I thought you said it was the duty of Men to destroy the ring?" Bilbo asked. "That the Elves' time on Middle-earth had come to an end?"

"Tell me," Elrond said instead, "if you decided that it was time to leave the Shire forever, but there was one last thing left to resolve that would rule the fate of all Hobbits. Would you leave them to figure out how to fix the problem? Perhaps advise them on the best course of action? Or would you stay and help resolve the problem before leaving?"

"I'm not sure that's a fair comparison," Bilbo argued, shocked, "and truthfully, the me now would leave them to fix the problem on their own." Elrond was taken back by his frankness. "And why is that now?"

"Why?" Bilbo snorted and began to pace around the room. "Because Hobbits are an extremely bigoted lot. They are not kind or generous, they are not open-minded or friendly. Hobbits care only about their bellies and gossip. They spread lies and rumors and believe themselves above outsiders. It might seem like they care about their families so much but if someone in their family did something they disapproved of, well . . ."
"I see," Elrond managed slowly. "If you were having a hard time in the Shire why did you not leave? Even if you did not come here to Rivendell, you could have gone elsewhere. Bree, perhaps?"

"How could I risk Frodo in such a way? Have you lost your mind?"

The elf stared at him blankly for a minute then shook himself. "You're right. But you're here now and you are welcome to stay here as long as you like."

"Oh, really? We haven't finished talking about this ring business."

"Bilbo Baggins," Elrond said with fond exasperation and shook his head though he was smiling. "You have already decided that you will find the ring. If only because you wish to avenge Frodo and kill Gollum."

Did he ever. Bilbo could not think about that wretched beast without also thinking about making him suffer as he had made Frodo suffer. Once upon a time he'd heeded Gandalf's words and had not killed the creature Gollum and he had come to regret it. *So much.*

If he did go after the One Ring, Gollum would not survive to tell the tale.
Bilbo would not be removed from Frodo's side during the hobbitling's healing sleep, despite the many attempts Thorin's Company and even the elves made to draw him away. He took baths, slept with Frodo snuggled in his arms, and ate when someone brought him food, but aside from that he did not move far from the hobbitling.

There was hardly ever a moment when he wasn't alone during the arduous hours he spent at Frodo's bedside; always it was either Thorin or Elrond with him and once in a while it was even both of them at once.

Thorin had been very displeased upon first encountering the Elf-lord in the room with Bilbo and Frodo but had learned to adapt to his presence when it became obvious that he would not stop visiting.

He could not say the same about the golden-haired elf, Glorfindel. It was difficult to adapt to the elf's visits when they were sporadic at best; one moment the elf was there and the next he'd disappeared as though taken by the very wind, with not even a whisper of sound to follow neither his entrance nor his leave. It was very baffling.

Even though he had learned to adapt to Elrond's presence, Thorin was still quite peeved when the elf and Bilbo would hold conversations as though the dwarf were not even in the room. They must have learned to speak in riddles for all Thorin could not make heads or tails of anything they said. That was when they chose to speak in the Common Tongue as often Bilbo would simply slip into the Elves' confounded language as easily as though he'd been born an elf himself.

It was three days after Bilbo arrived at Rivendell, the third of May, and he had just finished eating his lunch with Thorin when an unexpected guest appeared.

It was a boy. Not a Hobbit, Dwarf, nor Elf. With short cropped dark hair and grey eyes. Bilbo was not accustomed to being around the children of Men and could not tell how old the boy was and while Thorin had spent much time working in the villages of Men, he was not accustomed to spending time with their children either.

*There is something oddly familiar about him, thought Bilbo.*

"Can we help you?" Thorin demanded suspiciously and with a scowl etched on his face but the smile Bilbo threw the lad seemed to ease most of his discomfort.

"I wanted to see how the baby was doing," the boy explained uncertainly, shuffling his feet awkwardly.

"Come in," Bilbo said, waving the boy over to where he sat on the bed with his back against the headboard, Frodo sleeping peacefully at his side. "I didn't know there were any Men living here. In fact, the only Men I've ever known to live in Rivendell were . . ."

"Were?" Thorin echoed questioningly but the hobbit was not paying him any attention for he was staring at the boy with large eyes.

"Estel?" Bilbo ventured cautiously, squinting at the lad.

The boy looked startled at hearing the name and confirmed his identity with a nod. "How do you know my name?"
"Oh!" Bilbo looked around the room as he thought of what to say. "Elrond mentioned you, of course! You're his ward, are you not?"

"That's right," Estel replied with a proud sort of tilt to his head, though his eyes continuously shifted towards Frodo. When finally he could not seem to hold his curiosity any longer, he asked; "When will the baby wake?"

"I don't know, whenever he feels like it I suppose," Bilbo said with a laugh, running a hand through Frodo's curls.

"He's all better now though, isn't he?" Estel asked worriedly, eyes wide on his small face.

"He is," the hobbit assured. "He's just taking his time now."

Estel's worry eased and his gaze shifted from Frodo, to Bilbo, and then finally to Thorin, who raised an eyebrow at him questioningly. "Are you a Dwarf?"

Thorin's other eyebrow rose to join its twin and the dwarf threw Bilbo a grin, which the hobbit returned. "I am."

The boy was awed and shifted his attention to Bilbo. "Are you a Dwarf, too?"

"Good heavens, no!" Bilbo chuckled and then to ease the petulant expression on Thorin's face; "Not that being a Dwarf is a bad thing. But I'm a Hobbit, I'll have you know. So is my little Frodo."

"I've heard of Hobbits!" Estel claimed with excitement and practically threw himself onto the bed in his haste to get closer to Bilbo, to the hobbit's amusement and Thorin's annoyance. "But I've never seen one before! My brothers, Elladan and Elrohir, often speak of a Hobbit friend of theirs!"

"Oh?" Bilbo wondered.

Estel took a moment to think. "I think they said his name was Bill or Bo."

"It's Bilbo," Bilbo corrected with a roll of his eyes. "Of course those two troublemakers decided to come back."

"Come back from where?" Estel questioned with an awed expression. He was apparently quite awestruck at meeting the Hobbit friend of his foster brothers.

"Never you mind that," Bilbo said and flicked a finger at the boy's nose, chuckling when the boy went cross-eyed in his attempt to look at Bilbo's finger. "Where are Elladan and Elrohir? I haven't seen them since I arrived."

"I think they went Orc-hunting," replied Estel, absolutely bursting with pride at the thought of his brothers hunting Orcs. "They always do that."

"Should have guessed," Bilbo murmured to himself. "How rude of me, I haven't even introduced myself. Estel, I'm Bilbo Baggins, and this sleepy little one is my son, Frodo Baggins." Estel eyed the hobbitling with obvious curiosity. "And that grim and grumpy dwarf over there is Thorin Oakenshield."

The dwarf did not look amused by the hobbit's depiction of him but gave a nod of his head when the boy glanced at him.

"Is meeting Frodo the only reason you're here?" Thorin demanded, irritated by the boy's presence.
"You probably don't get to play with children your own age," Bilbo realized and glared at Thorin for being so rude.

"No," Estel agreed. The boy was throwing Thorin uncertain glances, unsure of what to make of his attitude.

"Don't worry," Bilbo said and ruffled the boy's hair, much to his embarrassment. "Frodo and I will be staying here for a long while yet. You'll have plenty of time to get to know him."

"Really?" Estel demanded with more enthusiasm, the dwarf and his bad attitude fleeing from his thoughts. "I'm glad." He began to grow uncomfortable again in the presence of Thorin, who continued to look at him through narrowed eyes. "I'll come back later!" When the dwarf wasn't present was left unsaid. The boy all but ran out of the room.

"Thorin!" Bilbo scolded once Estel had gone. "There's no reason for such rudeness!"

"I don't want that boy calling on Frodo," Thorin grunted irritably.

Bilbo blinked at him succinctly then covered his mouth as a peal of laughter erupted from his belly. The dwarf looked annoyed at being laughed at and Bilbo tried to control himself, though it was proving to be difficult.

"Don't- Don't you think- he's a little young for that yet?" he finally managed to get out despite his laughter.

Thorin snorted. "He was far too interested in Frodo."

"Oh, Thorin," Bilbo snorted a laugh and shook his head fondly. "There are no other children here in Rivendell. I imagine Estel feels quite lonely and I'm not surprised in the least that he's interested about Frodo. Frodo is quite possibly the first baby he remembers seeing."

"I don't care what his excuse is, I don't like it," Thorin growled.

"Here I thought I was Frodo's father," Bilbo said with another roll of his eyes. "Do you know what I think?"

"Pray tell," Thorin said glumly.

"I think you're afraid that Frodo will be more interested in spending time with Estel than with you," the hobbit said in a singsong voice. Thorin blushed, crossed his arms, and turned away from the triumphant hobbit. "Really, Thorin Oakenshield, would you deny Frodo the chance to make a friend? Because he doesn't have any."

Thorin looked instantly remorseful. "No, that's not what I want."

"Good," Bilbo intoned. "Because I'd smack you silly."

Thorin sputtered indignantly and Bilbo giggled at his expression, unable to help himself. Really, Thorin made it so easy to tease him.

"You might have been right about the reason I don't want that boy around," Thorin said after Bilbo had managed to calm himself. "But that's not the only reason."

"And what's the other reason, then? Or reasons?" Bilbo asked.

Thorin pursed his lips and looked out the window. How could he possibly tell the hobbit that it
wasn't just Frodo he was afraid of losing, but Bilbo as well? That he didn't like that the elves would hoard all of Bilbo's attention for themselves? But the biggest problem was that Thorin and his Company would continue on their quest and Bilbo and Frodo would stay behind at Rivendell.

"Hm," Bilbo hummed thoughtfully as he gazed at Thorin's profile. It was plain to see that many things were bothering the dwarf. Bilbo gently tucked Frodo in and planted a kiss on one of the hobbitling's chubby cheeks. "Have you spoken to Elrond?"

Thorin was visibly startled by the change of subject and turned to face the hobbit again, his expression one of confusion. "About what?"

"Your map," said Bilbo.

The dwarf shifted his eyes away. "No."

"You have to do it eventually," the hobbit pointed out reasonably. "He's just waiting for you to ask him, you know."

"What? How does he know about the map? Did you-"

"Before you start pointing fingers," Bilbo scolded, "you should know that Lord Elrond has visions that show him many things. It is very likely he knows more about your quest at this point than you do."

"He hasn't tried to stop us," Thorin argued. "He can't possibly know-"

"Why would he try to stop your quest, Thorin?" Bilbo demanded, bewildered. "He's been nothing but kind to you and your kin. I don't understand where all this mistrust is coming from."

"If you knew . . ." Thorin trailed off angrily, fists clenching.

"You could tell me," Bilbo said, both eyebrows raised imploringly. "I will tell you this; Elrond could just as easily have had you all thrown in the dungeons. He has provided you with rooms and food and you have repaid him with thinly veiled insults and mistrust. It is not just the elves you are insulting, I lived in here for many years and Rivendell will always be more of a home to me than the Shire ever was. You are all very lucky that Elrond is so kind, else you would not be enjoying so many comforts."

Thorin blinked furiously and swallowed heavily, "I- We did not mean to insult you."

"That's good but did you hear anything else I said?" Bilbo demanded succinctly, he ignored the glare he received and continued. "I am not asking you to trust them. I am simply asking that if you are going to insult them for whatever reason, that you do it in the privacy of your own rooms. Not here in my room and not out there in the presence of the elves."

The dwarf took a moment to digest that before shaking his head, shrinking down into the cushions of the armchair.

"Well, now you know. I would greatly appreciate if you would tell the others to keep their rude comments to themselves until they are in private. Elrond is the only one who can help you with your map, Thorin, and I would hate for you to throw away his help because you got thrown out of Rivendell. You are a king-" Bilbo glared heatedly when Thorin began to protest and the dwarf grew silent, looking properly chastised. "You are a king. It is your duty to keep your people in line and to
seek help even from unlikely sources, especially when it concerns something as great as the taking back of your kingdom."

There was a smile playing about Thorin's lips as he gazed at Bilbo, who blushed profusely as he ran out of steam. "I will speak with my Company about keeping their complaints to the privacy of their rooms. I feel I should apologize, I was not aware that you were taking their comments to heart."

"I wasn't," Bilbo denied. Truthfully, it was hard not to take the dwarves' grumblings to heart when they spoke deprecatingly of pointy ears, leaf eating, and other things that could just as easily describe a hobbit as well as an elf.

Thorin sighed heavily, leaning forward to grasp both of Bilbo's hands in his, seeing right through the hobbit's denial. "Forgive me." He took a deep breath, looking off to the side to gather his thoughts. "I will tell you. Before the dragon attacked Erebor there was an alliance between us and Thranduil, the Elvenking . . ."

Despite already knowing both sides of the story Bilbo listened attentively as Thorin told him of what he perceived as a great betrayal. It had been a long time since the dwarf had spoken to anyone of his past but it all came tumbling from his mouth with an ease he'd never felt before, all because Bilbo was staring at him with wide imploring eyes. He spoke of what he remembered from Smaug's attack, their battle to reclaim Moria, and the years he spent as King-in-Exile of Durin's Folk after his father went missing. All to the day where he was met by a Wizard who encouraged him to reclaim Erebor.

"Gandalf can be very persuasive," said Bilbo wryly.

"Indeed," Thorin snorted. He gazed at the hobbit inquiringly, arching his own eyebrow when Bilbo looked confused. "I believe it is your turn."

"My turn?" Bilbo echoed.

"I told you about myself, now tell me about yourself," Thorin commanded.

"Oh!" Bilbo exclaimed, somewhat surprised. He snorted and rolled his eyes. "Oh, very well. I don't think my life has been as interesting as yours, though. I was born on September 22, 2890. In fact, Frodo was born on September 22 of last year, so we share the same birthday. My parents were Bungo Baggins and Belladonna Took. Bagginsexes have always been considered very proper Hobbits and are well respected in the Shire, so it was quite a shock when my parents were married. My mother was a Took and they were known for being odd and adventurous. Not at all proper for a Hobbit. I was quite like my mother when I was young, I would often run off to the woods in search of Elves and Dwarves and Men and return home in the late hours of the night, all muddy and unrecognizable."

"I see where Frodo gets it from, then," Thorin said, amused.

"Oh, dear," Bilbo chuckled. He took a moment to gather his wits and think about how many lies he was about to tell; all of which would be collaborated by Elrond, Glorfindel, and Erestor if the dwarves were ever to ask. "My parents died when I was quite young, afterward I left the Shire and came to Rivendell. I wanted to meet Elves and learn more about them. I met Elrond and he invited me to stay for a while, in the end I stayed for a rather long time. There was so much to learn about them and so many books to read in the library that it felt like I would never get through them. Then several years ago, I met Frodo's mother," Bilbo paused to clear his throat; the idea of Frodo's mother was the biggest lie and he wanted to tell it before he forgot what it was they had decided on. "We never planned on any children, so it was quite a shock to discover that she was pregnant. We had planned to marry but decided to wait for the baby to be born, only . . ."
"She died in childbirth?" someone asked softly.

Bilbo was surprised to notice that while he had been telling the story they had gathered an audience of dwarves and a Wizard. He nodded wordlessly. "After Frodo was born, I decided to take him back to the Shire. I waited until he was old enough to travel and then we moved back to Bag End, my parents' home. We were only living there for a few months when Gandalf showed up."

"Perhaps now would be a good time to break for supper, Bilbo?" Elrond called out from where he stood by the door.

"Supper sounds wonderful," he replied, rubbing at his stiff neck and clearing his throat. Elrond called for supper to be brought to the hobbit and inquired as to whether the dwarves wished to eat alongside him or they would wait for dinner. In the end a group of elves brought Bilbo a large course meal and a light snack for the dwarves. Light because there was no meat, much to the disgruntlement of many of them.

Bilbo was grateful when Thorin cleared his throat and glared at his Company, drawing their complaints short. The dwarf thanked Elrond profusely for the meal, much to the Elf-lord's amusement.

"Thorin and I met Estel today," said Bilbo to change the subject.

"Did you?" Elrond wondered with a smile. "He's been asking after Frodo every day. It is beginning to affect his studies."

"Oh, dear," Bilbo murmured bemusedly. "I find that extremely amusing."

"Of course you do," Elrond shook his head at the hobbit. They both ignored the dwarves, who were staring between the two of them suspiciously. Gandalf, however, could understand all of their conversations, though he never truly understood what they were talking about. It was like they spoke in riddles. Most frustrating.

"He said something about Elladan and Elrohir that I found most interesting, too."

"If you're trying to ask if my sons are among the group of elves we spoke of, then the answer is yes."

"I'm surprised you let them."

"Truthfully, I didn't have much of a choice in the matter. They came after me."

Bilbo erupted in laughter, startling the dwarves. "They became rather attached to Frodo."

"I fear we elves become rather attached to Hobbits of the Baggins variety."

Bilbo noticed that Thorin was beginning to look rather upset and switched to the Common Tongue. "When are the troublesome two coming back then?"

"I'll give them a week," Elrond replied succinctly.

"What about Arwen?" Bilbo wondered. "Around this time . . . she's at Lothlorien?"

"She is."

"You . . . haven't seen her?" There was something odd playing across Elrond's face, even the dwarves and Gandalf noticed something strange. "She made her choice."
"Not yet," Elrond said firmly.

Bilbo gaped at the Lord of Rivendell. "Please tell me that does not mean what I think it means."

"Do not be so dramatic," Elrond murmured. "There are many paths for her that I can see now. She made her choice once, why should she not make another this time?"

"Hm," Bilbo hummed thoughtfully. "I imagine many things will be different now."

"Not as many as you think," Elrond replied. "Some things are inevitable."

"Yet you call me dramatic," Bilbo snorted. He finished off his supper and waited for an elf to collect his plates before settling down on the bed again. He snuggled Frodo against his side and kissed the hobbitling's chubby cheeks, he had found it to be a great stress reliever. "Elves."

"Would you tell us more about Frodo's mother, Bilbo?" asked Gandalf, he was gazing at Frodo with a speculative gleam in his eyes that Bilbo did not care for. "From your story, I gather that she was an elf?"

"Gandalf," Elrond intervened, to Bilbo's relief. "I was hoping we might talk. We have much of which to speak."

"Oh," Gandalf started and glanced at the elf suspiciously. "Is now the best time? I was hoping-"

"Now is the perfect time," Elrond claimed and rose from where he'd sat at the foot of the bed. The wizard sighed and pushed to his feet, he left the room shaking his head. Elrond looked back at Bilbo and gave the hobbit a wink, Bilbo was reminded that the elf had two rather mischievous sons and they had to inherit it from somewhere.

"Was Frodo's mother really an elf?" asked Kili, peering closely at the sleeping hobbitling. "He does have something sort of elvish about him, though."

"Would it matter? If his mother was an elf?" Bilbo questioned curiously.

"Well, not to me," Kili replied honestly, looking around at the other dwarves. A few of them looked annoyed but Dwalin and Thorin were shaking their heads, which relieved Bilbo somewhat as they were Frodo's favorites.

"Bilbo, is it true what you said before?" Thorin asked then, drawing everyone's attention. "About the elf having visions?"

"Very true," Bilbo promised. "I don't know how they work, so I can't explain it to you."

"Oh, but... how much of our quest do you think he's Seen?" Thorin wondered, rubbing at the back of his neck as he tried to appear casual.

Bilbo could feel his eye twitching in irritation as he tried to think of something to say. Perhaps he shouldn't have told Thorin that Elrond had Seen much of their quest? "You'd have to ask him, Thorin. I don't go around asking him about his visions. Perhaps when you finally decide to ask him for help with your map?"

"What about our quest did you want to know?" Balin asked Thorin.

"I think I'd want to know if I survive the quest," Fili said and no one heard Bilbo's sharp intake of breath as several of them agreed.
"That would be good to know!" Kili agreed heartily. "If I knew how I was going to die, I could prevent my own death!"

"What if you were to die of old age?" Bofur wondered. "How would you prevent that?"

"You wouldn't," Dwalin replied gruffly. "No one can cheat death."

*Oh, if only that were true,* Bilbo thought to himself and he must have fallen asleep, because the next thing he knew someone was gently shaking his shoulder.

"Do you feel up to dinner, Bilbo?" Elrond asked.

"No," Bilbo answered sleepily.

"Your dwarves have gone to eat," the elf continued. "Bilbo . . . what have you been telling them about me?"

Bilbo blinked to clear his eyes and only turned his head to look at Elrond, who sat on the bed beside him. "What do you mean?"

"Those two young princes," Elrond began slowly, eyes narrowed in thought. "They keep saying the strangest things to me."

"Like what?" Bilbo wondered. He was bewildered at what the two could possibly be saying that would befuddle the elf so.

"They keep saying things like; 'You probably saw that coming'," said Elrond. "Or, 'Lord Elrond always looks ahead!' It is most perplexing."

Bilbo buried his face into the pillow to muffle his snickering. Oh, those two were quite clever.

A knock at the doorway drew their attention. Estel hovered uncertainly, looking around the room cautiously.

"How fast did you have to eat to beat the dwarves here?" Elrond asked.

Estel grimaced at his foster father and shuffled closer to the bed to look at Frodo. "When's the baby going to wake up?"

"Are you quite eager to play with him already?" inquired Elrond.

"He's really adorable," Estel said instead, to the surprise of both Elrond and Bilbo. "Are all babies as adorable as he is?"

"If you asked Bilbo, he would say no," the elf replied. "But if you ask me, I'd have to say Frodo is one of the most adorable babies I've ever seen."

Estel nodded seriously. "I don't think there could ever be a baby as lovely as Frodo."

"But what if one day you have a babe of your own? Wouldn't you think he or she was the most adorable baby you'd ever seen?" Bilbo asked.

"How would I have a baby of my own?" Estel questioned, bewildered. "I'm not going to steal one!"

"That's a conversation best saved for another time," Elrond interrupted before Estel could start with the really awkward questions. Bilbo was smothering his giggles into his pillow again. The boy
looked ready to keep demanding answers, stubborn to the last. "Come, Estel, you don't want to keep bothering Bilbo and Frodo, do you?"

"Can't I stay with Frodo for a little while?" Estel pleaded.

"Only if Bilbo allows it."

"I don't know how exciting watching Frodo sleep will be for you, Estel, but you're more than welcome to stay," Bilbo said and regretted it once Elrond left as Estel began with the questions. Why did Frodo only have four fingers in one hand? How old was Frodo? When was Frodo's birthday? What was Frodo's favorite color? What was Frodo's favorite toy? Would Frodo like the doll Estel had left for him?

The questions never stopped. It was like dealing with Pippin all over again.

Forget the Quest of Erebor, Smaug, Gollum, and even the Dark Lord himself! It was the young ones — including Frodo—who would be the end of him!
The days were slow to progress and slow to pass for a Hobbit staying in the Last Homely House waiting for a little hobbitling to open his eyes and wake from his healing sleep. Little Frodo Baggins slept peacefully and deeply, surrounded by crisp white sheets and large Elf-sized pillows. Like a sleeping beauty waiting for the kiss of her true love to be bestowed upon her.

Every day, Bilbo would kiss the hobbitling's forehead, repeating the same process at night before drawing the little one close and falling into an uneasy sleep.

Sometimes a hopelessness settled deep within him that he could not seem to shake and it did all to cleave his heart to pieces. All anyone saw was the patiently waiting and calm father, who would not be moved from his son's side. They didn't see the pain he took great effort to hide, the tears that flowed at night, nor did they hear his fervent prayers to anyone who would listen.

It did not matter that Elrond reassured him that Frodo was all right, better than ever. Bilbo would not feel calm and assured until Frodo was finally awake.

A week slowly passed since his arrival at Rivendell and Bilbo laughed, and he smiled, and he teased. When the pain became so great that it could swallow him whole, he took long walks in the garden while Estel and Thorin butted heads over whose turn it was to keep Frodo company. Not that it mattered as in the end both were too stubborn to concede to the other and thus both kept Frodo company.

At the very least, Bilbo was glad as the two began growing accustomed to each other the more time they spent together.

It was one such night that Bilbo was sitting in the garden, eyes on the brightly shining moon.

"Dry your eyes, it's no cause to weep," Bilbo whispered faintly as the wind blew and took his words away. "The weather is fine, the road isn't steep."

"Elrond tells me you have not been getting much sleep," a voice whispered behind him. A voice so painfully familiar that a stab of pain shot through Bilbo's chest and stole his breath away. He did not dare turn for fear that if he did, there would be no one there. "How will you care for Frodo? When you grow wearier with each passing day?" There was no sound of footsteps though the voice sounded nearer and nearer each time it spoke. "Will you not look at me?"

"You are but a dream," Bilbo said with surety. "You cannot possibly be here. Clearly I was so exhausted that I fell asleep in the garden."

The voice was silent and the only sound was from the wind blowing through the trees. The moon was clear and shone brightly, lighting the garden in a peaceful bright aura.

"Is it a good dream?" there was a warm breath blowing across his ear that sent a shiver down his back.

"It is a very good dream," Bilbo murmured and he meant it.

Then there were long lean arms wrapping around him and pulling him back against a very solid, very male chest. "It is not a dream." The arms left him and when he turned to look behind him, there was no one there. He did not have time to be disappointed, as the voice spoke once again. "O Bilbo the Magnificent."
Bilbo smiled fondly and turned to the other side. "O Elvenking."

Thranduil sat beside him, back straight and expression somber. "It appears you require much rest, my friend. I will accompany you to your room as I wish to look upon Frodo and see how he fares."

"Perhaps not the best time," Bilbo said gravely. "I do not wish for you to start an argument with Thorin."

"Does the dwarf often stay in your rooms, then?" the Elvenking asked casually, but his steely blue eyes were far from pleased.

"I do not wish for you to start an argument with me, either."

"I would do nothing of the sort," argued Thranduil soberly. He stood and held out a long-fingered hand towards the hobbit, who gazed at it quietly but did not take it. "Come, Bilbo, tomorrow you may ask of me whatever you wish but for now you need to rest. I will carry you if I must."

Taking the words as the threat they were, Bilbo grasped the offered hand and allowed the Elvenking to pull him to his feet. They did not release each others' hands as Bilbo led them down hallways to his room, passing elves who were surprised at the appearance of Thranduil, though they bowed to the Elvenking as they passed.

They lingered outside of Bilbo's room and the hobbit peaked in through the open doorway with great caution, not caring to draw attention to himself and Thranduil.

Thorin was seated in his armchair, as he always was nowadays, with a book opened in his lap though his eyes rested on something in the far distance. A far away look Bilbo recognized, the one that meant Thorin was thinking of the Lonely Mountain.

Estel, Fili, Kili, and Ori were seated upon the bed around the peacefully sleeping Frodo. Estel was holding the hobbitling's hand in his own and unconsciously smoothing his other hand over it. The princes were excitedly sharing a story with Estel that held the boy spellbound and wide-eyed.

Ori appeared to be paying them no attention as his hand flew over his book, writing something; either what the young princes were saying or something entirely different, one could never tell with the scribe.

The Elvenking did not spare a glance at the King-in-Exile as he entered the room, still pulling Bilbo along by the hand. Thorin's expression turned thunderous as he pushed himself to his feet and Bilbo quickly moved to intervene his path.

Thranduil allowed him to go and stopped by the bed, arching an eyebrow at the four sitting upon it. The three dwarves quickly jumped off and move out of his line of sight, leaving only Estel gazing up at him with wide-eyes.

"You must be Elrond's ward," said Thranduil. "The one he named Estel."

"Yes, I am," Estel replied.

The Elvenking dismissed the boy from his mind and took a seat on the edge of the bed. Bilbo was unaware that he had grasped a hold of Thorin's hand and was pulling the dwarf alongside him as he moved forward.

"We meet again, Frodo Baggins," Thranduil whispered to the sleeping hobbitling, grasping one tiny hand and laying a kiss upon the knuckles, then bestowing another upon Frodo's brow. Finally he
closed his eyes and gently touched his forehead to the hobbitling's, the room was silent but for the whispering of Fili and Kili. "He has already fully healed from his wound and now simply gathers his strength. He will wake soon, Bilbo."

Thorin let out a long breath he hadn't known he was holding just as Bilbo did the same. The hobbit finally realized he was holding the dwarf's hand and quickly let go, his face turning a deep shade of red.

As the Elvenking stood and approached Bilbo, Thorin grew very still at his side, glaring at the elf with such hatred that Bilbo wondered how Thranduil could so easily ignore it.

"I trust my words are enough to ease your suffering, Bilbo," Thranduil said, taking Bilbo's hand in his own despite the deep growl that began to emit from Thorin. "Now that both Elrond and I have looked over Frodo perhaps you will get some sleep?"

Bilbo flushed guiltily as the dwarves turned to stare at him questioningly.

"I must speak with Elrond now," continued the Elvenking.

"Have you been given a room?" Bilbo queried. "Did you come all this way alone?"

"I have been given the room next door, so you might easily reach me if you have need of me," Thranduil answered and there was a teasing glint in his eyes. Bilbo was unaware of Thorin scowling furiously behind him. "As to the matter of my company, you will speak with Legolas when he arrives."

"Legolas . . ." Bilbo echoed faintly. "Legolas?"

Thranduil smiled, amused. "Indeed. We encountered Elrond's sons along the way and Legolas decided to stay and help them with . . . whatever it was they were doing. One can never tell with those two."

"Legolas, really?" Bilbo asked again, excited. One of the Fellowship had been sent back; the thought was strangely reassuring. Perhaps Frodo would be happy to see him as well? Though it was highly unlikely that Frodo remembered Legolas or the others of the Fellowship, it was a nice thought and one Bilbo held on to.

When Frodo wakes, he will be happy to see Legolas, Bilbo thought. When he wakes.

"What about . . ." Gimli, he wanted to ask, "Legolas' very dear friend?"

"There were only eight of us, Bilbo Baggins," Thranduil replied with a frown, "and my son's friend," he said with such distaste that the dwarves exchanged bewildered glances, "was thankfully not among them."

"Eight of you?" Bilbo wondered. He knew of seven at present and tried to think of who the eighth could be. It could not be one of the Rivendell elves or he would have learned of it already. He doubted it could be one of Thranduil's elves, as he did not know any of them aside from the Elvenking and his son. That left only Lothlórien. "Not . . . not the Lady Galadriel." Because that would be unthinkable. The Lady of Lórien had waited so long to sail across the sea and the thought of her being sent back to relive her life . . . it was inconceivable.

"No, not the Lady of Lórien," Thranduil assured.

Fili and Kili moved to Thorin's side as Bilbo fretted, they were all equally bewildered by the scene
they were witnessing. Thorin couldn't conceive the present Elvenking, who held Bilbo's hand so gently and smiled so happily, with the Elvenking he had met in the past, the one who had abandoned the dwarves to their fate.

"Do you know what they're talking about?" Kili whispered to Thorin. The dwarf shook his head and kept his eyes trained on Bilbo, watching him for any sign of trouble.

"How can he be here?" Fili demanded, perplexed. "Why is he here?"

"How does he know Bilbo?" wondered Kili, just as confused. "Does Bilbo know every single elf in the world?"

"It seems like it," Fili said. "I never imagined the Elvenking this way. From how everyone described him he seemed so . . ."


Fili elbowed his brother sharply and the two began tussling behind Thorin, who ignored them with the ease of someone accustomed to their antics. Fili and Kili immediately stopped playing not a moment later when Thorin suddenly bellowed angrily.

Thranduil had knelt down before Bilbo and with a bow—as he still could not reach the hobbit despite his kneeling—he gently laid a kiss upon the hobbit's brow. Bilbo jerked as Thorin's bellow startled him but the Elvenking simply pulled himself to his feet once again, scowling as the dwarf pulled Bilbo back into his arms.

In spite of the deep resentment and annoyance he felt, Thranduil was still quite amused by the dwarf's display of possessiveness and considered his job well done.

"Losto mae," he said to Bilbo, who nodded at him with a smile.

"Na-den pedim ad," the hobbit replied as cheerfully as he could manage. Not very happy considering the situation but happy enough considering the situation.

Thranduil congratulated himself for a job doubly well done and left Bilbo to deal with the dwarves, the hobbit could handle them.

Bilbo elbowed Thorin on the side and though the dwarf did not truly feel it, he eased his hold on the hobbit but did not let him go. Bilbo turned in the arms that refused to release him, taking the time to send a look at the other three dwarves, who were watching the interaction with much wonder and anticipation.

Fili and Ori understood that Bilbo wanted them to leave and grabbed Kili in between them, ignoring the dwarf's many protests as they dragged him out of the room.

Estel, who was hovering uncertainly around the bed, also received a brief look from Bilbo that sent him scurrying out of the room.

"Is something wrong?" inquired Bilbo, having to cover his mouth as a yawn escaped him.

Thorin felt some of his anger leaving him, though a part still lingered which was what pushed him to speak in the end, "Why was he here?"

"I imagine Elrond sent word to him," Bilbo replied soothingly, trying to lessen Thorin's anger.
"But why?" Thorin gnarled. "You appeared quite cozy with him. Did he come all this way for you?"

Bilbo sighed deeply, smiling wryly at the stubborn dwarf. "I have known Thranduil for many years, Thorin. He saved my life." Thorin drew up short at that, turning to gaze at him incredulously. "It was many years ago. I was quite foolish and wished to partake in a battle. Thranduil was kind enough to guard my back and saved me multiple times from certain death."

"What battle?" Thorin managed to ask, reeling from what he was hearing.

"I'll tell you about that some other time. Just know that I trust Thranduil with my life and the life of my son. I am so, so grateful that he came, Thorin. Both he and Elrond have been my friends for so long that I needed to hear that Frodo was going to be all right from them both. Do you understand?"

Thorin frowned as he mulled over the hobbit's words. Finally he acquiesced with a nod, drawing the hobbit closer and into a hug. Bilbo was startled but allowed it, managing only to grasp Thorin's coat briefly before the dwarf stepped back abruptly, clearing his throat and blushing brightly.

"I do not truly understand how you can be friends with him," said Thorin. "But I understand that you are and that he is quite important to you."

"Thank you," Bilbo smiled brightly.

"But I still do not trust him and you cannot ask me to-" Thorin continued, working himself up into a rant.

"I understand," Bilbo said, still smiling widely.

Thorin grew silent, rubbing his face tiredly, not the least surprised that there was a smile worming itself onto his face. He cleared his throat again, mustering up a somber expression, "I cannot speak for the rest of my Company, Bilbo."

"It's fine. As long as you understand that I care a great deal for Thranduil and I know more about him than you do. It's not my place to tell you his reasons for abandoning your people and I'm very sorry he did but I'm not him and I want us to remain friends, if that's all right?"

"Yes, that's more than all right," said Thorin, he stopped himself from reaching for another hug. "I know you say that you trust them but I'd rather not speak of our quest in the presence of the Elvenking."

"I can understand that," Bilbo nodded agreeably. "I am not expecting you to suddenly place your trust in him, Thorin."

"I do not trust him, I do not think I ever will. The past cannot be so easily forgiven. He turned his back on us, left us homeless and wandering the wild for centuries," Thorin ranted, pacing back and forth around the room, arms thrown out and waving about madly. "He refused us-" He broke off abruptly as a thump sounded from behind him and turned to find Bilbo on the floor, out cold. "B-Bilbo?"

Hours later, it was a very contrite and tired Hobbit that lay beside Frodo while Thranduil stood over him, arms crossed and expression irritated. Elrond, who had just finished checking the hobbit over, paced around the room with his hands behind his back.

Thorin lingered uncertainly near the doorway, unsure of his own welcome, and despite the infamous stubbornness of dwarves he did not wish to risk the wrath of the Elvenking, who had in no uncertain terms indicated that he blamed Thorin for Bilbo's fainting spell.
Bilbo vehemently argued that he had not fainted, thank you very much. He'd merely tripped over his own feet and knocked himself silly. That was all, thank you, Elrond.

Thorin still blamed himself. Was he not the one who spent the most time with Bilbo? Should he have not noticed how exhausted the hobbit had grown?

Instead he had allowed his Company to impose upon the hobbit at all hours of the day and night. They had used the hobbits' room as a safe haven, where they spent all their time while they waited for Frodo to wake.

"It's not your fault, Thorin," said Bilbo suddenly, rubbing at his forehead tiredly and glaring at the dwarf from beneath his fringe. "If anyone was to notice my exhaustion it would have been Elrond."

The Elf-lord sighed, looking pained as he continued to pace about the room.

"He did tell me you had not been getting much sleep," Thranduil muttered. He knelt by the hobbit's side and regarded him carefully. "You will rest easier now that we are both here, will you not?"

Thorin was baffled as he observed the gentle way in which Thranduil spoke to and handled Bilbo. He was only slightly surprised by the irritation he felt as Bilbo lightly pat the Elvenking's face and smiled brightly as the elf murmured something softly. He clenched his hands into tight fists as Bilbo laughed softly, face turning a lovely shade of red all the way to the pointy tips of his ears.

He promptly left the room, unable to watch any longer what was evidently a very loving friendship. Thorin could understand feeling indebted to someone who saved your life but what he had witnessed was beyond that. The ease between the three men, it was akin to the camaraderie between he and his Company.

He was... envious. He wanted that sort of fellowship with Bilbo, to be the one who was afforded those sweet smiles and that dulcet laugh. He wanted to be the one who stood by his bedside and gave him the strength to face another day while Frodo slept on peacefully, unaware of the suffering he caused his father.

Too much, he wanted too much. Thorin rubbed his forehead and tried to stave off the headache he could already feel forming. The more he thought of it, the more Thorin realized; the hobbit was distracting. Even without meaning to, Bilbo had been distracting Thorin from his quest since they day they met. His mind was no longer filled with thoughts of gold waiting in caverns old, nor of dragons stealing hoards that weren't theirs.

Instead he was plagued by thoughts of Bilbo; how his hair shone like spun gold in the sunlight, how much his eyes resembled the clear blue sky, how sweetly he smiled. He even thought often of Frodo; with his adorable little laugh like jingling bells, his big blue eyes that resembled his father's, just... everything down to his little furry feet.

*I am doing it again,* Thorin realized and rubbed his face tiredly.

"Ah, Master Thorin," Elrond said, startling Thorin, who sheepishly turned around to face him. "I thought I would have to search for you but I am glad to see you are here, Bilbo wishes to speak with you."

"Take care that you not make him faint again," said Thranduil as he walked out of the room, glaring down his nose at the dwarf.

"For the last time, I didn't faint!" Bilbo called to them, annoyed. He was still sitting propped up against the headboard, slowly running his fingers through Frodo's hair. He smiled as Thorin entered
the room, shutting the doors behind him.

A small smile spread across Thorin's face before he could stop it.

"Don't listen to Thranduil, it wasn't your fault. I haven't been getting much sleep," admitted Bilbo guiltily. He noticed the dwarf's grim visage and grew worried. "Is something wrong?"

"I allowed my Company to overwhelm you. That, at least, is my fault," said Thorin. "I noticed your weariness yet did nothing but add to it."

"Thorin, it is not your job to make sure I get enough rest. I am an adult, I can take care of myself and before you say anything, I know I haven't been doing a good job of it. I was already lectured by Thranduil and Elrond, I don't need anyone else to scold me some more."

Thorin quickly lifted his hands, palms out. He had been present for the Elvenking's angry and lengthy rebuke and for Elrond's quietly menacing scolding, and he did not blame Bilbo for not wishing to hear more on the matter.

"He is very different around you," Thorin said instead, unable to quench his curiosity. "He always appeared rather aloof and cold, I saw him smile more today than in the long years I've known him."

"I doubt he had much to smile about when in your presence," said Bilbo, then flushed when Thorin arched his brows. "Not that you're not charming in your own way but Thranduil has lived for a rather long time and it has not been easy for him either. He still tries to fight the darkness that lingers over Mirkwood while protecting his people the best he knows how. I'm afraid it's left a taint on him and am glad that he can find something to smile about when in my presence at least."

"You truly are one of a kind," Thorin murmured, unable to contain his own smile yet again.

"Oh, don't go singing my praises just yet! I assure you that I am not always so kind as you seem to think I am. I... have my share of flaws."

"I have my doubts," said Thorin abrasively. He cleared his throat awkwardly once he realized what he'd said while Bilbo flushed prettily. "I thought about what you said. About the map. We've already lingered here long enough, it is time we move on with our quest. I will be asking Lord Elrond to have a look at my grandfather's map and we shall be on our way."

"Oh!" Bilbo exclaimed, staggered. He floundered as he tried to think of something to say. He knew he should encourage Thorin to seek Elrond's help but... to be separated from the Company again... from Thorin... Bilbo swallowed heavily. "I suppose that's for the best. You have a very important quest to complete."

"Indeed," agreed Thorin distantly. On one hand, he did have a very important quest to complete but on the other hand he didn't want to leave Bilbo and Frodo behind in Rivendell. Though he understood that Bilbo considered them friends, Thorin did not feel comfortable with the idea of leaving Bilbo to deal with the Elvenking. "I am sorry we will not be here when Frodo awakens."

"Perhaps for the best," Bilbo murmured, smiling wryly. "I would hate to find out he stowed away in one of your bags again."

"Would you follow us to Erebor if he did?" Thorin found himself asking, immediately wishing he could take it back as Bilbo lost his smile and looked anguished. "Bilbo?"

The hobbit smiled tightly, "I would join you on your quest if I did not have Frodo to think about."
Thorin swallowed heavily against the sudden lump in his throat. He struggled for something to say and managed a weak "thank you" before an awkward silence descended over them.

"I wish you all the luck in the world," said Bilbo eventually, echoing words spoken to him long ago in another life.

Thorin bowed his head solemnly. "You, as well."

Bilbo turned and shakily ran his fingers through Frodo's hair, trying to distract himself from watching the dwarf walk away. Therefore he was unaware of the soft look Thorin regarded them with before sadly leaving the room. There was low murmuring out in the hallway as Thorin spoke to Elrond, their voices growing dim as they walked further and further away.

After a few minutes Thranduil entered the room, closing the doors quietly behind him as he moved to sit in Thorin's armchair. He shook his head when Bilbo attempted to smile at him while blinking back the burning in his eyes.

"Bilbo, why are you letting him go?" the elf asked.

"Why?" Bilbo asked incredulously. It wasn't as though he had a choice in the matter! "He has a quest to complete, in case you've forgotten! I cannot simply ask him to stay. What sort of person do you take me for?"

Thranduil rubbed his forehead as Bilbo huffed and puffed, rearranging the covers around Frodo as he muttered to himself about elves and their foolishness.

"Bilbo Baggins," the Elvenking growled menacingly, startling the hobbit with his vehemence, "I did not volunteer to be sent back to your side so that I could watch you throw away what's being offered to you!"

"Being offered to me?" Bilbo echoed in confusion.

Thranduil ignored the question, leaning to the side of the armchair so that he could rest his elbow upon the armrest and his chin in his hand. "Elrond will not help the dwarves until he deems it the right time, which means they will linger here for a while yet."

"The right time? Doesn't Elrond remember-"

"I do not doubt he does. However, just as I will do all in my power to ensure your happiness, so will he. Do you doubt how much we care for you and Frodo?"

"All in your power..." murmured Bilbo with a horrifying realization and then hissed, "You're going to sabotage Thorin's quest?"

"We will do what is necessary to ensure your happiness," corrected Thranduil, flourishing his hand as though to wave away Bilbo's concerns. "Do not concern yourself Bilbo. We have already made up our minds about this. You will be accompanying me to my home."

"I will?" Bilbo echoed faintly. "What about Frodo?"

"Of course we must wait for Frodo to awaken, it shouldn't be long now," Thranduil continued.

Bilbo tapped his forehead in thought. "You wish for Frodo and I to accompany you to Mirkwood. You except me to agree to this without protest? Are you out of your mind?"
"Have you no faith in me?" Thranduil murmured and there was a small infuriatingly familiar smirk playing about his lips; he was about to announce something Bilbo could not argue against. "Do not fear for Frodo's safety, Bilbo. We will not be going alone, after all. Why, between myself and Legolas, along with those trouble-making sons of Elrond, and even Glorfindel, he shall be quite safe. There is also a band of dwarves that will no doubt wish to travel along with us. After all, we are headed the same way as they for my realm is close to their mountain. Only to protect you and Frodo, of course. As dwarves, they would not leave your protection to elves, you understand."

It was quite possibly the most Bilbo had ever heard Thranduil say in one breath and if that wasn't shocking enough, his words certainly did the trick. The hobbit rubbed at his face, shook his head, and tried to think of something to say. There was no way the dwarves would choose to travel along with them just to ensure Bilbo and Frodo's safety, certainly they had not known each other long enough to elicit such a response.

"Before that, however," Thranduil began soberly, leaning forward in his seat so he could look at Bilbo intensely. "There is another matter of which we must first attend. The One Ring."
While the dwarves slept peacefully in their own rooms, Bilbo reluctantly left Frodo in the care of one of the attendants, who assured him she would keep a close eye on the hobbitling. Despite all her reassuring, Bilbo was still apprehensive about leaving the sleeping babe in her care and had to be bodily carried away by Thranduil in the end.

They were joined by Elrond, Glorfindel, and Erestor in a private chamber, where they all comfortably sat facing each other.

Bilbo grumbled irritably, "You didn't have to carry me."

Thranduil arched an eyebrow at him, leaning back in his chair and making himself comfortable as he lounged. "That is not important, Bilbo. Let us focus on what is."

"Thranduil is right," Elrond said when Bilbo looked ready to begin an argument. The hobbit muttered angrily to himself. "Though they are not present, my sons and Legolas have already declared that they will accompany you, Bilbo."

"I only arrived a week ago . . . how long have you all been making plans?" Bilbo demanded incredulously.

"We made many plans in Valinor!" Glorfindel exclaimed, doubling over when Erestor elbowed him sharply in the stomach. "I was just saying-"

"Say it with more tact," Erestor said blandly.

Elrond held up a hand before Glorfindel could begin whining, as was often the case when Erestor was involved. "We made many plans before being sent back ourselves. One of which was the finding of the One Ring."

"We hate to do this Bilbo but you're the only one among us who can carry it without immediate ill-effects," Thranduil continued. "Just long enough to pick it up and put it somewhere safe."

"Somewhere safe like . . . ?" Bilbo wondered.

Elrond withdrew a small box from his robes, not for the first time Bilbo wondered if the Elf-lord had magic pockets, and held it out in the palm of his hand. "This was created by Aulë the Smith and enchanted by the Valar to hold the One Ring dormant within. You need only place the ring inside and that is all."

"Oh," said Bilbo. He took the box from the Elf-lord's hand and examined it closely. It appeared to be just an ordinary box, not extravagant in any shape or form. "That's only part of the plan, though. What's the rest then?"

"Legolas will arrive with Elrond's sons tomorrow night, I gave him only a day or so before he was to follow after me," Thranduil explained. "The three of them, myself, and Glorfindel will accompany you to the creature Gollum's lair. How we deal with the creature is up to you but with us there it will not escape."

Bilbo thoughtfully regarded the box in his hands, mind on other things. It sounded simple enough when Thranduil explained it but things hardly ever went according to plan, especially when it involved so many hotheaded elves. At the very least there was no Ecthelion to encourage
Glorfindel's brash impulsiveness.

"I will be leaving Frodo in your care, then, Elrond?" the hobbit asked.

Elrond and Thranduil exchanged a quick look that arose Bilbo's suspicions. He had a faint thought of what they were planning for he knew them well enough and he was proven correct when the Elvenking next spoke.

"We were thinking Frodo might do well in the dwarves care," said Thranduil with a small smirk and raised eyebrow.

"Thorin Oakenshield's care, to be exact," Elrond continued earnestly. "It would be wise to allow the two of them time to grow accustomed to each other, perhaps even fond. After all, if all goes according to plan they will be spending a lot of time together in the future. Won't they, Bilbo?"

Bilbo flapped his hands at them, face a deep shade of red, and the elves chuckled at him. "I can't just ask Thorin to take care of Frodo! What will he think of me?"

"I do believe he will think you a very caring father," Elrond said.

"The dwarves believe in avenging harm done to their children. He will understand," Thranduil continued, then menacingly, "He best understand."

"Don't worry, Bilbo," Glorfindel intervened before the hobbit could begin scolding the Elvenking. "Erestor and Lord Elrond will be staying behind and they'll keep a good eye on the situation. Do you not believe Master Thorin will pass their test?"

Bilbo looked mutinous even as Erestor sharply elbowed Glorfindel once more. Elrond and Thranduil threw annoyed looks at the pained elf and received a sheepish smile in return.

"I should have known," muttered Bilbo grumpily.

"It is for best," Elrond said unrepentantly. "We are quite protective of Frodo ourselves, Bilbo, and it would certainly ease our misgivings."

Everyone ignored Thranduil's grumbled "yours, maybe."

With a put-upon sigh, Bilbo acquiesced with a short nod. "I suppose I do not have much choice in the matter." His eyebrows furrowed as he thought of something else and he turned to face Thranduil. "You said we would leave when Legolas arrived . . . and that Legolas would arrrive tomorrow night. Does that mean Frodo will wake before then?"

"I predict Frodo will wake sometime tomorrow," Elrond said and they all smiled at the sheer joy that illuminated the hobbit's face, though it was swiftly replaced by concern.

"But then . . . I will be leaving shortly after he awakens," Bilbo murmured worriedly.

"Frodo is very resilient, he will be all right," reassured Elrond. "He will have the dwarves to keep him entertained and Erestor and I shall do all in our power to make sure he remains happy and healthy."

The hobbit nodded again, agreeing because there really wasn't any other choice. He would not be alone in facing Gollum, either, and that was a hearty thought.

The group bid their good-nights to each other and went their separate ways, with Bilbo and
Thranduil walking hand-in-hand down the hallways to their rooms. Once standing before the doors to Bilbo’s room, the Elvenking bestowed a small kiss to the hobbit’s forehead before departing for his own.

Bilbo and Frodo had grown accustomed to such greetings in their time spent with the elves, who often made the foolish mistake of treating them like children due to their small size.

For a while Frodo had been too meek to correct the notion and had allowed the ever-tactile Ecthelion to tote him about in his arms. But as Frodo’s body and spirit had healed so had his temper and he had once and for all told the elves in no uncertain terms that he was not a child, nor did he appreciate being treated as such.

To the day Bilbo could recall the expressions on the faces of the gathered elves as they gazed down upon Frodo; that small being had saved Middle-Earth, they’d realized. Bilbo could also remember with certain clarity the bright eyes of Ecthelion as he gazed down fondly upon Frodo and declared—quite loudly, in fact—that he had finally found someone worthy to give his heart to. Whether the Elf-lord had been jesting Bilbo never discovered.

After getting himself ready for bed, Bilbo gently drew Frodo into his arms, consoling himself with the fact that the hobbitling would wake soon. It wasn’t long before he joined the babe in slumber and it seemed like no time had passed at all when he next woke.

He was groggy and confused as he sat up, yawning widely, and gingerly touching the wet spot he could feel on his cheek. It was almost as though someone had bestowed a kiss upon him while he’d been sleeping. A very wet kiss.

As he examined the wetness on his fingertips he also noticed something else out of the corner of his eye. He sat up and began pushing the covers back, shocked to discover a pile of cookies beneath.

On following the trail of crumbs to the other side of the bed, he was surprised to notice that Frodo’s chubby little face was caked in cookie crumbs and the hobbitling was holding a half eaten cookie in one hand.

"Were you so hungry you could not wait for me to bring your breakfast?" asked Thranduil humorously, gliding into the room with a large tray filled with food held between his hands. He easily obeyed Bilbo’s gesture to be silent with some confusion, placing the tray on the hobbit’s bedside table. He leaned over Bilbo’s shoulder to look at whatever had caught his attention and was surprised to notice the state of Frodo.

"Frodo?" Bilbo said wonderingly, leaning down to peer at the hobbitling’s face up close and poking gently at one of the chubby cheeks. "Fro~do."

With a soft sigh, a coo, and a stretch of his tiny body, Frodo blinked his blue eyes open and smiled widely at seeing Bilbo’s face hovering over his own. His little hands strained to grasp Bilbo’s face and his lips puckered as he demanded a kiss.

Bilbo laughed joyously and with much relief, gathering the babe close and peppering his face with kisses that made Frodo squirm and giggle.

"Papa-papa!" Frodo cooed.

Bilbo drew back with surprise, blinking large eyes down at the hobbitling, who continued to squirm and babble, kicking little feet. "What did you call me?"

Frodo giggled happily, then gasped as he caught sight of the cookie pile. He squirmed onto his
stomach with a grunt and a wriggle, grasping one of the cookies in his hand and turning back to face Bilbo, holding his price out triumphantly.

"Papa-papa!" he gurgled.

Thranduil watched the scene with a small but fond smile. Frodo happily repeated the words over and over when he saw that they made Bilbo gasp and laugh.

"Where did these cookies come from?" Bilbo asked the hobbitling, who promptly held his cookie out for his father to take a bite and proceeded to squirm and laugh some more when Bilbo did so. "What have you been up to, eh? Sneaking about already! What a little troublemaker I've raised."

Frodo gurgled questioningly.

"That's right, you're a little troublemaker, you are," Bilbo cooed, tickling the babe's belly.

"I think you're just encouraging him, Bilbo," Thranduil said, moving to sit in Thorin's chair and drawing Frodo's attention.

Frodo turned to regard him with wide eyes, squirming about onto his side and landing on his stomach. He dragged himself across the bed under Bilbo's watchful gaze and blew a raspberry at the Elvenking. He turned to look at Bilbo momentarily, raising his hand to point at the elf with a little finger. "Eg! Eg?"

He quickly lost interest in the Elvenking when the elf stared at him in confusion and took a long look around the bed then leaned over the edge to look down when he did not find what he was searching for. "Ah!" he cried and pointed at something on the floor. He made several grabbing motions with his hand when Bilbo did not let him go. To his delight Thranduil stood from where he had sat in Thorin's armchair and peered down where the hobbitling was pointing. Standing up with a strange sack doll in his hand that had obviously seen better days.

"Is this what you want, little one?" Thranduil asked, eying the doll dubiously. Despite his doubt he held the doll out to the hobbitling, who took it with wide eyes full of wonder.

Frodo peered at the doll closely, tenderly running his hand over the head where the fabric was ripped and white stuffing peaked out. "Oh-oh," he said unhappily.

Bilbo took the doll with much care, regarding it closely with confusion. It had not been ripped when he had gone to sleep the previous night. In fact, he had gone to sleep in a clean bed devoid of cookies and cookie crumbs, as well.

"Frodo, how long have you been awake? Where did you get these cookies from?" he wondered.

The hobbitling used Bilbo's leg to pull himself into a seating position, eyes on the tray of food Thranduil had perched on the bedside table. He pointed at it and made small questioning sounds at Bilbo.

"We will speak of this later, understood?" Bilbo questioned Frodo, who stared at him in confusion and made insistent eating signs with his hand.

"He must be quite famished," said Thranduil and moved to help Bilbo as the hobbit placed Frodo upon the ground. They pulled the covers and sheets back from the bed, gathering the cookies and placing them on Frodo's bedside table before wiping off as many crumbs as they were able.

Upset at having been abandoned on the floor, Frodo crawled to the edge of the bed and used the
sides to pull himself up with a great heave. He teetered on dangerously wobbly legs, tossing the doll he still held up onto the bed and whining when he could not climb up himself. He hummed happily when Bilbo picked him up and helped him atop the partially clean bed.

Bilbo fluffed up the pillows and placed them behind Frodo so the hobbitling could sit comfortably, then sat down beside him. They both smiled at Thranduil when he placed the food tray before them.

"I'll gather Elrond," the Elvenking said. "He will wish to look over Frodo."

"Of course," Bilbo replied distractedly, wishing he had thought to pack a bib for Frodo as he observed the drool that was coating the little chin. Neither noticed the elf leaving as they regarded the food thoughtfully. "What do you want to eat first then?"

Frodo promptly leaned his chin on his palm in his thinking pose, brows furrowed thoughtfully even as he pointed at a banana. "Mm!"

"You want a banana? I should have known," Bilbo easily peeled and cut up a banana for the hobbitling, who grabbed the slices with his hand and munched on them contentedly. "We have lots of berries here, don't we? Let's see. I'll eat the strawberries since you don't like those."

Frodo finished the banana slices soon enough, although most of them ended up smeared all around his mouth, and looked to Bilbo for more food.

"It seems you've acquired a normal Hobbit appetite now, doesn't it?" Bilbo asked. Frodo gurgled at him, stuffing his mouth with blueberries and chewing automatically with his two teeth.

They were eventually rejoined by Elrond and Thranduil, who were welcomed back by Frodo shouting happily and bouncing on the bed.

"Ef!" he cried excitedly, pointing at them and looking to Bilbo.

"Those are elves, all right," Bilbo agreed with a smile, thankfully accepting the small towels passed to him by Elrond. He used one to wipe Frodo's face clean and the hobbitling tried to help by puckering his lips and holding still.

"Dorf?" Frodo asked, raising his hands and shrugging his shoulders to communicate his confusion at the lack of dwarves in the room. He turned to look at Thranduil with wide eyes. "Eg?"

"Does he want eggs?" Thranduil wondered, perplexed.

"I think he's asking after Legolas," Bilbo replied.

He moved the food tray aside when Frodo decided he'd had enough to eat and Thranduil took it and settled it back on a bedside table. The hobbitling settled himself on his back and kicked his feet, grabbing at his toes curiously.

"How is it he recalls Legolas?" the Elvenking inquired.

"He might subconsciously remember many of us," Elrond replied.

The two elves lingered by the bed as Bilbo drew Frodo into his arms, throwing a clean towel over his shoulder as he gently pat the hobbitling's back. Frodo hummed and babbled as he lay his head across the towel, giggling when a burp took him by surprise.

He continued to talk to himself as Elrond took him in his arms but did an splendid job of behaving
for the Elf-lord, allowing himself to be checked over for anything out of the ordinary. He squirmed when the elf tickled his feet, smiling widely and looking around curiously, then he laughed and pushed away the big hand that tickled his belly, squirming away and reaching for Bilbo.

"Papa-papa!" he called, having grown bored of the elf already and wanting to be back with his father. He happily settled himself on Bilbo's lap, leaning back against the hobbit's chest and sticking a thumb in his mouth. He curiously observed the elves, twirling a finger in his hair contentedly.

"What type of milk does he drink?" Elrond asked.

"Goat milk, if you have any," said Bilbo, rubbing the hobbitling's stomach soothingly.

"I will ensure that we have some for the little one," Elrond nodded and excused himself.

Thranduil made himself comfortable in Thorin's armchair once again, smiling as he observed the two hobbits. Bilbo cooed at the hobbitling in the most sickeningly sweet voice imaginable while twisting his face into funny expressions. Frodo stared at him in confusion for a few seconds before letting out a peal of laughter and then paused to stare at his father again. The game continued for a short time until Elrond returned with a warm bottle of goat milk.

"Looks like it's quiet time!" Bilbo announced to the confusion of the two elves. They observed curiously as the hobbit removed a large blanket from one of his bags, laying it out on the floor and folding it in half. Next he gently lay Frodo atop it and handed him the bottle.

The babe immediately latched onto the nipple and began to suck, twirling a finger through his hair.

"He drinks a bottle of goat milk three times a day; breakfast, lunch, and dinner. He knows bottle time is Quiet Time," Bilbo explained to the bewildered elves. "He just needs a short time to take a break and slow down." Quiet Time lasted for close to twenty minutes, after which Frodo was once again burped. "He only just begun sitting up by himself two weeks ago, so he's not yet accustomed to burping himself."

While Bilbo set up a small play area for the hobbitling, Elrond and Thranduil kept Frodo entertained. The Elvenking stared at the carved wooden toy in his hand with disdain and refused to lower himself to making funny noises but Elrond happily played along, moving Mister Nibbles' arms up and down in parody of dancing. Frodo stared at them with wide eyes, clearly doubting their sanity.

Soon enough the hobbitling was left in the middle of the room surrounded by his toys, new and old. He grasped at a beautifully carved dwarf toy and babbled at it curiously, giggling to himself after pausing to stare at it, as though the dwarf had responded. He only had a handful of toys but kept himself entertained easily enough with what he had.

The joyous and calm mood in the room was briefly disrupted when Kili trailed in, rubbing at his eyes and yawning widely. "I had the strangest dream that Frodo was calling for me."

Frodo heard his voice and turned his head to look at him, wiggling on his belly and making excited noises. "Kee!"

Kili froze in the doorway, blinking his eyes owlishly. "Frodo?"

"Can you not stand in the doorway?" Fili demanded tiredly, pushing his brother out of the way none too gently.

"Fee!" Frodo called, pushing himself to his knees and crawling towards them.
"Frodo's awake!" Fili exclaimed, sweeping down to gather the hobbitling in his arms. Frodo squealed and pulled at the dwarf's braids excitedly, laughing loudly in surprise when he was stolen by Kili.

The brothers had less than an hour to play with Frodo before the other dwarves began wandering in, drawn by the commotion. Thranduil was irked by their presence and ignored the glare he received from Thorin, sulking in the armchair while somehow managing not to look like he was doing so.

The baby was ecstatic with all the attention paid to him by the dwarves and allowed them to pass him around and hold him without any fuss. If he appeared to spend more time in Thorin's or Dwalin's arms, no one said anything though a few laughs were smothered. There was even a signed "thank you" for Bifur, who had been the one to carve Frodo's new dwarf figure.

Soon enough it was time for second breakfast and Thranduil, who had quietly sneaked out hours prior, returned with another tray of food for Bilbo. He was followed by an elf attendant carrying a smaller tray of food for Frodo.

While Frodo stuffed his mouth with food, Estel dragged himself into the room looking only half-awake as he often did in the mornings. To the boy's surprise, he found himself the sudden object of attention as a very curious hobbitling saw him for the first time.

"Oh!" Frodo exclaimed. He blinked wide eyes at the boy, cocking his head to the side in confusion. "Papa-papa!" He patted at Bilbo's arm and pointed insistently at Estel. "Papa-papa!"

"Calm down, Frodo. That's Estel and he's the one who gave you that doll," Bilbo explained calmly, turning the hobbitling's attention to the sack doll sitting at his side—right alongside his three other toys. "Estel, come here and say hallo to Frodo."

"H-hallo," Estel mumbled timidly, shuffling closer to the bed when one of the dwarves gave him a push forward. "I'm Estel."

It was very amusing to watch the two solemnly shake hands. At least until Frodo got excited again and bounced on his feet while Bilbo held him about the waist. He reached for the boy, who looked at Bilbo with wide eyes.

The hobbit wondered if Frodo somehow remembered who Estel would one day become, just as he seemed to recall who Legolas was.

He helped Estel to settle the squirming baby in his arms and withheld a laugh as Frodo continued to bounce in the hold, clearly delighted as he reached his tiny hands to grasp at boy's hair.

Estel beamed, enthralled by the baby, and smiled widely when Frodo began babbling garbled sounds that sounded like "esh, esh" and might have been an attempt at the boy's name.

"Now that Frodoling is awake, we can give him his gift!" Glorfindel cried excitedly as he burst into the room, startling several dwarves with his abrupt entrance. The blonde haired elf was carrying a small box over his shoulder. Erestor followed right along behind him, a long-suffering look on his face, and Gandalf entered last, looking very interested in the proceedings.

Frodo's head turned so fast that Bilbo worried he'd hurt himself. The hobbitling squirmed in Estel's hold and had to be placed upon the bed before he was dropped. To Bilbo's exasperation and the dwarves' amusement, Frodo immediately began signing "gift" over and over again.

Glorfindel placed the box beside the bed. It was tied quite sloppily with a long red ribbon that ended in a crooked bow. Bilbo was unsure if the gift had been packed in a hurry or if Glorfindel was...
simply awful at packing.

He situated Frodo on the floor beside the box as everyone gathered around. The hobbitling hit the top of the box excitedly, grasping at the ribbon and pulling it with a grunt. He blew a very slobbery raspberry at Glorfindel when the elf tickled his belly.

They had some trouble opening the box as the ribbons were wrapped too tightly and refused to budge. Thankfully, Erestor had foreseen such a problem and carried a pair of scissors with him, to Glorfindel's embarrassment.

Once the ribbon was cut and pushed aside, Glorfindel helped Frodo open the box and draw out what was inside. It was a strange, wooden box with wheels, attached to a short handle.

"It's a wagon!" explained Glorfindel joyously, pushing the wagon back and forth to demonstrate. "It will be more useful to Frodoling once he can walk; he'll be able to put his toys inside and pull them along behind him," and then he added with a mischievous glint in his eyes, "or, we made it big enough that he can climb inside and have someone pull him along."

Frodo was already attempting to climb into the wagon with obvious difficulty, so Bilbo picked him up and cautiously placed him inside. The babe made himself comfortable and then began squirming and bouncing, delighted when the wagon moved a little from his efforts.

"Can I pull him along, Bilbo?" Kili asked eagerly. "I promise I'll be careful!"

Bilbo arched an eyebrow at him but conceded, turning to speak directly to Frodo, who was staring at Kili in confusion as the dwarf grasped the handle. "Kili is going to pull the wagon, all right? You have to sit very still or you'll fall out. You don't want to fall out, do you?"

"Ouch!" exclaimed Frodo with wide-eyes.

"That's right, you'll get an ouch if you fall out, so sit still," repeated Bilbo.

The hobbitling looked worried but sat still. He was startled when Kili began pulling the wagon forward, grasping at the sides and staring around with round eyes. Eventually he relaxed enough to enjoy the ride and cried out happily. When Kili's arms grew tired, he was swiftly replaced by Fili, and soon everyone had taken a turn pulling Frodo around in his new wagon.

"I imagine Erestor was the one to design it and you put it together?" Bilbo asked Glorfindel, who smiled widely and shrugged, leaning over to draw Erestor closer with an arm around his shoulders. Erestor glared at him sulkily but did not push the arm off and Glorfindel beamed with a sort of triumph.

There was a short break at eleven for the hobbits to eat what they considered small snacks but might as well have been a full course meal. Frodo's eyes were drooping and Bilbo settled him down for a nap once they were finished eating.

The dwarves and elves dispersed, going wherever it was they went when they weren't haunting Bilbo's room, and even Estel had been dragged away by Elrond to eat breakfast. Bilbo did not know where Gandalf had disappeared to nor when, but the Wizard was nowhere to be seen. Only Thorin remained, taking the seat beside Bilbo on the bench situated in the balcony.

They sat silently for what seemed an age. Bilbo lounged lazily as he smoked his pipe, enjoying the warmth of the sun.

"I spoke with Lord Elrond last night," said Thorin after a long silence. He fiddled with something in
his hands and a searching look revealed a familiar dwarvish key.

"Oh?" Bilbo wondered, trying for casual. "What did he say?"

"He told me that the map cannot be read until Midsummer's day, that we must wait for the moon of the same shape and season . . . to shine upon the map . . ." recited Thorin, looking lost as he tried to remember what exactly the Elf-lord had said.

Bilbo arched an eyebrow at him, stifling a laugh as Thorin sniffed majestically and simply stopped talking. Clearly he had not paid Elrond any attention, likely figuring Balin would remember what had been said.

"Midsummer's Day isn't for another six weeks, Thorin," Bilbo pointed out once he'd composed himself. "What do you plan to do?"

"Wait, I suppose, there is nothing else to do," replied Thorin. "What of you?"

Bilbo arched an eyebrow at him, mystified. He turned to fully regard the dwarf, noting his grimace.

"What of me?"

"Will you be returning to the Shire now that Frodo is awake?" Thorin asked.

Bilbo considered changing the subject but there was a look on Thorin's face; clearly he had been eavesdropping on Thranduil's conversation with Elrond earlier that morning. It would have been difficult not to, as the Elvenking had not been at his quietest.

As a matter of fact, Bilbo was sure Thranduil had spoken with the intention of being overheard by Thorin. He should have taken the time to speak with the Elvenking about his habit of going ahead with plans without anyone's consent.

"That elf," Thorin continued, when it looked like Bilbo would not be saying anything at all, "mentioned that you would be traveling to his home."

"He did, did he?" Bilbo inquired, annoyed but not surprised. Once Thranduil decided on a course of action there was not much, if anything, that could deter him. "It is true. Frodo and I will be joining Thranduil and his son on their journey back to the Greenwood."

"The journey is perilous," Thorin argued, worried. "Would you take Frodo on such a trip?"

"I trust Thranduil to protect us," Bilbo replied truthfully. "I've traveled the same road before, I know the dangers and how to avoid them."

"Even so-" began Thorin heatedly.

Bilbo sent a thanks to whatever deity was listening when he heard the sounds of Frodo shifting on the bed behind them. The hobbitling was grumbling as he tried to kick off the blankets.

"Papa-papa!" the babe called, close to tears already. "Papa-papa . . ."

"I'm right here," Bilbo cooed, moving to help him out of the blankets he'd gotten entangled in. "Did you have a bad dream? Do you want to sit with Thorin and I?"

Bilbo blinked in surprise when Frodo stopped sniffling abruptly and began flailing his arms and kicking his legs in excitement. The hobbitling calmed and gazed up at him with bright eyes.

"Thorin," Bilbo said, eying the hobbitling speculatively, and snorted with amusement when Frodo
began flailing excitedly again.

"Yes?" Thorin wondered as he leaned over the hobbit's shoulder. Frodo flopped over onto his belly and pushed himself to his knees with a grunt, looking up at the dwarf and blowing raspberries at him along with a few spit bubbles. "Is that normal?"

"Have you never cared for a babe before?" Bilbo questioned with a roll of his eyes. He knew that the dwarf had helped to raise his nephews, so he was bewildered by the question. "He's trying to talk to you."

"I . . . never thought much of it when Fili and Kili did it," Thorin said defensively, he gathered Frodo into his arms when the hobbitling pulled at his shirt. "Why does he need to do that when he can speak?"

"He only just said his first word a week ago before he fell asleep, Thorin," explained Bilbo, trying to keep his patience. "He's learning a few words at a time. He's not going to be holding long thoughtful conversations with anyone for a while yet."

With a chuckle and a shake of his head Bilbo rummaged through the bag he had packed for Frodo and withdrew a clean towel. He watched fondly as Thorin took the towel without protest and used it to wipe up the babe's drool.

"I wish to take him on a stroll in the gardens," Bilbo said, ultimately disrupting the peaceful moment of Frodo trying to chew on Thorin's beard. "Will you join us?"

Thorin's mouth was opened to answer when Estel, who was just then entering the room, interrupted him, "Can I join you as well, Mister Bilbo?"

"Of course, I'm sure Frodo will enjoy your company," agreed Bilbo, easily ignoring Thorin's annoyed expression.

Frodo clapped his hands merrily, twisting in Thorin's hold so he could find where his wagon had gone. He pointed at it and looked to his father.

"You want to take your toys with you?"

"He wants to ride on the wagon, Mister Bilbo!" offered Estel helpfully.

The hobbit regarded him with surprise and turned to eye Frodo questioningly, as though the little one would tell him it was what he wanted. Thorin cautiously placed the hobbitling in the wagon, pleased when Frodo settled himself comfortably and grasped onto the sides, looking up at them expectantly.

"I hope he will not want to be pulled along everywhere," Bilbo said worriedly. "He has to learn how to walk eventually."

"Could I pull the wagon, Mister Bilbo?" Estel pleaded hopefully.

Despite Thorin looking ready to protest Bilbo simply nodded agreeably, pulling the dwarf along behind the jubilant pair. He was incognizant of Thorin's baffled scrutiny as he held onto the dwarf's forearm.

They were waylaid often by curious elves, who cooed at Frodo and tickled the delighted hobbitling's chin. Thorin remained tense beside Bilbo, glaring heatedly at the elves but thankfully holding his tongue.
Fili and Kili also stopped to make funny faces at Frodo before running off again, to cause mischief elsewhere no doubt.

They did eventually manage to arrive at the gardens to the immense relief of Thorin. As he was placed upon the grass, Frodo looked about wonderingly, having never before seen so many flowers in one place. He was followed closely by Estel as he crawled off to explore while Thorin and Bilbo sat on one of the benches and relaxed.

The King-in-Exile was scowling, giving Bilbo a slight idea of what he might be thinking about. "Perhaps my Company and I could escort you instead, Bilbo?"

Turning a snort into a polite cough, Bilbo barely managed to withhold the smile threatening to split his face. Honestly, it shouldn't have been so amusing to realize how correctly Thranduil had proved to be with his assumptions.

"Thorin, even if you and your Company escorted Frodo and I to Thranduil's Halls, the elves would still travel along with us," he said humorously. "Are you quite certain you could stand to be around them for so long?"

"We have managed so far, have we not?" Thorin demanded crossly. "In case you had not noticed, my Company and I have been very good in doing as you asked. We have kept our insults to the privacy of our rooms and we have not complained about anything."

Frodo crawled back to his wagon, a handful of flowers in his grasp which he placed inside. The action drew both the hobbit's and dwarf's attention.

"Frodo Baggins," Bilbo scolded, leaning down to grab the hobbitling's hands and wiping them clean of petals and leaves. "What do you think you're doing? What will Elrond say when he discovers you've been destroying his garden?"

The hobbitling frowned thoughtfully, leaning his chin on his hand, but he was staring at Bilbo with confusion. He pointed helpfully at the flowers he'd gathered in his wagon. They were all very pretty, didn't Papa like them?

"They're very pretty," said Bilbo. "But they're not yours, are they?" Frodo pouted adorably yet his father did not look amused. "Estel, why didn't you-" stop him, Bilbo had been about to say, drawing short when he noticed the young boy breaking a flower's stem and turning to show Frodo triumphantly. The hobbitling clapped happily but Estel saw Bilbo's expression and quickly hid the flower behind his back, trying to look innocent. "I don't know which of you is worse."

Thorin smiled bemusedly as he watched the scene and smiled wider when Frodo presented him with a flower, all but shoving it his lap while he babbled. "Thank you."

"Don't encourage him!" Bilbo berated, though his eyes were shining jovially. Frodo squealed happily, crawling back to Estel to receive the flower the boy had broken off. As Bilbo moved to stop the two from ruining the garden any further he was grabbed about the arm by Thorin and pulled to sit again.

"Let them have their fun," the dwarf said. "There's no harm and Frodo is content."

Frodo was quite content, indeed. While Estel painstakingly twined flowers together Frodo held a very serious conversation with a caterpillar.
they could fly up high! Butterflies also liked flowers just like Frodo. But Frodo wasn't a butterfly, Frodo was a Hobbit! Sometimes he was a bunny-rabbit, too. Because Papa said Frodo was his little bunny, so it must be true!

Thorin and Bilbo were distracted as they watched Frodo making butterfly signs; both hands turned towards him and connected at the thumbs as he wiggled his fingers determinedly.

"He knows a fair number of signs for his age," noted Thorin, convincing himself it was not odd that he felt a strange sort of pride at that.

"Yes, I'm always surprised by how fast he learns," Bilbo said.

"Bifur wishes to teach him more," Thorin added casually.

"That's very kind of him," Bilbo replied. He recalled how delighted the toymaker had been when he'd discovered that Frodo could sign, though Bilbo remained unsure as to why. "Your Company seem to know their fair share of signs, too. Is it fairly common among your people? Signing?"

"It is known to us as Iglishmêk and I have never seen it be used by any other race until we met you," Thorin said. "Is it fairly common among your people?"

Bilbo paused, mentally berating himself—of course it was Iglishmêk, hadn't Bifur and Bofur taken the time to teach him that in the past?

He nodded, a bit too vigorously, as he lied, "Though we do not know it as Iglishmêk," and didn't Thorin look pleasantly surprised at his correct pronunciation.

A persistent tugging at his pants drew Bilbo's attention down, where Frodo was pulling himself to his feet, teetering dangerously until Thorin helped support him by grasping his tiny hand. There was a garland of daisies resting upon the hobbitling's head like a crown and he stared up at them expectantly.

"You look very lovely, my Frodo," said Bilbo, gently rubbing one cheek.

The babe smiled widely and turned to gaze at Thorin.

"Quite dashing," the dwarf agreed, chucking him under the chin.

Frodo babbled, letting go of Bilbo's pants to reach up and pat at his head, dislodging the garland and making it fall halfway down his face. He gasped in shock and tried to push the flowers back up, face scrunching adorably as the flowers tickled his nose and he sneezed.

"Oh, dear," Bilbo chuckled, drawing the hobbitling into his lap and fixing the garland upon his head. Once the garland was out of his face and back on his head Frodo reached for Thorin, snuggling against the dwarf's shoulder and humming contentedly.

"Mister Bilbo?" Estel wondered hesitantly, fiddling with the hems of his shirt when the hobbit turned to gaze at him questioningly. "Is Mister Thorin Frodo's father as well?"

"Thorin, Frodo's, father, what?" Bilbo sputtered uselessly while Thorin laughed loudly, startling Frodo.

"Mister Bilbo?" Estel wondered hesitantly, fiddling with the hems of his shirt when the hobbit turned to gaze at him questioningly. "Is Mister Thorin Frodo's father as well?"

"Thorin, Frodo's, father, what?" Bilbo sputtered uselessly while Thorin laughed loudly, startling Frodo.

"Well, Mister Thorin has the same hair color and the same eyes as Frodo!" Estel cried defensively. "But you have the same curly hair and the same nose and ears and feet as Frodo!"
Bilbo tried to come up with a suitable response while Thorin examined Frodo closely. It was true that he and the babe shared the same hair and eye color, that was where the similarities ended. Frodo was soft where Thorin was sturdy. Frodo was fair skinned while Thorin had roughened skin from years of hard labor. The hobbitling was meant to be protected and cherished, he was not meant for menial labor. Much like Bilbo.

Bilbo was saved from having to answer Estel's curious questions by an unfamiliar woman, who called for the boy and told him it was lunch time.

Estel pouted, "But, Mother! I'm playing with Frodo!"

"The little one will still be here later, you can play with him then," said Gilraen and she bowed at the waist as she approached them.

"Don't worry, Estel," said Bilbo. "It is time for us to eat lunch as well, perhaps we could join you?"

"We would be glad to have you," Gilraen agreed, surreptitiously eying Frodo with a warm, soft smile. "It is hard to imagine that such a small being did such great things."

"Pardon?" Bilbo croaked.

Gilraen winked at him conspiratorially. "I will inform Lord Elrond that you will dine with us."

"Bilbo?" Thorin wondered, when the hobbit continued to stand frozen for several moments. "Did she say something?"

"No, it's nothing," Bilbo denied with a forced smile, still reeling. "Er- should we go then?" He noticed the lack of hobbitling in the dwarf's arms. "Frodo?"

"Papa-papa!" Frodo called excitedly from where he patiently sat in his wagon, waiting for Estel to pull him along. He was moving his hand down his stomach, repeating the motion several times.

"You're hungry?" Bilbo asked.

"Mm!" Frodo agreed. He repeated the motion again and then pointed at Bilbo, cocking his head questioningly.

"I am quite hungry myself," Bilbo replied, pointing at himself and repeating the same motion. "Should we go eat?"

Lunch passed by as peaceably as it could when the dwarves discovered their king eating at a table with a group of elves. With Frodo seating comfortably on the dwarf's lap and drinking a bottle of milk the dwarves thought twice about bothering Thorin, especially when he glared at them heatedly when any one of them made to speak.

Bilbo alternated between eating, gazing at Thorin and Frodo, and trying to will his thoughts at Elrond, who blinked at him and arched an eyebrow. Mentally huffing his frustration Bilbo furtively pointed with his chin at Gilraen, whose attention lay upon her son in attempting to get him to stop staring at Frodo and eat.

Understanding dawned on Elrond's face and he gave a brief shake of his head, eyes promising to speak of the matter at a later time. Bilbo frowned but allowed the matter to drop, it was not the time nor place to have such a conversation.

"Bilbo, what does Frodo do after lunch?" Fili asked suddenly from behind the hobbit. "Could Kili
and I watch him for a while?"

Bilbo did not even take a moment to think about what Fili was asking, the "no" left his lips before he could fully grasp the question. Fili and Kili pouted and hunched their shoulders, widening their eyes and staring at him pleadingly.

"I've been around baby *hobbits*, that look won't work on me," Bilbo said, amused. He rolled his eyes when the brothers began whining at him, throwing a look at Thorin who busied himself with Frodo and did not meet his gaze. "Why do you want to watch him anyway?"

"We just want to play with him!" Kili assured.

"I want to play with Frodo," Estel murmured to his mother.

"After your studies," Gilraen murmured back, sharing a bemused smile with Elrond.

"You can watch him with adult supervision," Bilbo finally agreed.

Fili sputtered, "*We are* adults!"

Bilbo raised an eyebrow at him and turned to eye Kili, who was giggling helplessly and clutching at his brother so he wouldn't fall off his chair. Fili elbowed him sharply and Kili grunted in pain.

"Ouch!" Frodo shouted, pointing at them and looking upset. "Ouch!"

"You certainly won't be watching him if you're going to be bad influences!" Bilbo barked, startling several elves and dwarves. The room grew silent as people turned to stare at their table.

Fili and Kili looked contrite with shoulders hunched and heads lowered. Even Frodo was glaring at them from where he stood on Thorin's knee, both little hands on his waist in a pose reminiscent of his father.

"I'd be happy to watch Frodo, Bilbo," Thorin said, throwing a sharp look to his nephews.

"Actually," said Bilbo, looking hesitantly at Elrond. The Elf-lord nodded at him encouragingly while taking a sip of his tea. "I'd like to speak with you privately."

"Little Frodo is welcome to join my son in his classes," Gilraen offered helpfully, smiling when Estel began nodding vigorously. She placed a gentle hand upon his head to stop the movement.

"Oh, no, I don't want Estel to be distracted-" Bilbo began, nervously flapping his hands at her.

"It's quite all right, I believe Estel would concentrate better if Frodo were there, actually," she interrupted smoothly.

"If you're sure," agreed Bilbo hesitantly.

Frodo was confused when he suddenly found himself in a strange lady's arms. He gazed up at her curiously, touching her face with tiny hands, and smiling at her when he decided that she was nice. He tried to relax against her chest but it was bumpy and he grumbled. He settled against her shoulder when she pushed him up and that was much better. He waved at his Papa and Mister Thorin, happy when they both waved back at him.

Bilbo watched Gilraen vanish down the corridor with Frodo in her arms, Estel following at her heels.

The dwarves quickly dispersed after speaking lowly with Thorin, a few of them throwing suspicious
He was briefly startled by a large hand squeezing his shoulder and turned to face Elrond, who knelt beside him.

"You know what you must do," the Elf-lord murmured, gaze serious. He squeezed Bilbo's shoulder one more time before pushing himself to his feet. Nodding briefly at Thorin and ignoring the glare he received in return.

"Is there a problem?" Thorin asked, once they'd been left to themselves but for a few elves cleaning the tables.

"I hope not," Bilbo mumbled. He smiled at the dwarf and gestured with his head. "Come, walk with me." He unabashedly slid his hand around Thorin's bicep and led him out to the gardens once again.

Once they were far enough that no one could hear them, Bilbo removed his hand and began fretting. He pulled at his sleeves and fiddled with the buttons of his waistcoat.

"Bilbo?" Thorin wondered in confusion.

Bilbo wrung his hands worriedly, swallowing against the bile that rose in his throat. "I . . . I have . . . I have a great favor to ask of you."

"What is it?" Thorin asked, disturbed.

"It-It's-I-" Bilbo shook his head and covered his mouth. "Oh, Eru, I can't."

Thorin reached for his chin, turning his face gently towards him and looking upon him inquiringly. "You can ask me anything, Bilbo."

So Bilbo blurted it out before he could stop himself. "I need you to care for Frodo while I venture into the Misty Mountains to find the creature that chewed off his finger and kill it."

"You what?" Thorin managed to choke out eventually, after Bilbo begun fretting, staring at him in concern.

"Right," Bilbo gasped, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. "Um, you see . . . Thranduil will be accompanying me, along with his son, Elrond's sons, and Glorfindel. We will be going into the Misty Mountains, underneath Goblin-town, to where that creature lives."

"Why do you have to go along?" demanded Thorin, baffled.

"Because I am the only one who knows the secret way inside, of course," replied Bilbo with nary a blink. "Besides, I wouldn't feel Frodo was safe unless I saw the creature die with my own eyes. Do you understand?"

"I do," Thorin answered, frowning. "But . . . I could accompany you instead-"

"I know you and your Company are great warriors, Thorin," Bilbo interrupted, voice firm. "But elves are as stealthy as hobbits, if not more. There cannot be the slightest chance of that creature escaping."

Thorin conceded the point though he did not like it. "When do you plan to head out? Frodo only just
"My hope is that he will distracted enough by your presence that he will not notice my absence," said Bilbo humorlessly, a touch bitterly as well. "Let's not forget that he sneaked away from me because he wanted to stay with you and your Company. He will miss me after a while, true, but I'll be back by then. There's nothing else for it."

"Right," Thorin murmured. He looked around hopelessly, wishing there were someway to dissuade the hobbit, or at least go with him. Though he was honored that Bilbo trusted him enough to ask him to look after his son, still . . . "Why me? Why not Lord Elrond?"

Bilbo shrugged, "I would feel much more at ease if you were the one to care for Frodo in my stead. You are more familiar to him than anyone else here. He was but a babe when he met Lord Elrond the first time. You also told me you helped your sister raise her sons, so it shouldn't be too difficult a task to care for a Hobbit child, should it?"

A Hobbit child who had sneaked into a grown dwarf's bag and managed to keep himself hidden for quite a long time. Thorin did not think even his sister-sons had ever managed a feat such as that. To think the little one was only eight-months old.

"We are leaving at first light," Bilbo was saying.

"So soon?" Thorin demanded, startled.

"It is for the best, the sooner we leave the sooner we can return," Bilbo smiled bravely, though he was already growing anxious with the thought of finding the One Ring. Not even the idea of killing Golum made him quite so nervous as the idea of the ring.

Would he fall to it again? Would he prove weak as he had in the past?

He could not keep his hands from trembling, grateful when Thorin's larger hand enveloped his own, squeezing gently and giving him strength. "You do not have to do this. No one would think less of you if you decided to remain here."

"I know, but . . ." Bilbo grimaced, unsure of what else to say that would not reveal everything. "This is the task that was given to me. If I wish to live in peace—for Frodo to live in peace, for the rest of our days, then this is something that must be done."

Thorin had the vague idea that Bilbo wasn't speaking of the creature that had harmed his son anymore. There was no answer forthcoming from the hobbit however, so Thorin did the only thing he could; he pulled Bilbo towards him and held him gently but firmly in his arms.
Learning to Care for a Hobbitling

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Gilraen smiled softly as she peaked out the window towards the garden, touching her burning cheeks with her hands as she watched the dwarf pull Bilbo forward and into his arms. She fanned herself unobtrusively, listening with half an ear to Lindir's lecture on the First Battle of Beleriand.

Already little Frodo had answered several of the elf's questions about the Great Battles of Beleriand. The hobbitling had known how many great battles there had been—six. That one of them was known as the Battle of Unnumbered Tears. But his favorites, of which he continuously asked about, were stories about the Two Trees of Valinor and the Silmarils. He was a very bewildering little hobbit, all in all.

Since Erestor had deemed all the chairs in the study unsafe for the hobbitling to sit in, the babe sat on the elf's lap. He listened attentively to Lindir, eyes wide and bright, as though he were being told a children's story.

His little hands were caked with charcoal which he had been using to draw on a piece of parchment, imitating Estel who was taking notes—for once. The paper was covered in swirls and circles, the most prominent circle having long lines protruding upwards so that it resembled a rabbit.

Gilraen had covered her mouth to smother the giggles building in her throat when Frodo had shown his drawing to Mister Nibbles, his stuffed rabbit toy that sat beside him on Erestor's lap. Listening avidly to whatever the toy told him and nodding enthusiastically in agreement.

There appeared to never be a time when the hobbitling was not being adorable.

It was not half past three when Bilbo flew into the library and then back out with the hobbitling in his arms. It all happened too swiftly for them to comprehend. There was a babe in Erestor's lap one moment and the next there wasn't.

It was not until six that anyone saw the hobbits again, sitting together in the Halls of Fire, eating their dinner. Or in Frodo's case, wearing their dinner.

The two were quickly besieged by a group of dwarves who demanded to know where they had been.

Bilbo stared at them incredulously as he wiped Frodo's face clean. The hobbitling gurgled happily and hugged Mister Nibbles close, swinging the rabbit back and forth in his arms.

"Is there a reason you must know?" Bilbo asked humorlessly.

Kili shuffled his feet. "Just curious."

Frodo patted at Bilbo's arm, garnering his father's attention. The babe began signing; little hands opening and closing, followed by him putting his hands together, and then pointing at the ceiling.

The dwarves glanced at each other in confusion but Bilbo simply laughed, "Do you want to sing?"

"Mm!" Frodo agreed excitedly, clapping his hands.
"Twinkle, twinkle, little star," sang Bilbo, signing right along with the hobbitling. Several elves stopped nearby to observe. Frodo also babbled along with the song, following the same rhythm as his father. "How I wonder what you are. Up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky."

When the blazing sun is gone,
When he nothing shines upon,
Then you show your little light,
Twinkle, twinkle, all the night.

So it went until Bilbo had sung the entire song with Frodo signing right along with him. The elves whispered to each other in awe, for the little one had obviously learned the entire song; Bilbo had only stopped to correct the hobbitling's signs a couple of times.

Bilbo cheered once he'd ended the song and Frodo clapped his hands again, smile wide and happy.

The hobbit laughed when the babe began moving his right hand in an arch into the palm of his left hand. "Again? How about we sing another song this time?" Frodo lifted up Mister Nibbles to show his father after thinking for a minute. "A song for Mister Nibbles? Then, Lippity lop, lippity lop . . ."

Here comes a bunny hippity hop
With ears so tall and tail so small
Hippity, hippity hop
He sits up straight and wriggles his nose
At every sound he hears
Then scampers away as fast as he can
And suddenly disappears.

Oh
Lippity lop, lippity lop
Here comes a bunny hippity hop
With ears so tall and tail so small
Hippity, hippity hop.

Even after Bilbo finished singing and signing the hobbitling continued to repeat the verses to his rabbit toy. The hobbit sat back and let his son play while he finished up his dinner. A few of the dwarves lingered around uncertainly, though Bifur had no problem plopping himself down on the floor by Frodo's chair, watching the hobbitling closely as he signed.

Soon the dwarf was repeating the signs along with Frodo, who bounced happily on his bottom as he taught Bifur the song. Fili and Kili lingered nearby making their own attempts at learning the song. Though they understood most signs, the brothers and the other dwarves—aside from Bofur and Bombur—did not sign with the ease of Bifur. They had never had reason to keep using Iglishmêk as Bofur and Bombur had for their cousin, so their attempts at signing were unsteady and unsure.

While Frodo occupied himself with the dwarves Bilbo pulled a blank book onto his lap, reaching for the quill and ink bottle he had set aside as he opened the book to the page he had begun writing on.

'Frodo's Daily Routine' read the top of the page. Bilbo dipped the quill in the ink and wrote; "Bedtime for Frodo is at nine o'clock. He might wake during the night but eventually fall back asleep. He is up at around six in the morning . . ."

"What are you writing?" Thorin asked as he took the seat on the other side of the hobbit.

"Just some important information regarding the care of Frodo," Bilbo said, hiding a smile when
Thorin grimaced and tried to peer at the book. "You'll read it when I'm done, so impatient."

Thorin snorted and rolled his eyes, leaning back in the seat and crossing his arms as he observed his Company. "Where were you this afternoon?"

"It's funny how everyone keeps asking that," Bilbo replied absently. "Is it so important for everyone to know where my son and I are every single minute of the day? Can we not have a few minutes to ourselves?"

"I-I was simply curious," Thorin managed, unsure.

Bilbo shook his head, "We were visiting someone very important, if you must know."

The dwarf looked then at Frodo and back at Bilbo, seeming to come to his own conclusion. He looked apologetic and dropped the subject. Bilbo arched an eyebrow, looking askance at him, but remained silent as well.

Eventually the hobbitling noticed his father was writing in a book and curiously peaked at the page, examining the squiggles and recognizing his name among them in several places.

"Oh!" he cried, pointing at one such place where his name was written. "Fo."

Bilbo chuckled, "Does that say Frodo?"

"Fo," Frodo agreed, then pointed at all the other places were his name showed up. "Fo, Fo, Fo."

"He can't write yet, not even close," explained Bilbo at Thorin's awed look, running his fingers through Frodo's hair as the hobbitling made himself comfortable on his father's lap. "But he can recognize his name well enough, though often he will mistake other words for his name as well."

Frodo had already pointed at "force" and "food" thinking they said his name.

"You teach him many things, do you not think he is too young?" wondered Balin. His presence surprised Bilbo, who had not noticed him arrive. The dwarf sat on a chair on Thorin's other side, calmly smoking his pipe.

"Well," Bilbo began, eying the old dwarf hesitantly. "I'm a scholar at heart. I read to him often, it's our favorite pastime. I also spend much time writing and he likes to sit on my lap while I do so. So really he picks up much by himself without my help. He enjoys learning new things."

Balin hummed thoughtfully and Bilbo threw an awkward look at Thorin, who looked to be as perplexed as he. It was obvious to Bilbo—even if it wasn't to Thorin—that Balin wished to speak with the King-in-Exile in private but did not wish to say so in front of Bilbo.

"Time for little hobbits to get clean," said Bilbo cheerfully, easily gathering his tools with one hand while he raised Frodo onto his hip with the other.

"I'll carry those for you," Thorin volunteered, moving to take the book and tools from the hobbit.

"It's all right, I can manage," Bilbo reassured, waving away the dwarf's concern. In the end he could not manage, as Frodo wiggled and squirmed in his arms. Finally, one of the elf maids who brought their food helped him carry his things back to the room.

Thorin was left staring after them with a thunderous expression but allowed himself to be drawn away by Balin to the privacy of their own rooms.
Bilbo and Frodo had supper by themselves at eight, joined only briefly by Thranduil to finalize the plans for their departure. At nine Bilbo and Frodo could be found in the baths with Estel.

The hobbitling happily and wildly splashed the water towards the boy, who gently returned the splashes with some of his own. By the time he was nice and clean, Frodo was dozing contentedly in his father's arms and was asleep before Bilbo lay him down upon their shared bed.

Bilbo had trouble sleeping the entire night and was up and ready to go an hour before he was supposed to be. If Thorin was surprised to find him awake he did not say, simply smiling at him encouragingly.

"I've left instructions written here," Bilbo fretted, gesturing towards his bedside table where several pieces of paper were gathered. "I know this is highly irregular. Asking you to care for my son when we only just met a few weeks ago. Elrond and Erestor will be here to help. If you decide that you can no longer take care of Frodo they will-"

"That won't happen," Thorin interrupted, voice firm. "I am glad to watch after him." He watched the hobbit fret with the covers, tucking them around Frodo. Bilbo held the babe's four-fingered hand, running a finger over the stub.

Thranduil entered the room soon after, announcing that it was time for them to go. Thorin stood aside as the Elvenking gathered the hobbit's pack, striding out of the room with nary a glance at the dwarf.

Before Bilbo could follow after him, he was stopped by hand on his arm and turned to look at Thorin questioningly. The dwarf lingered close, staring at him intensely as though to memorize his face until he finally reached forward and drew the hobbit into his arms.

As surprised as he was by the embrace, Bilbo managed to gather his wits quickly enough to return the hug. He took comfort and strength from the arms that encircled him.

"I wish you luck," Thorin whispered into the hobbit's curly hair, squeezing gently one last time before stepping back.

Bilbo took one last look at Frodo before marching out of the room with a determined gait. Unsure of how long he had stood there watching the empty doorway, Thorin at last sank down onto bed, turning to observe the peacefully sleeping hobbitling.

"He'll be back soon," Thorin said softly, more to reassure himself than the sleeping Frodo. He pushed himself to his feet with a groan, feeling exhausted all of a sudden. He'd had much trouble sleeping, worrying both about Bilbo and taking care of Frodo.

He walked around to the other side of the bed, sinking back down onto the mattress and removing his boots. He blushed upon touching Bilbo's pillow, finding that it was warm. The space where the hobbit slept was also warm and Thorin quickly lay down on the spot, as though he could somehow trap the leftover heat with his body.

He took a deep breath. Breathing in the smell of flowers and something sweet that lingered on the pillow. He ran curious fingers through Frodo's hair as he waited for the hobbitling to wake up; but the bed was warm and the smell was comforting and he soon found himself drifting off to sleep.

It was not a minute past six in the morning that Frodo awoke. Silently and without fanfare he stretched his tiny body and kicked off the blankets that encased him. He wriggled onto his stomach and drew his thumb into his mouth, curiously eyeing the person who was sleeping next to him.

He wondered why Mister Thorin was in his bed? Where could his Papa have gone?
Frodo pushed himself to his knees, shuffling closer to Thorin to look down at his face.

"Dorf?" he asked, confused. He patted Thorin's face gently and poked at one of the dwarf's eyes when he refused to wake. Thorin twitched and snuffled but continued to sleep. Frodo huffed and lay his chin on his hand as he thought of how to wake the dwarf. He moved closer still, putting one of his hands over the dwarf's big nose and the other over his mouth.

That was how he sometimes woke his Papa, who made funny noises when he slept that Frodo didn't like.

Thorin startled awake, gently removing the little hands that barely covered him as he sat up.

"Papa-papa?" Frodo asked, lifting his hands palms up and shrugging his shoulders in confusion.

"Do you know what time it is?" Thorin rumbled, running a hand through his hair. "Do you usually wake up at this hour?" The dwarf yawned and moved to grab the pieces of paper Bilbo had left on the bedside table. Frodo curiously peaked at the pages and saw squiggly lines.

"Fo," he pointed helpfully at his name.

Thorin chuckled warmly, "That does say Frodo." The hobbitling beamed at him, wriggling around so he could lay his head on Thorin's leg. "Let's see here. Bedtime for Frodo is at nine o'clock. He might wake up during the night but eventually fall back asleep. He is up at around six in the morning. Six in the morning?"

The hobbitling grew bored of the paper and slapped Thorin's arm to demand his attention. The dwarf turned to face him in confusion and drew back when Frodo puckered his lips at him.

"Er . . ." Thorin said, quickly continuing to read the paper. "He is up at around six in the morning and requires a good-morning and a good-night kiss, or he will throw a tantrum. Oh, Mahal."

Frodo grumpily slapped Thorin's arm again until the dwarf turned to stare at him, little lips puckered and eyes glaring. When the dwarf did not move to give him his kiss Frodo's face scrunched up and tears gathered in his eyes.

"There, there," Thorin said soothingly and swiftly lay a kiss upon the hobbitling's brow. "How's that then?"

There was more confusion on Frodo's face as he reached up to touch the kissed spot. He blinked at Thorin, eyebrows furrowed but he did not cry, so the dwarf hesitantly read the paper in his hands again.

"After waking he will need his diaper changed, no delaying or he will grow grumpy, and then onto breakfast at seven. Do not worry over what to feed him as Elrond will be providing the meals. Also remember to burp him after every meal."

Frodo lay down on his stomach, feet kicking at Thorin. He was quite bored, you see. Didn't Mister Thorin know anything about doing fun things?

"Breakfast should be followed by a bottle of milk; this is known as Quiet Time and is not to be disrupted, even by Fili and Kili. Lay Frodo out on his blanket on the floor, nowhere near his toys or anything that might distract him, and give him his bottle. Quiet Time usually lasts around twenty minutes and he needs to be burped afterwards as well," Thorin ignored the little kicks aimed at his side. "Following breakfast and quiet time is Play Time until second breakfast at nine. After second breakfast is Free Time, which is whatever you decide to do. Often I will take Frodo on walks around
the Shire and sometimes we will simply work in the garden."

Thorin stopped reading and rubbed at his forehead. Frodo had stopped kicking at him and was squirming to hide underneath the blanket.

"Free Time is over at eleven when it is time for elevenses, which is a short snack meal for us. After elevenses is Nap Time and if he does not wish to nap, do not force him. The next meal is luncheon at one, followed by Quiet Time once again," Thorin skimmed through most of the rest, stopping to reread one part which struck him. "Do not ever give him two of anything unless it is food as he will find someway to throw one or both items into a fire. A fire!?"

He threw a dubious look at Frodo, who was babbling to himself and fighting with the blanket. The hobbitling laughed when he poked him through the blankets, squirming around out of his reach. With a shake of his head and a fond smile, he returned his attention to Bilbo's notes.

"He enjoys having Mister Nibbles, the rabbit, tell him stories before bedtime. Ask Dwalin if you do not understand . . . ?" Thorin's eyes shifted around the room as though the answer to his question would suddenly appear. He released a deep breath after he'd finished reading the papers. Frodo peeked out at him from underneath the blankets, giggling when the dwarf tickled him under his chin. "When do you suppose Lord Elrond will bring your food?"

The hobbit blinked at him curiously. Thorin put the tips of his fingers together and shook his hand twice before his mouth. He wasn't surprised when Frodo immediately brightened and repeated the motion.

"Um!" the babe cried, crawling out from beneath the blankets to sit by Thorin and stare at him expectantly.

"How impatient," said Elrond as he entered, carrying a small tray of food. Frodo squealed happily and clapped his hands as the tray was placed upon the bed in front of him.

Thorin leaned forward to take note of what was on the tray; mostly fruits such as berries, a diced banana, and a bowl of what appeared to be mashed apples—at least it smelled like apples. There was also a smaller bowl of something orange that looked like carrots, it was the only vegetable dish present.

Elrond noticed the dwarf's confusion and explained, "Frodo has only eaten fruits thus far due to his lack of appetite. He cannot eat meat yet, so I am hoping he will find the taste of carrots to his liking."

Frodo was unconcernedly eating his banana slices already, jaw working to chew despite that he only had two teeth. He grasped the tiny spoon on the tray with his right hand and used it to scoop up some mashed apple. He did it much harder than was necessary and some of the apple splashed outside the bowl.

"Do you wish for breakfast to be brought to you as well?" Elrond asked. "Or will you be dining with your Company in the dining hall?"

"I'll wait to eat with the rest of my Company," said Thorin.

With a small smile at Frodo, who grinned back with his mouth full of mashed apples, the Elf-lord left the two to themselves.

Frodo poked his finger into the bowl of carrots curiously, unsure what the orange food was supposed to be. He had only eaten oranges before and he didn't like them, they made his lips pucker up but not for kisses.
He turned his expression of dislike onto Thorin, who grimaced back at him exaggeratedly. "There is nothing for it, little one. You will have to start eating vegetables soon enough, might as well get it over and done with. They're good for you." He picked up Frodo's tiny spoon and held it cautiously in between two fingers, dipping it into the mashed carrots. "Why don't I try it first?" The hobbitling watched with wide eyes as Thorin ate the small spoonful and then shrugged. "Well, it tastes like carrots."

Bouncing on his cloth covered behind, Frodo opened his mouth expectantly and Thorin fed him a similarly small spoonful of mashed carrots. The hobbitling chewed reflexively and practically glowed as he found the taste to his liking.

"Mm," he hummed pleasantly, opening his mouth for more carrots. He managed to eat most of the carrots in the bowl before deciding he'd had enough. He nibbled at some berries until he could eat no more and lay back on the bed to stretch his body again.

He kicked at Thorin's back as the dwarf gathered the tray and placed it aside. "Why do you insist on kicking me?"

Frodo giggled and held his arms out, straining his body up when Thorin did not immediately pick him up. Instead the dwarf smiled a crooked but mischievous smile and began with tickling the hobbitling's feet, which made Frodo squirm and laugh, before moving onto tickling his sides until Frodo was struggling to get away, face flushed with happiness.

"Do you need to be burped?" Thorin lifted Frodo into his arms and the hobbitling pointed at his wagon. "First you need to be burped, I think." Throwing a clean towel over his shoulder and settling Frodo upon it, Thorin gently pat the babe's back until a tiny burp left the small body. Frodo gazed at him with a quiet curiosity as he hummed, making small sounds of his own as he tried to mimic the dwarf.

The babe released one last burp before he was done and pointing at his wagon again, much more insistently than before.

The wagon was near the end of the bed and upon closer inspection Thorin was amused to notice that all four of Frodo's toys—faceless doll, wooden horse, Mister Nibbles, and the newly carved dwarf toy Bifur had made for Frodo—were 'sleeping' in the wagon with a towel blanketed over them. "Before that we should get clean, shouldn't we?"

With much bafflement and head scratching Thorin finally managed to clip a new clean cloth over Frodo's bottom. The dwarf wondered how Bilbo managed to get it done so quickly when Frodo squirmed, struggled, and tried to chew on his feet.

"We shall have to take a bath later," Thorin mused as he used the towel covering Frodo's toys to wipe the hobbitling's face and hands clean. "I see now why Bilbo insisted I give you one every night. You are quite messy, aren't you?"

Lastly, Thorin put clean clothing on the babe; tiny-tiny pants that appeared to Thorin to be made for a doll, a tiny-tiny shirt under a blouse with ridiculously small buttons that the dwarf struggled to button, and little suspenders that Frodo appeared to like. When he was done dressing the hobbitling Thorin pulled back to look him up and down proudly.

Frodo smiled at him and—doing a very good imitation of his father—pulled on his suspenders with his thumbs. He pointed at his wagon again and whined when Thorin did not immediately place him on the floor.
"I think this is what your adadith calls 'quiet time'?" wondered Thorin.

"Oh," Frodo cooed. He placed his left hand flat, palms up, in front of him and then bent his right hand in a cup-holding shape. Moving the bent hand up and repeating the motion several times before holding both hands out and shrugging with confusion.

"Where's your bottle?" Thorin asked, exaggerating surprise. He could see one of Bilbo's attendants lingering by the doorway with said bottle in her hand.

Frodo brought his hands out again—as though to show that he was not hiding his bottle—and shrugged his shoulders while looking confused. Meanwhile Thorin gestured for the elf to bring him the bottle, so she did as swiftly and quietly as she could and was gone before Frodo noticed her.

The hobbitling was surprised to find his bottle suddenly behind him and laughed. He was disgruntled when Thorin did not give him his bottle, instead moving to spread his baby blanket out on the floor and then laying him atop it.

While the babe was occupied with his bottle Thorin changed himself into a clean set of clothes. He was pulling on his boots and tying them when Frodo suddenly appeared at his side, empty bottle abandoned on the floor behind him. So Thorin lay the towel over his shoulder once again and gathered the babe into his arms to be burped.

Frodo was playing with his toys when Fili and Kili wandered in, both barely awake and yawning widely. Thorin was sitting in his armchair and going over the pages Bilbo had written for him. The hobbit had taken the time to include a very simple schedule on the last page that Thorin was trying to memorize.

"FeeKee," Frodo greeted, waving Mister Nibbles at them. He lost his grip on the rabbit and it went sailing over his head to land at the brothers' feet. "Oh-oh!"

Fili picked the rabbit up and the two of them joined Frodo on the floor.

"Good morning, Uncle Thorin!" Kili said cheerfully.

"Where's Bilbo?" Fili wondered.

"Papa-papa!" Frodo exclaimed, shrugging his shoulders in confusion.

Thorin glared at them suspiciously. "Better question; why are you two up so early?"

"It's the only time we get to spend with Bilbo and Frodo without you or Estel hovering nearby," explained Kili honestly. He grunted when Fili elbowed him sharply on the side.

Thorin's eyebrows rose disbelievingly. All the years he had spent attempting to teach the two to get up early and all it took was a pair of hobbits for them to learn to do it themselves.

"So where's Bilbo then?" Kili asked, staring at his uncle imploringly.

The dwarf sent a look at Frodo, who was also gazing at him with wide eyes. "He'll be back soon," he said instead, shuffling the papers in his hands and focusing back on them so he wouldn't have to meet the hobbitling's questioning gaze.

Fili elbowed his brother again and shook his head firmly when Kili glared at him, confused. They were both distracted by Frodo, who gave Mister Nibbles to Fili and his new dwarf toy to Kili while he held his carved horse in one hand and the doll in the other.
It was not soon after that Frodo began to wail loudly, startling Thorin and drawing him to his feet. Fili was staring, dumbfounded, at what Kili held in his lap—the doll Estel had gifted Frodo. The poor doll's head had been ripped clean open and the white stuffing had fallen out and was all over the floor.

The hobbitling turned when he felt Thorin's hands wrapping about his waist, burying his face against the dwarf's chest as he cried his little heart out.

"Out," Thorin rumbled at his nephews. Fili immediately pushed himself to his feet and tried to pull his brother up. Kili opened his mouth, tried to apologize, but Thorin glared at him heatedly. "OUT!"

The two brothers meeped and quickly ran out. Thorin gently bounced Frodo in his arms, humming quietly into the curly hair. The hobbitling finally calmed but for the slight hiccups and sniffles that left him. He whined when Thorin tried to pull back so he could look at his little face, clinging to the dwarf's hair and clothes.

"There now, little one," murmured Thorin soothingly. "We'll just have to ask Ori to fix it, won't we?"

"Oi," Frodo echoed, rubbing at his eyes with tiny fists.

"Let's leave him—her?—to rest for now," Thorin moved Frodo to his hip and leaned down to pluck the doll up. Under the hobbitling's watchful and concerned gaze, he placed the doll upon the bed and covered it with the blanket when Frodo insisted. "Should we play together with your other toys?"

"Dorf," said Frodo as he gave his carved dwarf toy to Thorin. He made the sign for 'name' and pointed at the toy. "Dorf!"

"His name is Dorf?" asked Thorin, bewildered.

Frodo shook his head. "Dorf!"

"That's what I said, Dorf."

The hobbitling glared at him but let the matter go. He grasped the wooden horse and gave it to Thorin.

"Name you," he signed.

"You want me to give it a name?" Thorin asked.

Frodo shook his head. "You name."

"My name?" Thorin wondered. The babe nodded happily and pointed at the wooden horse. "The toy has my name? Thorin?"

"Short," signed Frodo.

"Shorter than my name? Thor?"

Frodo nodded vigorously, clapping his hands. He gave his rabbit to the dwarf and with his right hand pretended to nibble on his left hand.

"Yes, I know Mister Nibbles," said Thorin, smiling. He returned the rabbit to Frodo, who hugged it tightly, and grasped the dwarf toy in his hand. "This is Mister . . . Dwarf?" He was pleased and proud when the hobbitling smiled widely and nodded. He returned the dwarf to Frodo, who set it up
so it was standing beside him, and finally grasped the wooden horse. "And this is Mister Thor?"
"Mm!" Frodo agreed.

Pleased that he had been able to correctly guess the toys' names, Thorin devoted the rest of the time to keeping Frodo entertained and happy. He was bemused to notice how particular about his toys Frodo was.

Mister Thor the wooden horse was a mighty warrior—and sometimes a monster if the occasion called for it. Mister Dwarf appeared to be a blacksmith with his great hammer. Mister Nibbles was a noble king and a storyteller, when the rabbit 'spoke' Frodo listened attentively.

They had breakfast—second breakfast for Frodo—in the dining hall with the rest of the Company. Kili apologized for tearing Frodo's doll open, an accident which the hobbitling had already forgotten as he was happy to see both Fili and Kili.

The dwarves were divided on the matter of Bilbo. Balin was upset that the hobbit had seen fit to leave his son in the care of Thorin and that the King-in-Exile had not shared the news. A few of the older dwarves agreed with Balin and grumbled to each other, only growing silent when Lord Elrond stopped near their table to check on Frodo.

The others were upset that Bilbo had not asked them to accompany him instead of those elves. Even Gandalf appeared perturbed by the news that Bilbo had gone off on a quest of his own. He was disquieted to learn that Bilbo planned to kill the creature that had harmed his son.

"I'll not have you thinking ill of Bilbo, Gandalf," Elrond said, a fire burning in his eyes as he gazed at the wizard. "He allowed that creature to live once and it did naught but bring harm to Frodo in the end."

"I wasn't-" Gandalf sputtered.

"Do not treat me for a fool, Gandalf," Elrond continued. "You have done nothing but gaze at Bilbo with suspicion. He has done nothing to warrant such feelings from you."

"Not suspicious," argued Gandalf. "Merely curious."

"Curiosity does not make Bilbo feel uncomfortable in your presence," Elrond said with finality and addressed Frodo next. "How about you? Has Master Thorin been treating you well?"

"Ef!" Frodo shouted, straining against Thorin's hold to reach Elrond. "E-ef!"

"Perhaps another time, young Frodo," Elrond chuckled, leaving the group to their meal.

Frodo whined and pouted at Thorin, who merely raised an eyebrow at him. "You have not finished eating." The babe opened his mouth when Thorin fed him another spoonful of mashed carrots, though he went back to pouting after swallowing. "What did the elf mean that you think ill of Bilbo?"

"I assure you that I do not think ill of our hobbit," Gandalf assured.

"He's our hobbit," Kili grumbled petulantly.

Thorin rolled his eyes at his nephew's childishness but mentally agreed with the sentiment. He shifted Frodo away from his plate when the hobbitling tried to reach for a chicken leg. There was a short battle as Frodo thought they were playing a game and attempted to reach for the leg again, straining
determinedly against the arms that held him securely. Thorin was forced to push his chair back far enough that the babe finally stopped struggling, blowing a very wet raspberry at him.

"I'm done eating, I can hold him," Fili volunteered hopefully, holding his arms out towards the hobbitling. Frodo slapped at his hands playfully and was confused when he was taken from Thorin.

"If Mister Bilbo is your hobbit," Estel began, brows furrowed, "can Frodo be my hobbit?"

Thorin immediately began choking as he inhaled sharply and punched at his chest as he grasped for his goblet of ale and chugged it down quickly. Gandalf, too, was smacking the palm of his hand against his chest as he coughed and laughed simultaneously. The dwarves merely laughed uproariously, to the annoyance of the elves eating at nearby tables.

Kili, who sat to Estel's right, reached over and pat the boy on the head condescendingly. "Frodo can't be your hobbit, Estel. He's our hobbit."

"But you already have Mister Bilbo!" Estel argued. "That's not very fair!"

"Oh-oh!" Frodo cried and tried to reach for Thorin, wanting to help him.

"I'm fine, thank you," Thorin assured him once he'd gotten his breath back.

Soon Gandalf brought up the matter of their long stay at Rivendell and the dwarves dissolved into a heated discussion on the merits of staying or going.

Frodo gazed around at the dwarves, confused by all their shouting. Sometimes they would utter strange growling sounds that sounded very interesting and Frodo tried to mimic them, which only made Thorin and the dwarves laugh.

Though he didn't know why, Frodo laughed along with them, which only served to make everyone laugh all the more.

Frodo thought the dwarves were very silly.

After breakfast the dwarves adjourned to a private part of the gardens, it was the least visited area and had become their practice space.

Frodo was worried as he sat on Thorin's lap. Mister Dwalin was being mean to Fili and Kili! He didn't understand why Mister Thorin didn't stop him from throwing Fili and Kili to the ground.

"Ouch!" he cried but no one heard him over the loud ruckus they were making.

Soon it was Thorin's turn and he allowed his nephews the opportunity to watch the hobbitling. Estel had been called away by his mother for his morning lessons and Fili and Kili were eager to spend some time with Frodo without the boy hovering over them obsessively.

"Ouch!" he cried but no one heard him over the loud ruckus they were making.

Frodo was still worried, especially when Mister Thorin threw Mister Dwalin to the ground and all the dwarves began shouting. He didn't like all the loud noises and Fili and Kili were no longer paying him any attention, so Frodo decided to look for Erestor.

Erestor let Frodo sit on his lap and read to him! Erestor was always in the big room with all the books. Frodo liked that room.

He crawled away from the dwarves without any of them noticing him and up the few stairs until he was back inside. From there he followed after an elf carrying a stack of books. He crawled as fast as
he could but the elf walked too fast!

Frodo soon grew tired of trying to follow the elf and stopped to take a short break. He sat against the wall and sucked on his thumb, observing the elves walking up and down the hallway with curious eyes.

None of the elves saw him for they never looked down, always they were looking up. Luckily for Frodo, the very elf he had been searching for was passing by on his way to the library.

Erestor saw something out of the corner of his eyes and glanced sideways, only to see Frodo sitting against the wall with eyes half closed and thumb in his mouth.

He almost walked right by before quickly looking back to make sure his eyes were not deceiving him. Indeed they were not, for there was a hobbitling sitting off to one side looking ready to take a nap right where he sat!

"Frodo Baggins," Erestor sighed and approached the hobbitling, who sat up with sudden alertness and smiled.

"Essto!" Frodo cried happily and held his arms up.

"Were not the dwarves meant to be watching you?" Erestor asked, drawing the hobbitling into his arms. "Should we go find them?"

"Nah!" Frodo whined and shook his head, clinging to the elf’s collar with an oddly strong grip.

"If not the dwarves then were do you propose we should go?" Erestor questioned, rubbing a soothing hand down the hobbitling’s small back. "Should we find Lord Elrond?"

"Essto," Frodo whispered around the hand he shoved in his mouth.

"You wish to stay with me then? Perhaps we can find a good storybook to read in the library? Would you like that?"

"Mm," the hobbitling agreed. "Essto."

Erestor and Frodo made themselves at home in the library with several large tomes on the table before them and one propped open that the elf read from out loud. Both unaware that the dwarves had become aware of Frodo’s disappearance and had begun frantically searching all over Rivendell for the missing hobbitling—though none of them thought to look in the library. If not for one of them informing Elrond that they had misplaced Frodo, the hobbitling would not have been found until the hero of the story had rescued his damsel-in-distress—which was not for a while yet.

Luckily one of them did smartly inform the Elf-lord of the hobbitling’s disappearance and Elrond ventured into the library to ask if Erestor had an idea of where the little one might be hiding. What he found was an elf and a hobbitling completely engrossed in the story Erestor was reading. Elrond wisely, and with a great deal of fondness, left them to their own devices and left to inform Thorin that he had found Frodo.

He asked that the dwarves kindly keep quiet if they were going to go invading the library, for neither Frodo nor Erestor would appreciate the interruption or loudness.

Thorin berated Fili and Kili very quietly yet also rather vehemently. He might as well have been shouting for all the cringing the brothers did.
Relieved that Frodo had been found unharmed, the dwarves returned to their practices. Though not before Thorin remembered to pull Ori aside to ask him for a small favor—that is, to fix the doll Estel had gifted Frodo. Perhaps the young dwarf would be so kind as to give the doll some eyes? A mouth, too? Mayhap also provide it with clothes? Also if it wasn’t too much trouble then some hair would be nice as well.

Ori agreed fervently and with a sense of great purpose he visited Bilbo’s room in search of the doll. The young dwarf was surprised that the doll was not where Thorin had said it would be—laying on the bed covered up with a blanket. Instead the doll was in Frodo’s wagon, alongside the babe’s other three toys.

Ori shrugged and moved fleetly to grab the poor headless doll. He examined it thoughtfully, wondering about what he had on hand that he could use as stuffing. So caught up in his thoughts that he failed to notice the curious button eyes that followed him as he left the room.

In the meantime, Thorin was debating whether he should interrupt Frodo’s story-time or if he should find something else to preoccupy himself with. When Bilbo had warned him not to stop Frodo from spending time with the elves he had not imagined that the hobbitling would go searching out the elves himself!

He wondered how Bilbo ever managed with such a mischievous hobbitling.

Halfway through their story, Erestor and Frodo had to take a break as the babe was taken by Thorin to get cleaned. Soon the two were back in the library finishing up their very exciting story and also eating whatever Elrond had sent to them.

A few of the dwarves tried to join them but quickly grew bored when they realized Erestor was reading an Elvish book and they could not understand it. Fili and Kili valiantly tried to stay as long as they could, not wanting to be beaten by Estel. Neither seemed to realize that the boy could easily understand the story Erestor was reading and thus was not bored in the slightest.

Ori was the only one of the Company who would have enjoyed spending time in the library but the young dwarf was far too busy fixing up Frodo’s doll and had no time for other things. Already he was making plans for a full wardrobe of clothes for the doll. Though unsure of just how he knew, Ori was certain that the doll was female—either a very prominent lady or a princess. He made a note to ask Frodo next time he saw him.

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Frodo ate lunch in the library with Erestor and Lindir and afterwards "helped" the two elves organize books and scrolls.

"We will have to take that from him eventually," Lindir murmured to Erestor.

The hobbitling had an open scroll laid out before him that he was "reading" with his rabbit toy. How the little one knew the scroll told of the Two Trees of Valinor was anyone’s guess. At least the babe was very gentle with the books and scrolls; never touching them with dirty hands, pulling them, or throwing them around.

"You can take it from him," Erestor scoffed. There wasn’t any possible way he was going to be the one to make the hobbitling sad.

Sad though he was to leave all the books behind, Frodo was happy to spend more time with Mister Thorin and even Mister Dwalin.

The Company, minus Ori—who was far to busy with more important matters—, were out in the
garden again with their weapons. Frodo gazed at them with wide worried eyes.

"Ouch!" he cried, pointing at them.

"It's all right," Dwalin said, turning him around so he could not watch the training matches. "They're just playing."

Frodo babbled worriedly at him until a shadow fell over him and he looked up to discover Thorin moving to sit behind him. He laughed, legs kicking excitedly.

"What are we playing?" Thorin asked.

The hobbitling grasped at his leg and pulled himself up on wobbly legs. He began making little "ah" sounds as he swayed back and forth, reaching out a hand towards Thorin's chest. The dwarf held his arms out to catch him if necessary as Frodo let go of his leg and attempted to take a step, only to fall back on his bottom.

Frodo looked surprised then laughed. He grasped at Thorin's leg again and pulled himself to his feet, turning towards Dwalin and reaching out a hand. He managed one wobbly step before falling on his bottom yet again.

He crawled towards Dwalin, kneeling in front of him and covering his eyes with his hands. He peaked through his fingers at the dwarf and quickly closed his eyes again when he saw that he was being watched. He was surprised to discover that Dwalin's face had vanished the next time he peaked.

He turned his head to gaze at Thorin in confusion, turning back to find that Dwalin's face had appeared again! He gasped, amazed.

He grasped at the dwarf's chest, standing on wobbly legs in order to reach for Dwalin's face. Dwalin bowed his head lower so the little one could reach him. Frodo curiously touched the dwarf's eyes, nose, and pulled at the ears. He was surprised at patting the top of Dwalin's head to discover the dwarf had no hair!

"Oh-oh!" Frodo cried, worried. With the middle finger of his right hand jutting out he drew a circle atop his own head.

Thorin fell over laughing, drawing the Company's attention, while Balin, who had been sitting nearby smoking his pipe, tried to get some air into his lungs as he choked.

"What happened?" Fili wondered.

"What's so funny?" Kili asked at the same time.

Dwalin would have aimed a kick at Thorin if not for Frodo still staring at him worriedly. The hobbitling patted at his own head of curly hair then held his hands out while shrugging in confusion.

"Where did Dwalin's hair go?" Thorin wondered, grinning wickedly. "I wonder that, too."

Frodo paid no attention to him, still rubbing the top of Dwalin's head in awe. He curiously traced the dwarf's tattoos, making inquisitive noises and whining when Dwalin pulled himself up with a grunt.

"Sorry, little one, but my back hurts," Dwalin apologized.

The dwarves returned to their training once they realized the fun was over. Frodo crawled back to
Thorin and settled himself against the dwarf's chest, tucking Mister Nibbles tightly against him and pointing at the clouds overhead.

One of the fluffy clouds looked like a rabbit. Frodo showed Mister Nibbles. It was was round and fluffy and it had two long ears!

See, Mister Nibbles? Frodo asked, pointing. Mister Nibbles agreed that the cloud did indeed look like a rabbit.

The day passed quickly as Thorin fell into Frodo's routine. There was barely any time in between meals for the hobbitling to do much more than lay around and play for a short while. The final meal for the hobbitling was at eight and soon afterward it was his bath time.

The babe sat on the highest step of the bathing pool, splashing at the water enthusiastically, and ignoring the dwarf who rubbed a soft soapy cloth over his body.

Once bored of splashing at the water he patted at Thorin's arm to draw his attention and then moved his hands over the water in circular motions.

"Swim? You want to swim?" Thorin demanded incredulously.

"Bilbo holds him on his stomach and lets him pretend swim," said Kili.

Dubiously and with his nephews' help Thorin was able to assist Frodo in "swimming", which was the hobbitling floating on his stomach with Thorin's hand on his belly and the other on his back. The babe kicked his feet and waved his arms around while Thorin moved him along the water slowly.

"You can't take him past the stairs," Fili told his uncle a little too late.

Frodo had already stilled in the water and began shaking his head vigorously. "Nah!"

"Sorry, sorry," Thorin soothed, throwing a glare at his sister-sons, who did their best to look apologetic. He drew the hobbitling back to the stairs and sat him down on the step again. "There."

Grumbling petulantly and with arms hugging his stomach, Frodo glared at Thorin.

"I didn't know," Thorin defended, trying to appease the grouchy hobbitling. "I thought Bilbo meant that deep end." He pointed a thumb over his shoulder to the far end of the pool, where his Company were having a grand time of it splashing and trying to drown one another.

Frodo went back to splashing at the water, not the least bit concerned when Thorin cautiously began washing his curly hair. He helpfully tipped his head back without the dwarf having to ask, so that all the soap could be rinsed off.

Finally he was considered clean enough and drawn out of the bath. Thorin lay him on a large towel spread across the floor and wrapped it securely around the tiny, squirming body.

Frodo grunted and tried to kick the towel off.

"Don't move," said Thorin, shaking a finger at him. The dwarf used another towel to dry himself off before pulling on the clean clothes he had thought to bring along. When he looked back Frodo had managed to wiggle around onto his stomach and was getting ready to start bawling, little face scrunched up. "Do you never listen?"

Thorin gathered him up, bouncing him gently to soothe his tears as he walked back to Bilbo's room.
He dried the hobbitling gently as he sat in his armchair, taking the time to thoroughly dry the wet curly hair before dressing Frodo in a clean set of pajamas. The hobbitling was dozing contentedly by then, gnawing absently on the tip of his thumb. It was only a few minutes before he fell asleep to Thorin's gentle rocking.

"Frodoling," a sweet, familiar voice whispered. A soft hand tickled him under his chin and he laughed, squirming around until he was looking up at the red haired woman who held him in her lap. "Good morning, dear one."

He puckered his lips expectantly and she laughed. "Oh, my, what has our Bilbo been teaching you?" Even so, he received a kiss on the tip of his nose and he laughed joyfully, touching the kissed spot in wonder.

"Does only my lady get a kiss?"

Frodo drew his palm up to his mouth and away, blowing gently up towards the man who peeked over the woman's shoulder.

"Isn't he too sweet?" she laughed.

"Too adorable, as well," the man said with a laugh as he tickled Frodo's chin himself. The hobbitling grasped at the big fingers, trying to pull them towards his mouth, much to the amusement of both. "You don't want to chew on those, not tasty at all."

Frodo looked around curiously, pouting when he didn't find the person he wanted to see. "Papa-papa?"

The woman laughed again. "You have grown more impatient it seems."

"He most certainly has," said another familiar voice, one Frodo immediately recognized.

He quickly turned, squealing loudly as he strained his body up, hands reaching for the hobbit who joined them. "Papa-papa!"

Bilbo laughed delightedly and plucked him up, cuddling him close and kissing his cheeks until Frodo was protesting even as he babbled happily. "My darling little Frodo! It's only been a day but I've missed you so!

The hobbitling began telling his father of all the wondrous things he'd done that day; from waking up to find Mister Thorin sleeping in his bed, playing with Fili and Kili—who broke his doll!—and eating with the dwarves and Estel and the tall man with the big hat. The best part was story-time with Erestor!

"Sounds like you had a really fun day!" Bilbo exclaimed, wide eyed. "I'm glad everyone is trying to get along for your sake, as well. I thought you'd want to spend time with Erestor eventually. Silly boy."

"Essto!" Frodo cried happily.

"Such a smart boy!" Bilbo cooed. "You deserve more kisses, don't you?" Frodo giggled and easily accepted the kisses bestowed upon him. "Now tell me more about what you did today, especially the part where the dwarves took their eyes off you and you sneaked away to find Erestor."

Frodo told his Papa about what he had discovered that day; that Dwalin had no hair on the top of his head! It was empty! Also Mister Thorin had almost drowned him in the big water place and that
wasn't nice!

Bilbo listened avidly to the hobbitling's babbling until Frodo could no longer stay awake and drifted off to sleep. His father was not far behind him and both slept peacefully under the watchful vigilance of Yavanna and Aulë.

Chapter End Notes

Full version of Twinkle Twinkle Little Star available [here](http://www.example.com).
Bilbo drifted through a fog, enveloped by a sense of tranquility. He was aimless, with no worries or concerns. Only the quiet calm existed. There were thoughts and images that tried to linger but slipped through his fingers when he made to grasp them. He slipped into sleep once more.

The sense of peace did not last as he awakened a short time later when he felt a sudden pull at his being. He fought to breathe as he landed on rough ground. He tried to keep up with the sudden rush of emotions, sounds, and colors that tried to overwhelm him.

He became aware of several hands patting and soothing down his back. Someone helped him to sit up, keeping a firm hold of his arm as he threatened to topple sideways.

"Oh, dear," someone fretted. "I pulled too hard."

"Too hard?" someone else demanded, incredulous. "For a moment there I was afraid you had separated his fëa from his hröa!"

"It is the second time I've attempted to pull a Hobbit's dreams!" the other defended. "The first time was easy enough. How was I to know it would be harder this time around?"

"Calm yourselves!" a feminine voice intervened. "What's done is done. Cease your fighting. Don't frighten our dear Bilbo!"

"Why would he be frightened?" demanded yet another voice, this one more familiar than the last. "Considering all the time he spent in our company I would imagine he'd be quite accustomed to your silliness."

"Our silliness?" there were several grumbled complaints about this. "Speak for yourself, Tulkas."

Bilbo managed to regain his bearings while the voices argued amongst themselves. If not for the fact that he knew it was a dream he would have been quite shocked by the sight before him.

Tulkas, arms crossed and glaring heatedly at those around him, sat off to one side while Irmo and his wife, Estë, sat before Bilbo. It was Tulkas and Irmo who were the loudest as they barked at each other and poor Estë fought to calm them.

The King and Queen, Manwë and Varda, stood behind the group. Looking long-suffering and amused, respectively.

Vairë sat beside Estë, unconcerned as she ran a needle through a tapestry held in her lap. Her husband Námo stood silent beside her, expression blank and uninterested.

A somewhat hysterical laugh left Bilbo before he could contain it, drawing the attention of the Valar present.

"Bilbo!" Estë greeted, voice full of joy, drawing him into a hug. Her warmth was familiar and comforting, and Bilbo hugged her back. Her hands framed his face as she pulled back, eying him with sharp eyes. "You look well."
Tulkas was the next to greet him, drawing him into a boisterous hug and managing to squeeze the air from his poor abused body. Bilbo received a few rough pats on the back from the champion before getting passed to the next Vala.

Vairë was much kinder with her greeting, bestowing a soft kiss upon his forehead. He did not know the others personally and received respectful bows from them which he returned with his own.

"Thank you for coming, Bilbo Baggins," said Manwë, voice solemn but eyes kind.

"I didn't have a choice in the matter," Bilbo said, shy and unsure. He wrung his hands and fretted as his gaze shifted from one to the other. "What-" he broke off to clear his dry throat. "What can I do for you?"

"Do not look so worried!" Estë laughed, reaching forward to pat his hand in a consoling manner. "It is us who should ask you that. Oh, Bilbo! We made such a mess of things!"

"A mess . . . ?" Bilbo echoed confused.

"We only wished to bestow a gift upon you," said Vairë.

"You can see how that went," Tulkas grumbled.

"We shall speak of that at a later time, however," said Estë. "I'm afraid we did not think this thoroughly."

"Since Fro-Fro impatiently waits for his Papa over that hill there," Tulkas gestured towards a large hill. "I say we planned this first visit rather poorly."

"Perhaps next time Frodo should come after we speak with Bilbo?" suggested Vairë.

"Frodo is here?" Bilbo asked, pleasantly surprised.

The Queen pointed to the hill and made some shooing motion at him. The rest of the gathered Vala were too busy arguing once again, coming up with outlandish plans. Bilbo took the chance to scurry away from them as fast and silently as he could.

The entire ordeal was too surreal for him to comprehend. He had met a few of the Valar during his stay in the Undying Lands. Estë had been his nightly companion, helping him and Frodo to heal from the suffering caused by the One Ring. They had met Irmo, the husband of Estë, and Tulkas they had met on arriving. The boisterous champion had taken an immediate liking to Bilbo and Frodo, often dragging the younger hobbit on hunts with Orome.

Aside from them, Bilbo had only met Vairë and Nessa, Tulkas’ wife. He had never seen the king and queen personally and their presence did little to ease his discomfort. Just one look at Manwë had made Bilbo feel faint.

The hill rose, steeper than it looked from a distance, and he huffed and puffed as he crested the top. He took a moment to gather his breath and take a long look around, catching sight of two familiar and welcome people.

The Lady Yavanna sat at the bottom of the hill with her husband, Aulë, at her side. They were both concentrated on whatever it was she held in her lap.

"Isn't he too sweet?" he heard her ask of her husband as he neared them.
"Too adorable, as well," was her husband's response.

"Papa-papa?" came Frodo's voice.

Warmth spread throughout Bilbo's body, a smile spreading across his face, his heart filled with joy. He stumbled several times as he hurried down the hill. He slowed significantly as he reached the bottom, almost flying right past the three.

"You have grown more impatient it seems!" Yavanna laughed.

"He most certainly has," Bilbo managed to gasp out as he walked towards them, trying to catch his breath.

The smile that spread across Frodo's face was big, wide, and adorable. "Papa-papa!"

Who was Bilbo to deny the little hands that reached out towards him? The hobbit laughed and plucked Frodo into his arms, kissing his chubby cheeks and hugging him close. Frodo giggled, happy, and pushed his face away, so Bilbo pulled back to look at him. "My little Frodo! It's only been a day but, oh, how I've missed you!"

Frodo babbled quite seriously then. His little arms flailed as he explained everything that had happened to him that day. Bilbo half-listened to Yavanna and Aulë translate the baby babble as he observed the hobbitling. Irritated, Frodo told Bilbo of how he had woken up to find Mister Thorin sleeping in their bed! Then Lady Anna—the doll—had lost her head! Frodo didn't remember how it had happened but Ori would give her a new one, a better one!

But then no one had paid him any attention so he'd gone off in search of Erestor. Because Erestor always told the best stories—not as good as Bilbo, of course—and paid him loads of attention!

Lastly, he had gone swimming in the big water place and had nearly drowned! He had scolded Thorin, of course, so Frodo didn't expect it to happen again. If it did happen again then Bilbo needed to scold Thorin!

"Sounds like you had a fun day!" Bilbo exclaimed, feeling somewhat dazed. He shot a horrified look at Yavanna and her husband, who did their best to look reassuring. "I'm glad everyone is getting along for your sake. I imagined you'd want to spend time with Erestor at some point. Silly boy."

"Essto!" Frodo agreed, happy.

"Such a smart boy!" Bilbo gushed. "You deserve more kisses, don't you?" Frodo giggled as Bilbo bestowed more kisses upon his cheeks, doing his best to reciprocate. "Now tell me more about what you did today. Particularly the part where the dwarves took their eyes off you and you sneaked away to find Erestor."

So it went that Yavanna and her husband translated again how it had happened that Frodo had gone off in search of said elf. The two attempted to keep up a lighthearted tone but Bilbo still worried.

"His constant sneaking off will be a problem," said Yavanna. "But there is no doubt in my mind that between you and your many friends, old and new, a solution will be found."

"Perhaps you should just make a harness and tie a rope to it," suggested Aulë. "That should keep him close at hand." Yavanna and Bilbo shared a horrified look. "It is just a suggestion!"

"I am surprised that you decided to leave Frodoling in Thorin's care," Yavanna said, ignoring her husband.
"I wasn't going to," revealed Bilbo. "But Thranduil insisted and Elrond agreed."

"Ah, that makes more sense," said Aulë.

"It does?" Bilbo wondered, bewildered.

"I reckon they wish to test Thorin," the smith continued, looking thoughtful. "To see if he can handle taking care of Frodoling. It's a good plan. I also wish to know if Thorin can handle the responsibility of caring for a hobbitling."

"Yes, otherwise how are we to know if he is truly worthy of you?" Yavanna agreed. Bilbo blushed and ducked his head, looking at Frodo, who tried to blink the sleep from his eyes, smiling at his father. "If he cannot love Frodo . . ."

"Frodo and I, we come together or not at all," said Bilbo, rubbing his cheek against the hobbitling's head. "If he cannot accept Frodo, then I cannot accept him."

"I'm glad to hear that," Yavanna said. "We did not mean to saddle you with Frodoling in this condition but you love him so and he is so happy with you."

"Great," echoed Aulë. He looked pained as he continued. "Still, the king and queen have offered to take Frodoling off your hands. They wish to raise him themselves. Or perhaps give him to another family-"

"What? No!" Bilbo interrupted immediately, horrified. He tightened his hold on the hobbitling, fearing that they would take the babe from him at any moment. "Frodo is like this because he did not want to leave me. They cannot take him from me."

Yavanna pat his hand and smiled. "That is what we believed you'd say. The offer was made in good faith but it delights my heart to hear you refuse it. Please do not be angry, Bilbo. The king is fond of Frodoling, he would not have made this offer if he did not truly care for him."

Bilbo swallowed against his rising anger. He distracted himself by watching Frodo yawn and stretch his tiny body. The hobbitling fought to keep his eyes open and on Bilbo, who smiled at him reassuringly.

"Papa-papa . . . " murmured Frodo.

"What's wrong, dear one?" Bilbo whispered. "Why don't you close your eyes and go to sleep, hm? Do I need to sing you a lullaby?"

Awkwardly, the hobbit cleared his throat and tried to ignore the curious gazes of his companions. Keeping his eyes fixed on the hobbitling as he began. He only stopped humming once he was sure Frodo was asleep and wouldn't wake. He shifted the hobbitling in his arms and returned his attention to Yavanna and Aulë.

"Another matter is that of the One Ring," said Yavanna after a while.

"Oh. Er-" managed Bilbo, startled.

"Be calm," Yavanna suggested.

"Take a deep breath," added Aulë.

Bilbo eyed them with suspicion. "Why?"
"It's our fault, Bilbo," Yavanna began, giving the hobbit an imploring look. "We forgot that the ring would be . . . in existence . . . once we sent you back. A silly mistake to make."

"But we made it, all the same," Aulë frowned and glared at something in the distance. "I blame the King." Yavanna elbowed him none too gently, but he shrugged. "We couldn't have sent Bilbo back without his permission. Which he gave! But for all he knows, he couldn't have mentioned the matter of the ring to us? How it would affect Bilbo?"

"I think he believed we had a plan for that," whispered Yavanna. She looked around surreptitiously as though Manwë would appear out of thin air. "We have no plan. But Elrond and Thranduil seemed to have come up with one on their own! So we left them to it. I hope you're not too angry with us."

Bilbo was quite speechless actually.

"Of course, we will do all in our power to help you," Yavanna continued, much more cheerful now that she had 'confessed'. "We do not interfere but since this is a special case, I think it can be overlooked."

"Indeed, the king himself has been keeping quite a close eye on the matter, too," Aulë said. "He did not even mention that he would be doing so!"

"What do you mean 'a close eye on the matter'?'" Bilbo demanded, suspicious once again.

"Nothing, nothing," said Yavanna with fake laughter. She gave a sharp jab to her husband’s stomach and he tried to look innocent as well. "The others wish to speak with you as well. But Irmo can only keep you here for short moments at a time. Expect their company and Frodoling's for the next few days or weeks while you are away from Rivendell and possibly after."

"What could they have to say to me?" Bilbo wondered, baffled.

Aulë rolled his eyes and shook his head, "They think they're helping but they're just meddling. It's the first time in a very long time that we've been allowed to directly interfere in someone's life. So, of course, everyone wants to be part of it."

"Don't roll your eyes," Yavanna reprimanded. "I would remind you of whose fault it is Bilbo is in this mess!"

Aulë cringed. "You know my reasoning!"

Yavanna frowned at him but decided to let the matter go for she knew where the dwarves had inherited their stubbornness. She turned back to Bilbo instead and said, "Nienna wanted to be here, as well. She blames herself for the problems you have with Olórin but the Queen said she's taking the matter into her own hands. I'm not sure what she meant by that though she looked rather amused as she said it." Aulë looked as clueless and worried as his wife. "Also, Vairë wanted to speak to you about weaving Frodoling's story."

"It appears she's having difficulties with it," Aulë explained. "We did not understand much of what she tried to explain, though. So you'll have to speak to her about it."

"I hope it's nothing serious," Yavanna said. "Difficult enough it was; keeping Frodo from wiping himself out of existence!"

"What about the eighth person who was sent back?" Bilbo asked, not wanting to hear about Frodo no longer existing. "Do you know who that is?"
"We do not," Yavanna replied.

"It was the King's choice," said Aulë. "He said he'd send someone to observe things when he could not. It might be one of his Maiar."

"Need he always be so cryptic?" Yavanna grumbled. "We know, at least, that it is not Olórin."

"A great shame," murmured Aulë. "At least then he would not cause so much trouble for our Hobbits."

"I believe it is someone who is fond of our Frodoling," Yavanna said.

"Fond of Frodo? Why so?" wondered Bilbo.

"Don't you know?" asked Aulë, bewildered.

"Know what?" Bilbo demanded, confused.

"How Frodoling would travel to Ilmarin, during the nights you would spend with Estë," explained Yavanna. "He went alone the first time and we did not discover it until he went the second time. He continued going alone and we know not what he did there."

"But the King and Queen appear quite fond of him," Aulë continued. "He would not send one of his own to keep an eye on things if he did not care about Frodo's well-being."

"The king is kind and compassionate," said Yavanna. "But he is also rather busy. He has a great task."

"I see," said Bilbo, blinking away his daze. "So even in Valinor, Frodo was sneaking off."

"Oh, quite often!" Yavanna laughed. "When he was not at your side, Frodoling could not keep himself still. Always running to and fro. Why do you think Tulkas calls him 'Fro-Fro'?"

"Such a silly name," Aulë added.

"I did not think much of it," Bilbo admitted. "I thought it was just Tulkas being Tulkas."

"Why, he even visited the Halls of Mandos!" continued Yavanna, looking quite perplexed. "He said he liked looking at the tapestries and that he often spoke with the spirits that dwelt there."

"Perhaps he tried to find some measure of peace," said Aulë.

"Or maybe he was simply very curious?" wondered Yavanna.

Bilbo began to feel quite tired suddenly and blinked blearily to keep himself awake. He half listened as Yavanna and Aulë told stories of Frodo's time in the Undying Lands. From his adventures with Elladan and Elrohir. To his first meeting with Glorfindel's friend, Ecthelion, who enjoyed singing as much as Frodo did. Though Frodo had been quite shy about singing with elves, he grew accustomed to it when they would not leave him alone! The elves all thought Frodo had quite a pleasant voice, for a Hobbit. Never mind that many of them had never before met a Hobbit! There was also that one time with Gildor . . . and then the business with the dress . . .

Bilbo came awake with a gasp and sat up abruptly as he fought to get air back into his lungs. He hoped Frodo did not have to deal with the same problem as he!

Elladan and Elrohir, who had sandwiched him between them, startled awake. Thranduil, who had
been putting out their campfire, was swift to go to Bilbo's side. A waterskin in hand, he helped the hobbit to take a gulp of water—as though that would help him get his breath back. Bilbo mentally rolled his eyes. For all of Thranduil's merits he could be quite idiotic when someone he cared for was in trouble.

Legolas and Glorfindel were the last to gather around.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Bilbo managed to gasp eventually. He pushed the waterskin away firmly until Thranduil understood that no, he did not want water, thank you.

"Pleasant dreams?" Thranduil asked, ignoring the exasperated look he received from the hobbit.

"It was, between falling asleep and waking," Bilbo admitted. "Frodo told me all about his first day without me."

"How is he?" asked Legolas, worried about the hobbitling. The elf had been unable to see Frodo before they had left. "Are they taking care of him?"

"There was a small incident halfway through the day," revealed Bilbo. "The dwarves ceased paying Frodo any attention and so he searched out Erestor to provide him with some."

"That will teach them," Glorfindel laughed. "I imagine Erestor kept him occupied in the library then."

"Frodo called it story-time," said Bilbo agreeably.

"He called it story-time when Erestor would tell him embarrassing stories about us," grouched Elladan as he and his brother sat up.

Elrohir glared at Glorfindel when the elf began laughing again. "Why do you laugh? Erestor told embarrassing stories about you the most." That immediately silenced Glorfindel and the others laughed at his expression.

"We should be getting along now," said Thranduil and he tossed a piece of lembas to Bilbo.

"I meant to ask you yesterday," Bilbo began, taking the bread from its leaf wrapping. "Where did you get these?"

"The Lady Yavanna gave him the recipe," revealed Legolas.

"The Lady Yavanna? So he baked these himself?" Bilbo wondered, amazed. "I thought the recipe was a close guarded secret."

"The Lady thought it would be prudent for someone among us to know it," Legolas explained, grinning. "She worried about the appetite of certain Hobbits."

"The recipe is only known among the Yavannildi," Glorfindel continued. His smile just as wide and mischievous as the others'. Bilbo looked around the group, realizing their amusement lay upon Thranduil. The Elvenking ignored their stares as he moved about the camp gathering their supplies.

"The Maidens of Yavanna."

"I do not understand," Bilbo said, confused by their amusement.

"It is custom for the recipe to be kept among the Elven Queens," whispered Elladan. His brother chortled and the others followed.
Legolas chuckled. "Father has become the first Elven King to know the recipe."

"Very amusing," Bilbo rolled his eyes but did not stop their lighthearted ribbing of Thranduil.

"As I said, we'd best be moving along now," Thranduil repeated, either ignoring or uncaring of the group's teasing.

"Quite right," Bilbo agreed. He gratefully accepted another piece of lembas offered to him by the Elvenking. "I hope you made plenty of these, in any case."

"Plenty enough for a hobbit and five elves," said Thranduil.

The elves were swift and proficient at gathering the supplies, so Bilbo sat off to the side and contemplated the dream as he ate his lembas. Soon they were on the road again, climbing the treacherous path of the mountain.

Bilbo wished desperately that he had longer legs—they would have looked awfully silly on him, he knew—but the climb might not have been so arduous or slow if his legs were longer. The elves had grown accustomed to accommodating the shorter legs of a hobbit—Frodo's shorter legs, in fact—so slowed their pace to match Bilbo's.

It was all rather frustrating. He dreaded the thought of arriving at their destination but the slow pace was just as dreadful as the journey.

The path was long, dangerous, and narrow and often Bilbo slipped. Elf hands caught him before he could fall to his untimely death. Sometimes Thranduil would just gather him up—despite his many, many protests—and carry him along.

The further they climbed along the mountain, the colder it became. Thranduil and Legolas, who had adapted to the cold weather of the North, did not feel the biting wind as deeply as their companions. Elladan and Elrohir grumbled at each other through clattering teeth, huddling close together for any smidgen of warmth.

"I recall now why it is we never visit Legolas," said Elladan haltingly.

"We did that once," Elrohir pointed out.

"Once, and," Elladan grumbled, "we were bedridden the entire visit."

"I do believe that was due to the broken legs you both sported upon arriving," Thranduil added helpfully.

"There were giants," Elrohir muttered. "I am amazed we survived." Elrohir wholeheartedly agreed but the others merely rolled their eyes at the twin's dramatics.

It was to their great luck that there were no giants as they climbed the mountain path, a matter of which Bilbo had greatly worried. He did not think the giants were cruel at heart but they were careless and often did not think about those smaller than they.

The rain stopped by mid-afternoon on the third day, though it was still chilly and very, very windy. Several times a strong gust of wind hit Bilbo and all but knocked him silly, if he'd been any smaller or lighter he would have surely been carried off!

They made camp every night in nooks, gaps, and well searched caves. Most often the caves they found were too small to allow for five tall elves and Bilbo refused to stay in them, no matter how safe
they were. His conscience would not let him rest if his friends were not safe along with him.

Meanwhile, his nightly dream visits from Frodo and the Valar continued. Frodo told him all about his exciting days, which he spent doing many exciting things.

Mister Bifur taught him new signs, revealed Frodo, and then he proceeded to show Bilbo all the new signs he had learned. One for "crown", which Frodo put together with "flower" to make "flower crown". Mister Bifur said Frodo was very smart—although Frodo did not know what "smart" meant. Bilbo had been surprised at his son's happiness when told it meant he had good hobbit-sense.

Erestor read to him every night before he went to sleep. No doubt it bothered Thorin, Bilbo thought, but the dwarf had managed to remain civil so far.

Sometimes Mister Dwalin played with him while the other dwarves gave each other ouchies. Mister Dwalin had explained that it was a dwarf thing and not for little hobbits.

One night Frodo was quite grumpy and refused to tell Bilbo about his day. Instead he sat himself on his father's lap and cuddled against him, expression petulant and grumpy. In the end, Yavanna revealed it had been an upsetting day for Frodo as the hobbitling had thrown a tantrum.

Thorin did not lay him down for naps and it was clear the hobbitling had had enough. At least Thorin had learned from the experience and would lay Frodo down to nap henceforth. Frodo did not want to get in trouble for misbehaving, so he remained mulish and silent the entire visit. Even leveling a glare at Aulë when the smith tried to make him smile by tickling his belly.

Aside from Frodo's much anticipated visits, Bilbo also dealt with the Valar themselves. Irmo had trouble calling Bilbo's dreams for three nights. He was always apologetic when the hobbit arrived dizzy and unable to breathe.

"Frodo comes easy enough with just a pull," Irmo revealed, bewildered. "It is much harder with you."

Even so by the fourth night Irmo pulled Bilbo's dream with ease and without harm to the hobbit, who was grateful for the development.

Vairë, who ever wove her storied webs, her tapestries, also had a hobbit problem, though she with Frodo and not Bilbo. She showed Bilbo the tapestry she worked on but there was not much of it to see. Some blue at the top which might have been the sky, a golden rounded shape in a corner that might turn into the sun or something else.

"This is a special tapestry I weave for Frodo," she explained, handling the floor loom with care as she ran her fingers along the top. "It is slow in coming and erratic at times, but he is a babe so that's expected. Already we have changed the future of this world; it is exciting to think about, do you not agree? I can recall how the tapestry of the other future looked and it is quite different from the one that I weave now. You should come see it sometime."

"Err, that sounds lovely," Bilbo managed when she looked at him expectantly.

"I do not often weave a single person's story," she continued, satisfied with his stuttered agreement for the moment. "So this is a special occasion. There are many things you do not yet understand, Bilbo. But all will come to light, eventually." She lightly traced the golden circle in the corner. It was not perfectly circled, perhaps it would become an oval. From Bilbo's perspective it had begun to look an awful lot like the Arkenstone.

But he shoved the thought from his mind and concentrated on her sudden subject change. "What do I
"All in good time, dear Bilbo," Vairë said. She took one of his hands between hers, smiling mischievously. "The king will surely explain everything, in time."

Bilbo frowned. "I've heard several mentions of the king. Everyone seems to believe that he is quite fond of Frodo."

"Of course, he would not visit the child everyday if it were not so," she revealed carelessly.

"In his dreams, you mean?" he demanded.

Vairë stared at him blankly before laughing breezily. "Of course! In his dreams, that is what I meant."

Bilbo had no time to question her further, for he began to feel quite sleepy. He tried to make note to question her or one of the others next time but the thought swiftly left his mind as he woke.

They reached the secret entrance to Goblin-town a week after leaving Rivendell. They spent the first day canvassing the area and made camp behind a large rock formation that provided cover. Legolas and Elrohir took turns watching the entrance while the others rested, gleaning information. The goblins were lax with their security, keeping only two guards on either side of the closed door at all times. Their lack of regard for their safety was appalling. Yet none of them had expected better and at least their entrance into the mountain would be simple.

The next day they waited for the guards to switch. The two that had been guarding the door were soon relieved of their duties and replaced with another two goblins. One of which immediately went to sleep leaning against his spear. Legolas and Elrohir took up their bows and shot the goblin guards, both fell over dead, their poorly crafted armor clattering against the rocks.

They stood in silence, waiting to see if the goblins inside had heard but the door remained tightly closed. After that, it was a quick matter taking care of the ones inside when Glorfindel knocked a rock against the door and it opened after a few seconds of silence.

"What is it now?" growled one of the goblin guards opening the door. Neither had time to say more or even notice the elves before their heads were cleaved from their bodies and they, too, fell over dead.

Glorfindel was the first to enter the mountain and hit his head on the low ceiling, to Bilbo's consternation.

"Sorry, I should have warned you," the hobbit hissed. "The path is narrow and the ceiling often low."

"How are we to move about in here?" wondered Elladan. "It is not easy to see either. I am an elf, not an owl."

Bilbo was about to suggest he go on alone, but Thranduil—despite being unable to see his expression—knew him far too well.

"Don't even think about it," he said, rather menacingly, in fact. "We did not accompany you all this way just so you could face this alone. We're going with you."
"Indeed!" Glorfindel grumbled, rubbing at the spot on his head where he had bumped against the ceiling. "Let us use these crudely made goblin torches to light our way. I'd rather use them than our swords."

"Right, I don't want someone stabbing me by accident," agreed Elrohir, who like Legolas did not carry a sword but a bow.

Bilbo led the way through the narrow passage. He would have used Sting to light the way but it did not glow for there were no goblins near enough—not alive, at least. Instead he used the smallest torch they could find, though it still required him to wrap both hands around it.

He hissed in pain when sharp rocks protruding from the walls jabbed him on the side. He could hear the grunts and hisses of the elves themselves, who had to all but walk on their knees to get through the passage.

"I think I'd rather go through Goblin-town to get back out than through here again," someone grouched.

"That's an idea," someone else hissed. "You'd rather fight off an entire mountain of goblins—"

"Silence!" Thranduil growled back at them. The elves grumbled but soon fell silent.

The path which had been leading down steeply began to become wider and wider. Finally it opened up so that the elves could finally push themselves to their feet and walk behind Bilbo with more ease. The further they walked, the more familiar their surroundings became to Bilbo and the faster his heart began to thud in his chest.

The tunnel led into a familiar place and Bilbo stopped, listening for the telltale sound of water dripping from the roof into a pool below. The elves stayed back, eyes narrowed as they tried to see into the darkness. Bilbo ventured forth towards the pool, torch still held tightly in both hands despite it not lighting up much of the way ahead of him. A bit of light entered the damp cave from a hole in the ceiling and reflected across the water, so he could see better the closer to it he walked.

There was a low sound, a soft splash, and ripples across the water. He placed the torch upon a rock near by, making sure it would not roll off before turning to face the shadowy form of Gollum. Bilbo could see the creature's hunched form moving around the shadows and waited with one hand on Sting's hilt.

Gollum seemed confused by his presence, unsure whether to sneak closer or not. Bilbo wondered if he should take the initiative when the creature remained still, half hidden behind a large boulder.

He probably wondered why Bilbo stood there, the hobbit realized, and rolled his eyes at himself. Of course it would look suspicious for a strange person to appear in his cave and stand around looking tense.

He took a moment to calm his racing heart as he knelt before the water, dipping his fingers in and retracting them immediately with a hiss. The water was cold. The act appeared enough to ease Gollum's misgivings, if the heavy breathing that sounded closer and closer was any indication.

Bilbo waited as Gollum drew nearer and nearer to his kneeling form; until the creature was within arm's reach. Swiftly and with stunning accuracy, Bilbo turned, drawing Sting from its sheath as he went. He had the knife pointed at Gollum in an instant, just a hair's breadth from cutting the foul creature's throat.

Gollum cried out in shock, throwing himself back against the ground. Even with the low light in the
cave, Bilbo could see how his eyes bulged with shock even as he tried to get his bearings. The creature scrambled to his feet but did not back away, eyes shining with curiosity. Bilbo knew he did not look particularly menacing, even with his little knife, but Gollum was a cautious creature.

"What is it, precious?" the creature wondered.

Bilbo was silent as the creature assessed him. He watched the wretched face as the eyes narrowed before clearing once again.

"It's got an elfish blade," said Sméagol.

The face clouded over and Gollum spoke. "But it's not an elfs."

"Not an elfs, no," Sméagol agreed. "What is it, precious? What is it?"

"What I am is none of your concern," Bilbo interrupted. He held Sting steady in his hands, still pointed at Gollum. "Tell me, Gollum. Have you lost anything precious lately?"

The creature's attitude changed in an instant; eyes narrowing and mouth snarling as he screamed. "It's ours! It's ours!" He turned to run away, crying out when he discovered the path blocked by five elves, swords and bows ready. "Elfses! It's our precious, ours!"

"Bilbo," Thranduil said.

Gollum cried, a litany of "no, no, no" as he scrambled around the small space, trying to find a way to escape. He grew silent and still, eyes wide and full of terror, as Bilbo approached him, the elves moving in closer to form a circle around them. The hobbit held Sting out, as steady as he could, a dull roar in his ears as he gathered the courage needed to slay the beast.

Time passed. Only Bilbo's heavy breathing heard in the cavern. The elves said nothing, they remained silent in their vigil and did not push the hobbit to act, allowing him to take his time.

Bilbo startled when Legolas turned with swift abruptness, shooting an arrow into the darkness. Something fell to the ground, dead. The sound echoed in the cavern even as Gollum took the chance and pushed Bilbo aside.

Several hands caught the hobbit and steadied him on his feet as Gollum made a break for it, running out of the cavern screaming, "It's ours! You can't takes it, it's ours!"

"We can't let him escape!" Bilbo cried. Already on his feet and running after Gollum. They followed the creature down many tunnels but even the elves were not swift enough to catch him. Not when the passages were often small and narrow and Gollum knew the paths better than any of them. Bilbo grit his teeth and came to a decision, "Legolas, shoot him! Don't let him escape, shoot him!"

The elf only needed one second to spy his target and let his arrow fly. Gollum fell to the ground, dead, the arrow protruding from his back. The group took a moment canvas the scene. In the silence they heard shrill cries in the distance, growing closer and closer. It appeared Gollum's screaming had attained the goblins' attention.

"Bilbo, quick, the ring!" Glorfindel cried.

Gollum held the One Ring tight in his hand, reluctant to let it go even in death. Bilbo pulled aside the fingers, not daring to touch the gold ring itself he used the box he'd received to scoop it from the open palm. He secured the box in one of his pockets, confidant that it would not fall out.
"How do we get out?" Legolas asked, looking about with narrowed eyes. "I do not know where we are."

"It's like a maze in here, we'll never find the secret entrance," Thranduil murmured.

They all turned as one when a shrill cry drew their attention. The goblin fell dead from Elrohir's arrow before it could call to the others of its kind.

"We can't stay here, we have to move," Glorfindel said. Another goblin rounded the corner. Shot dead before it fully came into view. "Run!"

The goblins were on them in an instant, climbing the walls and jumping from somewhere above. With Thranduil at his back Bilbo swung his blade before him, taking down goblins left and right. He did not worry about watching behind him, trusting the Elvenking to guard his back.

They were being corralled somewhere, to Goblin-town no doubt. They had no choice but to keep backing away as they hacked and slashed at the goblin horde. Up and up they climbed. Along a crude path made of wooden beams tied together, running across bridges. Killing whatever monster crossed their path.

Until a great beast of a goblin with a crown on its head cut off their retreat, its massive body shaking the bridge with every step.

"Well, lookie here! Elves, in my kingdom!" the Great Goblin said. He eyed Bilbo with a hungry gleam in his eyes. "And what's this? You bring a child along?"

Bilbo said nothing, tightening his grip on Sting and readjusting his footing. He could take the Great Goblin by surprise, if nothing else. Elrohir shifted slightly, ready to let his arrow fly at the massive being.

Bilbo would never understand what happened next. Only that the mountain shook and in his surprise Elrohir suddenly shot an arrow into the darkness far above them. The young elf looked at his bow, unsure of what he'd done and even the goblins fell silent at what followed.

A low rumbling began, like a distant thunderstorm growing ever closer. Goblins shrieked as a large piece of rock fell upon the path, smashing a few of them underneath its weight. The rumbling did not cease, only growing louder and louder, and the ground shook as more rocks fell from the darkness of the ceiling.

"What did you do?" Elladan demanded of his twin.

"Uh, not to be redundant but . . . run!" Glorfindel shouted.

They shoved past the befuddled Great Goblin, who stumbled to the side with a cry of surprise, losing his footing. He fell off the side of the bridge with a scream. The group did to look back at the sound, shoving and slashing past shrieking goblins. The creatures tried to save themselves from falling rocks and stop the group at the same time.

"Where are we going? I don't know where we're going!" someone cried. Bilbo thought it might have been himself.

He came to a screeching halt when Thranduil grabbed him by the waist. A large rock fell upon the path and rolled down, flattening the goblins in its way. There was a light in the distance and though the path led towards it, it was too dark to see if the path did end there.
The goblins who did not stop to fight them were running along the path and the group followed close at hand. Bilbo wondered if Thranduil had forgotten about him, as the elf did not put him down. He carried the hobbit underneath his arm like a sack of potatoes.

But even from his strange location Bilbo was able to hack at a goblin who got too close to the Elvenking from behind. From his perspective, facing the back, Bilbo could not see where they were going but he could see from whence they'd come. He did not like the look of it either; bridges had fallen, there were great gaps all over, and no where to go should they have to turn back. If the path they were following led to a dead end, there would be no turning back.

As soon as the thought settled the group reached the entrance and Bilbo thanked the Valar.

"The exit is caving, hurry!" Elladan or Elrohir shouted. They tended to sound alike when panicked, Bilbo noticed.

Then Bilbo flew through the air; there was a sharp pain on the side of his head as he crashed to the ground. His vision blurred for a moment and he must have blacked out for a second. He heard Legolas shouting for his father, Elladan and Elrohir were shouting for him, and still a great rumbling.

His vision cleared and he focused on the most pressing matter first. Thranduil lay upon the ground, his leg caught beneath the rocks that blocked the entrance of Goblin-town. Legolas was attempting to move the rocks. They shifted precariously, threatening to fall like an avalanche. Glorfindel, Elladan, and Elrohir held back the horde of goblins who had managed to escape.

A great rumbling interrupted the fighting. Bilbo noticed a pair of stone-giants playing nearby. They were tossing giant rocks back and forth. One of the stone-giants missed a catch and the rock hurled over his head. It smashed against the side of the mountain, shaking the ground and tossing Bilbo off his feet.

Another rock hit the other giant in the head. The rock fell down into the forest, shattering trees and scattering birds who still lingered nearby.

The goblins screeched at each other. Unsure whether to continue fighting or run for their lives at the presence of the stone-giants.

"Glorfindel, help Legolas with Thranduil!" Bilbo ordered, continuing when the blonde elf made to argue. "Elladan and Elrohir will hold them back. You have to pull Thranduil out while Legolas shifts the rocks."

"But the goblins-" Glorfindel tried to argue.

Bilbo pushed to his feet and shouted at the stone-giants, waving his arms above his head. A few birds also began to shrill at the giants until the closest one turned and ventured nearer. He leaned in closer to take a good look at Bilbo and smiled, doubtlessly finding him strange and adorable, as many Big Folk did.

As the giant moved back a spear caught him in the eye. He let out a great bellow that drew the attention of his companion. Bilbo threw himself to the ground as a flailing hand almost knocked into him, feeling a great wind lashing over his body.

"Get down!" he shouted at the others, voice almost lost to the wind.

Elladan and Elrohir quickly did as told, flattening themselves to the ground. The goblins, panicked and in disarray, began throwing their spears at the giants. The giants were furious and crushed the goblins underneath their fists. The ones that survived ran and the giants followed them.
In the commotion Glorfindel and Legolas managed to draw Thranduil's leg out from beneath the rocks. The Elvenking grunted, hissing as his leg shifted. Bilbo moved to his side, looking the leg over with a critical eye. The leg slanted at a slight angle but the skin was not broken.

"Bilbo?" Legolas asked, worried.

"It's fractured," Bilbo said. He turned to Elladan and Elrohir, both looking paler than usual. "I need you to find at least two sturdy pieces of wood. One about this length," he indicated from Thranduil's ankle to his hipbone, "and the other half that. Understand?"

The twins nodded simultaneously and ran off into the forest to do as told. By the time they returned Thranduil's leg had been pushed back into proper alignment. The Elvenking was pale and sweating, his breath coming in heavy pants. Legolas ripped a piece of his cloak to pieces. They placed the wood on either side of Thranduil's leg and used the cloth to bind them together.

"This will have to do. Get him up," Bilbo decided, after thoroughly checking the splint. "Gently!"

Glorfindel and Legolas helped the Elvenking to his feet. He used them as crutches as he tested the makeshift splint.

"We have to get out of here, the goblins could return at any minute," the hobbit continued as he fretted at Thranduil. "Thranduil, will you be all right?"

Thranduil huffed, smile crooked and face pale. "I've survived worse, Bilbo."

They slowly made their way around the mountain, trying to ascertain where they were. Elladan and Elrohir jumped from tree to tree, hoping to find something that looked familiar.

"I think we're lost," Elrohir announced. "We can't wander around like this hoping to find our way."

"No, we can't," Bilbo fretted.

"Do you-do you still have the One Ring, at least?" Thranduil asked, face twisted in a grimace as he leaned against his son.

Bilbo froze, reaching into his pocket to withdraw the box. He shared a look with everyone before gathering his courage and propping the lid open. Nestled at the bottom of the box was the ring, silent and still. Dormant. The lid snapped shut.

"Yes," he squeaked then clearing his throat. "We have it."

The shrill cries of birds sounded overhead, drawing their attention. Despite Thranduil's injury and bumps and bruises all around, Bilbo was rather pleased. They had done what they'd set out to do. They had recovered the One Ring.

Chapter End Notes

- Mister Nibbles: (the stuffed rabbit Bilbo made for Frodo) Manwë
- Mister Dorf: (the nicely carved dwarf toy Bifur gave Frodo) Aulë
- Mister Thor: (the badly carved but much loved horse toy Thorin gave Frodo, which was named after him, too) Tulkas
- Lady Anna: (the strange faceless sack doll Estel gifted Frodo) Yavanna
All Silmarillion characters based on Gerwell's artwork, found here and here.
When Frodo woke that morning he was not happy. He was rather sad, in fact. He had not seen his Papa in his dreams as he had grown accustomed. He had refused many hugs and kisses after Yavanna told him he couldn't see his Papa.

A great rumbling noise from the other side of the bed startled him from his gloomy thoughts. He turned his head to peer at the dwarf sleeping there.

The monster in Adad's chest was talking again. Sometimes it talked and talked all night long and Frodo had to cover his head with the blanket so he couldn't hear. Other times he liked to lay his head on Adad's chest and listen to the monster.

It was not one of those times, however. Frodo was much too sad to listen to the monster talk. He shuffled over to the dwarf, leaning in close to look at his face before bestowing a big kiss on his cheek.

Satisfied that his Adad would be all right by himself for a while, Frodo grasped Mister Nibbles by the ear and slid down the side of the bed on his belly. He ignored the inquisitive whispers of the others, taking a moment to peek underneath the bed.

There were no monsters hiding there. Why would there be? Adad always checked to make sure nothing and no one was making their home under the bed. That was Frodo's hiding place and there was no room for any monsters!

With a nod at that thought, Frodo crawled under the bed, being careful not to hit his head.

Although the bed, created with a Hobbit or even a Dwarf in mind, was small. Frodo was still small enough that he could sit underneath without fear of bumping his head. Despite this, Frodo knew to be cautious as Bilbo constantly reiterated that one could never be too careful!

The hobbitling pulled at a pillow that had fallen on the floor. Dragging it underneath the bed with him with a few grunts and heaves. It was much too big for him to lay his head upon, so he crawled atop it and wiggled around until he was comfortable.

Mister Nibbles settled at his side and the hobbitling wrapped an arm around him. He took a moment to squeeze the rabbit in a hug, taking comfort from his knitted body.

Once the babe was comfortable on the pillow, the rabbit launched into a story. Distracting the babe from his sad and worried thoughts. Frodo was happy to recognize the beginnings of a tale about Telperion and Laurelin. The Two Trees of Valinor.

He nibbled on one of the rabbit's ears as he listened. He liked trees. Papa said trees were like big flowers and Frodo liked flowers. But these trees were very special because they had names! One of them was gold and the other one was silver, not green like the trees Frodo had seen.

He wanted to see the trees. But they were gone now and no one knew where they were. Although Mister Nibbles said that the trees would return someday and Frodo could see them then!

He wondered if the trees had gone on an adventure like Frodo? That just made them more special!
Because normal trees didn't go on adventures, just like normal Hobbits didn't go on adventures either.

Papa and Frodo were very special Hobbits, explained Mister Nibbles. Someday Frodo would look upon the Two Trees of Valinor. When the trees returned from their adventure.

Frodo wondered if his Papa would like to see them, too?

Then he remembered that he hadn't seen his Papa for a whole day! Papa had promised to see him! You weren't supposed to break your promises. That's what Papa and Mister Nibbles said. Frodo didn't know what a "promise" was but it sounded important! If Papa promised to see Frodo again, then he had to see Frodo! He couldn't see Frodo if he didn't come during sleep time!

Frodo rubbed his head, confused. He didn't know what he was talking about. Sometimes he had big thoughts that were confusing. He thought once in a while that he should be taller than his Papa. Only that wasn't right. He was only a little hobbit, how could he possibly be taller than his Papa?

Mister Nibbles hastily assured him that it did not matter and launched into another story. One about the Silmarils.

Before long, Frodo fell asleep again, clutching Mister Nibbles close.

Thorin woke as he always did; very, very slowly. Immediately reaching for the little body that slept at his side to pull it closer. Customarily he would bestow half-awake kisses upon a tiny, chubby face that would lead to giggles and little hands pushing him away.

But instead of a tiny body, his hand touched cold, empty sheets. He grasped around a little before reaching further. He opened his eyes, groggy and confused, when he reached the edge of the bed.

The lack of sleeping hobbitling at his side bewildered him for a moment before the panic set in. He threw the sheets back to see if the hobbitling had gotten turned around during the night again. But he did not find any tiny hobbits underneath the blankets. He checked over the side of the bed to see if the hobbitling had fallen off. But there were no little hobbits there either.

Thorin jumped out of bed, kneeling to reach for the boots he recalled kicking under the bed. He stopped short. Squinting into the dark space underneath the bed he spied a tiny body near the center, half his body hanging over a pillow.

"Frodo?" he called, baffled. "What are you doing under there?"

The hobbitling yawned, blinking for a few seconds before turning his back on the dwarf.

Thorin sputtered. "Frodo Baggins! Are you going to stay under there?"

The hobbitling grumbled in agreement and did not turn. With a grunt and a heave, Thorin pushed himself underneath the bed. It was not an easy fit and he had to wriggle and squirm quite a bit to reach the babe, who turned to gaze at him in curiosity.

"Well then," Thorin panted and tried to catch his breath. Perhaps not the best idea, to go trying to fit into places too small for the likes him. He had no idea how he would be getting back out again.

"You gave me quite a fright, little one. Why are you sleeping under here?"

Frodo's face crumbled, "Papa-papa?"
"Och! There, there, little one," Thorin grunted and cursed as he tried to bring his arms about to encircle the hobbitling. He tucked Frodo against his chest, humming a familiar tune until the babe stopped sniffling.

Wet eyes gazed at him, a small hand flailed in the air aimlessly until Thorin caught it with his own. Frodo's fingers could scarcely wrap around the thumb and the dwarf smiled fondly at the sight. "I know wherever he is, he's missing you just as much as you miss him. He's always thinking about you. He will return."

The hobbitling made an inquisitive noise, his large blue eyes full of questions. "Fo?"

"Aye. He's thinking about Frodo," Thorin continued, galvanised. "Wondering if Frodo is behaving. If he's eating all his food and taking baths."

"Baff!" Frodo exclaimed.

"You have been taking your baths, haven't you?" Thorin asked.

"Baff," Frodo nodded, expression serious.

"You've also been behaving, aye? Have you been good?"

Frodo giggled, gazing at the dwarf without any understanding. He recognized a few words but listening to it all strung together was terribly confusing for the hobbitling.

Despite his lack of understanding, he liked that people talked to him. Always paying rapt attention to the words and tone of voice and watching people's expressions.

He learned fast, as Thorin had discovered.

"Ba-ee," Frodo said, reaching for the braid that dangled above him. He examined the bead closely, tracing the patterns with his little fingers. He held the braided hair up triumphantly. "Bees!"

"Beads," Thorin corrected automatically.

"Bees," Frodo agreed.

"Once your hair has grown longer, we'll braid it and put some beads in," Thorin said. He ran his fingers through the fine, curly hair, considering—not for the first time—how difficult it would be to braid it. "Would you like that?"

The babe hummed, leaning up into the hand petting his head. He yawned widely, smacking his lips as he settled against the dwarf's warmth.

Thorin readjusted himself so he could lay his head on Frodo's pillow. He heard the sound of running feet and boots squeaked as they rubbed against the pristine floor. He groaned, startling Frodo as he tried to squeeze himself further underneath the bed.

The hobbitling was quick to rescue Mister Nibbles before Thorin could squish him, grumbling to himself and petting the rabbit's ears. His ears perked at the sound of the door opening and he sat up with sudden alertness.

"Shh," Thorin hushed. The hobbitling blinked at him with wide eyes but put his index finger up to his lips. "That's right. Shh."

Frodo bounced on his knees, excited, at hearing the perplexed voices of Fili and Kili.
"Uncle Thorin?" came Fili's voice.

"Frodo?" called Kili's voice at the same time.

"Shh," Thorin tried to calm the excited hobbitling.

Frodo covered his mouth, trying to contain his giggles. They were playing his favorite game; hide and seek!

Thorin smiled and huffed, exasperated, as the hobbitling began shortling behind his hands, unable to control his mirth.

"Are they hiding under the bed?" Kili whispered loudly to his brother.

". . . That is how it appears," Fili managed to respond after a moment's thought.

"How did Uncle Thorin fit under there?" Kili paused. "Do you think we can fit?"

Frodo squealed when Kili knelt to peer under the bed. "Kee! Hide!"

Kili laughed. "Are you playing hide and seek again?" He squirmed and wiggled into the small space, stilling only a moment to receive the kiss Frodo bestowed upon his cheek.

"Fee!" Frodo shouted as the blonde haired dwarf joined his brother from another side.

Fili huffed and smiled fondly. While Frodo was terribly pleased that the dwarves were surrounding him.

He gurgled and grabbed at Fili's braids, ignoring the blonde dwarf's expectant and puckered face. He gave Fili a distracted kiss on his temple when the dwarf poked him in the belly, still pulling at the braids. Fili's braids were his favorite.

Mister Bofur had a funny beard and Mister Nori had funny hair but Frodo liked Fili's beard the best. Aside from Adad's, of course. Because when he rubbed his hand or his face against Adad's face, it tickled!

"So what are we doing under here?" Kili wondered.

"Pway! Hide!" Frodo shouted, giggling and clapping his hands.

"Who are we hiding from?" Fili asked curiously.

Frodo shrugged his little shoulders. "Who?"

"That's what I was wondering," Fili tickled the hobbitling's belly.

"Won'ry?" Frodo echoed.

"Why does he always repeat the first or last words you say?" Kili grumbled.

"He likes me best, obviously," Fili sniggered.

Frodo took one look at Kili's saddened face and Fili's gleeful one and placed his fists on his hips, frowning at the blonde haired dwarf. Fili looked reasonably apologetic but Frodo was having none of that.
The hobbitling crawled across the floor to Kili's side and pat him on the head. "Dere, dere."

It was such a Thorin thing to do that Fili and Kili couldn't contain their laughter. Frodo laughed right along with them, which only served to fuel their laughter even more.

The hobbitling quieted suddenly, head turning towards the door and ears twitching. He smiled widely after a moment of bewildered silence, "On!"

Ignoring the dwarves' protests, Frodo crawled out from beneath the bed. He held his arms up at the elf who had quietly entered the room.

Elrond chuckled. He couldn't lift the baby into his arms with the tray in his hands so he set it down upon the small baby-sized table Erestor had put together. He raised a single eyebrow at the sight of the dwarves trying to get out from under the bed as he lifted Frodo into his arms.

"Time to eat, little one," he said.

The babe gave him a wet kiss on his cheek. Giggling as he brought his arms around the elf's neck as much as he could.

"What have you been up to?" he asked, throwing another look at the struggling dwarves. It took all his self control to remain calm and not laugh.

"Hide!" Frodo exclaimed and pushed himself back so he could look at Elrond in the eyes, he lifted a finger to his lips. "Shh."

"I see. Should we leave them to it then?" He sat Frodo on the extravagant pillow someone had left by the table. From the intricate patterns embroidered at the sides, Elrond knew it was one of Estel's. "We have some of your favorite foods here-"

Thorin's loudly cursing voice caught their attention. Frodo's more so than Elrond's as the hobbitling immediately twisted to look at the bed.

"Oh-oh!" he cried, pointing.

Fili was the only one able to pull himself easily from beneath the bed and was attempting to help his brother out by pulling at his feet. Thorin had to fend for himself as he twisted and squirmed.

Hobbitling and elf observed as Fili finally gave up on his brother. Instead he grasped the edge of the bed and lifted with a grunt. Kili and Thorin finally managed to slide out, shaking themselves off even as Thorin rubbed at his lower back.

"Adadada!" Frodo called, beckoning with his hand for the dwarf to join him.

"He's not dressed yet," Thorin grumbled, crossing his arms as he glared at the elf balefully.

Elrond regarded Frodo with fond amusement. The hobbitling returned his attention to the food before him. He concentrated on using a spoon to eat the applesauce, making loud exclamations of "mm!" and "yum!" when he found something to his liking.

"He is already eating, it would be a shame to disturb him now," Elrond replied.

Thorin conceded the point. The dwarves waited patiently as Elrond presented Frodo with a bottle. The hobbitling took one look at it and squealed loudly, all but tearing it out of the startled elf's hand.

"Tea!" Frodo proclaimed happily. He showed the bottle to Thorin. "Tea."
"What do you say to Lord Elrond?" Thorin asked.

"Thank you," Frodo signed, then blew the elf a kiss for good measure.

"Lindir will fetch Frodo in one hour for learning," Elrond said to Thorin. "I shall take my leave." He bowed to them and Frodo, who was already shouting about "Li'deer!"

"Frodo, eat," Thorin intoned.

The hobbitling leveled a strangely familiar look at him, holding a spoonful of food in the air that he'd been about to eat. Fili and Kili sniggered, taking off at a run when Thorin leveled his own glare at them.

While Frodo ate and babbled to himself and whatever object caught his eye, Thorin dressed himself for the morning.

After breakfast, Frodo spent the morning in the library with Lindir and Erestor. The elves took time off their busy schedules to teach Frodo new words. Though Thorin was loathe to admit it, they'd done a good job thus far. Frodo's vocabulary had grown by leaps and bounds and his pronunciations were coming along as well.

The only problem they had encountered thus far was Frodo's lack of mobility aside from crawling.

Lord Elrond had expressed concern over Frodo's mobility issues. Perhaps he was not yet old enough to walk but oftentimes the babe had trouble even sitting or rolling over. He crawled easily and quickly but anything else appeared to be a chore.

As Thorin watched, Frodo began tipping sideways. Thankfully the pillow he sat upon was large enough that when he fell to the side he remained on it. The hobbitling appeared confused by his position, grunting as he tried to push himself over. It took him a few tries but he managed to roll onto his stomach, from there he attempted to push himself around so he could sit but ended up on his back again.

He giggled and drank from his bottle.

They did not know enough about Hobbits and their children to know if Frodo's mobility problems were normal or not. There was nothing to do but wait for Bilbo's return.

Thorin managed to get the babe cleaned and dressed presentably by the time Lindir arrived to take him.

Óin had given Thorin some ointment for the baby's teething pains, which the dwarf king applied to Frodo's gums every morning.

Frodo refused to leave without Mister Nibbles, abandoned beneath the bed. Neither Lindir nor Thorin could get underneath to grab the rabbit. They allowed the hobbitling to retrieve his friend with much reluctance.

The babe was momentarily distracted by the pillow he'd left under the bed. He crawled atop it and lay down on his stomach, kicking his legs and making random noises. While Thorin and Lindir tried to get his attention.

"I think Erestor prepared some cookies-" Lindir revealed, although it was to be a surprise.

"Hoo'kee?" Frodo interrupted, sitting up so fast the top of his head grazed the bottom of the bed.
Thorin thought his heart would explode from his chest as it began beating wildly.

Frodo remained unaware of his Adad's predicament. He crawled towards Lindir but doubled back because he couldn't forget Mister Nibbles! Mister Nibbles liked cookies as well. Frodo knew this just like he knew normal rabbits didn't eat cookies because it made them sick!

"Hoo'kee," Frodo repeated to himself. He grasped at Lindir's leg and pulled himself up with a huff and a heave. "Up!"

"Up?" Lindir asked.

"Up plees," Frodo said, smiling happily. "Up plees!"

"Please," the elf corrected.


"Please," Lindir said, loudly and clearly. He gathered the hobbitling in his arms and carried him out of the room. Stopping in the doorway so the babe could blow Thorin a kiss.

Frodo's voice repeating "please" echoed down the hallway and Thorin chuckled. If there was one thing he was grateful to the elves for, it was their seemingly endless patience. Especially when dealing with a curious hobbitling.

While Frodo had learning time in the library with Erestor and Lindir, the dwarves had breakfast and morning practice in the garden. It had been to Thorin's great shock to learn that there were no training areas in Rivendell. They had an archery range, which Kili made good use of, but if they wanted to sword practice they either had to go into the woods or use the garden.

As Thorin did not wish to leave Frodo in the care of the elves for too long, they settled for using the gardens. They all were very careful not to step on any flower beds. It had been amusing the first few times until they realized the hobbitling became most upset when he discovered the trampled flowers.

The dwarves gathered together for lunch and even the Wizard appeared from wherever it was he vanished to to join them. Often times Estel and his mother, Gilraen, would join the group as well but only if Frodo was among them. The hobbitling would sometimes be too tired to eat lunch with the group.

After lunch Bifur, if he wasn't too busy carving toys—presumably for Frodo—, would take the hobbitling aside to a quiet place, often the gardens. Bofur joined them and the others would stop by once in a while to check on them.

Estel was in the library and taught by Lindir at that time, so there was no worry of him suddenly appearing and disrupting them.

Bifur taught Frodo new signs while Bofur translated their meaning to the Common Tongue and—unbeknownst to the others—sometimes even Khuzdul. They had taught him a sign for "wizard" as Frodo often called Gandalf "tall man". He also called others "tall man" so it was hard telling of whom he spoke.

The babe was soon calling Gandalf "crazy wizard", as Thorin would often grumble under his breath. Very often the little one would simply copy everything his "adad" would say and do. If not for Frodo's furry feet, the elves and even the dwarves would have been hard pressed to remember that the hobbitling was not truly Thorin's son.
No one quite knew who had told Frodo to call Thorin "adad". Bifur and Bofur had not gotten around to teaching him those words yet.

Dwalin was a likely suspect. He would often use "adad" to denote Thorin when speaking to Frodo. But the dwarf denied the accusation. The baby had called Thorin his "adad" long before Dwalin had, argued the dwarf.

Thorin was angry that someone would tell the babe to call him "adad" when Frodo did not know its meaning.

Once the hobbitling lost interest in practicing Iglishmêk, he crawled to the flowers. He spent a short time chattering at the cocoon hanging from the stem of a purple flower.

"A bearded iris," explained Lord Elrond to the befuddled dwarves, amused. "They do tend to attract a fair share of butterflies."

"Buffly!" Frodo agreed, all that was visible of him was his little bottom, as the rest of him was laying amongst the flowers. "Shh!"

According to Frodo, the caterpillar was taking a very long nap so that when he woke up he would be a butterfly. Frodo had tried to take a really long nap once, so that he could become a butterfly as well. But it did not work out so well. Mostly because his Adad kept waking him for silly things like eating.

Didn't Adad know he needed to nap so he could become a butterfly?

The rest of the day was a gamble. Sometimes the elves of the woods visited Rivendell. They held festive parties and the dwarves—bored as they were—would join in the drinking contests and dancing.

Or, as was becoming frequent, the Company would gather in Bilbo's room and pass the time playing with Frodo and his strange toys.

Thorin had given the task of mending Frodo's doll to Ori, who took it as a challenge and got started with much enthusiasm.

The young dwarf fixed the doll's head, added buttons as eyes, knitted in a mouth, and then added red yarn as hair. He went so far as to make some dresses for the doll as well. It was only when he finished that he wondered if perhaps he had gone a bit overboard? He did not think Frodo would enjoy playing dress up.

Needless to say, he was glad when Frodo, pleased as a button, gave him as tight a hug as he could muster and even kissed his cheek! In front of the whole Company, no less!

Ori did not think he'd ever blushed so much in his entire life. Though some of the redness might have been due to the glares he received from both the king and Mister Dwalin.

Really! It was just a baby kiss, it wasn't as though he was going to steal Frodo away from them!

Frodo named the doll "Anna". Or as he said in actuality, "Annanana".

Why Frodo felt the need to add extra syllables to people's names or titles was anyone's guess.

On the subject of Frodo's toys, the elder dwarves thought them to be strange and unusual. Not the toys themselves but something about them was terribly odd. Often the dwarves spoke to each other
of feeling their beady little eyes following their every move. They continued to find the toys in the oddest of places; places where they should not be and where Frodo could not have left them.

Fili, Kili, Estel, and Ori had no idea what their elders spoke of. Ori thought their brains addled or mayhap they were hallucinating. Perhaps the boredom had finally gotten to them?

No one noticed the speculative gleam in Gandalf's eyes as he observed the hobbitling babbling at his toys. The babe paused often, straining his ears as though the toys were speaking back at him.

At the end of the day, Frodo took a nice warm bath before going to bed.

When he woke the following day, he was once again upset. Papa had not been in his dreams that night either.

The Lady Yavanna and her friends had tried to keep occupied but he had continuously asked after his Papa.

Her response of, "Your Papa can't sleep right now for he is in dangerous territory. We must wait until he is safe again," was not understood by the distraught hobbitling.

The day passed much as the previous day had. Frodo learned how to say "thank you" and it was not by blowing kisses. Frodo liked to blow kisses, though, because people always smiled and were happy when he did!

He also learned the hand signs for "brother" and "sister". Frodo didn't know what a sister was and he didn't understand Mister Bofur's explanation either. But they explained that a "brother" was someone like Fili and Kili.

So Frodo decided that Fili and Kili were his brothers and told them so. Being a brother must have been a very good thing, too! He received many hugs and kisses from Fili and Kili and the dwarves were enormously happy for a long time afterwards.

Frodo crawled to the irises and made himself comfortable among them. He made sure he wasn't squashing any of the flowers.

He proceeded to tell Mister Caterpillar all about his day thus far. Frodo had tried to become a butterfly when he went to sleep. He'd covered himself with a blanket all around and over his head so he couldn't see! Only he hadn't been able to breathe and Adad had gotten very worried!

Perhaps hobbits didn't become butterflies? Frodo really didn't like it when he couldn't breathe.

He worried that Mister Caterpillar couldn't breathe in his blankets either. Did he need help getting out? Was that why it was taking so long for him to appear?

He poked at the cocoon, worried, before crawling back out. Estel was sitting on the grass behind him and Frodo smiled widely at him. Estel never visited the gardens with Frodo!

"Lindir has something important to do, so he said I could come play with you!" Estel said. "Do you think Mister Thorin will mind?"

They both looked at where said dwarf was speaking with Mister Bifur and Mister Bofur.

Frodo shook his head. He pointed at where their cocoon hung among the batch of purple flowers.

When will caterpillar wake up? Frodo wondered. Soon?
"Mother says that a caterpillar will stay in his cocoon for two weeks," Estel explained. "Then it'll come out as a butterfly."

Thorin sat on a bench after speaking with Bofur and Bifur. Cocking an eyebrow at the two boys. He had not paid much attention before, when Kili had mentioned that Estel could understand Frodo. He had assumed his nephew had been speaking about the Iglishmêk but as he observed the two, he realized that wasn't it at all.

The hobbitling cocked his head to one side, a hand against his cheek.

"Let's see . . . I think the caterpillar went to sleep about thirteen days ago? So it will be waking up soon," Estel continued. "It has almost been two weeks!"

"Papa-papa . . ." Frodo mumbled then.

"I don't know where Mister Bilbo is," Estel shrugged helplessly, looking towards Thorin. Frodo mimicked the older boy, looking towards Thorin with wide imploring eyes. Estel drew the hobbitling's attention back by poking his belly. It eased Thorin's discomfort at being subject to such a sad gaze. Frodo giggled and hugged his stomach defensively, smiling widely. "Why don't we play something else now?" He motioned towards the hobbitling’s abandoned wagon, where all four of Frodo's toys sat. "Should we play with your toys?"

"Hm," Frodo hummed as he moved into his thinking position once more. He laughed and squirmed when Estel tickled him again. "Es! Es!"

"All right, come on now," Estel pulled the hobbitling into his arms and carried him to the wagon. He placed Frodo down beside it and together they pulled out the four toys and began playing. "Don't be sad anymore. I'm sure Mister Bilbo is on his way back right now."

"Oh!" Frodo cried and clapped happily.

"My brothers, Elladan and Elrohir went with him, too!"

"Eh-Eh," Frodo said.

"That's right, Elladan and Elrohir, I guess you've met them," said Estel with a thoughtful frown. He shook his head and smiled at the hobbitling. "But anyway, they'll keep Mister Bilbo safe. Glorfindel will, too."

"Eh?" asked Frodo.

"Oh, I don't know who that is. Legolas? I think I've heard my brothers mention him, though."

Thorin realized he was gaping and quickly closed his mouth, taking a quick look around to make sure no one had seen him. He observed the two for a while yet, until Frodo had enough of playing with his toys and Estel. The hobbitling crawled to Thorin, making himself comfortable atop one of Thorin's booted feet. He brought his little arms as far around the dwarf's calf as he could—being so tiny, it was not far. Then with bright beseeching blue eyes, the hobbitling gazed up at Thorin.

"Adadada," he cooed.

Thorin sighed heavily and rubbed the pads of his fingers under the little one's chin. "You shouldn't call me that, little one."

"Adadada!" Frodo repeated, pouting petulantly. He squirmed and bounced atop Thorin's foot,
making inquiring and impatient noises.

"All right, all right," Thorin rolled his eyes. "You're a demanding little hobbit, aren't you?"

With a cautiousness he'd swiftly learned in the days the hobbitling had been in his care, Thorin lifted his foot. Frodo squealed and clung to the dwarf's leg, laughing brightly. The foot lowered to the ground and as soon as Frodo had calmed himself the foot lifted right back up. Thorin repeated the movement several times, until the hobbitling was blinking tiredly and yawning between laughs.

"Nap time," said Thorin.

Frodo whined unhappily, rubbing his cheek against Thorin's pants. He allowed the dwarf to pick him up, sleepily puckering his lips. He made happy noises and cooed when Thorin gave him a kiss on the forehead.

"Don't you have lessons?" Thorin grumbled at Estel.

The boy startled at the sudden attention and shook his bowed head. Thorin interrupted before Estel could voice his excuses.

"Could I trouble you to take Frodo's wagon to Bilbo's room?"

"Err, yes, of course!" exclaimed Estel after a moment's hesitation. He tried not to squirm under the dwarf king's piercing stare. Only once Thorin had vanished back inside did he dare move.

He huffed in relief and moved to gather up Frodo's toys. He remained unsure of why Mister Thorin appeared to dislike him so. He didn't think he'd done anything to warrant such angry stares.

All he wanted to do was spend time with Frodo. He truly hoped Mister Bilbo returned soon.

Thorin gently rocked Frodo in his arms as he headed towards the Halls of Fire. His Company gathered there when they weren't making nuisances of themselves in Bilbo's room.

"I'm bored!" came Kili's voice, whining once again. It was something Kili had begun complaining of often and Thorin had to agree. He did not understand how the Elves could keep themselves entertained doing practically nothing. They sang and they read and sometimes they even forged—shockingly enough. Most often they simply sat in silence, gathered in groups or by themselves. It was when the elves that lived in the surrounding woods visited that Rivendell became lively.

For those elves were loud and cheery and liked to make merry. They made up any excuse to have big parties and they sang all night and into the morning.

The dwarves of Thorin's Company had been very taken aback by them. Though a few of them had later joined in the drinking contests and had been drunk under the table by the end of the festivities.

Thorin paused to observe his Company, shifting Frodo so the hobbitling's head was laying across his shoulder.

Balin, Dwalin, and Gloin sat around the fireplace in deep conversation. While Fili, Kili and Ori were at the other end of the room. Ori was in a state of deep concentration as he attempted to disentangle the yarn Frodo had somehow gotten his hands on one day. There was a similar mess of yarn on Kili's lap but the young dwarf appeared to have given up on it, his limbs splayed haphazardly in his chair. Fili, on the other hand, was concentrating on cleaning and sharpening his swords.

The only other dwarves in the Halls of Fire were Bofur and Bifur. Thorin couldn't quite see what
Bofur was doing as the dwarf's back was to him, but Bifur was working on some type of carving. A toy, most likely.

Where the others of his Company were, Thorin could only guess.

Balin caught his eye then and waved him over, so Thorin tightened his hold on Frodo and moved to join them.

"Nap time for the little one," Balin murmured.

"Here," Dwalin said gruffly. He held his arms out, moving to take the little hobbit from Thorin.

The hobbitling opened his eyes as he felt the movement. He blinked at Dwalin curiously, only half-awake. After a second, he brought his hand up and stuck his thumb in his mouth, letting his head drop onto Dwalin's shoulder with a sigh. The dwarf beamed, patting Frodo's back. He ignored the amused chuckles his companions were trying and failing to hold back.

"You say I've grown too attached?" Thorin murmured humorlessly to Balin, who only frowned. "Why did you call me over?"

"Master Baggins will likely be returning soon," Balin replied. "Do you still intend to follow him on his journey?"

"I will not let him go with just those elves for company!" Thorin growled. It was bad enough the hobbit was out there with a group of elves doing Mahal knew what.

"But is it a good idea?" Dwalin asked. "I'd like to join Bilbo and Frodo on their journey as much as you. But would it be safe for us?"

"Bilbo believes it would be," was Thorin's somewhat defensive reply. He furrowed his eyebrows and looked at Dwalin with confusion. "I thought you liked Bilbo."

"Not half as much as you, obviously," Dwalin muttered. His deadpan tone of voice contradicted by the grin playing around his lips and the amusement shining in his eyes. If not for the hobbitling he held in his arms Thorin would have surely reached over and punched him.

Balin sighed, drawing their attention. "Is that the reason you plan to walk into enemy territory without the least bit of concern as to everyone else in your Company? May I remind you both that Master Baggins is not a member of our Company?"

Thorin blinked at him, shocked.

"You may be unaware of this," Gloin said, finally deciding to add his own opinion on the matter. "But every time we get together to discuss our plans, you insist on bringing up Master Baggins."

Thorin tried to assimilate that and turned to stare at Dwalin questioningly, knowing his friend would not lie to him. The tattooed dwarf merely raised an eyebrow at him in confirmation.

"It was sweet the first couple of times," Gloin admitted with a heartfelt sigh. "Reminded me of-"

"Quite," Balin interrupted before Gloin could start reminiscing. "Not only is Master Baggins not a member of our Company, but he has lived among elves for many years. He speaks their language and is quite friendly with them. He is obviously biased towards them, Thorin."

"I am not expecting you to suddenly place your trust in him, Thorin," Bilbo's voice echoed in his
mind. "It's not my place to tell you his reasons for abandoning your people and I'm very sorry he did but I'm not him and I want us to remain friends." Biased? "I assure you that I am not always so kind as you seem to think I am. I . . . have my share of flaws."

Thorin shook his head, smiling crookedly as the Bilbo in his mind's eye bowed his head and smiled sheepishly. "Bilbo is the most unbiased person I've ever met."

He wondered at what he'd said for Balin to stare at him so. It was not as though he'd said something that was untrue.

A great commotion reached their ears, forestalling any argument that might have erupted between them. There was shouting and elves running down the hallway. Thorin's first thought was that the elves of the surrounding woods had returned for yet another night of merry gathering.

Then there were shouts for a healer and Óin went running down the hall towards the noise.

Curious, and more than a bit concerned, the Company moved out into the hallway and towards the commotion. There were too many elves gathered around for them to be able to see what was happening.

"Thranduil!" Bilbo's voice echoed in the room, louder than all the shouting. "He's injured, Elrond!"

"Bilbo, your head is bleeding!" Óin shouted.

Thorin grasped Frodo close as Dwalin passed the startled babe over. The hulking dwarf began the task of pushing elves aside left and right with Thorin and the Company following close behind.

It was a shocking sight they came upon. With the Elvenking passed out on the floor, Bilbo and another blonde haired elf at his side. Óin hovered incessantly over the hobbit, trying to get look at the blood-soaked bandage wrapped around Bilbo's head.

"I'm fine!" Bilbo pushed the dwarf healer away. Óin barely moved; either the dwarf was stronger than he looked or Bilbo was too weak to push him back. "Elrond, his leg."

"I see it, Bilbo," the Elf-lord said, voice calm and collected. "Legolas, take Bilbo to his room. Master Óin can look at him there."

"No, no, no!" Bilbo argued, batting the blonde elf's hands away. "I have to stay with Thranduil, Elrond. He's-"

"Papa-papa!" Frodo whimpered, scared.

Glazed hazel eyes turned to regard them with confusion. "Frodo? Why are you so tiny?"

Elrond looked alarmed. "Legolas, take him now!" He shouted in elvish at some of the gathered elves. Some hurried forward to help the Elf-lord with the fallen Elvenking, while others carried towels, bowls, and jars of waters towards Bilbo's room.

"But he's dead!" Bilbo cried. He struggled weakly in Legolas' arms, breathing heavily as though it took all his strength just to do that. "Elrond! Elrond, don't let Frodo-don't let him take the ring. I should-was my respon-resp-don't let Frodo take it."

"Papa-papa?" Frodo whimpered, scared.

Thorin tried to soothe him but he felt a little unbalanced and unsure. He didn't understand what was
happening, all he could do was follow along behind the blonde haired elf carrying a delirious Bilbo. The hobbit continued to cry out things Thorin could never hope to comprehend.

Of the Company, only Óin and Gandalf entered the room with Bilbo. The others gathered outside against the opposite wall. They stayed well out of the way of the elves coming and going. A group of elves carried Thranduil into the room next to Bilbo’s.

The dwarves wandered away as time dragged on. Thorin let Dwalin to take Frodo for a while then allowed Balin to corral him to the dining halls to eat. He ignored the dwarf’s attempts to draw him into a discussion.

He knew what Balin wished to say. With Bilbo returned, there was no need for Thorin to watch over Frodo any longer. He knew Balin believed they should leave, no matter that they knew not what the map said.

Knowing there was nothing he could do but wait, Thorin returned to the Halls of Fire with his Company. He stared into the roaring flames, contemplative, and continued to ignore Balin's attempts to draw him into a discussion of their plans. Until at last the dwarf huffed and left him to his brooding.

The flickering flames soothed him, he closed his eyes to rest. Just for a little while.

"Thorin? Thorin!"

He startled. He blinked to clear the spots from his eyes and then reached up to rub at them when he saw who stood before him.

"Are you quite done?" Bilbo asked, eyebrow cocked. There was a clean bandage wrapped about his head.

"You . . . Am I dreaming?"

The hobbit frowned at him. He looked about the room slowly. "I thought Frodo would be with you."

"Dwalin took him to eat," said Thorin, also taking a look about the room. It was dark but for the fires still burning and they were the only ones in the room.

"Eat?" Bilbo gave him a flat look. "It is nearly midnight."

Thorin felt guilty suddenly, he had fallen asleep and forgotten all about the hobbitling. The hobbit sighed, his whole body deflating as he rubbed at his temples.

"Are you supposed to be walking around?" the dwarf demanded, worried.

Bilbo flapped a hand at him. "I'm fine."

"You were delirious," Thorin pointed out. He tried to keep his expression calm and his frustration under control.

"Momentarily," Bilbo shrugged. He didn't want to think about that nor about anything he might have said. "Now hush for a second."

For a second Thorin thought the hobbit would start spouting nonsense once again; his eyes glazed over and he went terribly still. There was silence but for the flickering of the flames, which continued to burn brightly, casting light around the room in hues of orange and red.
Bilbo's hair flared brightly in the light, his skin shining gold in the light. He looked ethereal and Thorin could hardly bear to gaze upon him.

He looked away quickly as Bilbo came back to himself. But the hobbit did not spare him a glance, walking away with nary a word to the dwarf, who can only stumble after him in confusion.

He's surprised, and surprised that he's surprised at all, at how silent Bilbo's footsteps are. There was no sound, no echo, nothing to announce his presence.

A burglar indeed.

They stopped before a familiar door. Fili and Kili's room. Bilbo quirked a smile at Thorin before pushing the door open and peeking inside.

There was a giggle and a coo. "Papa-papa."

Fili and Kili were deep asleep. Fili on his back, his arms crossed over his chest. Kili was on his stomach, arms and legs splayed wildly, his head hanging over the side of the bed.

Frodo lay between them, eyes tired yet alert. They followed Bilbo as the hobbit walked to the side of the beds.

Thorin had baulked at seeing Kili dragging his bed from his room and into his brother's. Yet he had silenced his protests and let the boy do as he wished, it was easier to just ignore it in the end. They weren't hurting anyone and they were happier together.

The hobbitling held his arms up. "Up please!"

Bilbo faltered. "What?"

Beseeching blue eyes twinkled at him. "Up, please?"

"I was . . . only gone for two weeks," Bilbo gathered the baby into his arms. Nine months old and already articulating what he wanted. He kissed Frodo's rosy cheeks then touched their foreheads together. "You're growing up so fast."

"Fast!" Frodo agreed, laughing twinkly. He snuggled against the hobbit's chest, gazing up at him with great adoration. "Papa-papa, love."

Bilbo choked on a gasp, turning his head to the side to cough. Fili woke with a snort. Kili fell off the side of the bed but only shifted and continued to sleep.

"I love you, too," said Bilbo, eyes glistening.

"Papa-papa, stay?" There was worry in that gaze. Worry that Bilbo would leave again.

"Of course, sweetling."

Thorin stood to the side. Heart bursting.

Fili stumbled to his feet and to the hobbits. He nudged at Kili with his foot until the young dwarf awoke.

The dwarves gathered around Bilbo as he sat on one of the beds. Thorin belatedly noticed that there were tears on Frodo's cheeks when Bilbo sat the hobbitling on his lap and dabbed at his face with a handkerchief. The babe whined, wanting to hide his face against his father's chest, and take comfort
from his warmth.

"It's too late for stories," Bilbo chuckled, shaking his head at Kili's demands to hear tell of their quest. "Perhaps in the morning. Shall we go to sleep?"

Frodo nodded, face blotchy but there were no more tears and he was smiling. He pointed at the beds.

"You want to sleep with Fili and Kili?" Bilbo asked.

Frodo nodded. He pointed at Bilbo and back at the bed.

"You want me to sleep with Fili and Kili, too? I'm not sure we'll all fit," Bilbo looked alarmed. He was even more alarmed when Frodo pointed at Thorin and back at the bed.

"Yes, sleepover!" Kili exclaimed. He took the hobbitling from Bilbo, twirling about once before plopping down on the bed.

The babe giggled and made himself comfortable in the middle. The two young dwarves had been smart enough to put the two beds sideways, so there was no fear of someone falling down the middle.

Frodo pat the bed on his left side. "Papa-papa, sleep."

Fili and Kili argued over who would sleep on Frodo's other side.

"You kick. I'd rather you kick me than Frodo or Bilbo," Fili argued.

Kili conceded with a pout. The two made themselves comfortable on Frodo's other side. The hobbitling reached over Fili, his belly over the dwarf's head, to pat at Kili's head and give him a kiss. He squealed and giggled when Fili blew a raspberry in his belly.

"Siwy!" he cried. He shook a finger at Fili but accepted a kiss from him as well. There was only one thing missing to make everything perfect, however. "Adadada, sleep!" He pointed at the empty place beside Bilbo.

Kili tried to smother his giggles in his brother's shoulder. Fili snorted and covered his mouth with the back of his hand. Bilbo and Thorin sputtered.

Frodo's smile slowly dampened when Thorin did not move to join them. His eyes filled with tears and his bottom lip wobbled but immediately cheered when the dwarf moved to remove his shoes and coat.

"He's good," Kili whispered to Fili, only to get elbowed and shushed.

Bilbo tried to concentrate on something other than the warm, solid body that slid in behind him. Thorin adjusted himself awkwardly on his back, arms crossed over his chest in an effort not to reach out and touch.

He cocked an eyebrow at Frodo as the babe pecked over Bilbo at him. The babe didn't want to hurt Bilbo's head, so he simply blew the dwarf a kiss, satisfied at last with the sleeping arrangements.

Little hands gently touched Bilbo's face and he looked at Frodo curiously.

"Sing?" Frodo asked and signed at the same time.

How could Bilbo deny him? So he sang.
Day is ended, dim my eyes,  
but journey long before me lies.  
Farewell, friends! I hear the call.  
The ship's beside the stony wall.  
Foam is white and waves are grey;  
beyond the sunset leads my way.  
Foam is salt, the wind is free;  
I hear the rising of the Sea.

Farewell, friends! The sails are set,  
the wind is east, the moorings fret.  
Shadows long before me lie,  
beneath the ever-bending sky,  
but islands lie behind the Sun  
that I shall raise ere all is done;  
lands there are to west of West,  
where night is quiet and sleep is rest.

Guided by the Lonely Star,  
beyond the utmost harbour-bar,  
I'll find the havens fair and free,  
and beaches of the Starlit Sea.  
Ship, my ship! I seek the West,  
and fields and mountains ever blest.  
Farewell to Middle-earth at last.  
I see the Star above my mast!

(Bilbo's Last Song, J.R.R. Tolkien)

Chapter End Notes

• Bilbo's Last Song, as sung by Stephen Oliver
The Silent Threat

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He had been woken various times during the night by suffocating warmth that enveloped and hung tight around him. Each time he had found himself in Thorin's hold, the dwarf all but using him as a pillow. Awkward the first times it occurred, it soon became frustrating and annoying. All Bilbo wanted was to get some sleep.

But if it wasn't Thorin at his back, it was Frodo at his front. The babe tossed and turned, waking in the middle of the night to babble at himself. The hobbitling liked his space when he wanted it, pushing at Bilbo and even Fili so they'd move away from him. Only to cling to them once he fell back asleep.

Kili was a terrible sleeping companion. He kicked out, limbs splaying, his body never calm, never still.

The two blonde men shared a long suffering look when they found themselves awake at the same time. Their dark haired companions slept on, peaceful and unaware of the problems they were causing.

Then Thorin turned and wrapped an arm around Bilbo again and the hobbit tried to make himself comfortable. There was nothing wrong with Thorin holding him. Any other time, Bilbo might have been thrilled by such a thing but five bodies on the bed, three of them dwarves, generated quite a bit of heat. It was stifling.

He woke around midmorning. The sun was shining brightly through the window and Frodo was giggling.

"Hold still," Fili whispered. The blonde haired dwarf finished buttoning the baby's shirt and stood back to regard his work with the air of someone proud of their accomplishments. "See, told you I could do it."

Frodo gnawed on his hand, blinking at the dwarf without any understanding. Their attention drawn to the bed as Bilbo carefully extracted himself from Thorin's arms.

The hobbit pat himself down, feeling self-conscious under the combined weight of Fili's and Frodo's stares.

"All clean!" exclaimed Frodo, pulling at his suspenders.

"I see that," Bilbo sent Fili a grateful smile. The dwarf rubbed the back of his neck, chagrined. "Should we find something to eat?"

"Food!" Frodo agreed.

Bilbo knew how rare it was that Fili leave his brother's side of his own accord. He was surprised to be joined by the dwarf as they left the room.

"Did you have a good time with the dwarves?" Bilbo asked Frodo.

The hobbitling stopped chewing on his rabbit long enough to lean back so he could use his hands.
The sign was awkward without two index fingers but the meaning wasn't lost. By the sound of Fili's sharp intake of breath, it wasn't lost to him either.

Family, signed Frodo.

"Oh, Frodo," Bilbo chuckled.


Fili's face turned a lovely shade of red. "We didn't teach him that."

"If you'd prefer he didn't-"

"No, no." Fili smiled sheepishly. "I don't mind. Kili doesn't either! He's been inordinately happy now that he's an older brother."

"On!" Frodo shouted suddenly, startling them both. He waved his little hand in the air. "Ha'o!"

It did happen that the elf was walking down the hallway towards them, carrying a tray laden with food. The Elf-lord made it a point to personally deliver Frodo's food tray every day. It gave him reason to see the babe without Thorin worrying about his presence.

"Good morning, Frodo," Elrond greeted. "Bilbo, it's good to see you up and walking. You gave your companions quite a scare."

"That was not my intention," Bilbo said.

"I will set up Frodo's food in your room. I believe Thranduil wished to see you this morning."

"How is he?"

"Better, as long as he stays off his leg in the meantime," Elrond might have grumbled the last but only Bilbo noticed. "He should be back on his feet in a week."

"Only a week?" Fili interrupted, shocked.

"Elves heal faster than other races," Bilbo said. "He only had a small leg fracture at any rate. It was aggravated on our way back."

"Food," Frodo said, reaching for the tray.

"Don't you want to see Thranduil first?" his father asked.

The babe puffed his cheeks but seemed to be considering his options. He was hungry but he also wanted to see the Elvenking. He couldn't decide which one was more important.

"Take the bowl of blueberries with you, he can munch on those," Fili suggested.

"Boo," the hobbitling agreed. "Mm."

"Could I trouble you to carry the bowl for us, Fili?"

Fili hesitated. Unsure whether he wanted to follow them to the Elvenking's room. But he could not say no in the face of Bilbo's earnest, pleading expression. So he agreed, taking the bowl of blueberries and following behind Lord Elrond and Bilbo.
The Elf-lord continued on to Bilbo's room. Fili wavered only briefly, following the hobbit close as he dared. He didn't want to come off as a coward.

Frodo's attention was immediately drawn to the elf sitting in a chair by the bed. He gasped, pointing. "Eg!"

The elves stopped what they were doing to pay them attention. The Elvenking looked pale and tired. One of his legs was done up in a makeshift splint. He looked most uncomfortable.

Frodo made a strange noise in the back of his throat, turning his face away and burying it against Bilbo's shoulder.

"What?" Bilbo wondered, surprised. "It's been Legolas-this, Legolas-that for weeks now. Don't tell me you're shy about seeing him!"

"Ahh," Frodo grumbled. It was something he'd picked up from Thorin and only did when he was forced to do something he didn't want to. He peaked around at the elf, who smiled bemusedly at him, and immediately turned his face away again. "Eg."

"Oh, dear," Bilbo murmured. He was amused. Not only because of the dumbfounded expression on Legolas' face, although that was a plus, but also due to Frodo—tactile, loveable, and cheerful Frodo—, who was shy. "You don't want to say 'hallo' to Legolas?"

The babe grumbled some more, lifting his head. He peeked at Legolas from underneath his eyelashes. "Ha'o." He stuck his fingers in his mouth and turned away.

Legolas laughed, unable to help himself. Even Thranduil cracked a smile. Fili chortled behind them.

But the hobbitling appeared to gather his courage, turning his head yet again to peer first at Legolas then at Thranduil. He held his arms out towards the Elvenking, throwing Legolas a suspicious look when the elf shifted in his chair. But Legolas was only moving to hide his face, from his shaking shoulders he was either crying or laughing. Bilbo guessed it was the latter.

Once safely on the bed, Frodo carefully crawled closer to the Elvenking, eying him with keen eyes. He gave the elf a kiss on his forehead, letting Thranduil gather him close for a cuddle.

"This is one of the Durins?" Thranduil asked, not taking his eyes off the babe, who cooed at him, happy.

"Oh, you haven't been introduced, have you?" Bilbo tsked, drawing Fili forward by the arm. He allowed himself to be pulled forward with much reluctance, trying to appear proud but nonthreatening. "This is Fili. The eldest of Thorin's nephews."

"The heir, I assume," Thranduil bowed his head at Fili, as much as he was able at least. "It is an honor."

Fili could not detect any hint of mockery or deceit in his tone. He floundered, unsure how to react. At an encouraging nudge from Bilbo, he bowed his head back.

"The honor is mine," he replied.

Legolas gave him an approving nod. Fili tried not to flush. The Elvenking's son was nice to look at, for an elf.

"Food?" Frodo chose that moment to interrupt.
Legolas burst into laughter, startling both hobbits, who turned to stare at him; one uncertain, the other exasperated. Fili tried not to stare but it was difficult.

"Only one thing ever on the mind of a Hobbit," Thranduil murmured with a shake of his head, but he was smiling also.

Bilbo made a protesting sound in the back of his throat. He didn't think about food that much!

Frodo giggled, reaching up to pat the Elvenking's face and babbling contently at him. He was incredibly pleased by the attention paid to him by Thranduil. Big, soft hands ran through his hair and he hummed.

He really liked Legolas. Legolas was a good elf. He was bright and brave and a hero! Frodo had only met one other hero before, that crazy wizard man, Gandalf. But Gandalf was strange. He would sit and stare at Frodo, it made him uncomfortable. Legolas was different, more special. He was familiar like Estel but almost . . . better?

Sometimes Frodo didn't understand the strange thoughts in his head. He only knew what he knew.

He knew Legolas was a hero. But of what, he didn't know. Either way, what did one say to a hero like Legolas? What if Legolas didn't like him?

Frodo nibbled at his fingers, worried. He peeked at the elf and quickly away.

Then there was Thranduil. Frodo also liked Thranduil. Because the Elvenking was soft, bright, and beautiful. The elf gave him hugs and let him ride on the long-faced creature with him—Adad had explained that the long-faced creatures were called horses or ponies but Frodo didn't understand the difference.

Thranduil and Legolas were part of their family. Mister Bifur had taught him that "family" were all the people you loved and Frodo loved his elves, just like he loved his dwarves and Papa and Estel, even that crazy wizard.

Frustrated that Thranduil was not paying attention to his long-winded explanation of why he loved him and Legolas, Frodo reached up to poke at what he could reach of the Elvenking's face. His chin. His hand was caught and kissed. The hobbitling examined his hand closely, bewildered. His puzzlement was forgotten as a bowl of blueberries appeared before his eyes. He squealed and grabbed at them, pushing one into his mouth before anyone could stop him.

"Frodo, where are your manners?" Bilbo demanded, fists on his hips.

Frodo didn't know what "manners" were. So he couldn't tell his Papa where to find them. He shrugged his little shoulders.

"Where?" he echoed, mystified.

The smile on Legolas' face was so wide and blinding that Bilbo worried he'd strain a muscle. He couldn't remember ever seeing the young elf so happy, unless he was teasing Gimli. It made Bilbo happy, to see him like that. He'd worried endlessly about Legolas being separated from the dwarf. Having to wait so many years again to meet him again and possibly having to work harder this time around to win his trust and friendship.

He worried now for a different reason. He was disconcerted by the besotted expression on Fili's face. That was worrying. Though perhaps "besotted" was too strong a word. But he couldn't think of how
else to describe the expression on the dwarf's face as he gazed at Legolas. He would need to pull Fili aside and have a talk with him. It wouldn't do for the dwarf to get his hopes up.

"Let me finish the introductions," Bilbo said, pushing his worries away for later. "Fili, you've probably heard tales of him already—one too pleasant ones, probably. This is Thranduil, King of the Woodland Realm, my sworn brother. His son, Legolas," Bilbo tried to push the amusement away but his lips kept twitching, "is Frodo's godfather."

Legolas tried to keep his shock from showing, his eye twitched minutely.

"Godfather?" Fili echoed, unfamiliar with the term.

"It is a ceremonial position. Among elves and in the Shire, parents assign close friends or relatives as 'godparents' to their children," Bilbo explained. "If anything were to happen to the child's birth parents, their godparents would become their primary guardians."

Fili oh'd, nodding to show he understood. He reeled a little at "sworn brother". That was . . . he had not thought the friendship between Bilbo and the Elvenking was that deep. Maybe the phrase did not have the same meaning for them as it did for dwarves? He wondered how he'd go about telling his uncle.

"These two handsome elves who've been spying on us for the past ten minutes are Elladan," Bilbo pointed at the elf to Fili's left, who he had not even seen standing there against the wall. "And Elrohir." Who was kneeling behind Legolas' chair and poking at his shoulder. "They're twins, if you didn't guess already, and sons of Elrond. Elrohir, leave Legolas be!"

The elf pouted but did as told. "But Bilbo. He's always so grumpy."

"Elladan, stop hovering in the doorway," Bilbo sighed, frustrated. Did they have to behave like children in front of guests?

"Yes, Nana," the elf quipped. "Ada said to tell you that," he took a deep breath, as though readying himself to deliver a long speech. "Little brother's food is waiting."

"Thank you, Elladan," Bilbo turned to Frodo. "Do you want to go eat? Or would you rather stay with Thranduil a bit longer?"

Mother? Little brother? Fili shifted his gaze from one person to another. Bilbo did not seem the slightest bit annoyed nor shocked at being called "mother".

"Eh-Eh!" Frodo exclaimed. He held one hand out towards Elladan and the other towards Elrohir.

Brother, he signed.

"Honeg is so lovely," Elladan cooed. "Look at his curls. So beautiful."

"He's still so tiny," Elrohir said. "Look at his tiny hands and his tiny clothes! He's like a doll!"

"We missed you, honeg." The twins held the puzzled hobbitling between them, swaying back and forth as they began to sing.

Losto mae, guren vell,
Avo gosto i morchaint
Elin lim tirar dad
Tinnad ah calan faenwain
Losto vi sîdh veriannen sen
Losto mae pen achas
Losto mae, guren vell,
Ôl dartha vi i fennas.

Silence descended upon the room as the song ended. Frodo looked from one twin to the other, unsure.

"Doh?" he pointed helpfully at the doorway.

"Yes, there are dreams in the doorway!" Elladan said.

"Let's go find them!" Elrohir exclaimed.

"You can go looking for dreams in doorways after Frodo has eaten breakfast, no sooner," Bilbo plucked the babe from their hold.

Frodo wanted to go look for dreams in doorways! But he also wanted to eat. He crawled across the bed when Papa put him down, reaching up to receive a hug and a kiss from the Elvenking.

Once done with his task, Frodo crawled to the edge of the bed and easily slid down the side on his belly, much to the protest of everyone watching. He hadn't realized that the bed was much higher than what he was accustomed and he was frightened for a moment as his feet couldn't find the ground.

Big, warm hands helped him to the floor. Legolas smiled at him, eyes bright and happy.

Frodo gnawed on a finger for a second before coming to a decision. He opened his mouth to say "thank you", just like Lindir and Erestor had taught him—because it was the polite thing to do!

Except what came out instead was a screech of, "EG!"

Embarrassed, Frodo crawled away swift as he could while Legolas was still in a shocked stupor. He attached himself to Papa's leg, grumbling.

Bilbo tried to hold back his laughter, he really did. Elladan and Elrohir did not even make an attempt, leaning on each other as they laughed themselves silly. Seeing poor Legolas suffer so many shocks in one day, when the elf prided himself on being composed at all times, was amusing. All in the face of a tiny hobbit babe who was so flustered around him, he could only say the elf's name.

"I think you've had enough excitement for the moment," Bilbo gathered Frodo into his arms, rubbing at his back soothingly. The babe peeked back at the elves over his father's shoulder, ashamed that he'd made Legolas sad.

The Company had gathered in Bilbo's room, whispering among themselves. They grew quiet as Bilbo entered followed by Fili. Bilbo tried not to let his annoyance show. Where they still using his room as their gathering place?

"Food. Food, please?" Frodo murmured to Bilbo.

"Yes, love." Bilbo faltered momentarily at seeing the tiny table Erestor had made for Frodo, laden with food, and a tiny, pillowed chair resting by its side.

Erestor, it seemed, still enjoyed spoiling Frodo with his hobbies.
The hobbitling wasn't too sure about the chair. He grumbled when he was sat on it.

Bilbo wondered how the hobbitling could possibly reach the food that was further away. He had his answer when Thorin knelt by the table and prepared the babe a plate with some of each food.

"Adadada!" Frodo squealed. His hand flailed in the general direction of Thorin, who grasped it and blew a raspberry into his palm, leading to more giggles and squeals.

The dwarves settled around the room; some choosing to sit on the floor by Frodo, others on the floor with their backs against the bed. There was only one chair in the room, which Bilbo took. Where the other chair had gone was a mystery to him.

"Were you in the Elvenking's room with Bilbo?" Kili hissed at his brother.

"I helped Bilbo carry something," Fili shrugged his brother off.

"Then why did you stay in there so long? And why did you not wake me?"

"I was hoping to get dressed," Bilbo told the room in general.

"We can-" Thorin began.

But Bilbo was already shaking his head as he gathered some clean clothes. "Don't bother. I'll get dressed in Thranduil's room." He knelt in Frodo's line of sight so the hobbitling could see his hands. "I'll be right back. So stay here."

I stay, Frodo signed back.

The dwarves waited for the door to close behind Bilbo, then turned as one to face Fili.

"So what were you doing in that elf's room?" Thorin demanded, glowering from where he hovered over Frodo.

"I already explained. I was carrying a bowl of blueberries for Frodo," Fili said defensively. It was not as though he'd done anything untoward, after all.

"Boo," Frodo nodded, mostly to himself.

"Yet you stayed in there for half an hour," Kili pointed out. "It doesn't take that long to carry something and leave it."

"Bilbo introduced me to . . ." Fili frowned. He probably shouldn't. But he was getting annoyed. "He was introducing me to his sworn brother, Thranduil, King of the Woodland Realm. Oh, and Legolas," he cleared his throat, realizing he probably sounded strange by the look on Kili's face, "who is Frodo's . . . erm, godfather? I think that's what Bilbo said. He also introduced me to Lord Elrond's twin sons. Whose names I cannot recall. . ." He might have been paying more attention to the Elvenking's son at the time.

"Sworn brother?" Thorin choked. It couldn't possibly mean what it meant to a dwarf. For one, Bilbo was a Hobbit and Thranduil was an Elf. The age comparison there was too skewed for sworn brotherhood to work.

"I told ye, laddie," Balin murmured. "You can't trust him."

"You judge him too quick, Balin," said Óin, to everyone's shock, Balin's most of all. "Master Baggins has known his share of hardship. Just because he managed to befriend the Elvenking does
not make him untrustworthy. That elf would trust a mere Hobbit as he does says a lot about Bilbo's character. If you would pause for a second and look, you'd see it too."

Bilbo returned, pulling at his clothes to straighten them. He wore a pleasant smile, it was obvious he was joyous. At least until he looked up and noticed that everyone, including Frodo, stared at him. Though Frodo only stared because that was his Papa!

"Is there a problem?" he wondered, trying to maintain his good cheer.

"How's your head, lad?" Óin asked.

The hobbit groaned, rolling his eyes. "I told you the blood wasn't mine!"

"Some of it was."

"Maybe a tiny bit of it was. If I'd actually lost that much blood from my head, I think I'd be dead."

Frodo tapped his spoon against his plate loudly. Bilbo froze mid rebuke as Thorin reacted to what the hobbit realized was a summons.

"'nana?" Frodo asked, hopeful.

"You want more banana?"

The bewilderment must have shown on his face because Thorin looked away, expression sheepish and guilty. Bilbo wondered just how his son had trained Thorin to do his bidding. No wonder Balin looked like he'd swallowed an especially sour lemon.

"Mm, 'nana yum," Frodo stated. He held up a slice towards Thorin. "Want?"

"Later," Thorin promised.

Once, Frodo would have cried at being rejected. It was a great testament to his increasing maturity that he did not. Instead, he smiled widely and went back to eating and . . . separating the berries from his banana slices from his . . . potato?

Bilbo beamed.

"Bilbo, is it true Thranduil is your sworn brother?" Kili asked. "Do you even know what that means?"

What kind of question is that? Bilbo wondered. He realized abruptly that he was still the subject of everyone's attention. All looked interested in hearing his answer.

"It means, Kili, that when Thranduil leaves these shores, I will be going with him," Bilbo replied, quirking an eyebrow at them. "Quite possibly an old man, hopefully having lived a long, happy life. Because we have vowed to pass on to the next life together. Along with Elrond." His eyes glazed and he grew still. "Frodo will continue to live on, even after we sail from these shores. He looks happy. I'm glad."

"A vision?" Óin wondered, receiving some startled looks. "Better than the one from last night at least. That was a doozy."

Bilbo blinked, eyes clearing. "I'll never be able to control that."

"Ah, the wizard said it might have been due to the bump you received," the dwarf healer waved his
concern away. "Once it heals, all should return to normal. Were you able to control it before that? I assume so. I don't recall you having a vision."

"Yes," Bilbo said slowly, as though unsure. "Wait. Gandalf?"

"Leaving these shores?" Thorin interjected. He appeared confused and quite lost. "Hobbits sail West?"

"Of course not," the hobbit laughed. "I have a, erm, standing invitation." He knew he was only further confusing the dwarves, who didn't know what to make of him already. There wasn't much he could tell them to make them understand, since he didn't fully understand everything either. "As does Frodo."

"Frodo will sail West?" Kili demanded.

"Not for a long time still, of course. But I do think Lord Aulë and Lady Yavanna will be disappointed if he does not." He threw a suspicious glare at Frodo's toys. "They are our . . ." Bilbo sighed. "Family." He buried his face in his hands, abashed.

"I'm confused," someone murmured.

"I'm a Maia!" Bilbo exploded, frustrated and angry because he was supposed to be a Hobbit. Just a simple, maybe a bit adventurous, but normal Hobbit! He'd been born a Hobbit and he didn't understand how he could suddenly be turned into something else while still looking like a Hobbit. "I was sent to Middle-earth for reasons I can't explain right now. Frodo wasn't supposed to come with me but he decided to sneak along."

"Sounds familiar," Kili managed with a somewhat hysterical giggle. Bilbo knew the feeling.

"He said as much to Gandalf last night," revealed Óin. The dwarf healer chuckled, chewing at his pipe. "Never seen the wizard pale so fast or faint. Though I admit to being confused, how did the wizard not know of you?"

Bilbo scoffed. "Because my parents kept us secret. They are rather . . ." He threw another glare at Frodo's toys. Several of the dwarves glanced over repeatedly, confused by this. "Overprotective."

Mister Dwarf tipped over and fell off the bed, drawing Frodo's attention.

"Dorf?" the hobbitling wondered. The babe was silent as he stared at the toy, then he began to laugh. "Siwwy!"

Thorin shuddered. There was something otherworldly about those toys and both Hobbits' reactions to them were only further compounding this fact in his mind. He was not the only one who was daunted, Bofur and Dwalin, closest to the toys, slowly edged away from them.

"You, uh, disguised yourself as a Hobbit?" asked Ori. He was the most interested of the bunch, the reason sitting on his lap, open and ready to be filled with stories or with all of Bilbo's life history.

Bilbo leveled a look at him. "What's wrong with being a Hobbit?" He took pity on the dwarf as he stammered and tried to think of a response that wouldn't sound offensive. "Hobbits are unobtrusive and unnoticeable. They are often overlooked by other races. It is simple enough to hide amongst them. Even if they are a bigoted lot."

"I'm still confused," murmured Dwalin. He scratched the back of his head, trying to make heads or tails of the conversation. "What about the creature you went hunting for?"
"That was personal," Bilbo scowled.

"So that was true?" the warrior asked. That was all he needed to know.

The poor, frustrated hobbit pinched the bridge of his nose to stave off a headache. "Yes."

Dwalin gave him a pitying look, throwing a glance at Thorin, who was staring at Bilbo, uncertain and with varying degrees of disbelief.

"Did ye kill it?" Dwalin asked.

"It's dead." There were congratulations all around, even Balin was pleased to hear the news. But Bilbo looked far from happy. "But I didn't kill it. I . . . I couldn't do it." He took a deep shuddering breath. "I had him right there. Right under the tip of my blade. I could have easily stabbed him in the neck. Or detached his head from his miserable body. But I couldn't. I couldn't."

"But the beast is dead and that's what matters," Dwalin said. It really should have been Thorin comforting the distraught hobbit but the King-in-Exile held his tongue.

"It should have been me," Bilbo whispered, his eyes overwrought with failure and pain. "I should have been able to do it. Why couldn't I do it?"

No one knew what to say in the face of his distress.

"Papa-papa, 'ook! 'nana. Want?" Frodo's head appeared near Bilbo's knees.

Just like that, Bilbo's expression cleared and a smile spread across his face. Like the sun shining after a storm, and Frodo was the rainbow, spreading the magic of his joy.

"Thank you, love, I am famished," the hobbit allowed the babe to feed him the banana slice. "Perhaps I should grab something to eat, eh?"

"Wait, wait, you haven't told us what happened yet," Bofur said.

"Here, you can eat these," Kili handed a bowl of strawberries to Bilbo. Frodo never ate them.

Bilbo gave the young dwarf a flat look that conveyed just what he thought of that idea. Like strawberries were going to fill his belly. He did accept the bowl in the end. He was hungry, after all, and there was no point in letting food go to waste.

"Start at the beginning!"

"Stah?" Frodo perked.

"Start, as in begin. Not star," Bilbo corrected. He cleared his throat and made himself comfortable in the armchair with the babe on his lap. "We climbed the High Pass of the Misty Mountains. The weather was horrible; it rained and rained for days on end. We were very lucky. Usually a pair of stone giants like to play toss near the pass. The caves of the High Pass have become too dangerous to dwell in. The goblins of Goblin-town delved traps in many, so we were forced to find other places to make camp. There were far and few places.

"Despite this, we actually made good time. We arrived at the secret entrance to Goblin-town within a week of leaving Rivendell. Our destination wasn't Goblin-town but a secret cave system far beneath it, where even the goblins feared to go. The creature that lived there was called Gollum, for the coughing noise he made gollum, gollum." Frodo whined, looking upset, and Bilbo felt like an idiot.
He hugged the babe close and cooed at him. "Oh, it's all right. He's not going to hurt you ever again.

"I confronted Gollum in his cave, I held the tip of Sting to his throat . . . He escaped me in the end, though the others gathered in a tight circle around us. We were distracted for a mere second when a goblin appeared in the cave, drawn by the commotion. Gollum took his chance, pushing me aside, and made a run for it. We ran him down until at last . . . I told Legolas to shoot him. We couldn't let him escape."

"Eg?" Frodo whispered, looking around surreptitiously, waiting for Legolas to suddenly appear.

"That's right. Legolas killed the monster for you," Bilbo said. Frodo looked appropriately amazed, though he did not know what "killed" meant. "By that time, we'd followed Gollum too far into the caves. We had drawn more attention than we wanted. The goblins began appearing around every corner and they chased us straight to Goblin-town. The Great Goblin, the chieftain of Goblin-town, appeared before us. He was a giant, blob of a goblin. Taller even, than Thranduil, and about four times as large. Just one of his footsteps shook the ground beneath us."

Frodo's expressions were amusing to watch. The hobbitling gasped and cringed, eyes widening in horror and amazement. Thorin doubted the babe actually understood half of what Bilbo said.

"The stone-giants must have been playing rougher than usual outside. The mountain shook around us at intervals. Elrohir was startled enough that he released an arrow up into the darkness of the cave. Next thing we know, there are boulders twice the size of me falling from the ceiling. One of them could have easily crushed us beneath its bulk. We began running towards a light in the distance. We hoped that it was an exit, it could very well have been a dead end.

"Thankfully, it was an exit. Thranduil, who had picked me up like a sack of potatoes, threw me out first just as the walls began to cave in. He was pinned beneath an avalanche of rocks and I hit my head on another as I landed. But that wasn't the end of our troubles, no. There was an army of goblins waiting for us outside and with Thranduil trapped beneath the rocks, things were looking pretty grim.

"There were a pair of stone-giants tossing a rock back and forth nearby. Though they are large and slow, stone-giants are benevolent but misunderstood beings. Often they simply do not pay attention to us smaller creatures. To our great luck, there was a flock of thrush nearby and they helped me get the attention of the giants. The goblins panicked, of course, when the giants drew nearer and began to attack them. This did not please the stone-giants at all and they began smashing and crushing the foul beings beneath their fists.

"The goblins fled with the stone-giants after them. It was obvious that we were quite lost afterward. I could not recall the place where we ended up. It was kind of the thrush to help us find our way back. We forgot that there were many entrances to Goblin-town on our way up the High Pass. We were ambushed as we climbed down again. It was a difficult task, fighting on the slopes of the mountain, especially with Thranduil injured. But we managed to overcome our foes and make it safely back."

Frodo cheered when he realized the story was over, clapping in excitement.

There was more than one dwarf gaping at the hobbit with astonishment. Bilbo could see Ori bent over his book as he wrote quickly.

"Are stone-giants made from stone?" Bofur asked.

"Stone? Good heavens, no," Bilbo chuckled. "They simply enjoy playing with it. You can usually find them tossing rocks at each other. It is no wonder they are slow, as they are often hitting each
other on the head."

"Is the High Pass safe now?" Balin asked.

Bilbo's eyes glazed, he stared off into the distance. "The stone-giants have moved on. They've chased many goblins away. There are still some stragglers but they remain in the lower caves that were not affected by the avalanche. They are being dealt with by Glorfindel."

"Can you have visions whenever you like?" Kili wondered.

"It really depends," Bilbo shrugged. "I'm not entirely sure how it works. Sometimes I cannot see things when I try."

An awkward silence descended. Bilbo noticed the looks some of them were throwing Thorin, seeking his guidance on what to do next, but the King-in-Exile remained stoic and still. Silent like a statue. He'd refused to look in Bilbo's general direction since Bilbo had blurted out his . . . secret. Bilbo couldn't ease his discomfort when he didn't know what the problem was.

There were many problems present. But which one was Thorin brooding over?

"Li'deer!" Frodo shouted when said elf knocked on the door, bowing to all within.

"I have come to take him to the library, if I may, of course, Master Baggins?" Lindir asked.

Bilbo laughed. "Of course, of course. How many times must I tell you to call me Bilbo?"

"Just once more, Master Baggins," Lindir bowed, taking the reaching hobbitling from his father. "Say goodbye to your father, Frodo."

Frodo gave Lindir a look. He didn't know what "goodbye" was. What was that?

Instead he blew his Papa a kiss. Amazed when Papa blew one right back. So he blew some more. He threw one at Adad too, before he forgot. Glad that the grumpy dwarf—because Adad was a grumpy dwarf—managed a small smile in his direction.

"Could I speak with you?" Bilbo asked, looking at Thorin.

Thorin looked like he wanted to protest but thought better of it. He nodded but remained seated where he was.

Bilbo contained his frustration. Barely. "In private?"

The dwarves trickled out one by one, throwing concerned looks back at them, but they did not protest. Not even Balin.

The door closed ominously behind them.

Bilbo shifted in the chair, clearing his throat when it appeared that Thorin would remain silent. "How was Frodo?"

"He was . . . well behaved," Thorin replied shortly.

"That's good," though Bilbo had heard otherwise, he allowed Thorin the lie. "I imagine you'll be pleased for a return of your free time."

Thorin made a noncommittal noise and did not answer.
"Is something wrong?"

"Just what else have you lied about?" Thorin asked. Demanded, more like. An underlying threat in his voice. "Was there anything you said that was true?"

Bilbo did not answer. Because he had lied. But it was a complicated matter and how did one go about explaining something like that? He couldn't tell Thorin that he had been sent back in time or that Frodo hadn't always been his son or that he'd been born a Hobbit not a Maia. It was unbelievable and impossible and who would believe such a story?

"I told you plenty of things that were true," Bilbo managed weakly. He couldn't defend himself against Thorin, he realized, because anything the dwarf might accuse him of would probably be true.

And then Thorin did not look angry anymore. He simply looked . . . tired and the pain in his eyes made Bilbo's chest ache. "Balin was right, was he not? I should never have placed my trust in you. You played us right from the start."

"I haven't been playing with anyone, least of all you," Bilbo argued.

"How can I believe anything you say from now on?" Thorin growled, barely managing to suppress the fury that snapped suddenly inside of him. "You're a liar and a thief. You played me for a fool."

Bilbo took several steps back, hands nervously patting at his pocket. The box was still there, a heavy weight and a heavy burden.

"You might want to think about leaving now," Bilbo said, moving back until there was a chair in between them. "Before you do something you'll regret."

Thorin blinked slowly, shaking himself. "Bilbo-"

"I said leave!" Bilbo screamed. He waited until the dwarf stumbled out of the room, dashing forward to shut the door behind him and turning the lock. He leaned against the door heavily, sliding down until he sitting on the floor.

He removed the box from the confines of his pocket, hands shaking. "You ruin everything." He growled, throwing the box across the room; it crashed against the far wall and fell to the ground. Lid still closed. Anyone would think it was just a regular box.

But for the whispers he could almost hear.
Chapter End Notes

Uh, this was supposed to be a happy chapter? Idk what happened. QAQ

• Sindarin Lullaby translation at Parflaer Estelion!
Thorin was reeling. He had been so, so angry and had felt justified in that anger as well. He'd been ready to grab the hobbit by the neck and . . . what?

Then Bilbo had stepped away and rationality had come flooding back, leaving him stumbling as he tried to find his footing.

He feared now. That it was the gold sickness. But it couldn't be. There had been no gold, as far as he'd seen. Perhaps he'd been sick all along. Perhaps he had already fallen prey to it, just like his grandfather.

"Uncle?" Kili asked, hesitant. He stood a few paces away, out of Thorin's reach. "Are you all right?"

"We heard Bilbo screaming," Fili offered. "Did . . . did something happen?"

Before Thorin could answer, Lord Elrond appeared around one of the carved pillars of the Hall of Fire. He looked far from pleased. Thorin mentally prepared himself; in case they got thrown out of Rivendell.

"Master Thorin," Elrond greeted. He came to a stop, arms crossed at his back. "I'm afraid I may have misled you."

"What?" Thorin wondered, voice rough.

"When I told you that your map must wait," Elrond continued. "I'm afraid I misled you into thinking I did not already know what it said."

"You . . ." Thorin trailed off, confused. "You did what?!" The elf had the gall to look unrepentant. He had known. He had known the elves would try to impede their quest!

He pushed himself to his feet, anger rising quickly. He froze, eyes drawn to the person standing at the Elf-lord's back and the anger left as swiftly as it came.

Bilbo chewed on his bottom lip, giving him a wide eyed look before turning away.

"Stand by the grey stone when the thrush knocks and the setting sun with the last light of Durin's day will shine upon the keyhole," said Elrond. He quirked an eyebrow at Thorin. "Do you think you can remember that?"

"I can," Fili volunteered.

"Good," Elrond turned away. Bilbo made a frustrated noise. Elrond sighed and turned back. "I trust you will be leaving now that you know?"

Thorin gawped at him. "You'll let us leave?" He eyed the Elf-lord with much suspicion. "You want us to leave?"

"I'm not the one who wishes for you to leave," Elrond murmured. "I was hoping you would stay for another week at least and provide protection for Bilbo and Frodo. They're journeying to Thranduil's, if you did not know."

"I did," Thorin eyed Bilbo in speculation. The hobbit was glaring at Elrond heatedly, an almost panicked look in his eyes. "Would it be too much trouble if we decided to stay?"
Elrond stilled, then a smile spread across his face. "It would be no trouble at all."

"B-b-but you know what it says now. You can leave!" Bilbo pointed out, hands flailing uselessly about to convey his frustration.

Thorin gave his nephews a look. They smiled at him with a nod and left. Elrond took that as his cue to leave as well, ignoring Bilbo's sputtering attempts to keep him near.

"I don't understand," Bilbo admitted after a moment of tense silence during which Thorin regarded him pensively.

"Of that we are in agreement," Thorin frowned. "Why do you want us to leave?" His expression earnest and unsure. "Is it because of . . . what happened in your room? Because I almost hurt you? I am sorry. I don't know what came over me. I—"

"No, no, no," Bilbo shook his head in denial. "It—that—it wasn't your fault."

"It was not yours either. Tell me, Bilbo, do you want us to leave?" Thorin continued before the hobbit could answer. "Do not lie to me. If you truly want us to leave, we will."

Bilbo's face crumbled. "No." The smile that spread across Thorin's face was filled with such joy, it eased an ache in Bilbo's chest, and warmed him to the very tips of his toes. He turned away. He didn't understand why Thorin would not want to leave when he had the chance. What could be more important to the King-in-Exile than getting to Erebor?

"Why did you not tell us you were a Maia?" Thorin asked.

The hobbit sighed, defeated. "Because I did not wish to get pulled into some grand scheme. People are always expecting help from the Istari, you know. It's fine for Gandalf to go gallivanting about but I have a baby to care for. And," he cleared his throat, flushing, "even with Frodo, I . . . I will do all I can to help you on your quest."

There was a gleam of hope kindling in Thorin's eyes, which Bilbo was glad to see. "Thank you. That is more than what I hoped."

"Oh? What did you hope?"

"Truly?" Thorin considered his words. "Only to be able to see you and Frodo again someday."

Despite the sad, self-deprecating smile on the dwarf's face. Bilbo found he could not contain the flush that spread over his own. His face burned all the way to his ears. He wondered if he looked as ridiculous as he felt at that moment.

"Perhaps once we'd reclaimed Erebor . . . made some repairs," Thorin fretted, though the hobbit did not notice. He willed himself to stop talking. But the words kept pouring out. "We would have sent you an invitation to visit. Provided safe escort. You could have stayed in one of the rooms in the Royal Wing. I believe there's one with a balcony. It's high up but it provides a great view and fresh air. You do like your fresh air, I think." The hobbit was staring at him with eyes so wide, they were in danger of falling right out of his pretty little head. He prayed for some divine intervention.

"Have you reconciled then?" The voice startled them and Thorin thanked Mahal for sending Balin to his rescue. The old dwarf smiled at them benignly. "Only Fili and Kili are making quite a spectacle of themselves trying to block the rest of the Company from venturing in here. They've attracted the attention of a fair share of elves, as well."
"Oh, dear," Bilbo murmured. "I should, uh, go do something . . . about that." A gentle hand on his arm stopped him. "Hm?"

"I was hoping we might have a chat, laddie," Balin said. "If you are amiable to my presence, of course."

"Yes, why wouldn't I be? I'll see you later, then, Thorin."

"Before you go," Thorin cleared his throat roughly. "I am sorry about before. I do not know what came over me."

"There is nothing to forgive," Bilbo squeezed the dwarf's arm gently, expression strangely calm. "It won't happen again."

He allowed Balin to lead him off. Fili and Kili scurried away as soon as they saw the thunderous expression on Bilbo's face. The others of Thorin's Company were just as confused as the elves who were milling about. All waiting for the brothers to allow them entrance into the Hall of Fire. Though why they would want to go there during the day was beyond Bilbo. Unless they'd been hoping to catch a glimpse of what was happening that led the two young dwarves to block the entrance in the first place.

"Is there somewhere . . . private, where we might speak?" Balin asked.

"There are many unoccupied rooms, let's use this one," Bilbo peeked into a random room they passed. It was empty but there was a fire in going in the fireplace and a tea kettle hanging over it that whistled softly. "Careless. Looks like someone was preparing some tea in here. Well, their loss, our gain!" Unless, of curse, Elrond had foreseen such a thing and left the kettle for them. Elrond could be so smug sometimes.

He went about preparing them some tea, hands fluttering nervously around the tea service. It was not as though he hadn't been expecting Balin to pull him aside at some point. He'd prepared himself mentally, as much as he could, but it was still nerve wrecking.

Once he served the tea, there was no reason for him to stall any longer. So he sat and tried to enjoy the hot drink, gaze flickering around the room, anywhere but at Balin.

"I wish to apologize to you, Master Baggins," began Balin without preamble.

Bilbo choked on his tea, feeling it burn all the way to his nose. He sneezed and hacked and coughed. All but throwing his tea cup on the table as he tried to get his body under control.

"I'm sorry," he gasped. He coughed a few more times. "Everyone is apologizing to me lately."

"There is a lot to apologize for."

"Balin, no," Bilbo shook his head. "You have nothing to apologize for."

"I made you uncomfortable. Do not try to deny it. It was my intention all along," Balin chuckled weakly. "I—"

"Balin. There is nothing to forgive. You acted out of fear for Thorin. How can I judge you for trying to protect him?"

Balin observed him with keen eyes. Until finally he huffed, shaking his head with a chuckle. "I do not know what to make of you."
"I'm just a Hobbit." The disbelieving look he received almost made him cringe. "All right. I am not just a Hobbit. But I have lived many, many years as a Hobbit. I do not know how to be anything else."

"How old are you, laddie?"

Bilbo quickly calculated the years. The one hundred and thirty one years he had lived in his first life, plus the fifty years he was in this life. How long had he and Frodo spent in the Undying Lands? "One hundred eighty one."

"Only that? You . . . You're quite young."

The hobbit hummed. One hundred eighty one was not young for a hobbit at all and he did not think it was for a dwarf either. Or perhaps Balin meant for a Maia?

"Thorin is . . . worried. He says you plan to journey to the Halls of the Elvenking?"

"Oh! Oh, dear," Bilbo rubbed his forehead. He could feel a headache coming on. "I mean, yes. We do. I do, that is. With Frodo. Thranduil wishes for Frodo and I to visit his home. It has been a while since I've been there. Frodo has never gone and I think he will like it."

"Were you aware that Thorin plans to follow you?"

"He was threatening to. I know he does not put much faith in Thranduil but I can assure that nothing will happen to us. There really is no need for everyone to tag along!"

There was a peculiar expression on Balin's face. "I was under the impression you had asked for us to accompany you."

Had he? "Did I?" He didn't think he had. "I don't recall having done so. But, it is not a bad idea. The path through Mirkwood is full of peril. The Elf-path is enchanted; it keeps the spiders away but the trees are close together, making the air stuffy and hard to breathe. If that's not enough, halfway through the path there is the Enchanted River. The water of the river is enchanted; anyone who comes into contact with it falls into a long, deep sleep that they cannot be woken from. And as I said, there's also the spiders, easily twice the size of me." He could see that Balin was speechless. "Thranduil and Legolas can provide safe passage through the forest. If you can accept their help, of course."

There were knocks at the door. Small, tiny knocks that were barely discernible.

"Papa-papa?" called Frodo's voice.

Bilbo laughed while Balin only shook his head. The hobbit opened the door carefully. Frodo was sitting on the floor, Mister Nibbles on his lap. There was no one else around.

"What? Did you sneak away again?" Bilbo demanded crossly. He knelt and gathered the babe into his arms. "We have to correct this bad habit of yours. You can't go sneaking away whenever you want, Frodo. You could get hurt!"

"Food?" the baby wondered.

"Oh, you," Bilbo sighed, exasperated. He made the hobbitling comfortable on the seat beside him, placing pillows at the babe's back and sides.

"Ba'ee!" Frodo waved at Balin, who smiled back. "Ba'ee. Ba'ee. Ba'ee."
"Balin," Bilbo corrected. He prepared some warm tea in a teacup and held it up to the babe's lips. Frodo quieted as he sipped, hands grasping at his father's hands but not pulling or pushing the cup until he could drink no more. He allowed Bilbo to dry his face with a handkerchief, then settled back against the pillows, drawing his rabbit close, and promptly went to sleep. "He's exhausted, poor dear. I wonder how long he was looking for me."

"Does he sneak away often?"

"He's never had a reason to sneak away before." Bilbo wished he had a blanket to cover the babe with. Frodo snuffled and smacked his lips.

"He has an adventurous spirit."

"How I wish he didn't. All this adventuring is going to lead me to an early grave." He wondered who'd been watching the hobbitling. The elves would never have been so careless as to lose him. He tried to card his fingers through the dark, unruly hair. "Hm. Hair needs brushing."

"You do not believe the Elvenking will try to stop our quest?" Balin questioned once the hobbit had settled in his seat again.

"Thranduil wishes to help your quest. He wants to right the wrongs done to your people in the past. I believe he has a plan on how to rid the world of Smaug but he does not think Thorin will listen to him."

"It is one thing to accompany you on your journey and quite another to trust in the Elvenking. No matter how good his intentions may be. No, Thorin will not listen."

Bilbo sighed in frustration.

"Do you know . . . what it is he plans? Can you see it?"

"I am . . . not very good at looking into the future, I'm afraid. It is ever changing, so what I see might not come to pass. I do know he plans to use his caves as sanctuary for the people of Lake-town. When the dragon wakes, he will attack the city, and many people will die as it burns."

"That would be a tragedy. But . . . the dragon. Still lives?"

"Yes, Smaug lives. But he is not as invulnerable as you may believe. There is a single bare patch on his left breast, near his heart, where Girion, Lord of Dale, hit him with a Black Arrow and loosened a scale."

"So he can be killed? With any type of arrow, would you say?"

"If you're thinking that Kili can kill the beast, he cannot. It is not Kili's destiny to slay the dragon. That honor falls upon Bard, the descendant of Girion, and the bearer of the last Black Arrow, forged by Thórór, King under the Mountain. Attempting to change fate may lead to dire consequences."

"Then why tell me all of this?"

Bilbo blinked. "Because you asked. Balin, as it stands, the quest will not succeed. I . . . I don't know how to tell Thorin this. I hoped that I'd be able to convince him to accept Thranduil's help but . . . it seems rather impossible at the moment. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Why is it so important that the Elvenking help us?"
"It is not just Thranduil. You will need all the help you can get. Men, Dwarves, and Elves must join together. Smaug is the least of your worries; there is an army of Orcs and Wargs gathering at the Grey Mountains, preparing to march upon Erebor. The numbers would have been greatly increased with the addition of the goblins of the Misty Mountains but we . . . uh, took care of them." He cleared his throat and drank some tea, ignoring Balin's expression of disbelief. But he could see that his words were starting to get through. "Azog, the Defiler, has been given orders to end the line of Durin. Though Azog will meet his end soon," Bilbo's lips quirked with amusement. "His son, Bolg, will take command of both armies."

"Azog?" Balin whispered. "The Pale Orc is alive?"

"He won't be for long." Tiny feet kicked at Bilbo's thighs but Frodo only turned onto his belly, drawing his thumb into his mouth to suckle at. "I'm sorry. I'm probably overwhelming you with all this. I'll give you time to yourself so you can think over everything I've told you."

Balin nodded absentmindedly. Bilbo cautiously lifted the hobbitling into his arms. Frodo whined and flailed uselessly before settling against his father's shoulder with some grumbles. It was amusing how grumpy he looked as he slept; lips pouting, brows pinched, and nose wrinkled.

"Just." Bilbo licked his lips, thoughtful and unsure. "Don't be too quick to make up your mind. Also know that Thranduil doesn't expect payment of any kind for helping you. Though the Men of Esgaroth probably will. He truly does wish to make amends with Thorin and your people." His lips quirked again, though he was not facing Balin so the dwarf could not see his amusement. "You should probably be aware that Elrond has already told Thorin what his map says."

That will show the Dwarf-king, thought Bilbo vindictively then immediately felt silly. It was not as though Thorin had done something that was not part of the plan. If anything, Bilbo had been the one messing things up. Thranduil would not be happy to learn he'd almost had Thorin and his Company thrown out of Rivendell in a moment of panic.

He ignored Balin's sputtering, hurrying out of the room as quickly as he could without looking like he was running away. He wondered at what to do next. It was too soon to face Thorin again, he was still frustrated with the dwarf.

It began as an itch. He scratched at the back of his neck and the top of his head but the itch remained in the corner of his mind and at the edge of vision. When he looked around there was nothing of interest and no one around.

Bilbo shook his head. He was imagining things, of course he was. Or so he told himself. But then Frodo woke from one second to the next, looking around with wide eyes, and Bilbo thought that there was something odd going on.

He saw her then, walking down the hall, and she was even more graceful and beautiful than he remembered. He ignored the dwarves that appeared at his side, pulling away from their insistent tugging.

Her eyes brightened as they fell upon him and Frodo, she changed directions, heading towards them in her slow grace. Elrond's face was full of bemusement. Bilbo could relate, confused as he was. But the draw of the Lady of the Wood was strong and he found himself meeting her halfway.

She wore a resplendent blue gown that shimmered as the light touched it. Or maybe it was her own light that was shimmering.

Frodo giggled, blowing Galadriel a kiss that brought a wide smile to her fair face. She reached back
and Bilbo belatedly noticed that there was another elf in her and Elrond's company. He was tall but not as tall as the Lady of Lórien; Haldir, always so stern and serious.

He handed Galadriel a phial filled with water that twinkled in the light.

"I have a gift for you, little one," Galadriel murmured. She passed the phial to Frodo, who grasped it with both hands and peered at the shining water closely. "The light of Eärendil."

"Stah!" Frodo exclaimed after a moment of curious observation, looking to his father for confirmation. He smiled at Galadriel, putting the fingers of his right hand up to his lips and then drawing his hand away. Thank you. He observed the phial some more before his attention was once again drawn to the Lady of Light, his hands reached out to her pleadingly. "Up, please!"

Her bewilderment shone in her eyes, though the smile remained on her face. She looked to Bilbo for permission and truly, how could he deny her or Frodo?

The hobbitling appeared so small in her arms but no less precious. She held him against her chest with gentle hands, afraid to hurt him in any way. Frodo reached with tiny hands to touch her face, babbling at her, content in her arms and held by her.

Haldir, too, appeared curious of the hobbitling, turning to one side so he could peer at the babe without seeming like he was.

"Bilbo," said Elrond, drawing the hobbit's attention. "Your presence is requested."

He had expected such a thing, giving Elrond a nod, and taking a deep breath. He had only ever attended one council meeting; the Council of Elrond. He knew what to say and what he had to do, but going forth with it . . . it frightened him.

"May I?" Galadriel asked, gesturing at Frodo, lounging quite comfortably in her arms.

"Of course!" Bilbo exclaimed, throwing an exasperated look at the babe. "I doubt I could tear him from you even if I tried."

The babe's babbling echoed down the hall as Galadriel swept away. A hand on his arm called his attention to the dwarves standing behind him. He hadn't even noticed them there.

"Who was that?" Kili wondered, eyes wide and shining with awe, still staring after the disappearing form of Galadriel. "Do elves usually shine like that? Is that normal?"

"The Lady of Lórien, Galadriel. She was born in Valinor long ago, she is quite old," said Bilbo. "You'll have to excuse me. I have to be present for the meeting."

"Meeting?" Thorin echoed with suspicion. "What is this a meeting of? Is this the reason Gandalf told us we must leave quickly?"

Bilbo chuckled, confusing them. "Ignore Gandalf, Thorin. The White Wizard believes it to be a meeting about your quest but . . . he's going to be sorely disappointed." The dark look that passed over the hobbit's normally genial face startled them into taking a step back. He smiled and pat Thorin's arm as he passed the dwarf. "Do not worry. No one will interfere with your quest if I can help it."

He stopped by his room to gather Frodo's toys. Making a brief stop by Thranduil's to warn the Elvenking against becoming involved, especially with that injury. Gathering Legolas, who was only too happy to be of some use.
Legolas was ill accustomed to sitting around and doing nothing for days on end. Preferring to be up and moving.

Haldir stood outside the balcony where the White Council was taking place. He greeted Legolas enthusiastically, or as enthusiastically as he ever appeared. Bilbo left them to their conversation, knowing Legolas would keep keen ears on the meeting, as according to plan.

His entrance went unnoticed by all except Galadriel and Elrond—who were expecting him.

"Smaug owes allegiance to no one. But if he should side with the enemy, a dragon could be used to terrible effect," Gandalf said.

"What enemy? Gandalf, the enemy is defeated. Sauron is vanquished. He can never regain his full strength," Saruman scoffed.

"Trolls have come down from the mountains. They are raiding villages, destroying farms—" Gandalf stopped abruptly as Bilbo made his presence known by pushing all of Frodo's toys onto the table. Why did everything have to be so bloody high? "Bilbo—what?"

"What is the meaning of this?" Saruman demanded.

The sight of his toys caught Frodo's attention and he looked at them curiously, smiling around the nipple of the bottle he drank from.

"I'm afraid to inform you that Gandalf is correct," Bilbo began. "The Necromancer that resides in Dol Guldur is indeed Sauron in disguise."

After a moment of incredulous silence, Saruman began to laugh. "Is this how you would convince us, Gandalf? By having a Halfling—"

"I am not half of anything," Bilbo snapped.

"Listen here, Hobbit," Saruman hissed with such disdain Bilbo could see Elrond fighting to remain calm behind him. "I am—"

"Nothing," Bilbo continued for him, eyes glazing. "By the will of your master, Aulë the Smith, and the Valar you are hereby declared incapable of carrying out the mission you were given. You are to travel to Mithlond and return to Aman." He blinked the glaze from his eyes, turning an annoyed glare on the toys. "Though why they'd bother is a mystery."

Galadriel drew away from the table, bouncing Frodo lightly in her arms. The hobbitling giggled, touching what he could reach of her hair. "They are being very forgiving, Curumo. You should do as they say."

The White Wizard scoffed, clearly believing it all to be a joke. His smile was malignant as he looked down at Bilbo. "And what, pray tell me, are my crimes?"

"You know your crimes well, Wizard," Bilbo took out the final test. The rounded, silver box that contained the One Ring dormant within. He slammed it on the table and took a step back, waiting to see what the Wizard would do. "I give you the One Ring of Sauron. Tell me now and tell me quickly, how can we destroy it?"

He would remember the look on Gandalf's face for the rest of his life. The shock, bewilderment, and confusion. It wasn't often one turned the tables on the Grey Wizard.
The greed on Saruman's face was disconcerting to say the least. "The One Ring, you say? Tell me, halfling, why should we destroy it?"

"Saruman!" Gandalf cried, aghast.

The White Wizard darted forward and grasped the box. He was quick for someone who looked ancient, Bilbo mused.

"The power of this ri—" he trailed off, eyes widening in horror as he opened the box. Because there was nothing within it, after all. As if Bilbo would be foolish enough to use the One Ring to test him.

"You can't say you were controlled by it, when it was never there to begin with," Bilbo tsked. "No Hobbit will ever die for your greed."

The Wizard's face twisted in fury. What happened next Bilbo would never forgive. Instead of turning to attack him, Saruman turned towards Galadriel and Frodo.

Galadriel turned her body away, as though to shield the babe, when the Wizard raised his staff. Though there was no doubt in Bilbo's mind that out of them all, Frodo was the safest. There was a ripple in the air as Saruman brought his staff down. Some unseen force threw him back and the staff exploded in his hand.

The shock silenced them for several moments. In that time, Legolas, Haldir, and some of Elrond's guards ran into the room, weapons drawn.

"No, no, no," Frodo scolded, shaking a finger at Saruman. He put his fists on his hips, glaring as angrily as he could muster. He quickly turned to bury his face against Galadriel's shoulder. "Eg."

Legolas spared him an amused glance; his bow taut and trained on the fallen Wizard.

"Take him to the dungeon. He will return to Aman at the earliest convenience," Elrond said.

"Return?" Haldir questioned. "Why not deal with him here?" The man had tried to hurt an innocent child, after all.

"It is not our duty to pass judgment on him," Bilbo explained. He quirked an eyebrow at Elrond. His relief giving way to amusement. "You have a dungeon?"

"I do now," Elrond replied, sharing his amusement, his relief also clear. His guards led the corrupt man away, followed by Legolas and Haldir close at hand. "Gandalf, are you well?"

Bilbo couldn't hold back a giggle at the Grey Wizard's face. Gandalf all but fell into a seat, shaking off Elrond's concern with the wave of a hand. He looked lost, spent, and unsure.

Galadriel lay a hand upon his shoulder and he managed a quirky smile at her and Frodo, who reached down to pat him on the head.

"Dere, dere," Frodo cooed. He held his bottle out to the Wizard. "Want?"

The tension dissipated as everyone laughed but the seriousness of the situation returned quickly.

"Was everything you said a lie? To trick Saruman?" Gandalf asked hopefully, looking to Bilbo.

The hobbit shook his head, dispelling any hope Gandalf might have had. "Sauron is the Necromancer."
"Then we must go—" the Wizard began.

"No, Mithrandir," Elrond interrupted. "We must keep him at Dol Guldur for as long as we are able. As long as he remains unaware of what is truly happening, we have the advantage."

"What is happening?"

"There is a plot. To end the line of Durin," Bilbo took over. "Sauron gathers an army at Dol Guldur. It will march upon Erebor."

"Is that more important than the Ring of Power?" Galadriel asked.

"Only for the moment," Bilbo assured. "If we can decimate his army at Erebor, he will be greatly weakened. This will give us a greater advantage in the long run. He will not be able to gather his forces so quickly the second time, not with them scattered.

"The secret door cannot be opened until Durin's Day. This give us ample time to help the people of Lake-town move into Thranduil's caves. With them out of harm's way, dealing with Smaug will be, while not pleasant, much easier."

"You truly have it all planned, haven't you?" Gandalf wondered, amazed.

"I had much help," the hobbit demurred, flushing. Frodo, standing on the Wizard's lap, reached for Mister Nibbles. The rabbit went into his arms without protest. "I did not plan much beyond Smaug's death, I'm afraid."

"You truly have it all planned, haven't you?" Gandalf wondered, amazed.

"I had much help," the hobbit demurred, flushing. Frodo, standing on the Wizard's lap, reached for Mister Nibbles. The rabbit went into his arms without protest. "I did not plan much beyond Smaug's death, I'm afraid." He threw an inscrutable look at Galadriel. "Especially the destruction of the One Ring."

Gandalf drew in a deep breath. "Then it is true. You found it?"

"It is true," Bilbo confirmed. "The ring will remain with me. Elrond will call a council of the Free Peoples of Middle-earth and the fate of the ring will be decided."

"But you have already decided its fate," Gandalf pointed out.

Bilbo smiled charmingly. "Of course. Anyone who thinks the ring shouldn't be destroyed is a fool. But they have the right to know." He cocked his head, regarding the Wizard in concern. "Gandalf, are you sure you're all right? We can speak of this at a later time, if you'd rather. I know you've had a shock."

"Many shocks," murmured Elrond.

"Oh, do assure Thorin that everything is all right," Bilbo continued, ignoring Elrond. "I don't want him sneaking out in the middle of the night . . . if they haven't already." Because really, he'd gone through all the trouble of setting up help for the King-in-Exile. If he had to chase them down too he'd be very cross.
Frodo and his grandma—she said it was all right to call her that, she did!—were in the garden. Big brothers, Elladan and Elrohir, were there as well. Even Estel joined them! Frodo was hiding flowers in Grandma's hair. He liked her hair; it was bright and shiny like the sun.

He held still as Grandma twined another flower through his own curls. He reached up to touch the flower, giggling.

"Frodo! Frodo! You'll want to see this!" Estel called. He was on his belly in the grass, peeking through the flowers to look at their cocoon.

The hobbitling crawled over and mimicked his position, leaning his elbows in the grass and his chin in his hands.

"Is that a cocoon?" Elladan asked.

"Look, there's bunches in the back, already opened, see?" Elrohir pointed. "Looks like we've got a late bloomer."

"Buffy!" Frodo called.

They could see the beautiful blue wings of the butterfly through the clearness of the chrysalis. The cocoon was splitting open even as they spoke.

"Do you see that? Butterflies breathe in air and expand their bodies," Elladan explained. "As their bodies expand, it breaks open the chrysalis."

"Ohh," both Frodo and Estel said in awe.

"It's likely to take a while for the butterfly to fully emerge," Elrohir pointed out. "Are you two going to be watching it all day?"

"Shh," Frodo said, staring with fixed fascination at cocoon.

"I guess so," Elladan laughed.

Galadriel kept the boys company as they waited for their butterfly to come out. She answered their questions and what kind of butterfly did she think theirs was?

"I believe," Galadriel chuckled for she did not believe in coincidences. "It is an Oakleaf Butterfly."

They did not have to wait long for the butterfly to fully emerge. It was as eager to finally greet them as they were. It took a moment to shake itself and get used to its new body before spreading its wings
Bilbo wondered when the Lady Galadriel would return his son. Several hours had passed and they were still in the garden.

"You told me she wasn't one of the few—" Bilbo began, frustrated.

"She is not," Thranduil said, body drawn tight like a bowstring. He took a few steps, leaning on the crutches Erestor, of all people, had given him. "She only sees what they want her to see."

"They want her to see what? Frodo?"

"I do not know. But. I believe this to be a good thing in the long run."

"Well, I suppose it can't be a bad thing," Bilbo murmured. He humphed, miffed. All he wanted was to go more than a day without surprises. He was becoming incredibly adverse to meeting new people, constantly wondering if they were one of the eight. "Were you aware of what Aulë had done?"

"I was not. But I believe Frodo was aware, it might have been why he went looking for you that day," Thranduil managed one final step to the bed. He sat down with great force, the bed shook beneath his weight. Bilbo only just managed to maintain his balance where he sat cross-legged on the other side. "He could hardly send you back as a Hobbit, could he? Not if there was even a minor chance you might not be able to return to Valinor."

"But as a Maia, I can? So it was all . . . what? For selfish reasons?"

"I do not claim to know the inner workings of the Valar, Bilbo. Nor do I wish to. But think of it this way, it is quite a gift—"

"And oh, how I wish everyone would stop using that word!" Bilbo snapped. "It is all I hear lately. 'This is a gift' and 'that is a gift'! I do not consider it a gift! I never asked for any of this."

"You did not ask for it. But you received it regardless. All you can do now is make the best of it. We're doing well, aren't we? We've had some drawbacks," he gestured at his leg and Bilbo's head. "But we've managed what we set out to do thus far. Does that not please you?"

"Ask me again once we're done," Bilbo sighed. "I'm worried about the dragon sickness. He—I wasn't expecting the ring to ensnare him like that."
"I doubt it will attempt to lash out again. The backlash alone should be enough to keep it subdued. Crafty little box, wish we'd had it the first time around."

"The first time around . . . you wanted nothing to do with the quest," Bilbo pointed out.

"I was foolish then. Speaking of foolishness," Thranduil's voice lowered into a growl, dark and menacing. "Did you try to get them thrown out of Rivendell?"

Bilbo swallowed, licking at his dry lips, as he tried to think of an excuse. "I panicked—"

"We've worked too long and too hard for this. So you cannot turn around and destroy all my well-thought out plans—"

"Oh, put a cork in it, will you?" Bilbo frowned. He rolled his eyes at Thranduil's overdramatized wounded expression.

Thranduil splayed himself on the bed, inelegant as he could manage. "I miss the days when you listened to me without argument."

"That was more than a hundred years ago and even then I didn't really listen to you," Bilbo snorted. "I miss the days when . . . when we'd lie out among the grass. Just conversing. We had no worries . . . It was—it was nice."

Thranduil pushed himself up. "We'll have that again, Bilbo. We'll go together this time. With Elrond and your . . ." He sniffed, annoyed. "Dwarf. Legolas plans to stay with Frodo for a while."

"Does he? Doesn't surprise me in the least. I suppose they'll all go together too." He had trouble imaging Frodo as a grown up. He would not be the same; he would never have to worry about the ring. Would he be the like the carefree boy of before? "Will Frodo have a task?"

"Did Melian have a task when she came to Middle-earth?"

Bilbo quirked an eyebrow at him. "That is not a fair comparison . . . is it?"

Thranduil only smiled. "Although, I imagine Frodo will cause quite a bit of ruckus, when he finally decides to return." He would say no more on the matter, smiling mysteriously. "I wish to take a walk. If I have to stay in this bed for another minute, I will jump from the balcony. Put myself out of my misery."

"Elrond will be angry," Bilbo said in a sing-song voice.

"I do not care. Now help me, will you?"

"Is that jest? What do you expect me to do? Carry you?"

Elrond cleared his throat loudly, standing in the open doorway with a frightening look upon his face. Thranduil and Bilbo froze, wide eyed looks of guilt and panic upon their faces. As though they were children caught stealing cookies before dinner.

"The dwarves have called a meeting."

"A meeting of what?" Bilbo squeaked.

"They did not say. But Thranduil's presence is also requested." The scowl upon his face spoke of just how much he liked that idea.
The dwarves had gathered in an open room. The very same place where Elrond had once held his Council, and would do so again.

The Lady Galadriel was also present, upon her own insistence. None of the dwarves had dared argue with her. She sat daintily on a chair, with Frodo grasping at her legs, teetering on his own chubby ones.

Once in a while, the babe would call for her attention with a shout of, "G'mamma!" He'd smile at her and receive a smile in return before going back to his teetering.

There was also a butterfly nesting atop his head; bright blue wings with orange stripes winked at passersby. It resembled a dry oak leaf with wings closed.

"Is it a hobbit thing, do you think?" Kili asked.

"They're not really hobbits, though, are they?" Ori asked.

"You think it's because he's what... half-Maia? We don't even know do we?" Fili asked. "If Bilbo was telling the truth about Frodo's mother."

"I never said of what race his mother was," Bilbo said from behind them. The three dwarves turned to face him, expressions sheepish and full of guilt.

"So was his mother a Maia then?" Kili asked, ever curious.

"If that's so. You'll be reunited with her when you sail West?" Fili asked. The thought was disconcerting to him to say the least and he felt betrayed on behalf of his uncle.

"No, Fili, I will not see her again. Frodo's mother passed into the Hall of Mandos," Bilbo snapped. "And because she was not an elf, she passed on to the Timeless Halls of Eru!"

"Oh," Fili cringed. "I am so—"

But Bilbo was already stomping away. He took the small, empty seat between Galadriel and Thranduil in a huff. The Elvenking lounged in his chair as much as he was able, glaring across the room. The three of them were soon joined by the rest of their Elven entourage; even Haldir and Lindir were present. The only one missing was Glorfindel, who still hunted goblins around the pass.

Gandalf stood off to one side, watching the two sides with open curiosity.

The dwarves huddled in a corner of the room, whispering furiously amongst themselves. They threw glances over shoulders and heads towards the elves and hobbits. They appeared to be arguing over something Thorin, standing in the middle, was telling them. The argument continued until Balin stepped forward, grasping Thorin's shoulder. Whatever it was he said had the others reeling back in shock, even the King-in-Exile stared at him in surprise.

After a moment of observing the spectacle in silence, Bilbo couldn't take the mystery anymore.

"What's this about?" he asked no one in particular. "Does anyone know? Elrond?"

No one knew.

Once Balin intervened, it was only a matter of time before the argument drew to a close. The dwarves dispersed; each taking a seat around the room. Thorin ended up sitting right across from Bilbo, something that Frodo did not like.
"Adadada!" Frodo shouted, expression adorably angry.

"Shh, little one," Galadriel murmured, running a soothing hand down his back.

The hobbitling regarded her with bright eyes, Thorin forgotten. "G'mamma!" He went back to more important things, like reaching the other chair leg. He knew that once he got there, he would be able to get the leaf that was on the floor. And he wanted that leaf.

"First of all, thank you all for coming," Balin began, bowing to the other side. "Before we begin, we have a quick question." He threw a somewhat exasperated flat look at his companions. "Why is there a butterfly in Frodo's hair?"

"Why is there a butterfly in Frodo's hair?" Bilbo wondered. It really was a beautiful specimen, though. Whether it's wings were open or closed.

"Frodo and Estel waited two weeks for the cocoon to open," Elrond explained. "They spoke to it often and as you can see, it has endeared itself to Frodo."

"Buffy," Frodo pointed at his hair, giggling as the butterfly descended down his forehead and came to rest on his nose. He reached up to grab it, despite the many protests of those nearby as they didn't want him to squash it. But the butterfly moved onto his hand on its own. Frodo proudly held his hand out, showing everyone the butterfly.

"Oh," Bilbo said with sudden understanding. "It's a gift from Lady Yavanna, isn't it?"

"Annanana," Frodo agreed. In his excitement, he opened his hand and squashed the butterfly in his grasp.

"Ack, Frodo—!" Bilbo cried.

The room's occupants held their breath. Frodo did not understand, only waving his hand about in the air. He brought the hand close to look at his new friend. Everyone prepared for the tears or questions or something. They were not expecting the butterfly to shake itself free of the babe's grip, shaking its body and stretching its wings.

"Oh, thank you, sweet Lady Yavanna," Bilbo managed to gasp, hand over his heart.

The butterfly decided it was safer to remain nestled among Frodo's locks. It made itself at home among the dark curls; like a resplendent hair ornament.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Bilbo was glad he wouldn't be explaining the concept of death to the baby yet.

"Well, that answers that—" Balin began.

"Is it true what you told Balin? That there's an army waiting to attack us at Erebor?" Kili demanded.

Tact, thy name is not Kili.

"It's true—?" Bilbo replied.

"But who would send an army after us?" Kili continued, glaring at the elves suspiciously.

"You better not be implying what I think you're implying," Bilbo growled. The warmth in the room vanished as a sudden chill overtook it. Several of the room's occupants shivered. "As for what I told Balin; there is an army of twenty thousand Orcs, Wargs, and Bats gathering at the Grey Mountains
"Twenty thousand!?" Bofur shouted, disbelieving. His exclamation echoed by the Company. "But we number only thirteen!"

"We can't fight twenty thousand Orcs!" Ori cried, grasping Dori's hand in fright.

"Orcs, Wargs, Bats, Trolls," Bilbo corrected. "I think the Were-worms were only there to provide passage as they didn't stick around."

"What'd he say?" Óin shouted. "Where are the wyrms?"

"Were-worms!" Bilbo shouted but there was too much commotion for anyone, let alone Óin, to hear him.

"Nicely done, Bilbo," Thranduil congratulated.

"Shazara!" Thorin barked before the meeting could degenerate further. The Company grew quiet, though some faces were ashen and there might have been tears in some eyes. The King-in-Exile turned dark yet pleading eyes upon Bilbo. "Twenty thousand?"

"It would have been more but we," Bilbo gestured at himself, encompassing Thranduil and the others, "took care of Goblin-town. Though that was accidental."

"That is why you say we require aid," Thorin said. He did not look happy with the idea, they had other choices, did they not? "I could send word to Dáin."

A peculiar expression crossed Bilbo's face before it disappeared. "Dáin will arrive with five hundred dwarves, veterans from the War of the Dwarves and Orcs."

"Only five hundred?"

"He will only answer if Erebor is retaken and Smaug slain. It is one thing to lead your people against an Orc army. It is quite another to lead them against the might of a dragon." Something he had, unrepentantly, stolen straight from Thranduil's own mouth. The Elvenking gave him a surprised but pleased look.

Dáin had not had much choice in battling the Orc army anyway. He'd been rearing to fight the Elves when the Orcs had arrived.

Perhaps it was just leftover resentment towards the dwarf, for taking a throne that should not have been his. Something Bilbo had never forgiven him for. But he wouldn't trust Dáin as far as he could throw him.

"And on that matter," Balin said. "Perhaps we should begin with that instead?"

"That means we slay the dragon!" Kili cheered. His cheer echoed by the others.

"Technically, it is not a dwarf that slays the dragon," Bilbo said.

That put a damper on the dwarves' good cheer.

"Nor an elf."

Well, that was better.
"In the floating wreck that is Lake-town, there is a bargeman by the name of Bard. He is Girion’s descendant and the only one who can kill Smaug."

"Why is he the only one?" Dwalin asked.

"He has the single black arrow left in the world and . . . it is his fate. If he does not kill the dragon, it will be difficult for him to take up the mantle of King of Dale. His people will suffer greatly under the rule of anyone else."

"What you're saying is that . . . this is not just about us," Fili said. As always, he was most perceptive.

Bilbo beamed, full of pride. "You're right. There are greater forces at work in the world. Some are good, some are not. But—Frodo! What is that in your mouth?"

The hobbitling looked at him, a withered leaf sticking out of his mouth. There was a brief struggle as Bilbo fought to take the leaf from the babe. Frodo cried brokenheartedly after. He wanted to eat the leaf because Butterfly ate leaves. Frodo just wanted to become a butterfly too.

"Come now, hush," Bilbo cooed. "Are you tired?"

Frodo nodded, rubbing at his eyes.

"Perhaps Erestor will tell you a story and put you down for a nap?" Bilbo whispered loudly.

"Essto," Frodo pointed at the elf, who was only too happy to take him. Having become bored of the proceedings. After blowing kisses to every single person in the room, Erestor carried a sleepy but happier Frodo away.

"Oh, where were we? Um, Thranduil!" Bilbo all but shouted, startling the Elvenking.

Thranduil grimaced as pain shot up his leg, waving Bilbo away when the hobbit flapped his hands at him uselessly.

"Perhaps you can tell them your plans? For the people of Lake-town?" Bilbo suggested. He tired of explaining things already and he did not know when to stop. If he continued, he'd spill everything.

"I will be providing sanctuary for the people of Esgaroth," Thranduil said. "We will arrive long before Durin's Day, so we will have time to move them into my caves. After that it is simply a matter of convincing Bard to slay the dragon."

"He is quite stubborn," Bilbo agreed. He'd surrounded himself with the most stubbornest of people.

"You would offer them sanctuary?" Thorin asked. He shook off Balin's calming hand, rising from his seat with all the ferocity of a wild animal stalking its prey. "Yet you could not offer my people—"

"Your grandfather did not come to me for sanctuary, dwarf!" Thranduil snarled. He ignored the shooting pains running down his leg as he sat up. "He came to me seeking an army! Expecting me to send my people to die over his greed! There were more important things to be doing, in case it did not occur to your foolish little mind. Or did you forget that the dragon lay waste to Dale? Did those innocent bystanders deserve the fate your grandfather brought upon them?"

Bilbo couldn't breathe, overwhelmed under the combined emotions he was feeling. The pain, the anger, the hopelessness. He must have blacked out for a moment because he woke to warmth and a voice murmuring in his ear.
"I'm sorry, Bilbo. I'm sorry," Thranduil said.

They were on the floor, he noticed. He sat upon Thranduil's lap, enveloped in his arms. There was Thorin kneeling beside them and Elrond was laying a cool hand upon his brow. It felt nice. The others lingered nearby, observing with worry. The Lady Galadriel held his hand, which she released as he pulled it away.

Firstly, he needed to reassure the Elvenking. "Brother," he murmured. He lay his hand upon Thranduil's cheek, soothing him gently. "Tell him."

The Elvenking took a deep breath but did not lift his head. His words muffled but understandable. "I told your grandfather I would shelter your people if he stopped pestering me about attacking the mountain. He refused. He said he would rather his people starve than accept sanctuary from a coward. Your father could not convince him, so your people left my halls."

"...My grandfather was mad for some years after we left Erebor," Thorin said. He did not look at Thranduil and Bilbo, instead glaring at the floor. "But the longer we were away from the gold, the better he got. My father often told him to seek sanctuary from you again. I did not understand why Father wanted Grandfather to beg you for help. Grandfather did not agree, of course. He still had his pride and I think now, that mayhap he was ashamed, as well."

It was not an apology. But it was a truce. A hand extended. Literally, as Thorin was extending his hand towards Thranduil. Some held their breath, inhaling sharply in the stillness.

The Elvenking accepted Thorin's handshake, firm and truehearted. Bilbo lay his own hand upon theirs, "That's good." Then he passed out.

There's a sprinkling of twinkling stars in the sky,
Stars in the sky, stars in the sky,
There's a sprinkling of twinkling stars in the sky,
A sprinkling of twinkling stars.

He came awake to Frodo singing. Though it was more babbling than actual words. Along with the beautiful, enchanting voice of Galadriel.

"Stah buh buh," Frodo sang along. He grasped at his feet, rolling from side to side. "Stah buh buh."

The song was calm and soothing, Frodo's babbling only adding to the enchantment. It said something about how many times the Lady of Light had sung it, too. If Frodo already remembered the rhythm and some of the words.

There was an itch in the back of his mind. An echo of pain that wasn't his; Thranduil had aggravated his leg again.

Stretch up and reach out to the stars in the sky,
Stars in the sky, stars in the sky,
Stretch up and reach out to the stars in the sky,
The sprinkling of twinkling stars.


"Shh," Galadriel murmured, voice soothing.

So soothing, in fact, that Bilbo could hardly open his eyes. He did not think he was tired but he felt exhausted. The feeling was not his but it pulled at him and lingered, no matter that he tried to block
it. It pulled him into a peaceful sleep, so he stopped fighting and let it take him.

Next time he woke, Frodo was suckling at a bottle and Thorin sat in the armchair by the bed. There was a sword across his lap that he examined with a critical eye.

"Ech!" Frodo stopped suckling long enough to say. He pointed at the sword. "Ech."

"Ech?" Thorin echoed, baffled. "Do you mean 'blech'? Because it is an Elvish sword?"

Bilbo laughed uproariously, startling them both, and sat up. "He means Ecthelion, Lord of the House of the Fountain. A dear friend of Glorfindel's, as well. That sword belonged to him, a long time ago. It doesn't surprise me that Frodo can tell; the sword sings with Ecthelion's voice."

"Ech?" Frodo asked.

"We left Ecthelion in Valinor, remember? You'll see him again when you return," Bilbo touched the tip of his finger to Frodo's button nose.

The hobbitling giggled and went back to suckling his bottle, twirling a lock of his hair around a finger.

"I imagine you met a great many Elves, while there," Thorin said.

"Not as many as you would think. See, they tend to stay separated as well. There really were too many of them to formally meet. I did meet some interesting ones, though. I could write whole books about them!"

"Was this 'Ecthelion' a great warrior, then? This is a remarkable sword."

"One of the greatest I've met. He slayed a balrog. Well, not just any balrog, either. The Lord of Balrogs, Gothmog. Of course, Glorfindel slayed a balrog once, too. Although it killed him."

Thorin listened, rapt. "Killed?"

"Oh, yes. The balrog grabbed Glorfindel by the hair as it fell, dragging him down with it. He was reembodied and sent back."

"You do seem to know a lot about them."

"That is because Ecthelion retold the tale so often that even Frodo has it memorized." As though to prove his father's point, Frodo ran a finger down his cheek. "That's right, Frodo. Ecthelion led a wing during The Battle of Unnumbered Tears."

Thorin was duly impressed. "And you've made several mentions of our Maker and his wife."

"Yes. Lord Aulë and Lady Yavanna are very fond of Frodo."

"Annanana," Frodo pointed at his doll.

"So fond that they think they can spy on us whenever they wish!" Bilbo snapped, glaring at the group of toys gathered on the bedside table.

Mister Dwarf tipped over and fell off the table.

Bilbo ignored the toy and Thorin's horrified expression. "Thorin, I want to thank you." He waited until he had the dwarf's full attention before continuing. "For what you said to Thranduil. I know you
said it under great duress but . . . you did mean it, did you not?"

"I would not have said if I did not," Thorin huffed. He looked remarkably like the old Thorin then. The one Bilbo was beginning to forget. The one that always looked to be brooding. Bilbo was bemused to notice Frodo with the same look upon his own precious face.

Thorin appeared to notice the same thing for he shook his head and lightened his expression. Frodo immediately did the same, smiling widely and kicking his feet.

"I see you've been of some influence," Bilbo chortled.

Thorin smiled shyly. It had not taken him long to learn that Frodo liked to mimic things he saw others doing. As Thorin spent the most time with him, it was understandable that the babe copied his mannerisms the most.

"Bilbo," Thorin hesitated, unsure whether to reveal what hung on the tip of his tongue. Bilbo stared at him with open concern. "I did it for you."

". . . What?"

"I offered a truce between the Elvenking and I for you," Thorin elaborated but he did not meet the hobbit's gaze. He studied the back of Mister Dwarf's head where he lay on the floor.

"I—I—" Bilbo cleared his throat and went silent. Brows furrowed in thought, head cocked to the side. He mulled the words over internally before shaking his head. "I don't understand. What do I have to do with that? I mean, I did not force it upon you . . . did I? Because if I did, I am so sorry, Thorin. It was not my intention, at all. I wasn't present during that time so I can't—"

"No one forced me."

_Oh, well._ Bilbo nodded but he still did not understand.

Thorin looked to be frustrated and stood abruptly. "Never mind."

"What—wait—Thorin!"

But the dwarf all but ran from the room. Bilbo and Frodo stared at the empty doorway in silence for some time before turning to face each other.

"Dwarves are very strange creatures, my love," Bilbo declared.

"Dorf!" Frodo agreed.

"Elves are not much better but let's pay Thranduil a visit, mm?"

There was no one in Thranduil's room aside from the Elvenking himself. He lay pale and unmoving on the bed but he was not asleep.

Frodo crawled across the bed carefully, making himself comfortable by the elf's head. He wrapped his arm around Thranduil's head as much as he could. Either unaware or uncaring that he was covering one of the Elvenking's eyes and poking the other one.

Bilbo thought this was a good idea. The cuddling, not the poking. So he climbed up the other side and tucked himself against Thranduil. He lifted himself only for a moment so the elf could wrap an arm around him.
"So how badly did you aggravate it?"

"Not as badly as you're imagining," Thranduil murmured. He turned his face towards Frodo, who was mumbling something into his ear. "Frodo?"

Frodo blinked at him, then, "Stah buh buh! Stah buh buh!"

Thranduil leaned back, shocked at the volume. "Indoor voice."

Frodo quieted. "Stah buh buh."

"Much better. Look," he pointed at the door, where Legolas was entering. "There's Legolas." He caught the worried look on the babe's face. "Why don't you sing Legolas a song?" Frodo grumbled. "I'm sure he'd appreciate a hug, at the very least. After all, Legolas loves you." Frodo looked amazed and questioning. "He does. He loves you quite a bit. He couldn't wait to come here so he could see you. You may not remember but he promised to protect you always."

Frodo shuffled around until he was on his knees, facing Legolas. The elf removed his bow and quiver, putting them off to the side. Unaware of the attention he on the receiving end of. At least until he heard a little voice calling his name.

"Eg," Frodo whispered loudly, not really wanting the elf's attention. But Legolas wanted a hug from Frodo. "Eg!"

With the elf's attention finally on him, Frodo did not know what to say. So he settled for holding out his arms, squeezing his eyes shut, and puckering his lips out of nervousness.

Legolas thought his heart would burst. He quickly calmed himself before he lost his opportunity. He did not think Frodo would appreciate being picked up, even if he was holding his arms out. So he bent over the bed and pressed a kiss to Frodo's forehead.

The hobbitling's reaction was . . . not what he expected.

Redness spread across Frodo's face, down his neck, and to the tips of his ears. He swayed and fell to one side, hands grasping at his burning cheeks.

Legolas let out a startled sound that had Bilbo peeking over Thranduil to get a good look.

"Oh, dear. Frodo. Frodo!"

Thranduil pulled at the hobbitling's feet until the babe was within reach to be picked up. Lifting the tiny body to his chest and rubbing at his back soothingly.

"Hey there, wasn't that nice? Legolas gave you a kiss!" Bilbo chirped. "Did it shock you? Are you embarrassed? Did you like it?"

Frodo blinked his eyes wide like an owl. The redness slowly receded and so did his shock, until finally, he screeched, "EG!" He pat his forehead where the elf had kissed him. "Eg!" He didn't seem to know what to think, only repeating Legolas' name in somewhat shocked or scolding tones.

Bilbo laughed. Poor Legolas looked so baffled and repentant. "He only wanted a hug. You gave him a shock."

"I thought he wouldn't welcome a hug," Legolas said. But at least Frodo was looking at him—glaring at him. Frodo was glaring at him.
"No, no, no!" Frodo scolded, shaking a finger at him. He grumbled and tucked his face underneath Thranduil's chin.

"Well, he sure told you," Thranduil murmured, amused.

"At least I know why everyone seems unable to deny him anything," Bilbo said with humor. "He does resemble Thorin in a rage."

Chapter End Notes

• Butterflies don't actually eat leaves but Frodo is a baby, he does not know this.
• Butterfly is based on Hal, the cockroach from Wall-E 8D
• Song sung by Galadriel and Frodo is A Twinkling Of Stars by Fran Avni
Bilbo knew it was only a matter of time before Gandalf sought him out. The Wizard had been far too quiet during the meeting. Choosing to observe rather than give unwanted advice, as he was wont to do. So he waited, sitting on the bed by Thranduil, and absently flipping through a book.

Frodo played with the feathers of a broken arrow, given to him by Legolas. He threw them into the air and flailed at them excitedly as they floated. His new friend, Butterfly, had made a temporary nest for himself atop the Elvenking’s head while the man diligently brushed the babe's hair. Legolas deliberated over which hairpin—a bunch given to them by Elrond, possibly Arwen’s—would best fit the hobbitling.

When the knock came at the door, it was Legolas who answered it. Only pulling the door open wide enough to allow the Wizard into the room.

"I was so hoping we might speak alone, Bilbo," Gandalf said, leaning against his staff. Though he tried to appear calm, his fingers grasped the staff harder than necessary.

Bilbo gestured at the empty armchair. "Nonsense. Thranduil and Legolas have my absolute trust. Unless you're worried about Frodo."

The hobbitling flailed at his floating feathers, laughing brightly. A feather landed on his nose and he crossed his eyes to look at it. He flailed at it, it was tickling his nose, but instead hit himself in the face with enough force to send him reeling in shock. He grunted as he landed on his back. Before long his bottom lip wobbled and he began to cry.

Big, gentle hands lifted him up and set him across a broad shoulder. Blonde hair tickled his nose and he sneezed, grasping at the long strands before him. His tears receded as he regarded the hair in his grasp, curiously he stuffed a handful of it in his mouth, nibbling and slobbering over his prize. Pain forgotten, Frodo kicked his legs and ignored Legolas' attempts at drawing the Elvenking's hair out of his mouth.

Bilbo's heartbeat calmed considerably once he saw Frodo was all right. He rubbed at his face, sending a look at Gandalf as though blaming him for the incident.

Gandalf seated himself without further ado, expression awkward and uncertain. "I have questions."

"I imagined you would," Bilbo said. He let the man gather his unfailing courage before turning his full attention on him. He took the time to help Thranduil remove his hair from Frodo's mouth. Ignoring the hobbitling’s protests and whining. "What is it you want to know?"

"There are several things I am confused about. Balin informed me that you are one-hundred eighty one years old."

"It may be more. It may be less. I do not remember," Bilbo said with a shrug. He smiled at the scene Thranduil and Frodo made. The hobbitling had managed to get a hold of the hair brush and made the valiant attempt of using it on Thranduil's hair. The Elvenking looked exasperated as he tried to sweet talk the babe into giving the brush over. "I just added up some numbers and told Balin that was my age."

He laughed at the exasperated glares he received from both Gandalf and Thranduil.

"One-hundred eighty one is quite young, however. Which leads me to my other question. I am
confused as to your origins," said Gandalf. "You know that I am a—a—"

"A Maia. It would be difficult to ignore. Did you wish for me to keep it secret? From Thorin and his Company?"

"Perhaps for the best."

Bilbo wisely did not tell him that it was probable he'd already revealed the truth to Thorin. "They already know about me. I suppose it is too late to retract that now. I did not think to keep it secret."

"Hindsight. You have spoken of your parents," Gandalf continued. Glancing at where Frodo was working a hair pin into the Elvenking's hair, succeeding only in poking the elf on the head. "I admit this has me baffled."

"Because Maiar do not have parents. All Ainur were created by Eru Ilúvatar, the Father of All. I know."

"Then why this talk of parents? I do not understand."

"It is true that all Ainur may claim The One as our Father, including me," Bilbo sighed, blowing a hair from his eye in frustration. "This is very complicated. I was created by the Valar. Each gave a piece of themselves into my creation and Eru gave me life. So when I mention my parents, I do mean to encompass all who were part of my creation."

Truly, the only reason he addressed them as 'parents' was due to being repeatedly asked to by a bright eyed Yavanna. He would never have addressed them in such a manner otherwise as it felt awkward.

Gandalf let out a deep breath, confusion not lightening in the least. "I—I see. This baffles me all the more, I'm afraid. I remember a young lad. The son of Belladonna—"

"I am he. I am Bilbo Baggins, son of Bungo and Belladonna Baggins."

"But how?"

"I did tell you it was complicated, did I not? I did not lie. I came into this world as a babe. Belladonna Baggins brought me into this world. The Bagginses are as much my parents are those who were part of my creation."

"What was the purpose of your creation?"

"That I do not know."

Legolas took Frodo into his arms. The babe, half-awake, snuffled and whined, arms flailing about uselessly. One tiny hand hit the elf on the chin before the hobbitling settled. The elation on Legolas' face should not have been as amusing to Bilbo as it was.

"Was there anything else?" Bilbo asked.

"Frodo's mother . . ." the Wizard began, hesitating over his words for he knew it was none of his business.

"A Hobbit, of course. Frodo has a nice mix of Baggin, Took, and Brandybuck."

". . . Nice," Gandalf echoed in disbelief. He eyed the sleeping babe in Legolas' arms with trepidation. "No wonder he is so stubborn. Though, this brings me to another matter."
Bilbo sighed, resisting the urge to rub at his forehead. It appeared his explanations only arose more questions, which he could almost see building in the Wizard's eyes. It was as though Gandalf was trying to catch him in a lie.

"Where was Frodo born?"

"Frodo was born in the Shire."

"Then how is it he's met—"

"I imagine he's met a great many people thanks to Irmo," Bilbo held back a triumphant smile as Gandalf faltered.

Thranduil observed them with a gleam of amusement in his eyes but did not interrupt.

"Ah, so you are aware that he is visited by—?"

"It would be hard to remain unaware of it as they do their best to intervene in our lives. Despite that they have rules, or something to that effect, against such things," Bilbo scowled then. "They do spoil him."

Thranduil scoffed. "They do not spoil him any more than we do."

They observed in bewildered amusement as Legolas rubbed the tip of his nose against Frodo's. The hobbitling made a happy noise and burrowed against the elf's chest, drawing a big smile from him. Legolas flushed at seeing he was the center of attention but only cuddled the babe closer.

"Hobbit-magic," Gandalf murmured, his amusement palpable.

"Frodo-magic," Bilbo corrected with a laugh.

"Just one more thing. About Saruman. What are you planning to do—?"

"Oh, I am not planning to do anything to Saruman! It is not my place. He will be taken by Círdan to Mithlond and then on a ship across the sea. He will face judgment from the Valar."

Gandalf visibly relaxed. "Can you tell me what his crimes are?"

"He has been planning to offer his alliance to Sauron for a while now. With the purpose of taking the One Ring for himself and ruling Middle-earth. We hope that once he is away from their influences, he will return to himself."

"Well, Mithrandir, I do hope Bilbo has sated your curiosity," Thranduil said, rather pointedly looking to the door.

They did not call Gandalf a wise man for nothing. The Wizard knew when to make himself scarce, "Yes, yes. Will there be planning? At one point?"

"Obviously we have much to plan," Thranduil snapped before Bilbo could get a word in. "At a later time, perhaps. My rooms will not be turned into a meeting place for dwarves."

Gandalf excused himself quickly after that, only just hearing Bilbo's words to the Elvenking, "You are very rude for a king." He closed the door behind him, taking a deep breath.

"Gandalf!" Kíli exclaimed. He all but skipped to the Wizard's side, looking at the door with suspicious eyes. "What were you doing in there?"
"I do not have to explain myself to you, young dwarf!" Kíli looked mulish. "I was merely speaking to Bilbo—"

"Bilbo's in there? We've been looking for him, you see, and—"

"And you will stop looking for him. King Thranduil does not wish to be disturbed at this time—"

"But I won't be bothering him. I just want to—"

"Will you stop interrupting me!" Gandalf slammed his staff on the ground, glaring until Kíli subsided. "As I was saying. It would be a horrible idea to bother the Elvenking in any way, even just to get Bilbo. Do you understand?"

Kíli muttered under his breath.

"Speak clearly!"

"Yes, I understand!" Kíli cried. He stomped away, back to Bilbo's room, with all the petulance of a child throwing a tantrum.

Gandalf startled as the door behind him opened. He looked down.

Bilbo stared at him blankly. "Thank you for that, Gandalf. But could you please go scream elsewhere?"

"Oh, certainly," Gandalf chirped, pleased with himself. Perhaps he could find the Lady Galadriel. It had been some time since they'd had a nice chat.

"You'll find her with Elladan and Elrohir. A balcony overlooking a waterfall," Bilbo said.

Gandalf eyed him speculatively but the hobbit merely quirked an eyebrow at him and closed the door. The Wizard huffed, eyes gleaming with fond annoyance, "Hobbits."

There was little else to do that week except wait for Thranduil's leg to heal. Knowing their time in Rivendell was coming to an end, the dwarves gathered what provisions they could carry. An anxiety befell them and it seemed they could not wait to be back on the road again.

Galadriel spent what time she could with Frodo; doing her best to hoard all his attention. Her mere presence intimidated the dwarves into leaving them alone. Despite that they, too, wanted to spend time with Frodo once in a while.

When time finally came for her to leave, Frodo was inconsolable. He cried, clinging to her hair, dress, whatever of her he could reach. Though her heart ached to leave him, there was much for her to do in light of what she'd learned.

But being just a babe and with the attention span of one, Frodo did not remain sad for long. It would have been terribly hard to remain so, surrounded by so many interesting people. All of whom did their best to provide him with all the attention he could ever want and more.

Círdan, the shipwright, arrived one day to take Saruman to the Grey Havens. A group of elves sailing West would keep an eye on him aboard a ship, he explained to a fretful Bilbo.

"Wasn't that a Wizard?" Bofur asked, taking a seat by the hobbit. "Why were they dragging him away all tied up?"

"He committed crimes for which he will face judgment from the Valar," Bilbo said. He pushed away
the plate of food he'd been about to eat, losing his appetite.

They were in the dining hall, there was an elf maiden playing the harp. Despite the peaceful tune, Frodo bounced on his legs to a more fast-paced rhythm. Every time the elf stopped playing, Frodo ceased his bouncing, only to start up again when she resumed.

"What did he do?" Bombur wondered. It must have been something terrible to have to face judgment from the Valar.

"I'd rather not speak of it. He—he corrupted his mission, let's just leave it at that."

Knowing they would get no more from Bilbo, the two brothers turned their attentions to their plates. They were soon joined by others of the Company, a few tried to draw Frodo away from his dancing but the hobbitling refused to be picked up.

"He must be tone deaf," Nori said. He truly could not understand why the babe appeared to like the Elvish music. "How else can anyone like this funeral music?"

"He's just a baby," Ori said, defensive of the hobbitling. "If he likes funeral music, it's no concern of yours."

"Oi, lad," Bofur poked the hobbitling on the side, earning him a petulant glare. "Come now. I'll show you what real music is!"

With that declaration, the dwarf jumped atop the table, sending Bilbo's plate scattering to the floor. The hobbit scowled and saved his goblet from a similar fate.

 Nearby, Elrond looked pained and irritated as the food began to fly yet he did not intervene. Lindir unobtrusively used the Elf-lord as a shield while Erestor calmly walked through the Hall, nose buried in a book. Bilbo found himself somewhat envious of how the elf managed to steer clear of all the food that flew through the air.

He imagined Erestor was unaware of just what went on around him.

There's an inn, there's an inn, there's a merry old inn
   beneath an old grey hill,
   And there they brew a beer so brown
   That the Man in the Moon himself came down
   one night to drink his fill.

Thorin, standing off to one side of the table, stomped his foot to the rhythm as he drank from a mug. Frodo observed him in curiosity, looking down at his own foot. With all the determination and stubbornness he possessed, he moved his foot up and down. It was awkward and required much of his concentration the first times but soon enough he stomped his foot fast as he could manage.

The ostler has a tipsy cat
   that plays a five-stringed fiddle;
   And up and down he saws his bow
   Now squeaking high, now purring low,
   now sawing in the middle.

"That's the way to do it, laddie!" the dwarves cheered Frodo on.

The commotion drew the attention of elves nearby. Some lingered, watching the scene with wide eyes, while others quickly made themselves scarce.
Bofur kicked his feet, uncaring of the mess he made as he danced atop the table. At one point a bowl of salad fell to the floor, spilling half its content. More interested in the food than in the song and dance, Frodo quickly crawled to it.

So the cat on the fiddle played hey-diddle-diddle,
a jig that would wake the dead:
He squeaked and sawed and quickened the tune,
While the landlord shook the Man in the Moon:
'It's after three!' he said.

The Hall filled with much applause as Bofur finished his song and took a bow. The Elves remained wary of the dwarves, giving their table a wide berth and hurrying away.

The toymaker turned to Frodo, only to find the babe stuffing his cheeks full of food.

"Laddie! Don't eat that off the floor!" he cried.

The hobbitling gazed at him in confusion, cheeks puffed with food. He tried to smile around his mouthful, resembling like a chipmunk. He whined as the salad bowl was taken from him. Nori reached down to pick him up, cradling him against his chest.

"You don't want to eat that rabbit food, anyway," the thief said.

Frodo perked at the mention of rabbits, looking around for Mister Nibbles. The rabbit toy relaxed by the harpist, waiting for her to play again, although it appeared that she would not.

"He is a hobbit, not a dwarf," Bilbo pointed out, annoyed. "If he wishes to eat 'rabbit food', then it is certainly no concern of yours."

Nori held the babe out as a shield. "No offense meant."

With Mister Nibbles and Frodo in hand, the hobbit left the dwarves to their meal. Butterfly—who had been aptly named so by Frodo—flew after them.

"He's in a rotten mood," was observed by all.

"It's Uncle Thorin's fault," Kíli imparted.

"Why do you say that?" Bofur asked.

"Every time Bilbo wants to talk to him, Uncle Thorin runs away," the young prince explained.

The heated glare he received from his uncle sent him running away, his brother at his heels. The King-in-Exile ignored the contemplative looks from his companions. He gulped down the rest of his ale and slammed the mug on the table.

It was no business of his Company if he ran away from the hobbit or not. Not that he did. He just had a lot to prepare for and did not want Bilbo to distract him.

He was joined by Balin as he left the dining hall.

"I thought you would be making your intent known," Balin said.

Thorin scowled and it must have been a frightening thing, for elves in their path quickly turned and ran in the opposite direction.
"I did."

A widening of eyes the only indicator of Balin's surprise. "What did Master Baggins say?"

Thorin did not think his mood could drop any lower. "He had no idea what I spoke of, Balin."

Balin tried to control the twitching of his lips but from the glower on Thorin's face, he was not successful. Still, "So your course of action is to . . . run away when he approaches?" He threw a subtle look behind Thorin.

The King-in-Exile twitched, turning on his heels. He growled at discovering no one approaching him from behind, glaring at Balin when he began to chortle.

"Perhaps Hobbits do things differently," Balin said, after containing his laughter.

"He is not a Hobbit," Thorin snapped, annoyed.

"But he lived as one for many years. Come, Thorin. Perhaps there are books in the library that will tell us how to salvage the situation."

Needless to say, Thorin did not stay long in the library once he discovered that Bilbo and Frodo were there. The hobbit listened attentively to Lindir and Erestor as they explained everything they had taught Frodo thus far.

Frodo caught the dwarves' attention. The babe sat on the floor between two bookshelves, a tuft of hair at the top of his head stood straight up in the air. He pulled at a book on the bottommost row and gently set it on the floor. On pulling it open and discovering that it was not what he was looking for, the hobbitling closed the book and tucked it back where he found it. It took much of his energy to return the book to its proper place but he managed it, grunting and heaving as he pushed it into the empty slot.

He did not seem to understand that he was putting the books back the wrong way. There were three other books that Thorin could see with their spines on the inside.

The babe moved onto the next book in the row, pulling it out and open. He looked through a few pages before putting it back.

"What are you looking for?" Erestor asked the babe, ignoring the books with hidden spines. It happened often enough that it no longer bothered him.

"Stah?" Frodo wondered.

Erestor hummed as he contemplated the books. "How about the story of Eärendil? I believe your father wrote a poem."

Frodo blinked at him, lips turned upwards in a smile.

"Perhaps too advanced for you at the moment. So is this cosmology book, I believe."

"Ah!" Frodo exclaimed. He made grabbing motions at the book Erestor had pulled out.

"I think this is too advanced even for you, Frodoling."

Frodo traced a constellation with his finger. "Stah?"

Erestor sat beside the babe, leaning against the bookshelf at his back. "This is a constellation; it
consists of several stars. This one is called Menelvagor, the Swordsman of the Sky. These stars are Borgil, Helluin, and Luinil."

Frodo listened attentively as the elf launched into an impromptu cosmology lesson. Eyes shining bright with honest interest.

Menelvagor represented Túrin Turambar, a famous Man who was an enemy of Morgoth, whom Frodo knew to be a naughty person from Mister Nibbles' stories. Túrin was so great that he defeated Glaurung, the Papa of Dragons.

Frodo had never seen a dragon but he knew them to be naughty as well. They destroyed houses and that wasn't nice because where did everyone live? If they didn't have houses did they live on the street? Even when it rained? What if they were cold?

Dragons weren't very nice.

The babe eventually found his way onto Erestor's lap and the elf dutifully flipped through the book, educating the hobbitling on each star and constellation they came across.

Frodo refused to be removed from Erestor's presence. At least until Bilbo agreed they could look at the stars that very night for . . . educational purposes. Lindir overheard their plans and invited himself along for support. If by the end of the day the entirety of the Elven population of Rivendell had decided to join them, Bilbo could only blame himself for being unable to tell them "no".

The dwarves did not understand the elves'—nor Frodo's—obsession with the stars yet they were also present that night. Even Thranduil refused to be left behind, though he did not have much interest in stars as his kin did. There was a barely noticeable limp in his step but he walked without crutches or help and Bilbo was pleased with the elf's recovery. Elrond walked behind the Elvenking at a sedate pace, followed by Elrohir and Elladan.

The twins were the first to climb trees, settling themselves on thick, low hanging branches. Fíli and Kíli also climbed a nearby tree, if only to prove that they could as well. Frodo was undoubtedly disappointed when he could not follow after them up into the trees.

He was appeased when Erestor drew him into his lap. The cosmology book from the library before them, Erestor helped Frodo find the stars and constellations featured on the pages in the skies above them. Telling the enraptured hobbitling tales of how the stars came to be and what they symbolized.

Once all stars and constellations that could be found had been named, the elves took to singing and reciting poems. Bilbo joined in when the elves sang a hymn to Elbereth but mostly sat back and enjoyed the tranquility.

Thorin sat beside him, a silent yet comforting presence that warmed his side. Though Bilbo wanted to grasp the opportunity to finally get the dwarf to talk to him, he resisted the temptation. It was much easier once Frodo grew sleepy, crawling into the small space between them. The babe made himself comfortable between their bodies, leaning his head against Thorin's side.

The Company talked in hushed whispers, contemplating the elves, the songs, and the stars in equal measure. Ori appeared especially interested in the stories being told of how the stars were first created by Elbereth Gilthoniel, otherwise known as Varda, Queen of the Valar.

To Bilbo's great dismay but not surprise, the dwarves did not know much—if anything at all—about the Valar, besides Aulë and perhaps due to the connection she had with him, Yavanna. They appeared to know about their own creation but very little beyond that.
"You've met our Maker, haven't you, Bilbo?" Ori asked.

Bilbo became uncomfortable at finding himself the center of the Company's undivided attention and even some of the elves'.

"I have," he said, at once regretting it when the dwarves began asking questions.

"What is he like?"

"Is he very handsome?"

"Does he have a very long beard?"

Bilbo tried to keep his expression neutral but his anger—the anger he still felt whenever the Smith came up in conversation—must have shown on his face. An uncomfortable silence descended upon the group, crickets chirped merrily in the background, and the elves continued to sing around them.

"It would be better to ask Frodo about Aulë the Smith," Thranduil muttered. He also regretted his words as the Company turned to eye the hobbitling, who gazed back at them with sleepy eyes and a happy smile.

"Do you know Lord Aulë, too, Frodo?" Kíli asked.

Frodo scrunched his eyebrows together, looking thoughtful. Then, he exclaimed happily, "G'appa!"

Bilbo almost smacked himself as he buried his face in his hands. He rubbed at his temples, "Aulë is . . . kind. But foolish." He ignored the insulted expressions of the dwarves around him as he continued, so long as they ignored Frodo, he would answer their questions. "Aulë is very kind and good, he likes to help others, and he knows when to ask for help. But he is also very impatient and sometimes he does not think before acting. The Valar, they are not perfect."

". . . So, is he very handsome?" Kíli asked as the others digested Bilbo's words. "He made us in his image, after all."

Bilbo laughed. "He is taller than Men and Elves, as are most of them really. He has lovely auburn hair and a nice, long beard that he braids like so." He used Thorin's hair to demonstrate, twisting the dwarf's beard into a single imitation braid down the center. Thorin stared at him with wide eyes while someone behind Bilbo giggled and others coughed politely to cover their laughter. "He often goes around without a shirt, with all his muscles on display. Lady Yavanna likes it."

There was more snorted laughter from behind him and even some high pitched giggles that Bilbo thought came from the elves.

"He passes his days in the smithy and often returns covered in soot—"

"Bilbo," Gandalf interrupted, expression curious. "I thought you did not remember your time there?"

"I do not remember my age. I assume it's less than two-hundred but I may be wrong. I also do not have all memories of my time there but it's—" he waved his hand in the air, looking for an appropriate way to describe it. "It's coming back."

"Papa-papa," Frodo called around a yawn.

"Time to sleep?"

"Mm," the hobbitling nodded, rubbing at his eye with the back of his hand.
It was late. The elves had already begun to disperse. Some returned to Rivendell while others disappeared among the trees and into the woods.

Dori corralled his brothers back to Rivendell, with Ori dragging his feet while vainly fighting to keep his eyes open. The others took the dwarf's initiative and dragged themselves after them, using each other as crutches.

Bilbo gathered Frodo in his arms and helped Thorin to his feet. He did not feel tired or sleepy himself, he rarely did unless he was injured or hadn't rested in a while. But he was accustomed to sleeping, even if he no longer needed it, and so slept when the others did.

Frodo, being half-Hobbit, still needed to sleep every night. He would continue to need sleep until he was old enough to go without, or so Bilbo had been told. It was likely Frodo would continue to sleep, if only to continue visiting the Valar.

It was strange that despite all he did to avoid talking to Bilbo during the day, Thorin still slept with him and Frodo.

The dwarf threw himself upon the bed without bothering to take off his shoes. Bilbo cooed at Frodo as he drew a nightgown over the hobbitling's head, laying a kiss upon his forehead as he removed the hairpin from the top of his little head.

"Did you have a nice time looking at the stars?" he asked.

"Stah," Frodo mumbled sleepily. He yawned widely, then sung, "Stah buh buh."

"You and your stars," Bilbo chucked him under the chin, receiving a sleepy giggle. "Did you want a song before you went to sleep? Or have you had your fill?"

Frodo nodded groggily, placing his left arm out flat before him but bent at the elbow, he waved his right hand over it. *Song.*

\begin{verbatim}
Sing we now softly, and dreams let us weave him!
Wind him in slumber and there let us leave him!
The wanderer sleepeth. Now soft be his pillow!
    Lullaby! Lullaby! Alder and Willow!
\end{verbatim}

He tucked the small body against his chest, rocking the babe back and forth. He stood at the balcony, gazing up at the moon, even as the babe's breathing evened out.

He flushed as the bed groaned. Clothing rustled, signaling Thorin getting ready for bed, but he did not turn.

\begin{verbatim}
Sigh no more Pine, till the wind of the morn!
    Fall Moon! Dark be the land!
    Hush! Hush! Oak, Ash, and Thorn!
    Hushed be all water, till dawn is at hand!
\end{verbatim}

He only turned once the bed groaned again as Thorin sat down heavily. He carried Frodo to the bed and gently tucked him in the middle. The babe curled against Thorin's warmth.

"We'll be sitting down to plan our trip tomorrow after breakfast," Thorin murmured as he made himself comfortable on Frodo's other side. "$That's our breakfast. Not yours." Which meant second breakfast for Bilbo and Frodo. "$If you could . . . inform the Elvenking of it, that would be much appreciated."
Bilbo hummed agreeably, joining them under the bedsheets. He could almost hear Thorin thinking and it kept him awake, waiting patiently for the dwarf to break the silence.

"You truly do not remember your life?" Thorin asked.

"... I remember the Shire and truly, that's the only thing that matters now."

"You were not happy in the Shire."

"Perhaps not when you met me. But I was a happy child. I loved my Hobbit parents and that makes it all worth it."

"And Frodo's mother?"

Bilbo furrowed his eyebrows. "What about her?" He blinked at the ceiling. "I do not regret having Frodo if that's what you mean to ask."

"No. It—Did Frodo call our Maker 'grandpa'?"
It was the very question Bilbo had been dreading since Frodo's outburst. He contemplated it in silence, wondering how best to answer, if at all. He could feel Thorin's uncertainty radiating from his side of the bed. The dwarf had felt him stiffen and the sudden tension in the air. Mentions of Aulë still made Bilbo uncomfortable and angry.

How could he tell the dwarf that it was the Smith's meddling that had landed Bilbo in the past, reliving his life, with a baby who was once his nephew? That if not for the timely intervention of the other Valar, Frodo might have ceased to exist?

He couldn't.

He could only tell Thorin the lie that his life had become. “Aulë took part in my creation,” he said at last, though his thoughts differed greatly. *Aulë tried to send me back in time but instead he tore my soul apart because time is not something the Valar can control.* He cleared his throat as he continued, “As did the other Valar. They . . . envisage themselves as my parents and therefore Frodo's grandparents.”

The silence was heavy. Bilbo hoped that Thorin had fallen asleep but the dwarf shifted, lifting himself up with one arm so he could get a proper look at Bilbo. “You are . . .” Thorin looked faint. “A child of the Valar?”

Bilbo flinched, throwing himself to his feet without disturbing Frodo. “I'm just a Hobbit.”

“You . . .” Thorin shook his head in disbelief. “You truly believe that.”

“Because it's true!” the hobbit snapped. He took a deep breath to reign in his anger as Frodo shifted on the bed with a whine. “I left Valinor to be born into this world as a Hobbit. I am a Hobbit.”

The memory was there but it escaped him and his head throbbed painfully the harder he tried to grasp at it.

*What's happening to me?* He wondered, rubbing at his forehead.

“Bilbo?” Thorin asked, frowning in worry.

“Just tired,” Bilbo lied. “It's been a long day.” He rejoined the two on the bed, making himself comfortable as he drew Frodo into his arms. He placed several kisses upon the babe's chubby cheeks to calm himself, feeling a bone tiredness settle within him. “Was there . . . anything else you wanted to ask?”

Thorin regarded the hobbits thoughtfully, a peculiar look on his face. “No. Get some rest. We have a lot of planning to do tomorrow.”
Bilbo hummed in acknowledgment, already feeling the familiar pull of Irmo summoning him. He wondered what they could possibly want as he slipped into sleep. A soft touch—Frodo?—on his cheek the last thing he felt as awareness faded away.

He took a deep breath and promptly inhaled smoke. He coughed and sputtered as he opened his eyes. Fire burned bright around him, flowing lava ran like rivers through the floor. The sounds of metal hitting metal would have been comforting once upon a time. Instead, it only served to anger him.

Back facing him, Aulë stood over an anvil, hammer in hand. Sparks flew as the hammer hit the anvil, over and over again. The man’s shoulders were tense but Bilbo did nothing to ease his discomfort, choosing to remain silent for the moment.

It appeared as though the Smith forged even in his dreams. But did they even dream in the first place? Bilbo wondered at this as he looked about. The forge was a familiar place, though he didn't visit often except to accompany the Lady Yavanna when she wished to see her husband—who was in the habit of losing himself to his work.

No, it was Frodo who spent the most time with the Smith; watching him work, listening to his stories. Visiting the King and Queen, the Halls of Mandos, the Woods of Oromë, the Gardens of Lórien. Lost but . . . not alone. There had always been someone there to keep him company. Though Bilbo could not recall who. Could it have been Ecthelion?

“Will you tell me the truth now?” he asked.

The pounding of the hammer stopped as Aulë froze. The Smith contemplated the question as he put the hammer down atop the anvil, reaching for a nearby rag to wipe his hands.

Bilbo began to feel frustrated as the silence continued. He moved closer to the man, ready to voice his question again.

“He was . . . in so much pain,” Aulë said as he gazed into the flames leaping from the furnace. “Though he tried his best to hide it from us. He did not wish to be a burden, especially not for you.”

“Who . . . ?” Bilbo’s voice trailed off for he already knew. “Frodo?”

“He withered away, day by day,” Aulë continued, ignoring his interruption. His distant gaze remained locked on the flames as his mind brought forth memories of a future that would no longer come to pass. “The King said to be patient for he would heal in time. But I . . . could not bear to watch him suffer so.”

Realization hit Bilbo, knocking the breath from him. Blood rushed in his ears as forgotten memories played before his mind’s eye. Fake smiles, fake laughs . . . unnatural pale skin and dark bruises surrounding tired and dulled blue eyes.

“We feared he would not last even half a year,” the Smith continued. “Although he proved us wrong, he continued to diminish. He stubbornly remained because of your presence and as the time for your departure neared, I feared that he would fade away completely. So I . . . delved with things I should not have.”

“It wasn’t about me,” Bilbo said, surprised by the hoarseness of his voice. Only then recognizing the wetness of his cheeks as tears.

Aulë frowned in thought. “. . . He made it about you.” At Bilbo’s confusion, he sighed, pulling at his beard. “Control over time is not within my power and I underestimated his love for you. He clung to
you so tightly, refusing to be parted from you. In the end, I pleaded for Eru to save you both from my mistake. He was forced to alter your fèar with our help, to save what he could of you, you were re-embodied . . . though your hròa is at present that of a Hobbit, you are no longer one.”

Bilbo reeled from the shock, even as tears gathered in his eyes and ran down his cheeks. While lost to his own weariness, ignorant of Frodo’s pain, others had cared for the younger hobbit in his stead.

The thought brought him nothing but shame and regret.

After a moment, he swallowed heavily, attempting and failing to regain his composure. “Why all the lies?”

“The truth was hidden, even from the others, but will be revealed now with Eru’s blessing,” Aulë smiled sadly. “Eru is ever merciful. Despite that I . . .” His heavy gaze locked on Bilbo and he knelt before the hobbit. “Forgive me, Bilbo, forgive me.” The hobbit stared at him with wide eyes full of confusion. “For you may now share in our fate, bound to this world as long as it lasts.”

Bilbo swallowed again, for the words brought him great sadness though he knew not why. His eyes burned with renewed tears. He started as the Smith drew him into a warm embrace. “If you are angry, I understand. If you never wish to speak to me again, I understand.”

“I think—I think I need time,” Bilbo faltered over his words, choking on them as he continued to fight a losing battle against the onslaught of tears.

Aulë bowed his head in understanding. He pulled back to look at Bilbo in the eyes. “Until everything is as it was, we will continue to guide you and lend our aid. Do not despair, for we are with you.”

A sudden sleepiness came over Bilbo and his eyes grew heavy. The Smith bestowed a kiss upon his brow as he faded from the dream.

He woke to the light of the rising sun making its way across the room and Frodo leaning over him. The hobbitling’s small hands grasped his cheeks.

“Papa-papa?” Frodo wondered. His bright eyes filled with tears and soon enough he was bawling. Bilbo’s heart clenched at the babe’s sadness and he drew Frodo into his arms. The cries woke Thorin, who, startled by the noise, quickly sat up, ready to defend against an unknown enemy.

“Why do you cry?” Bilbo asked.

Thorin blinked at them, observing the scene with increasing worry. “Bilbo, why do you cry?”

For Frodo only cried at the sight of his father’s tears, feeling his pain and sadness and unable to do anything about it. He cried in sympathy, great heaving breaths shaking his small body as he clutched at his father. Bilbo touched his cheeks, which were wet with tears that continued to gather in his eyes and overflow.

All he felt was a great sadness—an immense sorrow—that he could not understand. For himself, for Frodo, for all those bound to the world, unable to escape it. So he cried and cried, and Frodo cried with him, until Thranduil and Elrond burst into the room, having heeded his call that he needed them.

Thorin tried to comfort the hobbits, though his efforts were in vain as Bilbo only shook his head, pushing him away. Soon the dwarf was pushed from the room and could only stand idly outside as he wondered what he should do.
Fili and Kili soon joined him. They were bewildered to find him standing by the closed door, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, expression worried. At least the crying had ceased, though Frodo’s loud gasping breaths were as heartbreaking as his cries.

Finally, the door opened to the Lord of Rivendell. Face weary, eyes hard, and lips turned down in a frown, Elrond spied the dwarves lingering by the door and shook his head at the questions in their eyes. He gestured for them to follow him, which they did with great discontent.

He led them into a private study where Gandalf sat at a table, nibbling at what looked to be some type of cake. Erestor stood on the other side, spreading scrolls across the table while Lindir stood at his side holding a stack of scrolls in his arms.

“Lindir,” Elrond called. He said something to the elf that Thorin was not close enough to hear. Lindir bowed his head, placing the scrolls he held in a corner of the table before leaving.

“What’s this? What’s happened to Bilbo?” Gandalf demanded.

“Something’s happened to Bilbo?” Fili questioned, worry apparent in his gaze as he turned to Thorin.

“Bilbo’s memories are returning,” Elrond said.

“Is this not good news?” Gandalf wondered.

The Elf-lord exchanged a look with Erestor, even as the Wizard looked between them in bewilderment. “If not for the manner in which he came to Middle-earth, perhaps.”

“What manner was that?”

Elrond’s attention turned to the dwarves, Thorin specifically. “You have been witness to his reaction at being asked of his past. His anger,” Thorin nodded, recalling the events of the previous night. “I reveal this to you against his wishes, so you might not find yourselves on the wrong end of his temper. Bilbo’s relationship with Aulë the Smith, most of all, is complicated. Before coming to Middle-earth, Bilbo possessed the Gift of Men, to leave this World and join Eru Ilúvatar somewhere beyond our understanding.”

Gandalf choked on a bite of cake, only Erestor spared him a glance.

“Due to the interference of the Smith, Bilbo no longer possesses that gift,” Elrond continued. He met Gandalf’s gaze. “You might find Bilbo’s upset and anger understandable. His memory was taken as a mercy but return as his power returns.”

“The visions,” Gandalf muttered.

“And dreams. Do not worry for Bilbo, he is much like a Dwarf; he will endure. His anger will ebb and with time, he might come to forgive the Lord Aulë,” Elrond’s keen and steady gaze grew hard as he regarded the Wizard. “I cannot sate your curiosity about him or his existence, but understand this; talk of his past only brings forth painful memories. Do not add to his burden, for it is not his wrath you will face.”

“I understand,” Gandalf said gravely.

The Elf-lord turned his attention to the dwarves again. “I only reveal this to you so you might understand his position. Mention of the Smith around Bilbo will rouse his resentment and anger. He understands that, as dwarves, your Company holds the Lord Aulë in great esteem, and would never
offer insult *knowingly.*

“I understand.” Thorin echoed.

“Now,” the Elf-lord clapped his hands and the tension in the room lifted as though by magic. “Your Company must be wondering where you’ve disappeared to. Shall we adjourn for breakfast?”

“Is this where we will meet to plan our journey?” Thorin asked. The scrolls that Erestor spread out on the table appeared to be maps.

Fili shook his brother as their uncle spoke to the Elf-lord. The young dwarf had been lost in a stupor, shocked by what they’d come to learn of their hobbit. While Bilbo had told them of his origins, Kili did not understand what any of it meant. He made note to ask Ori at the earliest convenience; the young dwarf was capable of explaining things in a manner that was easier for Kili to understand. Not at all like the riddles that the Elf-lord seemed to spout.

The brothers followed their uncle back to Bilbo’s room, hoping that they might see their dear hobbits but discovered both already gone. They were patient as they waited for Thorin to ready himself for the day and accompanied him to the dining hall.

They heard Frodo’s laughter before they saw him. The hobbitling sat on the lap of an unknown elf, battling against long-fingered hands that tickled at his belly. Bilbo sat beside them with the Elvenking at his left. Legolas and Elrond’s twin sons sat before them, on the other side of the table. Gilraen and Estel sat at the end of the table by the unknown elf, the boy paying more attention to Frodo than his meal.

The three joined their own kin at a nearby table, reassuring them that there was no trouble. As breakfast passed, Thorin observed Bilbo’s table with keen interest. His worries eased the longer he watched, for there were no signs of tears on neither Bilbo’s nor Frodo’s faces. Indeed, Frodo was quite jovial, babbling at anyone who paid him attention.

The group appeared to be having a lengthy discussion in the Elven-tongue. Though Thorin understood the language, he could scarcely hear them across the hall over the shouts of his kin—elated at news that they would be leaving the next day. From what he managed to hear, the unknown elf shared plans of a pilgrimage West. It would take them past the Shire and he promised to deliver a letter for Bilbo.

Thorin also paid close attention to the other elves that ventured into the hall. Many of them were pleased to find the hobbits among those of their kin, as often the two ate in their room in the company of the dwarves. They ventured near and touched the hobbitling or spoke to him in gentle, cooing tones. Even a few of the armored guards drew close. Their armor glittered in the light and drew Frodo’s wide-eyed attention. Though he did not like the clanking noise they made as they moved nor how hard and cold they were to the touch. The hobbitling went so far as to hit one of the elves on the head with his rabbit when the attention began to bother him.

There were also those that spoke to Bilbo, flustering him with their words. The hobbit looked towards Thranduil for help but the Elvenking only observed with an air of haughty disinterest, despite the amusement that shone clear in his eyes.

As Thorin concentrated on his food, he lost track of Frodo. Only realizing the hobbitling had disappeared from his sight when he reappeared at his side and only noticing he was there when he was hit on the side with a knitted rabbit.

The babe teetered unsteadily on two feet, grasping at the leg of Thorin’s chair. There was a look of
intense concentration on his face as he swung the arm holding his rabbit. He smiled when he saw that he had Thorin's attention but continued to hit him with the toy.

"Ghivashel?" Thorin asked. He lifted the babe into his arms and settled him comfortably on his lap. "We've talked about hitting."

Dwalin reached over from his seat beside Thorin to poke at the hobbitling's belly. Frodo accepted the poke from his "Uncle Dwalin" without fuss but his expression was clearly unhappy. The babe did not like having his belly poked, prodded, or touched in any form. He guarded the area like a dragon guarding his hoard.

“What an unhappy face,” Dwalin chortled.

“One you should be quite accustomed to,” Thorin snorted. While others treaded lightly where Frodo was concerned, Dwalin had no qualms about getting in his face to demand his attention. More often than not, Frodo was pleased to provide that attention but not when it concerned his belly.

As breakfast passed, Frodo entertained himself by reaching up to pull at Thorin's beard. Seeming to take great pleasure in making him sound strange as he tried to speak to his kin.

So when Gilraen and Estel asked to spend time with Frodo in the garden, Thorin was only too grateful for a moment of respite for his abused beard. He bestowed a kiss on the babe’s forehead and handed him over.

He noticed Bilbo and the Elvenking leaving the hall and looked around at his companions. Most were done eating and sat conversing as they waited. Bombur would continue to eat unless he had reason not to, that left only Balin.

The dwarf had been relatively silent throughout the meal, speaking when spoken to but making no effort otherwise. He seemed worried, face lined with wrinkles and brows furrowed.

“What’s wrong?” Thorin asked, rubbing at his sore face. “Is it the journey? Because of the elven company?”

“No, no,” Balin shook his head with a chuckle. “Though I'm not surprised that’s what you’re worrying over. No, it’s . . .”

“The battle,” Dwalin finished for him. “He’s been worried since Bilbo mentioned the scale of the army that will attack us.”

“The battle,” Balin agreed. “Are you not worried? A force of twenty-thousand Orcs, Wargs, and who knows what other manner of creature . . . will attack us thirteen dwarves. How will we survive?”

“Have faith,” Fili said, drawing their attention, “in Bilbo. He said he had a plan, didn’t he?”

“And he can See what’s to happen! So he’ll definitely have the best plan!” Kili exclaimed.

“I don’t know about best,” Balin muttered but nodded in agreement. “But you do have a point.”

“There’s no use worrying over it,” Thorin said. “The battle is not for many months and not until Smaug is dead.” He looked around at the Company. “Come. We have a long journey ahead of us to plan.”

He led the way to the private study where the elves already gathered. The first thing he noticed was
that Gandalf had remained, deep in conversation with Elrond and Erestor, and still gorging himself on cake.

“These are the only useful maps I could find,” Erestor said to Bilbo, who stood on the chair beside him. Both maps were little more than basic drawings of the region east of the Misty Mountains.

“These will work fine, we already know the way,” Bilbo said. He grasped a quill in hand and made several notes on the first map, which depicted the area from Rivendell to the edge of the Greenwood. Adding marks to show where Beorn’s home, the Carrock, and the Forest Gate were. “We should stop at Beorn’s. If not only for his help,” he tapped at the spot he’d labeled as ‘Carrock’, brows furrowed. “There’s something important here.”

“How do you know?” Gandalf asked.

“Because I can’t See it,” Bilbo replied. “Whatever is there or might happen there, the Valar wish to keep it secret from me.”

“Perchance another gift for Frodo, then,” said the Elvenking as he moved to stand beside the hobbit, voice echoing his distaste at the idea.

Dwarves and elves gathered around the table, making themselves as comfortable as possible despite what little room they had.

“Perhaps,” Bilbo agreed. He moved his finger to Rivendell, gaze distant. “Glorfindel’s hunting party has cleared the High Pass. The one thing we need to worry about is the weather, as it is often stormy and quite slippery on the slopes.”

“How long do you think it will take? To get through the mountain?” Thorin asked.

“Well, it truly depends. Baring the weather, stone giants, stray goblins,” Bilbo said, “I would think between two to three weeks.”

“And who is this ‘Beorn’ of whom you were speaking?” Balin asked.

“Ah, Beorn is a Northman, he lives here,” Bilbo circled the area he’d marked with the Skin-changer’s name. “Just south of the Forest Gate. He is a generally kind person, I have little doubt that he will provide us sanctuary before we venture into the forest—”

“Generally kind? I have heard otherwise,” Gandalf interrupted.

“Except to those who bring harm to his animals, maybe, and Goblins, Wargs, he does hate those,” the hobbit replied. “As long as we ask politely.”

“Best not send Thorin to ask, then,” the wizard muttered, ignoring said dwarf’s heated glare.

“Nor Thranduil,” Bilbo agreed, smiling apologetically at the elf, who only shrugged. It was true, after all.

“If we are stopping at Beorn’s, we might ask him to contact Radagast, as well,” Thranduil said, “and Radagast might contact the Eagles. In fact, why not simply contact all who might help us?”


“If there truly is a force of—twenty thousand, was it?—then we will need all the help we can get,” the wizard said.
“The Lady of Lórien has promised a regiment of Galadhrim Warriors,” said Elrond. “They travel here and will join with the regiment I send. I cannot leave these lands unprotected, so I must remain. As such, Erestor will go in my stead.”

“Is that so?” Bilbo asked, a mischievous smile playing about his lips that was mirrored by the Elvenking and Elrond. Though the Elf-lord faced away from them, Bilbo could clearly feel his amusement. He cleared his throat and returned his attention to the map, pointedly nudging Thranduil in the side when the elf continued his silent teasing of Erestor. “That’s Beorn, Radagast, the Eagles, Elves of Lothlórien, Imladris, and the Greenwood, quite possibly the Dwarves of the Iron Hills . . . anyone else?”

“It is likely the Men of Lake-town will help as well,” Thranduil said. “Bard, most certainly.”

They kindly ignored the shock—and tears that a few of them were trying and failing to hide—on the dwarves’ faces. Thorin’s lost yet hopeful expression, especially, was painful to look at. So Bilbo resolutely stared at the map while they composed themselves.

“I set the Captain of the Guard to keep the Elf-path clear of spiders,” Thranduil said. “But to avoid Dol Guldur at all costs.”

“That’s good, I’d hate for him to catch wind of what we’re doing,” Bilbo said. He further explained the path of their journey for the benefit of the dwarves present. “The Elf-path leads straight to Thranduil’s Halls. It’s the safest road through the woods at the moment. Unfortunately, that doesn’t make the woods any less dangerous to travel through. Because the trees are so close together, the air does not flow freely and the sun does not reach past the canopy of the trees; it is often hard to breathe or see.” He moved his finger east, towards the mountains and then north along the river. “This is the Enchanted River. The water of this river is cursed. Coming in contact with it will lead to one falling into a deep, deep slumber, and losing some memories.”

Bilbo tapped the map several times, drawing everyone’s attention to the edge of the woods. “From this point, the Forest Gate,” he drew an invisible line to the home of the Wood-elves, “to Thranduil’s Halls, your best chance of getting through the forest unscathed is to follow Thranduil and Legolas. Once you step off the Elf-path you will never find it again, and you will wander the woods, lost until Durin’s Day has come and gone. Can you trust Thranduil to lead you through the forest?”

Thorin still reeled from learning of just how many were willing to aid them in their quest—when his own kin had refused him their help—and did not answer.

Bilbo continued, allowing the King-in-Exile time to collect himself. “Once we reach the Halls of the Elvenking, we can start putting the plan into motion. Thranduil will offer refuge to the people of Lake-town, so there’s no fear of innocent lives being lost when Smaug inevitably attacks the town.”

“Why inevitably?” Balin asked.

“Because that is the plan. I will venture inside Erebor to draw Smaug out,” Bilbo said.

“What?” Thorin demanded. He threw a look at the Elvenking, who looked none too pleased but unsurprised by the words.

“It will be alright. Smaug will not harm me,” Bilbo reassured.

“You can See that?” Thorin demanded.

Bilbo mulled over the words. “I can See the death of Smaug.” Though there was something strange about the dragon’s demise that Bilbo couldn’t quite put his finger on. “Hmm, how do I explain this?”
“Bilbo can only See things that he will be present for,” Thranduil explained. “So if he can See the death of the dragon, it is because he will be there at that time.”

Thorin relaxed, releasing a breath he hadn’t known he’d been holding.

“Why such a limitation?” Gandalf asked.

“Bilbo’s gift—” the Elvenking grunted as Bilbo’s elbow connected with his side. “Bilbo’s power is beneficial to himself. He can See what might become of others but only in direct relation to himself. He can still receive visions sent to him but can only actively use his powers for his own benefit.”

“Have you been speaking to—” Bilbo began, brows furrowed.

“Not now,” Thranduil interrupted, leveling a look at the hobbit. Bilbo blinked, surprised by his abruptness. Others looked curious, Fili and Kili whispered to each other while throwing wide-eyed, awed looks at Bilbo.

Bilbo scowled. “We’ll speak of this later.” He turned to face Thorin and Balin, they stood straighter at the look in his eyes, though his annoyance was directed at the elf at his side and not at them. “As I’ve said before. Bard, the descendant of Girion, last Lord of Dale, is in possession of the one remaining Black Arrow. The Black Arrows were created before the fall of the Lonely Mountain by Thrór, as a gift to the Lord of Dale, Girion, and imbued with certain magical properties for those of Girion’s line. Bard must be the one to slay Smaug, and with that deed earn the fealty of his people and assume the throne of Dale. The people of Dale will be of great help to you in the coming years, as the Northmen were in the past to King Thrór.”

“I understand,” Thorin said with a bow of his head.

“Now,” Bilbo hesitated, “I’m sure you’re aware that a sickness lies upon the gold in Erebor.”

“I am aware, as it drove my grandfather mad,” Thorin said roughly.

“You are mistaken, Master Thorin,” Elrond said. All turned to face him as he spoke. “The sickness that afflicted your grandfather was not dragon sickness.” Even Bilbo looked surprised by the news, though the hobbit did not know much of the dwarves beyond what they felt like sharing—which was not much at all, come to think of it. “Your grandfather, and from what Gandalf has told us, your father, fell prey to the Ring of Power that passed to their possession.” He faced Bilbo as he further explained. “Dwarf-lords proved themselves resilient against the magic of the rings. But they were still affected in that the rings kindled certain traits of theirs.”

“. . . Greed?” Bilbo asked, after thinking it over for a moment.

Elrond bowed his head. “The ring worn by King Thrór gave him the power to multiply all mined under his domain. It brought him great wealth but also evoked his greediness and summoned great evil to his halls.” He faced the shocked King-in-Exile and there was no judgment in his eyes nor in his expression, for he knew the same burden. “The effects of dragon sickness are much the same as those shown by your grandfather. The dragon, Smaug, has lain upon that treasure for more than a hundred years. All who come in contact with that gold will become afflicted with dragon sickness. It will affect those already full of greed for gold stronger than others.”

“The Arkenstone is not gold, though,” Bilbo pointed out. “If I find that for Thorin, will it affect him?”

Thorin looked to him in surprise but Bilbo’s attention remained on the Elf-lord, who looked thoughtful for a moment before shaking his head. “I do not know. Will you take the risk?”
Bilbo threw Thorin a careful, considering look. The dwarf stood straighter under his penetrating gaze and though he could feel his cheeks heating, his own gaze did not waver. “The Arkenstone is the King’s Jewel. An heirloom of the Kings of Durin’s Folk. To me, it is only a jewel, no greater than any other despite that it is pretty to look at. But . . . if the King under the Mountain wishes it so, I will retrieve for him the Arkenstone.”

Elrond nodded. “I trust your judgment, Bilbo.”

“As do I,” Thranduil agreed easily. “If you wish to give the Arkenstone to your dwarf, then so be it.”

There was a moment of absolute silence before Bilbo started sputtering, face turning bright red. He turned from Thorin, unable to look him in the face. He dug his fist into Thranduil’s side. The Elvenking only grunted, not looking the slightest bit repentant at his words. “He’s not—”

“Isn’t he?” Thranduil wondered airily. “He’s only been courting you for the past week.”

Bilbo fell silent, gaping at him. Finally, he scoffed, “He has not—” The words died in his throat as he caught sight of the guilt on Thorin’s face. “But—”

The Company burst into loud laughter as Bilbo as he gaped at Thorin. For a moment, he thought that it was only a bad jest but Thorin’s embarrassment was real and Thranduil would never do such a thing.

“You’ve been—” Bilbo cut himself off as he recalled the dwarf’s rather peculiar behavior. “But you’ve done nothing but run away at the sight of me!”

The Company roared with laughter. Elladan and Elrohir clutched at each other in mirth while Gandalf pounded at his chest as he choked on the Old Toby he’d been smoking. Legolas leaned against a bookshelf, lips twisted in a smirk that made him look remarkably like his father.

Dwalin, still chuckling, pounded at Thorin’s back. “He’s been anticipating yer rejection, laddie.”

“Rejection . . .” Bilbo echoed, voice faint.

“You did not respond to any of my overtures,” Thorin said, flushing. “I was beginning to lose hope.”

“The . . . flowers . . .” Bilbo realized suddenly. “You gave me a bouquet of yellow carnations.”

Thranduil rubbed the bridge of his nose and Elrond shook his head.

“Frodo picked them,” Thorin said, unable to see the problem. “You like flowers.”

Bilbo laughed somewhat hysterically. “Yellow carnations symbolize disappointment, even disdain or contempt!” The hobbit rubbed his face at Thorin’s shock, even as the dwarves burst into laughter once again. “Oh, Eru, and the meal you cooked.”

“You like food,” Thorin scowled, throwing a stern glare at his kin, who could not contain their mirth. Fili and Kili were on the ground, gasping for breath.

“It was inedible!” Bilbo cried. “The meat was undercooked. I think the mushrooms were poisonous but who could tell when everything else was burnt to a crisp!?” Thorin begun to look annoyed, standing with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face, even as Bilbo flailed his arms about. “Not to mention the hair braiding and beads, the tea date, the flower crown that attracted a hive of bees—who, if not for Frodo and Butterfly, would have stung us to death!”
It was true that none of Thorin’s overtures had come out quite the way he’d intended. But did the hobbit have to shout it out for all to hear?

“There’s probably more I don’t know about,” Bilbo muttered. “But since you’ve been acting so strange every time I’ve seen you, I’ve taken to ignoring you.”

Another round of laughter, stronger than all previous ones, startled Bilbo. He looked around at them, brows furrowed in annoyance and cheeks red with embarrassment.

“We shall speak of this in private,” he said at last.

Thorin agreed with a nod, expression serious though his ears burned. He returned his attention to the map on the table. Once they had gathered themselves, the dwarves huddled close around the table again. A few of them still released the occasional laugh. Legolas, Elrohir, and Elladan pressed close behind Thranduil and Bilbo. Elrond moved to stand by Erestor—their somberness belied by the curling at the corners of their lips and the mirth in their eyes.

“What became of King Thrór’s ring?” Bilbo asked.

Gandalf stopped puffing at his pipe, throwing an uncertain look at Thorin as he replied. “I’m afraid that it was taken from his son, Thráin, at Dol Guldur. I found him imprisoned there and that is when he gave me the map and key. He . . . did not survive. I did not come to learn his identity until later.”

The dwarves bowed their heads. Balin grasped Thorin’s shoulder whilst the King-in-Exile clenched his fists. There had been little hope that Thráin yet lived and while the news of his death was not surprising, it still upset them.

“Why there? Why was he imprisoned there?” Thorin demanded once he’d regained his composure.

Gandalf hesitated, looking to Bilbo, who shook his head. Thorin looked between them with suspicion and confusion.

“There is another army that gathers there,” revealed Bilbo after careful deliberation. “It will march upon Erebor. You cannot fight the evil there, Thorin. You are already on an important quest. You must stay your course and reclaim the Lonely Mountain. Attempting to seek revenge for your father will only lead to your demise.”

Thorin gazed at him with hardened eyes but Bilbo remained unmoved. Finally, the dwarf nodded, conceding that the hobbit had a point. Reclaiming the mountain was more important than avenging his father’s death, at least for the moment.

“Once news of Smaug’s demise reaches Bolg, he will lead his army to Erebor from the Grey Mountains. We will not have much time to prepare before the first attack,” Bilbo continued. “The army from Dol Guldur will come from under the ground by way of Were-worms.”

“Who is Bolg and what of Azog?” Thorin asked.

“Bolg is the spawn of Azog,” explained Bilbo and he nodded his head at Legolas. The dwarves regarded the elf with confusion and he smiled at them enigmatically. “Legolas claims the right to kill him.”

Thorin raised an eyebrow at the elfling but did not argue. Dwalin scoffed from beside him, regarding the son of Thranduil dubiously.

“Of course, anything could happen in the heat of battle. About Azog, however. . . he will die before
the battle . . . in fact,” Bilbo pointed at the Carrock, “the Valar refuse to show me his demise . . .”

Elrond regarded the map and the hobbit then concluded, “You think Beorn will kill Azog?”

“Well,” Bilbo mulled over the question carefully. “I cannot See anything of Beorn or the death of Azog. So they might be somehow connected.”

“A conundrum,” Elrond agreed. “You don’t think—”

“*Beorn*?” Bilbo scoffed, waving the words away after a long exchange of looks between him, Thranduil, and Elrond. “How would that work? No, there must be something else there. I suppose we’ll see when we arrive.”

Thorin exchanged a look with his kin but none of them knew what to make of the conversation. The elves and Bilbo were, once again, speaking in riddles.

“Do not worry about Azog, he will meet his demise,” Bilbo assured Thorin, who could only nod. Though he would have liked to be the one to kill that Orc, he could not bring himself to care about whoever did the deed as long as the White Orc died. “Once the people of Lake-town have moved to safety, we can set up an ambush for Smaug.”

“Will the dragon not destroy Lake-town?” Balin asked, worried.

“Unfortunately, yes. Most of the town will be destroyed, either by dragon fire or claws. The Lake-men will move to Dale, some will remain there but some will return to Lake-town once repaired. Either way, they will prosper; there is no need to worry over their fate.”

“Does that mean we win the battle?” Bofur asked, excited.

“I can See many ways the battle might end, nothing is definitive,” Bilbo said. “I can only lead us down the closest path to victory.”

“But . . . what do you think?” Bofur implored.

All dwarven eyes turned to Bilbo, gazing at him with such high hopes that Bilbo could only open and close his mouth as he tried to think of what to say.

Finally, he released a deep breath and smiled. “I do believe we’ll win the battle.” A cheer went up among the dwarves. Bilbo allowed them a moment of celebration before loudly clearing his throat. He glared at them, arms crossed and gaze stern, until they finally grew quiet. “That does not mean you should grow overconfident. As I said, the future is not set in stone, and even the smallest change could alter our path.”

“We have faith in you, Bilbo,” Thorin said, rendering the hobbit immobile and mute. “We know you will not lead us astray.”

“We’ll speak more of the battle on the road,” Thranduil interjected when it appeared as though Bilbo would speak no further. The hobbit continued to stare at Thorin, thunderstruck. “We leave at first light.”

“We’ll be ready,” Thorin agreed.

The group took that as permission to disperse. Thranduil and Legolas headed out first, deep in conversation over Legolas claiming the life of Bolg. Elladan and Elrohir followed close behind, arguing that they had as much claim over the Orc’s life as anyone else.
“Ah, Nori,” Bilbo called out, looking about the room with an air of unease. The star-haired dwarf paused on his way out the door. “Would you be kind enough to return the, err... the candlestick, silverware, dishware, the—” Bilbo waved his hand around, “before we leave?”

Dori reached over and slapped his brother upside the head. Nori smiled sheepishly as Dwalin turned to look at him with narrowed eyes.

“What?” the thief demanded defensively. “I wanted a few keepsakes.” He allowed himself to be pulled from the room by a furious Dwalin, throwing a smile at the hobbit over his shoulder.

Thorin shook his head, looking both apologetic and defensive while Elrond appeared amused. Soon, only Bilbo, Thorin, and Erestor remained in the library. The elf ignored them as he gathered up the maps.

“I hope you’re not bothered,” Bilbo said. Thorin thought for a moment that he was being spoken to, but the hobbit turned to Erestor. “That Glorfindel will not be returning for a while.”

The elf continued folding the maps but Bilbo caught the moment he tensed before immediately relaxing. They were all accustomed to teasing each other but it had been a while so Bilbo didn’t blame him for being out of practice.

“Why should I be bothered? It will be nice to have some peace and quiet around here for a short while,” Erestor said.

As Bilbo stared at him, a smile spread across his face. “‘Short while’, you say. Considering you’ll be leading the Elves in Elrond’s stead, isn’t that right?”

“Maybe you should focus on your own blossoming romance,” Erestor said. Bilbo did not think he imagined the snark in the elf’s voice, though his expression remained flat and serious.

Bilbo threw the quill at his head, pouting when the elf caught it with ease, not even bothering to look. Then he smirked and even Thorin found amusement as the hobbit teased the elf. “My own ‘blossoming romance’? So you agree that there’s romance brewing—”

Erestor walked out of the room with quick strides, abandoning most of the scrolls on the table. Bilbo threw Thorin a guilty look yet did not appear repentant otherwise.

“I suppose we should talk.”

“Indeed,” Thorin agreed. He rubbed at the side of his face, unsure of where to begin the conversation. “You... truly had no idea, did you?”

“Well... no,” Bilbo answered truthfully. “I thought perhaps your strange behavior due to the valley affecting your senses.”

“Affecting?” Thorin echoed in bewilderment.

“It is not wise to tarry too long in Rivendell,” Bilbo explained. He looked out into the balcony and beyond, into the beautiful valley below. He would always consider Rivendell a home to him but he knew how easy it was to lose all sense of time in the valley. To become enamored with the contentment and peacefulness and never leave. “Especially since you are on a quest. It is easy to lose the passage of time here. June is almost upon us, it is time to move on.”

“You’re right, it is almost June,” Thorin said. His brows furrowed, surprised by the news. “What trickery is this?”
“Not a trick, Thorin,” Bilbo answered with a roll of his eyes. “Rivendell is a safe haven; a sanctuary. Time heals all wounds. It is only magic and it affects people in different ways.”

“Elven magic,” Thorin grumbled.

“Magic is magic,” Bilbo said. He bit at his bottom lip as he grew nervous, eyes darting about the room.

"We do not have to speak if—"

"No!" Bilbo interrupted. Then quickly corrected himself, "I mean. We should. It's only that . . . I imagined you'd be too focused on the quest to—you know," Bilbo flailed his hands around as he tried to explain. "I'm not making any sense, am I?"

"It's true that I must focus on the quest," Thorin said. "But . . . some things . . . are not so easy to ignore, no matter how hard you try." He ran the knuckles of his hand against his chin, a sign of his own nervousness. But as he had failed in all previous attempts at subtle courtship, all that was left was a direct approach. "My feelings for you are one such thing. If you are amenable to being courted by one such as I, then it would please me to continue doing so—properly, this time."

"'One such as you', you say," Bilbo rubbed a hand across his eyes, where tears had begun to gather once again. He'd cried so many tears already, it was a wonder there were any left. "I'm the one that should say that. I'm only—"

"A Hobbit?" Thorin smiled fondly. He ran the back of his fingers against Bilbo's cheek, catching a stray tear. "There is no one I'd rather spend the rest of my life with."

Which only brought fresh tears to Bilbo's eyes, thinking again of his fate. But he had already lived one life without Thorin, could he live another? Or could he be selfish this time? He did not know but thought that he might as well try.

Out in the garden, Estel and Frodo chased after Butterfly. Or rather, Estel chased after Butterfly with Frodo in his arms. All three laughed joyously and free, unaware that they would soon part from each other.

Gilraen watched over them, happy yet sad. She wondered how her son would react to Frodo leaving. They had grown so close in their time together, even she baffled at the ease with which they understood each other. She wondered at that often but had yet to receive an answer. She knew the others were as baffled as she.

"Buffly!" Frodo called.

"Frodo!" Butterfly called back in a sweet, childish voice. That, in itself, was another surprise. She doubted anyone knew Butterfly could talk, though her son reassured her that the butterfly had been speaking for a while. Only that Butterfly was quite shy and only spoke to Frodo and Estel.

The butterfly appeared to have made friends with the bees that called the garden their home. Though they seemed to like Frodo as well, buzzing around him and frightening Estel. The boy held the hobbitling closer, guarding him from the bees as he made his way back to his mother.

They sat at her feet, holding a conversation she only understood one side of.

"Bees," said Frodo.

"I'm not scared of them," Estel pouted. "I don't want them to sting you, that's all."
"Bees," said Frodo again.

"I know you think they're nice but better safe than sorry."

"Es," said Frodo.

Estel huffed. "I'll tickle you."

Frodo quickly covered his stomach, eyes wide as he whined, "No!" He fell to the ground on his side and rolled around as he struggled to sit up again. Estel helped him back up, throwing Gilraen a guilty look as he struggled to wipe the grass off the babe's clothes. The pants and shirt were already stained green, so his attempts were futile.

"Es!"

"All right," Estel agreed. He knelt before the hobbitling, grasping his hands as he pulled him to his feet. Frodo teetered, staring down at his feet as he attempted to bring one forward. The foot wavered in the air before dropping to the ground in the same spot it had previously vacated. "Let's try again."

"Es," Frodo said. He lifted the foot again, brows furrowed in concentration, and it wavered for a moment. Gilraen surprised herself by holding her breath in anticipation. The foot dropped forward, barely a couple of centimeters from where it had been. But the hobbitling looked up at them with beaming eyes and a wide smile.

"Good work, Frodo!" Gilraen cheered.

"You'll be walking in no time!" Estel exclaimed. He lifted the babe into his arms once more, seemingly incapable of putting him down for long. They chased after Butterfly, who flew off with a laugh.

At some point Thorin and Bilbo joined Gilraen, who raised a single eyebrow at their joined hands and hid a smile. Estel ran back to them when the bees made a reappearance, swarming around them and buzzing insistently. They were more interested in Frodo than anything else, drawn to him for reasons unknown. Butterfly shooed them off when he saw that they made Estel uncomfortable.

"Bees," Frodo said.

"I'm not scared!" Estel denied, pouting.

The look on Frodo's face said he did not believe the boy but chose to let him pretend otherwise. Because Frodo was a good friend.

They played all morning and well into the afternoon, only taking breaks to eat. It surprised Estel, who often had to fight off dwarves and elves—especially Legolas and his own brothers—for just a moment of Frodo's time. He wouldn't complain though and only enjoyed the extra time he could spend with the hobbitling.

Frodo also enjoyed spending time with Estel but often had to pay the dwarves and elves attention or they would be sad. Due to their departure the following day, both dwarves and elves allowed Estel time with the hobbitling. They were busy getting last minute supplies ready, after all, while Dwalin made sure Nori returned all the 'keepsakes' he'd taken.

That night, after the hobbits had enjoyed a relaxing bath, Dori approached Bilbo with a bundle of blue cloth in hand.
“I thought the little one might need something warmer for the road,” he explained, fretting as the hobbit regarded the coat with keen eyes.

“This fabric looks terribly familiar,” said Bilbo. Dori followed his gaze towards where Thorin and Frodo sat on the floor by the bed, deliberating over how best to put the babe's toys in a bag. The hobbitling insisted on putting Mister Thor in his diaper and Bilbo smothered his laughter at Thorin's increasingly horrified expressions. He wondered how Tulkas felt about the treatment and if Frodo had done such a thing before. Served them right for spying on them.

The blue coat held in his hands bore a striking resemblance to Thorin's. He turned inquiring eyes upon Dori but it was Thorin who answered the unspoken question. “Kili carries an extra coat at all times, as he is in a habit of losing his. He gave the extra for Dori to alter for Frodo.”

“I see,” Bilbo held the coat out at arm's length to inspect it more thoroughly. The coat was deep blue in color and made of cloth, not leather, with sleeves as long as Frodo's arm and fur lining the seams. It did not resemble Kili's coat at all, instead altered to look like Thorin's. Thorin and Frodo stopped what they were doing as Bilbo knelt beside them. “Let's try it on, shall we?”

Frodo could not get his hand through the arm while holding Mister Thor and had to drop the horse. Thorin quickly grabbed the toy and put it in the bag before the babe could pick it up again. The hobbitling frowned and gave his Papa a betrayed look, clearly blaming him for his Adad's actions.

“It doesn't seem heavy,” Bilbo murmured to himself, as he helped the babe to his feet to assess the coat in full. “Is it too heavy, Frodo?”

The fur tickled Frodo's neck and he giggled. He did not appear to have trouble with the weight of it, though it felt remarkably heavier to Bilbo than the babe's normal clothes.

“He'll not need to wear it often,” Thorin pointed out. “But it should provide added warmth at night when he sleeps.”

“Why only at night?” Dori asked, perplexed.

Bilbo threw Thorin a glare. “You haven't shown them?”

Thorin coughed and busied himself with the worn leather bag at his side. He made sure Frodo's toys were comfortably settled within. “They will see when it is ready.”

Bilbo scoffed and rolled his eyes. “I thought it was ready.” He helped Frodo out of the coat. “Thank you for this, Dori.”

Dori startled. He'd been staring at the three of them with a peculiar expression on his face. “Of course, lad, think nothing of it.”

“Oi? Where?” Frodo wondered.

“Oobbit,” Frodo nodded in agreement. He tried to open the bag where Thorin had hidden his toys, growing frustrated when it would not open for him. He hit the bag with his tiny fists. "G'appa!"

Bilbo sighed. He opened the bag for the hobbitling, who pulled out Mister Nibbles as soon as he saw him. The babe held the rabbit close, rubbing his cheek against the top of the rabbit's head.

"Can you say 'thank you' to Dori for the coat, Frodo?” Bilbo asked.
"T'an' you?" Frodo echoed around a yawn. He put the fingers of his right hand up to his lips and then pulled the hand away.

"You're quite welcome, little one," Dori said. He left after ruffling Frodo's hair, much to the hobbitling's displeasure.

Uncle Thranduil had only just brushed his hair! He grumbled petulantly. Quieting as Papa picked him up and lay him in the middle of the bed. Soon they were all settled on the bed.

Frodo curiously touched the hands that lay over his stomach. Were Papa and Adad holding hands? They'd never done that before. He wanted to hold their hands too!

He grasped at the entwined hands, pulling them up so they covered his chest and he could lean his head against them.

They felt warm. Not like fire. But warm like happy. Frodo decided that he liked that. As sleep claimed him and all through the night, he held his parents' hands.

He woke the next morning to much noise and Papa shaking him awake. He grumbled and flopped over onto his belly, kicking at the hands that tried to lift him up.

"Frodo, don’t be difficult," Bilbo said. He struggled to get the babe into his clothes as Frodo flopped around like a fish out of water, being unhelpful. “At this rate, everyone will leave without us. Then what will we do?"

Leave? Frodo wondered. He sat up and rubbed at his eyes groggily. “Where?"

“Where? Well, we’re going on an adventure,” Bilbo said.

“Dorf? Ef?"

“All the dwarves are coming with us, of course,” Bilbo replied. “So are Thranduil, Legolas, Elladan, Elrohir, and Glorfindel.”


“Elrond has to stay here and protect the valley. We’ll see Erestor later. I don’t know what Lindir will do with you gone, though. Whoever will listen to his songs?"

Frodo giggled, signing, Sing. Still, one very important person remained, “Es?"

“Estel has to stay here with his mother, but that doesn’t mean you won’t see him again,” Bilbo reassured. Frodo stared at him with wide eyes as he tried to understand the words. He turned to where Mister Nibbles still lay, listening to the rabbit with an attentiveness he never paid anyone else. He faced Bilbo with a smile, signing, Dream?

“Will you see Estel in your dreams?” Bilbo asked. He threw a thoughtful look at the rabbit. “If the King says you will, then it must be so.”

Frodo clapped.

“The King?” Thorin echoed faintly, throwing a horrified look at the rabbit.

“G’appa!” Frodo exclaimed.

Bilbo gazed at Thorin’s pale face with concern. “I thought you knew.”
Thorin ran a hand over his mouth, waving the hobbit’s concern away with a strained smile. “Then . . .” He pointed at the bag where he’d put Frodo’s other toys.

“Ah, don’t worry about them, they’re not the actual toys,” Bilbo laughed. “It’s difficult to explain. I suppose you could say that they send their thoughts to Frodo through the toys. Though I can feel their presence, I don’t hear them like he does.”

Thorin eyed the rabbit with suspicion as he gathered their bags, making sure to be careful with the bag of toys, just in case. Bilbo ducked his head to hide a smile, finally done getting Frodo ready. The babe flopped around the bed, babbling happily and clapping his hands.

They were going on an adventure! He could hardly contain himself.

“Time to say our goodbyes,” Bilbo said. He lifted the bouncy babe into his arms, chuckling at his excitement. Grabbing Mister Nibbles and giving the room a final check to see if they’d forgotten anything.

There were elves gathered all around the courtyard, waiting to wish them farewell. An awkward tension hung in the air, the source of which stood surrounded by dwarves and elves, crying his poor little heart out.

Frodo’s gaze locked onto the crying form of Estel and his bouncing ceased. Elrond and Gilraen attempted to comfort the boy though their efforts proved in vain. Butterfly flew around him, pulling at his hair to cheer him up.

“Es,” Frodo said. He reached for the boy and Bilbo moved forward until his little hands were able to touch Estel’s face. His eyes filled with sympathetic tears at seeing the boy’s pain. “Es.”

“So—sorry,” Estel managed around a sob. His arms covered his face, as though he couldn’t bear to look upon them.

“Estel, it’s not goodbye forever,” Bilbo said. He pushed Frodo into the boy’s arms, waiting until Estel had a good hold on him before stepping back. “You’ll see each other again. Possibly sooner than you realize.”

Estel held Frodo as tightly as he could manage without harming the babe. Until the Company could tarry no longer and the two were parted.

Bilbo dried the hobbitling’s cheeks as Gilraen pulled her son to her side, offering him what comfort she could. The babe teared up again as Elrond knelt before them, laying a kiss upon both hobbits’ heads.

After the Elf-lord stepped away, all others took turns bestowing their own farewells upon the hobbits. Frodo grew more and more agitated as he realized just how many people they were leaving behind. He burrowed his face against Bilbo’s shoulder and refused to look up any longer.

Bilbo took that as a sign that it was time to leave. Frodo peaked behind them once they were past the bridge and on their way up the mountain. He could see a relatively small figure, compared to the elves, standing at the end of the bridge.

Estel’s voice echoed in the valley as he shouted, “Frodo! Le cenithon ned lû thenl!” Arm waving wildly over his head.

Frodo sniffed and smiled tremulously. He mimicked the boy by waving his own hand in the air and did not stop for a while. Until he could no longer see the people without squinting his eyes and not
even then.

He lay his head across Bilbo’s shoulder and thought that it was all right. It was just like Estel had said. They’d see each other again soon.

Chapter End Notes

1. I'm in need of a Captain of the Guard for Thranduil. I thought about doing a poll like "Tauriel: Yes or No?" LOL. She's ready made but if I do decide to use her, she won't end up with Kili. Because, no. Just, no.
2. Big thanks to my awesome beta. ;a; Couldn't have done it without you. Well, no, I could have but it would have sucked ;D
3. Still no new laptop but my step-dad gave me his old one. It's slow but it doesn't crash or do weird things when I use it. \o/

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