the complicated affairs of thorin, bilbo, two dwarves and a dwobbit

by wearethewitches
Summary

wherein Fili and Kili get lost, Freylin Baggins is a small matter of huge importance and Miss Bilbo Baggins - of Bag-End, Bagshot Row, Hobbiton, of the Shire - is not quite certain of her place in the world.
An Unexpected Duo

You were out patrolling when you heard them. They were children, which was quite obvious – and one was upset, and you could practically hear his tears.

“-told you, Uncle’s going to be mad now-”

“No he won’t, he’ll just be worried, Ki, so come on – follow me!”

You stop, holding up the lantern to the left side of the road, looking up a few seconds before two scrawny boys burst from the hedge. Upon seeing you, they startle, and the dark-haired one wobbles, before losing his balance. You drop the lantern in an instant, leaping to grab him before he hits the ground, and you succeed, with moderate success. The boy immediately latches onto your neck, and you’re surprised at the strength in him before realising something quite important.

This is no hobbit child.

“Kili!” The blonde yelps, before dropping and rolling onto his front, shimmying down the side of the tall brae, hopping to the ground, mucky boots making a dull thud and a slight squelch as they hit the compact dirt of the path. “Let him go, put him down, put my brother down-” the blonde boy runs up, kicking you in the shin and grabbing onto his brother’s clothes. Probably in the opposite way he expects, you grip tighter at the assault, the boy in your arms – Kili, you remember – matching your grip, a wet patch already apparent through your loose scarf.

“Woah, woah, hey, stop that,” you step a couple of paces back, briefly reaching down to grab the lantern, holding Kili in one arm on your hip as you bring the lantern to the level of your eyes. “You’re safe, you’re brother’s safe, I’m not going to harm him.”

“Then put him down!” Then the young blonde boy takes a gleaming silver knife from his belt, and you suddenly feel faint. Why the hell is a child carrying a knife is a question you only half-ask yourself, too focused on the fact that you are getting very mixed signals from either child. “Put Kili down!”

“Where are your parents?” You ask, voice shaky but calm. “Are you travelling with a caravan?”

“Uncle,” Kili whispers to you, voice muffled and clogged, even as his brother growls, “None of your business! Put Kili down!”

You have had enough experiences with your Took cousins to know that even if you wanted to, Kili wouldn’t be letting go of you any time soon. So, quietly sighing about the dusty path you’re supposed to be patrolling, you slowly sit down on the ground, getting comfortable as Kili shifts and keeps holding on tightly, even as you make large, exaggerated motions of letting him go, fiddling with your hair, the lantern, your dress, around the boy whose brother now stares at.

“Kili?”

“I want my uncle,” Kili cries to you quietly, and you pet his hair, stroking it softly, tucking a stray beaded strand behind his ear. You look at it, briefly, wondering what the runes are, what they mean, even as you recognise them as Dwarvish. You look between each of the boys, Kili and his brother, and nod to yourself firmly.

“Dwarves. You’re dwarf children.” You look to the blonde boy, raising your finger sternly even as his eyes suddenly narrow in hatred. “Where are your parents?”
The young dwarf boy clenches his jaw, glaring. He still hasn’t put the knife away. “None of your business, khulum. Kili, get away from her.” In your arms, Kili has gone still. You look down, frowning.

“What does…” you glance at the blonde, before looking back at Kili, “what does ‘khulum’ mean?”

“Elf,” Kili mutters, before looking up fearfully, hand reaching up to push your mouse-brown curls away from your ears. But unlike his brother, whose face betrays his disgust, Kili’s eyes are bright with curiosity. “Soft.” He traces the small point of your ear, causing you to shudder a little at the ticklish sensation, before you shake your head.

“I’m not an elf. I’m a hobbit.”

“What’s a hobbit?” Kili asks.

You hum, thinking on the question, “Well, we’re a merry people. The Big Folk – the Men – call us halflings, and so do the elves. We keep to ourselves, mostly, like you dwarves, but we prefer the open sky to dark mountains. We love the dirt beneath our feet, and good food and drink to warm our bellies.”

At your words, a distinct, small rumble comes from the older of the brothers, who immediately turns pink. You try not to smile, failing, before you secure Kili and get up, causing the blonde dwarf to tense.

“Sit down again,” he orders, but you just shake your head, looking up over the brae.

“No-one is shouting for you, or coming – and it’s already past dark. I’m taking you to my home, and giving you something to eat. You can sleep in a guest bedroom, and in the morning, we’ll go to see the Thain.” You pick up the lantern from the ground, holding it out to him. “Would you like to carry this while we walk? Hobbits can’t see very well in the dark, and the moon isn’t even out tonight,” you motion to the sky, which is moonless, as you said. There’s a long, silent pause, and he takes the lantern quickly, jerking it. You glance at Kili.

“Before we set off to my home, perhaps we should introduce ourselves. My name is Bluebell Baggins, but you can call me Bilbo, like everyone else does.”

“I like bluebells,” Kili whispers, “Kili, son of Dis, child of Thrain, at your service.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Master Kili,” you smile gently, before looking to his brother, who grips the lantern like a lifeline, staring at you in suspicion. You can guess what he might be thinking – throw it at you, get his brother; blow it out, make you lose your way if you were telling the truth about not being able to see, which on another note, you had been, though not to the degree he perhaps thinks. “And who are you?”

For a moment, there’s more silence. Then, he straightens, heels pressing together, arms flat against his stocky dwarf body.

“Fili, son of Dis, child of Thrain – at your service.”

You can see that it’s taking him some effort, and as he bows stiffly, you curtsy in reply. “A pleasure, Master Fili. Now, if you would follow me, I believe I have a jar of raspberry preserve waiting to be spread.”

There, you see him crack at the mention of food, but it’s not visible, and you wonder just what exactly he needs to know etiquette for – you yourself knew all the Hobbit etiquette in the book,
though you might not ever use most of it. Being a direct granddaughter of the Thain isn’t something you take as lightly as others seem to believe.

You hold out a hand.

“I swear on my mother’s heart that I will not harm, nor lead you or your brother astray. Please. I just want to make sure you’re safe as you can be until your family finds you again.”

Fili hesitates, but it only takes a soft snore from Kili – who had somehow fallen asleep during your short conversation – before he reaches out, grasping your offered digits. Together, you walk along the worn path, further into the Shire. You can only barely see in the lamplight how he reacts as he sees the full magnitude of the Shire, the rolling hills of green and the hobbit houses built into them, pinpricks of light shining all over the valley.

Your voice is soft as you speak, “Welcome to the Shire. In any house, you’ll find good food, a warm hearth, and perhaps – if you play your cards right – a happy host. Hobbits live for the simple things of life. We don’t fight – we don’t raise arms, or join armies. If a King of Arnor took his throne, we would kneel, and probably dissolve the Thainship, but we’re self-governing, still would be. We only nominally serve. Our Thain lives in Tookborough, as the Took’s are always Thains, and the Mayor lives in Michel Delving.”

“What’s the difference?” Fili asks.

“The Mayor is in charge of the Shire’s business, the people. They’re in charge of the Bounders, and Shirrifs, our authority. They also preside at banquets.” You pause to help Fili over a stile, taking the lantern briefly before climbing over, being careful not to jostle Kili. You continue after you’ve begun walking again. “When the last King of Arnor died, we created the Thain to replace them as lawmaker and ruler. We answer to them when there’s a crisis, and they can call a Shire Moot in dangerous times – but we’re a peaceful race, and rather lazy, if you ask me. Our Hobbitry-in-arms is rather lacking.” You glance down at him, smiling slightly. “But it’s a good thing the Thain is my grandfather, or I wouldn’t have been able to become a Bounder and find you here today.”

Fili looks up at you sharply at that, looking shocked, “You’re the granddaughter of your people’s king?”

You shake your head, clucking, “I already said we’d bend the knee to the King of Arnor, if he took his throne. We hobbits don’t take those kind of titles.”

“But if you did, the Thain would be called a King? Wouldn’t you be a princess?” Fili looks at you, desperate, eyes gleaming, and you tilt your head, before giving in, seeing his logic.

“Yes, I suppose we would.”

Fili, at this, looks star-struck, and you have to lead him down the path a little more than before, as he gets lost in his own head, stumbling and not looking at his feet – just staring at you.

When you come up to the edge of Hobbiton, you can see Otho Sackville-Baggins with a lantern, about to start his patrol.

“Bilbo? Who’ve you got there?”

“Otho, these little ones are lost – I found them just off the road on the way to Ered Luin.”

Otho huffs, approaching, screwing his eyes up to look at each boy. “Those aren’t fauntlings.”
“No, they aren’t,” you don’t bother expanding, not in the mood to share that information with your hated cousin right now. He would figure it out himself, momentarily, but you don’t care. “Would you be able to take the rest of my patrol up by the woods of Rushock Bog, or ask another Bounder while I take these ones to Bag-End?”

Otho grumbles, but nods as Fili’s stomach rumbles again. “I’ll tell Saradoc to go up the road, you get those ones home – and feed them. They’re skin and bones. Would you like me to visit the Thain for you tomorrow on my way to Tookborough market?”

“Oh, if you would, that would be wonderful, Otho. Thank-you very much,” you lean over to kiss his cheek in thanks before continuing on your way. Fili looks back at him with a strange expression.

“Who was that?”

“My cousin,” you reveal, shifting the snoring Kili on your hip. “Our fathers are brothers. We don’t generally get along very well.”

Fili frowns as the three of you make your way across the Brandywine, past the Green Dragon and through the village, walking the road towards Bagshot Row. By the time Bag-End is in sight, Fili is lagging, and you realise that to a dwarf – especially a child dwarf – who had already been travelling who knew how long, the way to your home all the way from the wood by Rushock bog must have been terribly long and arduous.

“We’re nearly there,” you murmur, before leaning down and picking him up, balancing the two boys carefully, clutching tightly as you trek upwards, taking a minute or two longer than you usually would with the two weights on either of your hips. Fili makes it easier by holding on tight, gripping your side and shoulder with a strength that makes your bones creak.

You set Fili down again when you get to the gate, opening it up and letting him walk up the stone path to your door – you’d painted it blue last midsummer, and the paint was peeling a little, faded. **Maybe they can help me paint it tomorrow, red maybe – keep their minds off everything.**

“Why is the door round?” Fili asks, sounding slightly confused as he pokes at snowy hibiscus, your flower of choice this year for your front garden.

“Hobbits live in the ground – that doesn’t mean we always used to be builders,” you reply, before checking the handle. You’re pleased to find it locked, and knock, causing Fili to give you a confused look as Kili brings his head up at the sound, blearily looking at the door.

It opens, revealing your young cousin Primula.

“Bilbo,” she starts, only to see the dwarrow boys, “Oh my, who are these little ones? Not fauntlings…”

“Dwarrow,” you reveal, before stepping forwards, Primula opening the door for you all. “Fili, shoes off.” He’s looking at your home in bewildered wonder. A hand reaches out, knocking the wooden beam of a round doorframe. “Fili,” you catch his attention, meeting blue eyes, “shoes off.”

“Oh, okay,” he nods, before sitting down on the ground, plonking down with a soft thud, beginning to untie his boots, which look like they’ve been dipped in Frogmorton rather than Rushock. You sit down on a nearby chair, turning Kili around to face outwards, beginning to untie his boots, but failing as the knots confound you. Kili bats at your hands, reaching over, and its embarrassing how quickly he gets them undone.

“What happened?” Primula asks, crouching beside Fili to take his boots, holding them with delicate
fingers. She sniffs them, making a face. “Rushock.”


“Not Lady, mama’s a prin-” Kili starts, only for Fili to hit him, “-ow! Fili-”

“Shush, you can’t say anything about that.” Fili hisses, before you take his boots from Primula.

“Fili, don’t hit your brother,” you say, before kissing Primula on the cheek, “Thank-you for looking after Freylin.”

Primula smiles, “It’s really no bother, Bilbo, really – she’s a darling, and has been fast asleep for a few hours. It’s the dwarf in her – sleeps like a rock.” She winks as you roll your eyes, opening the door again and letting her out after she grabs her jacket and shawl.

“My next patrol isn’t for another two days,” you call as she opens the gate, nodding.

“I’ll see you tomorrow for tea,” she replies with a cheeky smile, and you laugh a little before nodding, waving her goodbye. Once the door is shut again, you look to Fili and Kili, boots in hand.

“I’m going to put these in the sink, and you’re both going to clean the mud off of them while I cook you supper. Is that alright?” Fili nods, Kili quickly copying his brother. “Good.”

Breathing in, you lead them through your smial to the kitchen, running a half-sink of water before placing their boots in, pulling over two chairs for them to stand on and getting out the scrubbers your mother had gotten you for exactly this reason when you were small.

“The soap is right there, if you want it.”

“Okay!” Kili replies enthusiastically as Fili tugs the arm of his jacket off, tiredness from before all but forgotten, it seems. You help Kili up onto a chair as Fili climbs up with ease, watching them for a few moments as they begin to clean their boots, before stepping away and taking off your jacket and scarf finally, stoking the kitchen fire. Preparing a dinner doesn’t take long, but you’re distracted by a cry from through the smial, and take soup off the stove as you wipe down your hands with a tea-towel, going to exit the kitchen.

“Bilbo? Who’s that?” Kili’s voice stops you momentarily, and you glance back at him.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” you promise, not answering his question as you turn back and walk on through the smial towards your bedroom. Reaching it, you call out to your fauntling.

“Freylin, Freylin, shh sweetling,” you go over to her bassinet, leaning over to pick her up. Her cries lessen, but don’t fully quiet, so you check her over, deciding she must be hungry. “You’ll be okay, baby, just wait a few moments.” You hold Freylin in one arm, untying your corset with one hand, setting it on your bed. You pop your shirt-buttons and sit on the bed, pulling down your shirt to let Freylin have access. Sitting there, your peace is disturbed almost immediately by a small figure climbing up onto the end of your bed.

“You have a baby?” Kili crawls over, fascinated, muddy hands making marks on your covers. You internally sigh. They needed changed anyway. “What’s his name?”

“Freylin, and she’s a girl,” you say gently, looking over to the door where Fili stands, blonde hair illuminated by the light of the corridor – Primula had capped many of the candles in this room, but
not the rest of your home. “Fili, you don’t have to stand over there if you don’t want to. Come and meet my daughter.”

His eyes widen, and he takes a step back, immediately alerting you to the fact that something’s wrong. “Fili?”

“I don’t want to marry a baby!”

Your eyes widen, “What? Marry her? I don’t want you to marry her – is that a dwarven custom, marrying their daughters off with a few words?”

Fili takes a deep breath, obviously relieved, “Girls are special. Mama says to every girl there’s ten boys.” You stare, shocked.

Because that is a very small amount of women in comparison to men.

“Well, I don’t want you to marry Freylin,” you say numbly, “She’s a bit young yet – not even four months.”

“She’s very small,” Kili whispers, bringing his hand up to her head – but you reach over, holding his wrist gently.

“You have muddy hands and muddy boots to finish cleaning. You can hold her later, if you like,” you say, causing him to bite his lip, looking down at the covers.

“Sorry, Miss Bilbo.”

“It’s okay, just be more thoughtful next time.”

“Okay,” he replies, before Fili comes over, hands going under Kili’s armpits to pull him off the bed gently.

“Come on, we’ve got to clean our boots. We can see Freylin later.”

“Okay,” Kili repeats, before they scurry off, feet clunking on the hardwood in a way that a hobbit fauntling’s never would. You look at Freylin, curling your finger around a dark curl. You’d just been having an adventure – just some fun. You had planned to settle down, leave the Bounders, find a husband, have fauntlings of your own and stay in Bag-End until you were old and grey. The dwarf had been caustic, yet you’d been tipsy enough and ludicrously honest enough – out loud – about how attractive you found him and how annoying his continual brooding had been the past few days she’d seen him – especially when he directed his anger into something other than getting through tankards of Men’s mead.

You never expected to end up with a half-hobbit, half-dwarf baby of your own, let alone to get pregnant from a one-night stand.

“Maybe this is my chance to tell him,” you had no doubt in your heart that Fili and Kili’s parents would try to find them, and you could probably get in touch with Freylin’s father through them. Dwarven children were sacred, and you would bet a pretty penny that with how Kili had been trying to correct you earlier, he and Fili were Royal, if not princes themselves – it wasn’t hard to connect the dots. Not to mention the fact that you had the hobbit version of what Fili had put to use earlier, with his high posture and perfunctory bow.

You shake your head. Princess indeed.
In your arms, Freylin wriggles, mouth detaching from your teat, and you turn her around, letting her
at the other before she can start crying again. Your spare hand brushes her feet, strange in their lack
of hair. Her feet are sturdy though, with skin as tough as any other hobbit’s, and you have to wonder
if feet-hair is something she’ll grow into, like her beard – and while you do find it strange for a
woman to have a beard, she isn’t just a hobbit, and shouldn’t have to deal with anything less than
equal consideration when it comes to hobbit and dwarf customs, physical or otherwise.

“Little boy blue, come blow your horn; the sheep’s in the meadow, the cow’s in the corn. But where
is the boy who looks after the sheep? He’s under the haystack, fast asleep,” you sing without
provocation, knowing Freylin likes it. “Will you wake him? No, not I; for if I do, he’s sure to cry.”

Freylin finishes after a few more minutes, and you clean up before returning to the kitchen, where
Fili and Kili are using one of your spare tablecloths to dry their boots. Sighing once more at their
actions – good-hearted, honest, but mistaken and raw with youth – you walk over and put Freylin in
the spare bassinet you have in the kitchen for exactly this reason, giving her a carven oak horse to
play with before returning to the soup, heating it up as Fili and Kili crowd around your daughter,
tickling her and making faces.

“I think she looks like mama,” Kili says out of the blue, once you’ve sat them down with soup and
bread. You raise an eyebrow.

“Really? How?”

Kili dipped his bread in his soup, “Well, she’s got the same forehead – her hair goes in a V-shape,
like mama and uncle’s,” Kili demonstrated by lifting his fringe, making a V-shape with his hands,
soupy bread still in his grasp. “And her eyes are the same blue as Fili’s and mama’s.”

“Not your uncle?” You clarify with some amusement. “Does he have brown eyes like you?”

“No, Kili’s got brown eyes from our papa,” Fili replies, shaking his head, “Uncle’s eyes are blue too,
but his change colour sometimes, go darker or lighter when he’s angry or happy.”

“But they’re like Freylin’s too!” Kili bounces on his seat, causing drops of soup to splatter the table.
“And she’s half-dwarf, isn’t she? She could be Uncle Thorin’s baby!”

You feel something tighten in your chest, gasping suddenly. You stare at Kili, eyes blown wide –
because you know that name, it’s why you named Freylin, Freylin, rather than Freylinia in full.
You’re well aware of the dwarven custom of hereditary names, endings to names.

Freylin.

Thorin.

Freylin, daughter of Thorin.

And apparently, cousin to Fili and Kili, sons of Dis.

You turn to face the fireplace, shakily ladling yourself a bowl of soup. Yavanna, what kind of
coincidence is this, for it cannot be natural! “Clever theory, Kili, but maybe you should focus on
eating rather than thinking on your uncle’s imaginary children.”

Fili starts chattering to Kili as you sit with your own supper, only half-paying attention. They’re
speaking in Khuzdul however, so it wouldn’t have made a difference – it’s all blocky sounds and
guttural, yet lyrical words. You can’t imagine what their poetry must be like.
“Miss Bilbo?”

You snap to attention, “Yes, Kili?”

The brown-haired boy sits up straight, licking his spoon speculatively, “Why do hobbits have such terrible cutlery?” You blink.

“What?”

He holds up his spoon. “I could forge a better spoon.”

“Oh, well…good for you.”

“Do hobbits not know how to forge cutlery?” Fili asks, sounding terribly honest in his questioning. You hesitate, struggling to find an answer.

“No…not really. I mean, we have a smithy down near Bywater, but they just fix up carts and ploughs and other farming equipment. Usually, we buy our cutlery from the Men. Gypsy caravans come through the Shire sometimes, or one of the hobbits from Stock will order a large bundle from the blacksmith in Bree, to sell to other hobbits…what’s wrong with my spoons?”

“They’re very flimsy,” Fili holds up his spoon, bending it. You gasp at the move, anger rising in you as you set down your own cutlery.

“What do you think you’re doing? Bend that back into shape, right now.”

Fili looks between the spoon and you, embarrassment and fear sinking into his face. “Oh. I’m sorry, Miss Bilbo.” He bends the spoon back into shape, but there’s a defining bump to it in the middle, which he tries to smooth out before you reach over to stop him, shaking your head.

“Leave it, it’s fine – I can buy another one next time I’m at the household goods market.”

“I’m really sorry,” Fili scrambles off his seat, rushing around to your side of the table, holding out his hands, spoon left on the table. “I apologise for the injury I caused to one of your household objects, and beg forgiveness, and ask that Kili not be thrown out of your home as well as I.”

“Thrown- oh, Fili,” you twist on your chair, taking his hands, and leaning over so you were nearer his eye-level. “Fili, it was a thoughtless mistake, and you’re still young yet. Yes, you made a mistake, but you’ve already apologised – twice. I’m not going to kick you out of my home for bending a spoon, Yavanna knows I did the same thing in my youth.”

“B-but I broke it! I broke your spoon! I’m a guest, and I broke your things.” Fili’s eyes are wide and slightly shiny, as he works himself up. You hold his hands tighter, drawing him close into a hug.

“You are always welcome in my home, Fili,” you hold him warmly in your arms, his Mahal-made body a slight, childish frame with childish fancies, as you immediately receive a reply to your actions, small, blocky arms slipping around your chest.

“What about me?” Kili mutters quietly from across the tabletop, yawning a little, rubbing his eyes. You bend your head to look at him, smiling kindly.

“You too, Kili. On my honour as a Baggins, Head of the Baggins Clan, you are both always welcome in Bag-End, my home – the smial that my father built with his own two hands, the jewel of Hobbiton.”
“Thank-you,” Fili says, voice muffled into your collar, and you can feel the wetness on your skin from his eyes and breathe. Oh, Fili.

“You’re very welcome,” you release him, but he doesn’t release you, and you laugh, kissing his blonde hair. “Go and finish your soup. It’s very late – you have to go to sleep soon, or I won’t be able to wake you up in the morning.”

“I’m not tired!” Kili exclaims.

You glance at him, eyebrow raised, “Oh really? What was that yawn I heard earlier then?” He flushes, and you smile, turning back to your soup, taking a peek at Freylin at the end of the table, who is shaking the wooden horse, the acorn inside producing a soft rattling sound. Fili goes back around the table to his chair, climbing up, and you wonder how old they are.

“Fili, Kili, how old are you – and how long to dwarrow live?”

Kili chewing some bread, Fili swallows to answer, “Three hundred, sometimes, but two hundred and fifty, now, usually. I’m nearly fifteen – but Kili’s only a baby, he’s nine.”

“I’m not a baby!” Kili spouts, glaring at his brother as you nod.

“And when do you become adults?”

“Thirty.”

You hum, as that’s somewhat similar to hobbits, though your kind rarely live to a hundred and fifty, let alone three hundred, though you do age rather slowly. You glance at Freylin again. How old will she be when she finally goes old and grey? One hundred? Two? You doubted she could live to three hundred, what with her mixed ancestry, but it was a nice, if lonely thought, if she decided to stay in the Shire all her life instead of going to live with dwarves – or a dwarf – who might grow old with her, rather than outlast her if they were hobbits.

“How old are you, Miss Bilbo?” Kili asks, as you finish your meal.

“I am twenty-nine,” you reveal with little shame, despite the situation that fact found yourself in once the Shire found out about Freylin, your words causing the boys’ eyes to widen.

“And you already have a baby?”

“Yes,” you nod, “and that is the end of that conversation. Finish your soup, then follow the main route through the atrium and west hall till you reach a family portrait – then turn left into the spare bedroom. I’ll join you there. Call for me if you get lost.” You stand, going over to Freylin and wonder if she’s sated enough yet to fall back asleep as you pick her up.

“What do we do with our bowls when we’re done?” Kili asks as you exit the kitchen.

“Put them in the sink!” You reply, before heading to your room, taking the shortcut through your study. Placing Freylin in the cot again, you replace the wooden horse with a ragdoll, murmuring soft things to her. Soon, though, you hear Fili and Kili calling for you, and you leave Freylin in her cot to search them out, eventually finding them in your storage room, Kili sneezing at the dust.

“I’ll draw you a map before I sleep tonight, so you can figure your way through Bag-End,” you say quietly, before leading them through the smial to your guest bedroom, pausing at your family portrait.

“Is that you?” Fili asks, pointing at your younger self with long golden waves flowing down her
shoulders. You remember that your mother had forced you to take it out of it’s usual braid down your back – you remember when you cut it all off in rebellion.

“Yes. That’s me and my parents, Bungo and Belladonna.”

“Is that why they call you Bilbo and not Bluebell?” Kili looks up at you in confusion, but you shake your head.

“No. Female hobbits are named after flowers, and ferns. Males get family names, traditional names. I’m called Bilbo because one of my cousins couldn’t say Bluebell right – it just stuck. Everyone calls me Bilbo now.”

“Oh,” he looks down, “okay.”

“Are your parents alive?” Fili interjects, and you pause again before shaking your head, leading them into the guest bedroom.

“No, they died.”

“Our papa died, too, in the mines of Ered Luin.” Kili says sadly. You squeeze his hand, before letting go to pull back the bedsheets for them. He climbs in, with help from Fili, and they tug off the rest of their clothes, except their underwear, and you take each set and fold them, placing them on the chest at the end of the bed, starting a fire in the hearth.

“Miss Bilbo?”

“Yes?” You look back at Fili. “What’s the matter?”

“What happens if we need the bathroom?”

You smile a little, chuckling, before pointing to the corner. “A small bathroom is in there. Toilet and sink. There’s a bucket of wood-mulch and a jug for water – a step in the cupboard under the sink, if you need.”

Fili nods, saying “Thank-you”, then burrows under the covers, whispering to Kili in Khuzdul. You keep tending to the fire, getting a blaze going and warming the room before brushing your hands on your apron and coming up to the bed again, tucking them in.

“Good night to you both, and hope that we’ll find your mother and uncle tomorrow, so you can go home.” You kiss their foreheads, getting a dual ‘Goodnight Miss Bilbo’ before you leave, returning to Freylin, finding her asleep.

You undress, putting your dirtied clothes in the washing basket in the corner of your room, and change into a long nightgown, going around your home and dousing the few fires and candles remaining, other than in yours and the guest’s bedrooms. Other, smaller things you see to, before you finally return to your room, to your soft bed and turn down your covers, checking once more on Freylin.

Then, you close your eyes, and dream of the Fell Winter.
Familiar Burns

During the Fell Winter, you had been a fauntling of indeterminate age and maturity. The Fell Winter brought snow, and a cold so fierce that the Brandywine froze from bank to bank. Wolves could walk across without fear, and even orcs and their wargs like to pillage and plunder the Shire when they happened across it. For the Shire was hardly easy to find, with the magic you and your hobbit-fellows refused to admit you had. You could walk in shadow, and grow things in impossible conditions – and when you claimed a place as your own, oh, did others soon forget it existed, and become boggled and confused to the point of madness at how to navigate it.

It was why the Big Folk always had to have an escort when they made their way through the Shire, or they’d never find their way out of it.

The only exception was Gandalf the Grey, and even he had troubles occasionally. You could remember the Midsummer after the Fell Winter, when the roads were being re-dug and built back up, the snow having melted into the ground and caused it to slip into angles, that he drove his giant horse through Hobbiton market no less than four times after going in giant circles, missing the exit for Bagshot Row each and every circle, until you finally called out to him, approaching to take the reins of his horse. You’d been less afraid back then, after such hardship, young and wily and hardened against beasts. Even now, you aren’t afraid of Men’s horses and how they tower over you, double the height of an average hobbit.

You’d nearly been killed by wolves twice, during the Fell Winter. Each time, it had been your parents to save you: your father, the first, by whacking a wolf over the head with a shovel until it dazedly laid on the ground, giving you, Bungo and your gardener’s son, Holman, time to run away; the second time, your mother saved you, who had stuck three wolves with her sword after the wolves managed to bash down the door to the post office, where you and some dozen-other hobbits holed up when the wolves came running into town. The second time, one wolf had still managed to bite you though, and you still had scars on your shoulder to this very day – silver and pink, teeth marks that tore upwards on either side.

You can remember being so, so scared, and as you dream of the day the wolves tried to invade Bag-End, you imagine them managing it, grey furred beasts howling as they ravaged your father, ate your mother, headed for you-

“Miss Bilbo!” You’re snapped out of your dream as Kili shakes you, Fili rocking Freylin in his arms on the floor beside her crib. Your mouth opens and shuts, no words escaping as Kili climbs up onto the bed, sitting beside you and wrapping his arms around you tightly. You clutch back, feeling tears on your face as your cheeks brush together. “Miss Bilbo, you were screaming in your sleep. We didn’t know what was wrong, and then Freylin started crying too, and-”

“It was a dream, it was- it was a nightmare, oh Yavanna,” you shake, squeezing your eyes shut, hugging Kili tightly, his body-heat warming your shivering form. The bedroom is dark – the fire has gone out. Too cold. You know that’s the reason you dream of ice and terrifying animals that prowl the snowy grounds. Pulling away from Kili, you get out of bed, taking Freylin from Fili, holding your daughter close, shushing her as you make your way to the fireplace, kneeling beside it, one-handedly creating a new fire, striking a match on the fireplace-floor.

“Shh, Frey, shh – mama’s okay now, mama’s awake, shh…” You can’t help but continue thinking of your dream though, and an ache settles heavily in your chest. Two pairs of arms wrap around your shoulders and arms. “I’m sorry I woke you all.”
“It’s okay,” Fili says quietly, in a way that reminds you of how Kili had been at dinner earlier, “Uncle Thorin has night terrors a lot. Mama tells him to go and stay with Dwalin and Uncle Frerin when he starts swaying after he has lots of mead when he wakes up.”

“Your Uncle Thorin must have seen some terrible things,” you murmur, reaching up your free hand to stroke Fili’s blonde strands of hair. “You’re both very brave, do you know that?”

“Yep,” Kili says in a grave voice, as if his answer isn’t comical. You chuckle, leaning your head on his, staring at the fire. “Miss Bilbo, what was your night terrors about?”

“The Fell Winter. It happened when I was only a faunt – the Brandywine River froze over, and wolves roamed the Shire. I have many terrible, fearful memories of that time.”

“Mama told us about the Fell Winter,” Fili replies, “She said that a lot of people in the Blue Mountains died, because it was so cold.”

“Yes, I heard. Not very many in the Shire died from cold however, at least, not the adults – most who were caught out by the cold were children who didn’t make it to shelter in time, or didn’t wear enough layers. Smials are usually very warm, and we didn’t need a lot of fuel to burn when so many hobbits lived in one place. People bunked up. Bag-End was home to nearly forty hobbits at one point, most my father’s relatives, and some neighbours.”

“Uncle Thorin saw the Desolation of Erebor,” Fili says solemnly, before Kili pipes up.

“And he and Uncle Frerin were at Khazad-dûm. They fought orcs with the dwarven army!”

“Uncle Frerin lost his leg, and he has night terrors so bad that he hurts himself in his sleep, mama says,” Fili continues.

“And we don’t get to see him, mama said we’re not allowed, and when we asked Uncle Thorin, he got so angry that he broke the door,” Kili whispers, eyes wide. You frown lightly, feeling sorry for this ‘Frerin’ uncle of theirs – Freylin’s uncle, too. Hmm, I named her for Thorin and freylinia flowers, but it seemed that I have accidentally paid homage to a war-damaged uncle. You adjust your grip on the now-quiet babe, thinking it a Valar-driven destiny that you would speak and meet with your would-be-nephews, if Thorin and you ever reunited and married.

You doubt it, but it’s a nice thought.

“I think it’s time we went back to bed,” you say, as the fire begins producing actual heat. Kili wiggles.

“But what if you have night terrors again?” He asks, sounding concerned. “We should stay with you, to make sure you don’t get lonely, or cold!”

“Kili, Miss Bilbo isn’t like amad – we can’t just get into bed with her!” Fili hisses at his brother, making Kili’s face drop into an even sadder expression.

“You’re right,” you agree regretfully, “I don’t know you, and you don’t know me. If you’re uncomfortable staying in the guest bedroom though, I could make up a pallet on the floor in front of my fireplace.”

“I agree,” Kili nods, hugging you again, tighter than before. “Don’t want to leave you all alone, Miss Bilbo.”

“Okay,” you agree, before pushing them off gently, standing to put Freylin back in her cot – she’s
fallen back asleep in your arms as you talked to the boys. When you’ve tucked her blanket over her, you go to the guest room and get the boys’ blankets and pillows, bringing them through and making a pseudo-bed on your carpet beside the fire, keeping them a little out of range from any spits and embers.

Once you tuck them in again, you return to bed, and the heavy breathing of the dwarrow princes’ lulls you into sleep, the uneasiness in your breast fading. But right before you completely fall, you hear the floor creaking, and tense, until you feel a small body climbing up onto the bed, joining you under the covers. You shift so they have more space, unsurprised at the body that follows, settling on your other side.

“I thought it was different because I wasn’t your amad,” you force yourself to speak from the depths of near-sleep, fleetingly remembering the word Fili had used. Fili mutters something back in Khuzdul, and you unfortunately don’t understand it, even as Kili says something that sounds the same.

You fall asleep.

When you wake up, it’s from tiny hands shaking your arm.

“-bo, Miss Bilbo, there’s a hobbit man at the door. He’s very old but we haven’t let him in, because he’s very angry-faced.”

“Angry-faced?” It takes you a second, before the description causes your grandfather’s face appears in your mind. “Ah– oh, oh dear.” You get out of bed, grabbing your dressing-gown hurriedly, tying it as you check briefly on Freylin – who’s fast, fast asleep, with no sign of waking yet – before rushing through your smial to the front door, looking out the window, your worst fear being confirmed.

You open the locked door, as fast as you can for Fortinbras Took II, 29th Thain of the Shire and your great-great grandfather through your mother.

“Good morning, Bluebell.”

You bow your head slightly, “Good morning, Grandfather – my most sincere apologies, Fili and Kili are wary of strangers.”

Fortinbras puffs on his pipe grumpily, stepping into your entrance hall, free hand tucked in his pocket. “As all dwarves are. Where are the scallywags?” As if their ears were burning, Fili and Kili come speeding around the corridor bend from the East Hall, entering and exiting the Oak Room to stop very suddenly in the entrance hall at the sight of Fortinbras.

“Miss Bilbo, who is this?”

“Fili,” you shut the door, “son of Dis, child of Thrain, who I would presume is some child-prince of the dwarrow, meet my great, great grandfather, Thain Fortinbras Took II of the Shire.” You motion to Kili, “Kili, son of Dis, child of Thrain – Fili’s younger brother – meet Thain Fortinbras Took II of the Shire.” The boys are still for a moment, gaping, and then they’re scurrying into a straight line, shoulders upright and their bows coordinated.

“Greetings, Thain of the Shire,” they say in unison, as Fortinbras puffs his pipe, staring at them in their underwear.

“Don’t look much like princes to me,” Fortinbras eyes them shrewdly, “but your manners are good. Stand easy, Your Highnesses.” At his words, both boys relax, though tension remains in the lines of
Fili’s shoulders. “I was told you were found off the road to Ered Luin. Is a caravan approaching? Lost? Did you go a-wandering?”

“We were just having some fun, hiding in the rocks, then uncle left with the caravan – we had put pillows under our blankets, so they must have thought we were asleep.” Kili looks to the ground, fidgeting with a leather bracelet on his wrist, then up again with teary eyes. “We didn’t mean to get lost!”

“Well,” Fortinbras puffed his pipe again, “if you really are princes, your uncle will try to find you, surely, though seeing as you somehow found yourself in the Shire…I’ll get the Rangers that patrol up past Needlehole to keep a look-out, possibly even hunt them down. They’ll have realised you aren’t with them by now.” He looks to you, raising an eyebrow.

“…tea, grandfather?” You bite your tongue at your unintentional faux-pas, but to be fair, you had literally only just gotten out of bed.

“Tea would be grand, Bluebell.” Fortinbras puffed his pipe, before walking through to the kitchen, you following him nervously, the boys tagging along.

“Where is young Freylin, Bluebell?” Fortinbras asks as he sits at the head of the table, Fili and Kili coming up to sit where they had the previous meal before. You start up the fire, answering him.

“Still asleep, grandfather – and no, she’s still not played with the toy you sent yet.”

“That’s the Baggins in her, not liking Took gifts,” he puffs his pipe, looking to Kili as he plays with one of Freylin’s carven farm animals. “Did you not have any toys of your own on your person on your little adventure?”

“Lost ‘em in the bog,” Kili says quietly, looking away from Fortinbras’ penetrating gaze. “Fili barely managed to keep his knife when we tripped on a tree-root.”

“Mmm, Rushock is no place for children – Bluebell would know, her cousin Saradoc nearly drowned.” Fortinbras motions to you, as you fill a kettle for tea. “Don’t worry, we’ll get you home to your family. The Shire is no place for dwarves.”

“What about Freylin?” Fili questions, causing you to freeze unexpectedly. “If dwarves aren’t meant for the Shire, then what happens to Freylin?”

Fordinbras narrows his eyes at Fili, before looking to you with anger. “A dwarf? You said Freylin’s father was a Man!”

“It’s none of your business, Fortinbras~”

Fordinbras roars to his feet, shouting in the Greentongue, “You are a Took! You are an unmarried, orphaned, underage fauntling living in a prize smial in Hobbiton, all alone without even a spinster for company! I am Head of this Clan, Thain of the Shire~”

“I am a Baggins!” You exclaim, interrupting him, finding his words preposterous. “My mother might have been a Took, but I am not! You have no claim to guardianship over me – I am the Head of the Baggins Clan, and you will not shout at me in my own home, Fortinbras Took!” There’s a silence, awkward and awful, and your heart beats scarly quickly in your chest. “If you could still ask the Rangers to look out for the dwarves searching for Kili and Fili, I believe many others will be grateful for their finding and returning, Thain.”

Fordinbras glares at you, and through the smial you can hear Freylin making noises that while not yet
upset, definitely needed seeing to. Fortinbras stands from his seat, just as the kettle begins to bubble.

“I’ll let myself out – and see here Lady Baggins, if I ever hear something so damning exit your mouth again, be assured that everyone in the Shire would know by sundown that you are not a Took.” And then he storms out, and you are left to retrieve Freylin, returning to the kitchen to make some black tea and breakfast.

“Did we get you in trouble, Miss Bilbo?” Kili asks, voice afraid, as you set a teacup in front of him, milk jug in the middle of the table. You shake your head, sighing.

“No, I did that myself. I’m the Head of my family, and he is Head of my mother’s – because I am not quite yet fully-considered an adult, he considers me his responsibility, especially seeing as my parents are dead, I have no husband, and I have a baby,” you had taken out some frozen meats before your Bounder patrol last year, for breakfast, and you separate the bacon and sausages easily, heating up some oil on a pan, checking the fireplace grilling grate is in place. “Oh, and I’ve not got an elderly hobbit woman living with me, so I have time to go out and get a husband.”

“So…he was right?”

You don’t have a response to that, instead taking some eggs out of the egg-basket and holding up a few yellow tree-mushrooms. “Can you eat these? And would you like eggs?”

Fili peers at the mushrooms, “Do they have brown spots on the top?”

“No.”

“Then yes, we can eat them – we can’t have ones with brown spots on top, if they’re yellow.”

“Hobbits can eat anything, so I wanted to make sure.” Just to be sure though, as you prepare breakfast, you make sure none of the mushrooms are the ones he described, showing them the fungi occasionally to be sure. Each time, they both shake their heads, so you assume the mushrooms they talk about are of a different variety to the ones you get around the Shire paths.

When you finally plate up, Freylin gives out a whine, and you bring her over, feeding her with only a little difficulty, rearranging the collar of your nightgown so she could reach. You somehow manage to multitask in a way you weren’t a month ago – maybe it’s because she can hold her head up now, but it’s just so much easier.

“Miss Bilbo, can we have more food?” Kili whines, “I’m still hungry.”

“You get second breakfast in an hour,” you explain patiently. “Hobbits eat less at meals, but more often than you would think. I’ll be making you both up cereal bowls and a fruit platter for us all to share.”

“Fruit?” Fili scrunches up his nose. “Fruit is-”

“-good for you, sweet, and fills you up when prepared right.” You interrupt, sighing – you seem to be doing that a lot lately. “If you eat one of each thing I put out for you, I’ll let you leave the table, but you have to try it.”

“Dwarves can’t have-”

“I am well aware of what dwarves can and can’t have, Kili,” you stop him from speaking, pursing your lips at the beginning of the lie you knew was escaping his lips, pinning him with a look. “Most mushrooms and certain roots are poisonous to you. That’s why I’m trying not to have things that
Freylin could potentially die from in my home before she starts eating solids. Mushrooms are a delicacy for hobbits, however, and I’ll be keeping them out of her way. So don’t try feeding me any lies, Kili – I will know."

Kili withers under your gaze, playing with his bracelet again. “Sorry Miss Bilbo.”

“Don’t. Do it. Again,” you rap your knuckles on the table thrice, before shifting Freylin to your other breast. “Lying is a terrible thing, Kili, and unless your or another life is at stake, you should never, ever say things that aren’t true.” Maybe you’re being a tad too dramatic about it, but with children, it’s good to make an impression like that…at least, with hobbit children it was.

But Kili and even Fili both seem to take your words to heart, and you hum to yourself, a little overly-proud at your minor accomplishment. *Maybe I’ll make a good mother after all.*

“I’m cold.”

“We should all get dressed, I think,” you reply to Kili’s comment as Freylin finishes – she’s getting too good at feeding, you think. It hurts with how fast it all disappears. “Your clothes are in the guest bedroom still – can you find your way there? Or would you like a bath?”

“We can have a bath?” Fili bounces in his seat, eyes wide. “Please!”

“Yes, please!” Kili bounces too, but continually rather than Fili’s singular jump. “We haven’t had a bath in weeks!”

You look at them in horror, before burping Freylin. “That- that’s-”

“Smelly,” Fili informs you, finishing his tea. “We bathe in rivers with soap, and wash our clothes, too, but we haven’t had a proper bath since we left Ered Luin. Can we be of any help?”

“Hmm…” you look around, pointing to the sink. “Fili, why don’t you wash, and Kili, you can dry.”

“Okay!” Kili exclaims, getting off his seat and taking his dishes to the sink, turning the tap on. Fili follows him, and you watch them carefully until they stop the tap at half-full. Then, you feel like it’s safe to get the bath prepared, which you finish drawing rather quickly, after the boys help you with transporting the multiple medium pots of boiled water to the bath in your room, which you are letting them use rather than the spare – it’s needing replacing anyway, even you can tell. The boys won’t go near it for the strong stink of copper.

A knock comes from the door as the boys finish actually washing in the bath, playing about, and you wipe your hands on a towel, standing.

“I’ll go see who that is. Keep an eye on Freylin, and don’t put your head under the waterline,” you warn, before leaving them and Freylin, your daughter sitting on her stomach on a thick blanket at the end of your bed with her toys, out of range of Fili and Kili’s splashing. Answering the door, you are greeted by Primula.

“I thought you were coming over for tea, not second breakfast,” you admonish, pressing a kiss to her cheek, taking her hands. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, no reason,” but her face is flushed, as if she’d been running, and there’s a serious note to her eyes. “It’s just that there are some problems at each of the roads into the Shire. People are blocking them. The Rangers are working on it, but until we figure out what they want, no-one is getting in or out.”
You're shocked, “Fortinbras didn’t mention it when he visited.”

“He wouldn’t,” Primula explains, glancing in the direction of laughter and splashing. “This is all confidential – I heard it first from Flambard as I was on my way to see my mother. I ran straight here because I know you have the two boy-dwarfs. We’re not going to be able to get in contact with anyone outside the border until whatever this is, is resolved.”

“Oh, okay, but- but what do they want? Who are they?” You ask, referring to the people blocking access to the Shire. “And every exit?”

“Well, no, obviously – just the main roads, and a couple of larger backroads,” Primula shook her head, “The best you can do right now, Bilbo, is look after Freylin and the boys. They chose one hell of a time to pop into your life.”

You look back in their direction. “It seems so. Thank-you for coming and telling me, Prim.” You kiss her cheek again, before she backs up, out of the door.

“I’m going to go find Rorimac. Oh, and I asked my sister Asphodel to bring over some more clothes for Fili and Kili – they can’t stay in their own forever.” She waves, and you wave back.

“Thank-you!” She gives a final wave before jumping your gate and rushing down Bagshot Row, back towards Hobbiton. You shut your door, returning to Freylin, Fili and Kili.

“Who was that?” Kili asks, a pile of bath-suds on his head causing your lip to twitch in amusement despite the worrying news Primula had just delivered.

“Primula, from last night. Her sister will be coming over with some clothes for you to wear at some point – I’ll be washing yours, if that’s acceptable.”

“Why would we need different clothes?” Fili puzzles out loud, frowning. “We’re only going to be here until Uncle Thorin gets here.”

“And when will that be? Certainly not soon – it takes time for people to get into the Shire when they’re taking the tolled roads, and your uncle is from a caravan, with a schedule.” You excuse his absence only slightly, not wanting to mention the road-blocks. “I’m sure he’s missing you terribly, but you will be here for a few days, at the very least.”

“Oh,” Fili’s frown disappears, a deeply contemplative one replacing it as Kili stares at you.

“We…we have to stay here for a few days?”

“Yes,” you nod, before helping Freylin sit up a little more, holding her gently as she built up her arm-muscles, brushing back black twists of hair. “I’m sorry you can’t see your family sooner.”

After supervising their leaving the bath, dry-down and dressing, you migrate back to the kitchen, where you make a fruit platter before pouring out small bowls of cereal for each of you, questioning whether they would like milk or milky sweet-cream. Once they’ve chosen, you serve second breakfast, and watch as Fili and Kili eye the fruit with narrowed eyes.

“Try some,” you encourage, picking up a slippery slice of plum inbetween spoons of cereal, eating half before depositing the rest on your plate as the tartness comes through unexpectedly.

“Is that apple?” Fili points, and you nod, Kili immediately going for it. “I don’t like apple.”

“But I do!” Kili exclaims, before he takes small bunches of grapes for each of them, plopping one on
Fili’s side plate. “I don’t know what anything else is, except the blueberries and red-berries, but I
don’t like them anyway, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Hmmm,” you hum, finishing your cereal and digging into the fruit platter, before pointing at each
fruit, saying its name and explaining what it was like to eat. The boys are slow to try things, and
there are a few mishaps, but eventually the platter is finished – though you have to finish off the
pears, as neither boy is pleased by the fruit nor the skin you’d deliberately left on.

Afterwards, you feed and change Freylin, and then you gather the boys to help you take out pots of
paint to the front step to paint the door.

“What’s wrong with it?” Kili frowns at it. “It’s fine.”

“It’s peeling, see,” you tug off a larger flake, slightly miffed that you didn’t do this sooner. “My smial
is one of the best in the Shire – I won’t have the standards falling because I forgot to repaint my
door.”

“Why red? Why not just make it blue again?” Fili questions as you set the painting sheet on the step.

“Because red is an autumnal colour, and I feel like red. Now, roll your sleeves up and put these
aprons on over your shirts.” You pass them each aprons, helping Kili with his and doing Fili’s knot
as he’s confounded by backwards tying. Then, you give them paint-brushes, with warnings not to go
anywhere near the handle, keyhole or door-edges.

That’s the scene your aunt Donnamira is greeted with as she comes up the lane, Asphodel walking
behind her, carrying a chest with her husband Rufus.

“Bluebell, my darling! Introduce me to the fine lads you have there – they’re the talk of the town!”

Your head jerks up, and a brilliant smile lights up your face. “Aunt Don!” You put your paint brush
down, wiping your hands on your apron as you make your way down to the gate, that Donnamira
opens to wrap her arms around you. You burrow your face into the crook of her neck, smiling
widely. “I haven’t seen you in what seems like forever – what are you doing here?”

“Meeting your small houseguests, of course!” Donnamira pushes you back, looking you up and
down critically, as if the sight of a young hobbit woman offended her creaking bones. “You haven’t
seemed to age a day, how is that?”

You chuckle, “Trust me, I’ve grown since you last saw me.”

“Oh, pfft,” Donnamira waves you off, before heading over to where Freylin wiggles on her stomach
on a blanket, over soft grass. “And how is little Freya doing?”

“Freylin is fine,” Fili says softly, drawing Donnamira’s attention to him as Asphodel and Rufus enter
your front garden, setting the chest down briefly. You say your hellos and thank-you’s, watching
your aunt with trepidation as she greets the young dwarves.

“And what’s your name, darling?”

Fili glances at you, and you give an encouraging nod. He clears his throat, standing, putting the paint
brush down and placing his hands at his sides, back straightening.

“Fili, son of Dis, child of Thrain, at your service. This is my brother, Kili-”

“At your service, ma’am!” Kili finishes brightly, smiling widely. “Who are you?”
Donnamira laughs a full-belly laugh, continuing to grin. “I’m Donnamira Boffin-Took – I’m Bluebell’s aunt on her mother’s side.”

Kili looks over to you in surprise, “You have an aunt?”

Donnamira laughs again, just like before, as you smile softly, shaking your head. “An aunt? Try eleven aunts and uncles on a single side of the family! Bungo was one of four, as well, I believe!”

Fili and Kili both stare at you in awe, Fili breathing out a “Is that normal for the Shire?”

Rufus speaks up at that, “You can have none, or as many as thirty fauntlings in a lifetime, depending on who you are. I think the record is forty-two, but that was only once in the entirety of Shire History.”

“Let’s not get into all that now,” you finally interrupt, moving to take the chest with Asphodel. “Let’s get this inside where Fili and Kili can get into it.”

“What is it, Miss Bilbo?” Kili questions as he and his brother move out of the way, you and your cousin depositing the chest inside. “Is it for us?”

“Yes,” you nod, brushing your hands on your apron, “Clothes, for when yours inevitably get dirty.”

“Thank-you, Miss Bilbo,” Fili grabs Kili’s shirt collar, making sure he couldn’t run over – but unfortunately not preventing him from brushing against the door, red paint splaying across the blue of his bunched, dwarven tunic sleeve. You sigh, and Asphodel giggles, before Donnamira tuts and grabs him under his armpits, heaving him over her shoulder.

“To the sink with you!”

“Nooooooooo!” Kili moans, “Sink’s cold!”

“That’s not my problem,” your aunt says, and you stifle giggles as Fili follows her and his brother through your smial towards the kitchen. You look to Asphodel, and Rufus who stands just outside the doorway.

“Lunch?”

“Oh, that would be downright lovely, Miss Bluebell,” Rufus steps inside finally, and you link arms with Asphodel.

“Well then, follow us, and then tell me why exactly Asphodel chose you to help her bring that chest here, Rufus.” You hide your smile as Rufus and Asphodel blush right to the roots of their red and golden heads.

“I-It’s nothing,” your cousin tightens her grip on your arm, and even with as young as she is, you feel like she has a handle on things, so you change the subject - you’d be hypocritical if you didn’t.

“Nothing it is, then. How’s aunt Mirabella, then?”

You have lunch, the friendly gathering impressing on Kili and Fili how much food meant in hobbit culture. Your aunt was rather cross at one point, when Kili refused to eat his vegetables, but he changed his tune at her subsequent glare, packing them away so fast you thought he’d be sick. Kili seems to always be at the centre of attention in your home, and you don’t notice how Fili analyses, watches, learns, mimics. By the time Rufus has started on his second plate of food, Fili’s imitating how he sits, how he holds his cutlery. Hobbits are creatures of habit, and your kind notice oddities.
You’ve already made your peace with Fili’s demeanour. The change is noticeable.

But because of the subtlety he uses, it takes you more time than you would like to notice how he looks at Freylin like she’s about to pull a knife on him.

Later that day – after having persuaded each of the dwarrow into showing you what they could do with numbers once Rufus and Asphodel had left, and teaching them the basics of Sindarin after Kili questions the books he can’t read the titles of – you ask to speak to Fili while Donnamira directs Kili on how to hold Freylin in your big chair.

“Fili,” you start, sitting down in your father’s chair, feeling small even being near his desk. “To be quite straightforward, I’d like to discuss my daughter, and how you look at her.”

“She’s Uncle Thorin’s daughter,” he immediately states, lips pulled tight, eyes meeting yours as if daring you to contradict him. You don’t.

“She is, but I found you and took you and your brother into my home, I didn’t realise exactly his standing in dwarven culture.” You pause, before taking a chance, trusting that what you’ve thought up to connect together all the jigsaw puzzle pieces to be true. “You’re his nephew, and you haven’t mentioned any old siblings, or cousins, or sons or daughters of your uncle apart from your uncle Frerin, who seems rather unfit to be a king by what I’ve gathered – so please be assured, Fili, that I have no designs on Freylin stealing your crown.”

“It’s not mine,” he argues reluctantly, looking at his knees, hands clutching around them. You lean over to his level, like your father did when he told you of how you were the Heir to the Baggins Headship, and you shouldn’t be stealing from Farmer Maggot, no matter how fun it was.

“Fili, Freylin is a dwobbit, a half-hobbit, half-dwarf. She will never sit on a throne, never rule before you or Kili. Mayhaps she shall have the luck never to rule at all.” Fili is stone, still and unmoving, the exact opposite to his hurricane of a brother.

“Will you tell uncle, when he comes to retrieve us?”

“That depends,” you sit back a little, “It’s my decision to make, but I do want Freylin to know her heritage. I know that many dwarf things are secret, and I have no wish to intrude, so if I revealed it to him, then I would ask his help to find those that would teach her.”

“Why don’t you just come to Ered Luin?” Fili’s eyes brighten, hands still on his knees even as he thurms with energy. “She could just grow up a dwarf, then!”

“But that’s not I want, not what can happen,” you disagree with the idea most vehemently. Thinking of living in the Blue Mountains brings about thoughts like that of Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, who would sooner make off with your prize silver before letting Bag-End sit in the hands of one of your Took relatives, while you went off abroad to raise your daughter inside a giant rock. “The idea is sound, but not feasible.”

“But-”

“No,” you cut him off, with finality to your tone. “I’ll tell your uncle he’s a father, but nothing more. Freylin will remain in the Shire. If he wants to be a father to her, he may come and visit her, and give me the names and addresses of those who could tutor her in the years to come. Khuzdul is one thing I know she should know, others, I do not. I barely know what dwarrow-hobbit physiology will do to her in later years, but she at least ages like a hobbit, so far. Hobbit’s live half as long as dwarves, Fili.” You draw in another breath. “If, however, Thorin wishes to have no contact, then he shall not
have it. I know the habits of Men, and they seem to do that when it comes to relations that produce offspring.”

“Uncle Thorin wouldn’t leave her,” Fili grits his teeth, “He wouldn’t. And if he did try, mama would smack some sense into him before coming here herself.”

That makes you pause, and you wonder if she actually would. “Really?” Fili nodded emphatically.

“Her name is Dis.”

“Dis,” you repeat under your breath. Freylin’s aunt. And to think, there’s an uncle as well – a mad, troubled one, but an uncle nonetheless. You had no siblings to speak of, your mother not wishing for anyone other than you. “Say, Fili, was your mother in the caravan with your uncle?”

“No,” Fili answers, and you are both relieved and sad. “Uncle took us along to meet with some dwarrow and men nomads, south of Needlehole. They were gathering – making a big, big group, big enough that they couldn’t really be nomads. That’s what mama said, anyway.”

“Dwarrow and men-” you suddenly stop, because big group strikes you oddly. It only takes a few seconds of rapid thought for you to conclude that the people Thorin had been going to see could be the very same men who surround the Shire at this very moment. “Oh dear,” you blanche, causing Fili to finally break from his pose.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing- really, nothing, don’t worry of it,” you say in a soft, worried voice. “My mind runs quicker than it should – away from me, even, sometimes. Ignore me.” Fili goes to speak, when a knock comes from the study door.

“Fili!” Kili calls through the wood, voice muffled. “You’ll never guess what Lady Donnamira showed me!”

You stand, going to open the door. “She didn’t show you her famous magic tricks, did she?”

Kili beams up at you, “She did! They’re fantastic – not even Bofur from the market-place in Ered Luin can do them like she does!” Behind him, Donnamira chuckles, before jerking her thumb towards the kitchen, Freylin on her hip.

“I’m going to make a start on dinner, Bluebell, and you can feed little Freya while I do.”

“Of course, thank-you.” you take your daughter from your aunt, looking back at Fili. “Remember what we talked about, and don’t speak of it until I can speak with your uncle about it.”

“Okay,” Fili looks like he’d rather do the complete opposite, but nods, taking Kili’s hand as Donnamira calls for them to follow her to help with dinner. You’re left with your baby, who you feed and change, before going to the kitchen, ready to watch Fili and Kili fumble as your aunt barks orders as if they’re simply fauntlings at her feet, rather than dwarfling princes.

You find yourself looking forwards to the prospect, and breathe in, ready to finish your day.
Thorin thinks himself a fool. Of course such a gathering of men and of the dwarrow – of the shaved and homeless and thieving vagabonds – would not be of good faith! Balin would say ‘I told you, Thorin’, when he made it home, for he had already made his opinion clear about Thorin answering the letter they’d sent many a month ago.

“Yer ‘ighness, my craft-master would wish to see you, sir,” a young dwarf approaches the tree to which he is tied, his guards coming to grab at him as Thorin glares at the dwarfling – whose father would imprison him, him. “He said to tell you that we ‘as the rest of the members of your caravan, who had hidden in the bushes.”

A flutter of fear runs through him.

Fili.

Kili.

Thorin though, a moment later is relieved, for they had already gone missing – probably miles and miles west of Evendim Lake, where they had been attacked by their hosts. Thorin had meant to meet them alone, slip away from the caravan as they made their way to Bree, but they had come to them first, having moved north-west from their last known location. The entire camp is large enough to cause a yellow hue to the night sky above.

Hopefully, Fili and Kili are far away enough – and are alive, and have been found by ones that would not harm them – that they too have not been caught by these traitors and bandits.

The dwarfling tilts his head as he’s brought to standing position, knife at his throat. “Yer not what my ma says. She says yer ‘majestic’. She was at Azanubizar, she was. Met my da there. Da says pa’s a pussy by not being here – he’s all the way back at Ered Luin waiting for us with ma and my brothers and sisters.”

“Your pa is wise then, for me and mine will show no mercy to those within this camp,” Thorin mutters, and a single flicker of fear shows on the dwarfling’s face before he sneers and turns, leading them through the camp towards the construction area, where dozens of forges are being built and fed.

“Da!” The dwarfling calls over the havoc, and a disgruntled dwarf slaps him over the head, knocking him to the ground.

“I told ye not to bring him in here! Into the tents, idiot boy!” The other dwarf hollers in Khuzdul to another nearby dwarf before tugging his son back to his feet, leading Thorin and his guards out of the forges and towards a muddy tent with a faded Durin flag on top.

If Thorin was angry before, he’s incensed now.

“You dare? You dare fly my flag-” Thorin rages, throwing off his guards and grabbing a weapon, tugging the dwarf’s boy into his arms, knife at his throat. The dwarrow around them draw weapons immediately, and the boy’s craft-master turns, eyes glinting.

“I wouldn’t, my King. While your death is imminent, you wouldn’t wish to add the young Fili to the Halls of Mahal yet, would you?”

Thorin’s blood runs cold – but Fili and Kili are both only young children, and lost, and he wouldn’t.
He wouldn’t. He swallows, before deliberately causing a part of the boy’s beard to slice away. The boy moans as if in physical pain, and his father flinches.

“Don’t,” he snaps under his breath, before standing tall, sword in hand. “We have people in Ered Luin who are making their move. Your nephews will be taken from their beds and brought to me, to be raised in our new home – this greenland, with it’s precious gems and diamonds hidden below the surface.” The dwarf points wildly to the south. “It will be a new stronghold, a new mine, home.”

“You are deluded,” Thorin grins viciously, “if you think you will get my nephews so easily. And if I were to die, is it truly them who would take the throne after me? Nay, for Frerin still lives, and Dis too!”

“Frerin is a madman, lost in battle-grief and the anger that comes with it!” The dwarf snaps. “And your sister is that, a sister. We would never allow her to become Queen, no matter the existence of her sons. Or son, as it will be if you do not give me back mine.”

“Your son is dead anyway,” Thorin smirks, “I am just making the journey swifter, and cleaner by far than Dwalin’s axe – which would be far blunted and bloodied by the time he reached your kin, from all those within this camp, unless we chose to hang you…which would be far more painful, and slow.”

“Let him-” the dwarf begins to bellow, before an arrow strikes his neck, causing him to choke, blood bubbling and leaking from his mouth, before he drops. Thorin pinpoints the archer, left of the assembly watching – a dwarf of the Firebeards, her hair and beard making the shape of a star, a hairstyle much copied among the dwarrow throughout the camp.

“Du bekâr!” He shouts, and then there is a battle around him as those with the star-haired dwarrow begin to slaughter those of different stylings. Thorin slits the dwarfling’s throat and drops his body, rushing to the nearest dropped weapon, joining the fray – the archer at his back with throwing knives and throwing stars, and a dagger for those who get too close.

“Who are you?” Thorin questions as they fight.

“Nori, son of Cori,” she replies, “and those around you with stylings like my own are your allies and kin, no matter what other traits of dwarrow we bear. We are altogether a guild, one that should likely never be named for our own sake, if not yours!”

“You infiltrated the camp,” Thorin states, quickly getting confirmation.

“Aye, we did – we heard the whispers. They plan to build a grand dwarven city underground, and one of men’s above, ruled over by their allies in shape and purpose of a mountain. When we realised their numbers, we joined them over time. We had a large number coming to join us, before we made our final plans, though your capture sped things along. I wasn’t to kill Grogur for another two weeks. But that no longer matter, and you need to leave now, Majesty, for while we’re trained – half of us have seen battle, the other the prisons of Ered Luin – we are few and it is not safe.”

“I will see you through till the end,” Thorin shakes his head, beheading an unlucky dwarrow with grey in their beard.

“No, Your Majesty, you won’t. You need to get into the Shire, for that is where your nephews are held in safety.” Thorin’s eyes widen. “Our people were watching the north-eastern road, by the hills, closest to Ered Luin. We made sure they got through safely. The hobbits will have found them by now, they have patrols that way, don’t worry, Your Majesty. If you want to join them though, you need to go, and soon – my people are being cut down, there are too many. You need to run.”
And with the thought of his nephews in mind, Thorin runs, dropping his weapon only at the very edge of the fray, hiding where he should have instead felled those in his way. Eventually, he finds himself in a sea of green grass, and in the distance he sees a swell of people – not Men, or even dwarrow. Hobbits, he realises as he approaches, ignoring their cries of stop and halt.

Thorin only remembers how to stop his feet when one raises a bow.

“Who are you, dwarf? Are you another of the emissaries, telling us that we will be overrun and killed, one by one?” The archer asks, eyes lined taught with stress. Thorin belatedly realises he’s covered in blood, and takes off his outer jacket, folding it a little.

“The dwarrow that would try to do such things are being fought by a small force. They had come in the name of my forefathers, but I and those loyal to me are trying to defeat them. One of my allies told me to run, for my death would do naught but cause anguish for my people and fellow rulers.” He pauses, watching the group with sudden wariness, “That ally also told me they made sure my nephews were brought past the north-eastern road barricade.”

In an instant, there’s a reaction, and mutters in a language that sounds like the wind itself, but is clearly coming from their mouths. The archer lowers his bow.

“You are Thorin, uncle to Fili and Kili?”

Thorin quite truly sags with relief, “Yes, yes, I am. Are they sound?”

“Aye, my own niece looks after them in her smial,” the archer puts his arrow back in his quiver, walking over and standing straight and prim, bowing slowly. “Hildigrim Took, second son of Fortinbras Took II, Thain of the Shire, and Shirrif of Brockenborings and the Greenfields in regency of young Jasper Greenbrock. He broke his leg some weeks ago, so I apologise for his absence – I would have rather greeted you on my own turf, Tookborough, far south, but alas, we meet here.”

Thorin nods slowly, not quite sure what most of his words mean, but there is meaning to them, he can tell, a cultural significance that he cannot deny as his ears hear the authority this…Hildigrim’s, voice. He bows in return.

“Thorin, son of Thror, son of Thrain, rightful King of Erebor. My sincerest apologies for the renegades and greed-consumed dwarrow that might threaten you and your kind so, and that might claim me as kin and fly my flag, when their deplorable actions would render those rights false.” He stands straight, to beseech the hobbit, “Please, if I might see my nephews, take them home.”

Hildigrim nods, and his disposition matches the tail-end of his name as he motions an older-looking hobbit forwards. “Garby Greenbrock, Jasper Greenbrock’s uncle – he shall be your guide. But I might warn you that the only safe road out of the Shire as of this moment would be one that no dwarf would be able to navigate, let alone locate. They’re called mazepaths for a reason. T’would be best if you stayed a few days, or weeks, until the threats are long-passed and it would be safe to ferry young ones away.”

Thorin nods back, upset by the news gifted to him, but walks passed him to wear Master Greenbrock waits, hand resting on a…is that a gardening fork?

“I thank you,” he thanks the hobbit later, when they have walked the winding path through the edges of ‘Bindbole Wood’, ‘Overhill’, to ‘Bag-End’, as Greenbrock names each location, as if there were signs. And Thorin means his thanks sincerely, and believes Hildigrim’s words about a dwarf being unable to navigate a secret road terribly true, if Thorin can barely get his grip on the simplest of roads in the Shire – the path from Greenfields to Hobbiton being one of the most straight and easy, if thin,
said Master Greenbrock.

Truly, the Shire would have been a horrific choice for dwarrow to settle.

Thorin gets his first proper look at a ‘smial’ when he walks over Overhill, as it turns out. They are quaint and cheery abodes, set inside hills with round doors and glass windows. Autumn has caused many a flower to wilt, but berries grow in the gardens, and lines small plots of land. There is an entire orchard, settled between ‘Bag-End’ and what Thorin supposes is ‘Hobbiton’, for the townstead is clear in the distance, bustling and full.

“Never mind me, Master Thorin,” Greenbrock waves him off cheerily, “Tell Little Lady Blue that I’m still waiting on that crock of vegetable-venison soup!” He walks off sharply, without another word, and Thorin is left outside the little gate.

Turning to it, Thorin walks carefully into the front garden, being careful not to stray from the path. The door is a bright red, and glossy, the smell of varnish strong even feet away. On the front steps, there are scarlet handprints, and Thorin has to contain his surprise at seeing Fili and Kili’s names spelt out in the same colour beside them. Knocking on the door, Thorin spares them a last glance before looking up as the door opens, Kili’s beaming visage the first thing he sees.

“Kili,” he breathes, a great happiness rising within him at his nephew’s appearance. Kili’s eyes are wide at the sight of him too, and the cuff of his hobbit shirt lowers to show his leather bracelet as he holds the door open, green velvet waistcoat pulled up high with matching trousers tucked into his boots.

“Uncle Thorin!” He exclaims after a moment, before launching himself at Thorin, who grabs him with ease, swinging him around.

“Oh, Kili, duyam ghivashel, how have you been? Are you fed? Well-cared for?”

“I’m amazing – Miss Bilbo makes the best cakes and biscuits and uncle Thorin she’s so nice to us and we have new clothes and we get a bath every night~”

“Uncle!” Comes another exclamation, even as Thorin gets a feel he knows that name, oddly enough. Thorin looks to where Fili is running over and steps into the home to catch his flying form, knocking their heads together.

“Fili, my lion, what a sight to sore eyes you both are.”

Fili’s eyes are bright with familial love as he speaks, but swiftly they darken, nervous energy escaping the boy. He goes to speak, but a female voice calls through to them.

“Fili? Kili?” A female hobbit comes around a corner, and stands in a circular archway. “Who’s at the…”

Thorin’s eyes meet hers, and with a start, he realises he recognises her – and she recognises him.

“…door. Oh. Hello, Thorin Oakenshield, rightful King Under the Mountain.” Bilbo looks him up and down as his memories from Bree revisit him sharply, flashes of soft skin and an equally-soft face reeling past his eyes. “I suppose this is goodbye.”

Her words snap Thorin out of his thoughts. “No, not yet. Traitors still guard the borders.” Immediately Fili and Kili startle, questioning him in Khuzdul about them, and why did he have blood on him? He quiets them with a short Shazara, before Bilbo speaks.
“I was trying not to inform them of that little tidbit. You’re welcome to stay as long as you like, provided you follow my rules.”

“Like taking your boots off when you get inside,” Kili starts, Fili adding.

“And wash your hands and face before dinner.”

“And have a bath every night because you’re mucky-”

“And brush your hair in front of a mirror properly, with brushes and not Missus Belladonna’s special comb-”

“And don’t be rude,” Bilbo interrupts with humour, stepping forwards properly into the hall, walking until she was beside them all. Shutting the door – Thorin moving out of the way, she manoeuvres his coat out from between Fili and his arm, holding it tenderly. “I’ll deal with this. Take your shoes off, and then let the boys take you to the kitchen. Fili, when you’re there, get the biscuits out of the larder.”

“Oh, why can’t I?” Kili pouts.

Bilbo sends him a look that amuses Thorin greatly, and then amuses him even more as she delivers her reply. “Because the last time you did it, and the time before that too, you ate half of them before you even returned. Fili at least has the decency to only eat one before he gets back to the kitchen.”

Snorting, Thorin puts the boys down, nodding to the mistress of the smial as Kili takes his hand, tugging him into what looks like a library and then a kitchen. He can see a dining room through the next archway, next to a roaring fireplace, the heat only offset by the fact that the window’s open. Fili disappears into the hallway, and Kili sits down on a bench at a rather old-looking table.

“Miss Bilbo is so nice, Uncle Thorin, do you know that she has a baby? Freylin’s really adorable – even more adorable than I am!”

Thorin’s eyes rise up, “More adorable than you? It can’t be?” He goes to sit down, but Kili gets up, grabbing his hand again.

“Let’s go see her! She’s sleeping right now, but Miss Bilbo says we can watch her sleep if we don’t make any noise – come on!” And Thorin, bemused, lets his nephew drag him out of the kitchen, and it’s only when Fili asks where they’re going, and Kili replies with, “To see Freylin” that they stop.

Because Fili yelps, “No! You can’t!”

Both Kili and Thorin turn at that, to see Fili standing, paralysed, in the hallway, a ceramic pot of biscuits in hand.

“Why can’t we? Bilbo said we could,” Kili argues.

“Not Uncle Thorin though,” Fili’s eyes are wide, but Thorin feels there’s something more to this, his mirth slipping away at Kili’s antics to be replaced with something far more…muddied. “Miss- Miss Bilbo wouldn’t like that, if someone strange saw her baby without her permission.”

Thorin nods after a moment at his nephew’s words, but watches him carefully as he speaks to Kili, “Let us go back to the kitchen, Kili. It would be intrusive to look upon another’s babe without their permission.”

Kili slumps in disappointment, but Fili distracts him with biscuits, and Thorin is silent as they go to
sit on the benches. It is a few more minutes before Bilbo returns without his cloak, and when she
does, she puts a kettle on the fire, sighing tiredly under her breath as Kili complains at the crumbs in
his hair from the biscuits Fili had thrown at him.

“No throwing food, boys,” she says, glancing at Thorin. “Distracted? They were doing that long
before I came in, you know – I could hear them from the other side of the smial. A usual
occurrence?”

“Too usual to faze me, unfortunately,” he admits, “What of you? They mentioned a baby? Do you
have other children?”

Her movements slow as she prepares tea, and he watches her with curiosity, wondering if hobbits
were more like dwarrow than men – as he thought – when it came to their children. She has treated
his nephews finely, he can sense from their conversation, but…

“I only have one child, Freylin,” she says reluctantly. “Rather too many for my age, you’ll quickly be
informed by others, during your stay here in the Shire.”

“Too many?” Thorin questions, puzzled. He glances at Fili and Kili, but the boys are focused on
only themselves, and Bilbo and Thorin speak in quieter voices. “Do hobbits have a tradition dictating
the age in which one should have a child?”

“Oh, no, well, yes, but no – it’s not like that,” she’s decidedly nervous now, and Thorin’s curiosity
turns to alarm as she sets the kettle down, playing with her oven glove. “I’m not…exactly, at age of
majority, you see.”

Thorin-

Thorin, for lack of a better word, stops.

Not exactly at age of majority.

His lungs seize, his mind ripples with furious, shameful, disgusting, awful guilt. His mouth opens and
closes like a fish’s, and her eyes become alarmed, hand coming to rest on his shoulder- but he pulls
away, burned.

“I- I, how-”

“Dammit,” she murmurs, before looking to the boys, “Fili, Kili? I’m afraid I’ve forgotten to bring in
a toy of Freylin’s from the back garden. Would you try find it for me, please? You may take the
biscuits.”

“Yes Miss Bilbo,” they say, scurrying off with the pot, not seeing or recognising Thorin’s state.
Bilbo waits until the door has shut before crouching in front of his frozen form.

“Mr Thorin, my mother went adventuring when she was only twenty-five, and when she returned at
thirty-four, she married and had me. Some hobbits marry and have children at as young as thirty-one,
and are allowed to live on their own.” Her eyes meet his, shrewd and assessing. “Thirty-three is the
majority age in the Shire. I bed you at twenty-six and a half.”

Thorin would have let out a noise of perhaps horror, but instead his mind turns, cogs clicking in his
brain. “I took your maidenhood, you said so yourself.”

“Yes, you did, and you were the only one I slept with then and so since, so don’t get any prideful
ideas about going around Bree searching for any that might have caught my fancy in penance,” her
tone is amused, wry, but she mistakes his sudden sharpful eye as he stares at her.

“Indeed, I am the only one you say – and there is a babe of your blood in the building.”

It is her turn to still, eyes widening quickly. Thorin leans forwards, taking her hands tightly in his own, eyes devoid of anything but want of an answer.

“Am I that babe’s father, Bilbo Baggins? Did you bed me at twenty-six and a half, and gain naught but a child and scorn from your neighbours for having a babe out of wedlock when not yet even- oh, what was it? Thirty-three?”

Her hands grip his tightly, but not so tightly – hobbits are not strong, he knows this well, and she never was.

“Her name is Freylin, and if you try to take her from me, I’ll shave your beard off-”

“Take her?” Thorin interrupts with a startled noise, cutting her off, though not missing a single word. His grip loosens from around her hands as confusion enters his eyes. “Why would I take her from you? If- even if I wanted to take her, I would take you too.”

A laugh of shock escapes her, “A double kidnapping? Why, so presumptuous that you’d even get away with it!”

Thorin gains a small grin. “It wouldn’t be a kidnapping, you would come willingly and with all faith in my abilities to take care of you both. My daughter, and her mother.” There’s a short silence, before Bilbo slips her hands from his and wraps her arms around his neck, hugging him. He hugs her back, being gentle. When they part, she looks up at him shyly, a curl of gold slipping down in front of her eyes.

“Would you like to meet her?”

“Yes,” he breathes the word, nerves rising in him in a so-very different way to when Dis had called him from the outer-corridor to meet his first nephew, to meet Fili with his little mane of sunshine. This is different, so different. “Please.”

*My daughter. I’m going- I’m meeting- mine- I have a child, a girl, a daughter of my own*

Bilbo’s hand takes his, and she pulls him out of the kitchen, tea cooling rapidly even as they leave, walking through a study into a bedroom, where a bassinet stands beside a double-bed sized for hobbits – and dwarrow – the bassinet with white lace and frill falling out the sides. His heart leaps as he sees an arm waving about, and the quiet mumbles, babbles, of a speechless bairn. Bilbo brings him over to watch over her, and he is utterly captivated as Bilbo lifts her from her cradle, this half-awake babe with mounds of black hair and slitted eyes with blue peeking through.

“Freylin, child of Thorin, child of Thrain…is that it?” She mumbles, and he nods vacantly, emotions welling in him. He feels no shame as his chin wobbles, tears escaping his eyes. Bilbo looks up at him through her lashes, and smiles brightly, stepping close to him, until Freylin is ensconced between them. “Hold her.”

Thorin takes her, and he’s afraid he’ll break her, drop her, but Bilbo is there, a soft counterbalance, holding her aloft just as much as Thorin is.

“We’ve got her, Thorin, she’s okay, if a little wriggly,” she giggles slightly, under her breath, as Freylin – *Freylin*, what a perfect name – wiggles. Thorin’s muscles finally seem to remember how to hold a baby, and come to take her fully, changing her position so he can see her as he would like to,
lifting her higher, for Bilbo, bless her, is far from equal to him in height.

They talk a little, and Thorin attempts to entertain his daughter when they move back to the kitchen, Bilbo reheating water for more tea, the last batch having gone cold. And Fili and Kili come in from the garden, covered in mud, holding up three wooden toys for Bilbo to see – and he sees now why she would make a rule for a bath each night, and for so much cleaning between and before meals. Thorin hadn’t realised how grubby he’s let them be in the past until now.

They have afternoon tea, and it’s a scrumptious, sweet amount of food, and Thorin eats most of it. To be fair, he has seen battle earlier that day – to think of it now! – and he is much famished. Bilbo decides to even have an earlier dinner, and two suppers, and Thorin is amazed and most fascinated by Fili and Kili’s descriptions of hobbit mealtimes.

“How do you not grow plumper than pigs?” He blurts out, quite by accident, but Bilbo only laughs starkly.

“Oh, that would be a secret, but seeing as you will be as close to hobbits as any dwarf can be in the coming century, I might as well say – hobbits are magic. We give to the earth, even as we till it. Yavanna blesses us with that power, and tis hard to leave the Shire once you’ve left it, even harder to enter should you have malign intent.”

“What’s malign?” Kili questions, Fili answering, elder brotherly wisdom giving him solemn countenance.

“Malign is bad, so Miss Bilbo means that mean people have bad thoughts, like they want to hurt someone, when they try to get into the Shire, they can’t.”

Kili glances at Thorin, “So does that mean the traitors wouldn’t have been able to get in?”

Thorin frowns lightly, and looks to Bilbo, who is quiet for a time before she shakes her head.

“They had the Shire surrounded, not an easy feat,” she says at low volume, “Have, I should say, unless your force has beaten them back. Not even our magics could keep so many out at one time. I suppose they might never, ever be able to find Tookborough, if we gathered there and dwelt in the Halls and Great Smials – the Took’s Great Smial is the largest, and most complexly tunnelled, and we take great pride in it.” A short twitch of her lip. “Not even Brandy Hall is as big nor as grand as Took Smial.”

Thorin observes her and cannily guesses, “You are a Took, as well as a Baggins – you have great pride.”

Bilbo glances at him, and her sadness disappears as she smiles so honestly that it makes his heart thump.

“You’re right. I do. But I’m far prouder of Bag-End.” And she beams at the rafters, and the walls, and her halls, and Thorin has to forcibly think of her age, of the great blow to her reputation he has brought, despite the joy that Freylin brings.

Before he leaves, another of his braids shall be cut, and he will gift it to her.

It will be a true apology, done in the only way he knows how.
Thorin ruminates much on what he has done over the next few weeks. In truth, he knows that taking the maidenhood of a child, no matter how willing that child might be, is unforgivable and it is something he will never forgive himself for. Fili and Kili are horrified for the better-part of their stay in Bag-End, the night after he shaves his already-short beard to his skin. Fili at least understands why, after a short conversation, but Kili remains unaware.

Bilbo herself is quick to brush off blame. “I got a gift from it, Thorin. Any negative side-effects are my penance for such lies I told you.” Thorin lets her speak but does not take her words to heart – for she is not passed her majority. Hobbits, like dwarrow, have a time before in which it would actually, truly be…what it was, however having a child between that time of true childhood and adulthood is still, in either culture, a terrible burden and sacrifice of reputation.

_Tweens_, is apparently the correct hobbit-term. Thorin knows they have a word in Khuzdul that equates, but there isn’t one in the Common Tongue that he can tell her yet. _Yet_, he thinks, closing his eyes and wondering at all the political implications that had. One day, she would be his Queen Consort, if not his Consort. There was no way around it – especially considering that the only way to regain what respect he would lose by impregnating a _tween_, would be to marry her. His beard be shorn if he did not.

“At least we get along,” he thinks of her braveness, her loveliness and bespokeness. Fili called her a princess of hobbits, in khuzdul – or, rather, as the translation truly would go, a _Descendant of Yavanna’s chosen children_. He’d meant it in the same way that Durin was one of the original dwarrow, one of Mahal’s first creations and rulers of dwarrow-kind. In ways, Bilbo was like them. _For she is kind as she is gracious, as fair as she is mothering._

Also, in Thorin’s opinion, she makes the best blueberry tart he has ever tasted. _Another gift of hobbits_, she says, but Thorin thinks it a lie as her eyes swift left and right, anywhere but his face and flush rises on her own.

The Shire is stranger, however. Hobbits visibly whisper and gossip about he and his nephews. Thorin is used to the talks of those in Ered Luin, but usually dwarrow are blunt enough to speak to him directly or in the privacy of their halls. ‘Upfront’ seemed to be a word that puzzled Donnamira Took, aunt of Bilbo and elder hobbit woman, when he inquired politely as to if anyone would directly question him.

Her answer had been thus.

“We hobbits are peaceful creatures, Master Dwarf and it does no good to speak bluntly. That would incite confrontation and that is the _height_ of rudeness. I wouldn’t think that Bluebell would have told you, but she and Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, _oh_,” Donnamira looked around, as if she were speaking of something secret, “they get on like fish and frog. Lobelia is the fish, here. Inhabit the same area but should never interact or things get…strange. We like to keep an eye on them. Bad reputation, bad, _bad_ reputation. _Never put Lobelia and Bilbo in the same room together_!”

It had confounded Thorin for some time, until said Lobelia Sackville-Baggins came poking around Bag-End uninvited, nearly going off with six pieces of Bilbo’s prized silver cutlery – _they’re heirlooms, not mathoms_, she had fussed, shining them with the corner of her apron. Thorin thought sentimentality was a poor reason to keep such works, until he realised that said prized heirlooms were of dwarven make.
So, perhaps Thorin had Fili and Kili make a few rounds of other smials, as they were called, searching for dwarven-made items. Bilbo thought it a lovely idea for them to practice their baking, silly though Thorin thought the skill to be for princes of Erebor, but it gave them the chance to look around as they offered their homewares to neighbours – Bilbo had agreed most vehemently with his suggestion after tasting the far-too-salty scones, even suggesting visiting her infamous adversary. Their report, when they returned, revealed much to Thorin of hobbit culture.

No smial his nephews visited had weapons of any kind past their sharpened cooking knives, engraved with signatures of their makers on the ends. Candlestick holders, garden tools, nails, screws, bolts and hinges – an oven, even, at the Green Dragon Inn. Hobbits valued not trinkets or gems, but practical items. At most, it seemed a string of pearls made up a woman’s jewellery, maybe some bronze rings or twine and leather bracelets. A man might have a broach, or their lady’s courting band around their wrist.

“It’s funny,” Bilbo hummed in her kitchen, stirring a soup, “but every time I see Kili’s leather band around his wrist – the braided one, on his left wrist – I always think it’s a courting band. Quite absurd, I know, but hobbit customs are quite different from dwarven, it seems.”

“Aye,” Thorin had agreed, before inquiring about hobbit courting bands.

“Oh, it’s not much, a small but meaningful step. It’s part of the gifting stage of courting – after flowers and pies – and acts as a kind of pre-declaration, declaration of courtship. Hobbit lasses braid them however they like, but they must be made of leather, one that’ll last. Hobbit lads receive them and when they put them on, they never take them off again, unless they or their partner dies. It’s either buried with its maker, or worn by them – unless, of course, they want to remarry. Some young widows bury their courting bracelet with their husband, tying it around the main bouquet for all attending hobbits at the funeral to see.”

“Dwarrow do not remarry,” Thorin had replied shortly before sitting in silence with Bilbo in the kitchen, until dinnertime when the boys came running in, screaming in panicked joy as two neighbouring fauntlings chased them through Bilbo’s smial.

Yes. Thorin does find the Shire strange, its customs even stranger – but what he finds the strangest is his hobbits acceptance of his apology braid.

At the beginning of autumn, the dwarf, Nori, knocks on the door of Bag-End and introduces herself to her princes with a bow. Thorin calms Bilbo, afraid as she was about an unfamiliar dwarf appearing at her home and invites the one that killed Grogur inside. Bilbo takes Freylin, Fili and Kili out into the garden when Thorin asks for use of the study, discussing the affairs of things with the guild-sworn dwarrow. He had sent a letter some weeks ago to Balin, stating he and his nephews were safe and would return as soon as they heard it was safe.

Nori tells of how they released his guard and other merchants that he’d been travelling with, who turned the tides of the battle purely due to the fact that Dwalin son of Fundin had been part of the ranks. It had been a slaughter on both fronts, however Nori’s guild had captured most of the younger ones and made away with half of them, forcefully taking them into their various guild-crafts as punishment. Thorin could agree to that, as death would have awaited them otherwise and there had been many dwarflings there that day, training under their craft-masters and parents.

Dwalin had taken control after that, Nori’s guild slipping into the night. She had stayed, letting herself be caught by the infamous guardsman who had already locked her up several times for various thefts and burglaries. She had – from inside a jail – overseen the procedures and beheadings of many, before she escaped her cell and wrote to Balin of the truth of matters and of how she would be coming to the Shire to seek him and his.
“You did well,” he tells her, putting a hand on her shoulder. “My thanks.”

“It was no bother, your majesty,” Nori mutters, eyes twinkling darkly. “I still owe the line of Durin twelve favours out of thirteen. Call upon me again when you need.” Thorin narrows his eyes, but doesn’t say anymore on the matter, knowing there were very few debts that would call for thirteen favours. *If she is willing to pay them, I will not press*, he vows, but quietly wonders if Dwalin is slipping. Nori is sent to the guest bedroom after dinner.

That night, however, as Thorin knows they will leave in the morn, Thorin kneels in front of Bilbo in her father’s study and cuts a braid from his head.

“You know little of our customs, but I assure you, that as it is a higher shame I have committed, this is just punishment. I would beg you, Bluebell Baggins, child of Bungo and Belladonna, of the Shire, accept my sincere apology.” He presses his braid into her hand, the silver bead cool against the heat of their palms.

“I- what…” Bilbo looks at him, slightly lost, “so…this is an apology, in dwarrow culture.”

“It is a joyous apology, should you take it. If you do not, then throw it in the fire and my apology is for naught, my head be shorn and my privilege taken from me.”

“Joyous…” Bilbo whispers, before she smiles and reaches down, wrapping her arms around his neck. Thorin startles slightly, flushing as she presses a short kiss to his cheek. “I accept your apology, Thorin of the Longbeards.” She pulls back, taking his hands and standing, coughing a little. “Sorry, I never thought I’d have to accept an official…apology. Come on.” She leads him away, out of her home onto the top of her smial, leading him to a round patch of ground that he’d seen her weeding and ridding of grass and leaves.

“Is this hobbit custom?” He questions, looking up at the moonlit sky above.

“Well, usually it takes place in the day – hobbits aren’t really creatures of the night, or the dark and underground – and before you get started about how our smials are underground, that’s something we picked up from the dwarrow.”

Thorin blinks, eyebrows rising. “The dwarrow?”

“Yes, now shush, unless you wish your little apology plant to bloom a thistle on my back. Mother always said history was represented by thistles, for everything of the past demands respect…” she trails off, falling quiet as her hands leave his, one gripping his braid tightly, the other digging a hole in the ground.

Thorin thinks her words odd, but perhaps it is more hobbit culture he has no clue of. *Maybe*…he blinks as she places his braid in the ground, taking out a few strands of her own hair and tucking them through a looser – than perhaps respectful – part of the braid.

Will it?

“An actual flower will bloom?”

Bilbo’s lip quirks. “Yes. I hope so at least. It always works – planting, I mean. Flowers don’t always sprout, but they always grow into something. My parent’s, when they had me…this patch used to be full of magnolias, common marigold and edelweiss.” She motions around, before taking a needle from her apron. Thorin raises an eyebrow speculatively as she pricks her finger, squeezing a drop of blood onto the braid-

“Oh, mint and motherwort,” she mutters, annoyed as a second drop falls. “That’s not good at all. Oh dear. So much hard work ahead. Three. Three? Dear me…your turn, now.” She holds out the
needle, letting him poke a hole in his finger. “Two drops, no more – if you do I will literally strangle you.”

“Is the number important?” Thorin asks honestly, a little put off by her huff.

“Important? Oh, you dwarrow…” she mutters under her breath, clearly annoyed, before calming. “Sorry, yes, it’s important. Now, you have your bead in there, so that’s fine. I need something from me though. We have to be equal, you see. Hair, blood, sentiment. Sentiment…” she sucks her pricked finger for a few moments before lighting up. “Of course!” She reaches to her neck, unclasping a thin chain, taking off a small silver pendant, the gold plate etched with some form of flower. She smiles at it sadly for a moment before putting it in the hole with everything else, before covering it up with dirt.

“Now, watch,” she whispers, leaning against his arm, gripping the sleeve of his tunic. Thorin feels peculiarly sensitive in that moment, weakened – like his life-force is being drained through his feet, before it slows, a connection to the ground beneath his feet so palpable and fitting. Then power is returned in a rush, invigorating him and causing Thorin to sigh in contentment, all his stresses and worries washing away. Moonlight bathes them and then Bilbo is shaking with excitement, batting his arm hurriedly. Thorin looks down and is amazed by what he sees.

A sprout.

Tiny and green- two sprouts, he realises. Two tiny green sprouts that were most definitely where they had not been before.

“Mahal…” he whispers, only to be corrected.

“Yavanna. Maybe you’ll tell me how it works in dwarrow culture one day. You have to come back now – that’s as much a promise as it is an apology. You have to tend it, look after it. When the flower blooms – if a flower blooms, that is – then…then we’ll be happy.”

“I will most definitely be returning,” he murmurs, “though not just for this. Freylin. She- she is…I…”

“It’s alright. I can do most of this by myself, I think. Just…come back. Freylin’s our daughter.”

“Aye, our- our daughter,” Thorin whispers again, before looking to Bilbo, staring at her smiling face. He brings up a hand, hesitant, but Bilbo presses her own to the back of it, leaning her cheek into his palm. “You are magnificent, o daughter of Yavanna.”

“You are kind and noble, son of Mahal. Hopefully, one day, Freylin will be so too.”

“I would want her to take after her mother,” Thorin admits, chagrin as he smiles. Bilbo lets out a deep laugh suited to her personality. Thorin could not imagine it any different – if t’were like bells, he would not understand. Bilbo is kind, gracious, magnificent – but she isn’t flint, she doesn’t shatter easily. Her soul is strong and her will stronger. Thorin doubts he has seen even the barest fraction of that spirit and determination.

You are mithril, he wants to say, briefly, before feeling embarrassed at his own poetry. Just because we share a child – a child out of wedlock, no less – does not make her mine to compliment and treasure as I please.

The next day, Thorin and his company leave. Nori rides ahead with a hobbit to the closest exit to Ered Luin, Thorin driving a carriage bought and gifted by Bilbo, Fili and Kili running alongside. Bilbo and Freylin say their goodbyes at the gate of Bag-End, the former more teary than even the latter in the moment where Fili and Kili start sobbing. They call her Aunt Bilbo and Thorin reiterates
his promise to visit again, as soon as they could.

“I miss amad but I don’t want to leave yet,” Kili cries plaintively into Bilbo’s dress. Bilbo wipes tears from her own eyes, running her hand through his already-matting locks. “You are the yâsith’az nadadaz’amad.”

“Kili, no,” Thorin puts in sharply, “Bilbo is not my yâsith. Just like how your father is not your mother’s yâsûn.”

“My adad was mother’s yâsûn,” Fili says quietly, Thorin briefly wondering whether or not he should stop their conversation, considering Bilbo’s presence. He glances at her – the look in her eyes tells him she’s paying attention, probably filling in some gaps of her own. Why Fili and Kili are like night and day, for example. Frerin is blonde too, but not the same shade or texture as his nephews. Dis had two partners, the first a Firebeard with the infamous auburn locks for his beard and Fili’s blonde in the rest of him.

Gradient, Dis had given her excuse for her strange choice, you don’t see it often. Of course, Dis also had a half-elven child, which in itself isn’t so bad – simply that Kili is Royal makes it a true fault of decision on her part. Exoticism was no problem, but if Thorin, Frerin and Fili all were to fall with no true dwarven heirs, Kili would inherit the throne and all the responsibilities that came with it – and then, in the eyes of all dwarrow, the line of Durin would be forever tainted.

May that day never come, Thorin begins to brood, thoughts of Azanulbizar flashing across his mind’s eye. A storm cloud, Thorin quickly loses patience with the extended goodbyes, longing to be in the deep dark of the Blue Mountains, of Erebor, of- the dwarven words for his home don’t even form in his head, his grief so loud and poignant. I forgot for a moment, he sucks in a breath at the thought. I forgot, I forgot-

“Adad!” a small voice chirps out. “Adad.” Thorin whips his head around, eyes zeroing in on Freylin. She sits on a blanket on the small, grassy expanse of Bag-End’s front lawn, leant purposefully on a curved cushion piled with blankets to help her sit up. Her hands clap together soundlessly as she sways and rocks forwards a little, but she doesn’t say it again, even as Thorin almost begs her to, in his head, his heart beating a thousand leagues a second.

“First words don’t come easily to hobbits,” Bilbo speaks frankly, shock in her voice. “It- I didn’t speak until I was six summers. Dwarrow must- dwarrow must be very much different.”

“Aye,” Thorin says softly, before he reaches down to pull Fili up by his scruff onto his lap. “Kili.” Kili still grips Bilbo’s skirt, but at his uncle’s words, lets go and climbs hurriedly up to join them, leaving Bilbo standing alone at her gate. “It may be a few weeks after the new year before we may journey to return here, dearest hobbit,” he warns the Baggins woman, who hesitates slightly before nodding.

“Yes, that makes sense. Snowmelt in the Blue Mountains comes later, yes?”

“Only just,” Thorin rearranges the three of them on the cart, nodding solemnly to his future queen. “Lady Baggins, always at your service, may we see each other again soon.” He looks to Freylin, simply waving as the boys become a cacophony, yelling and waving frantically to both Bilbo and their cousin. Thorin looks once more to Bilbo, before setting off the pony, the cart trundling down the road.

Their journey is swift and steady. Journeying west, they pass through Rushock Bog – where Fili and Kili had originally found their way to Bilbo through – staying on the road and away from the muddy
marshes and sinkholes. They regroup with Nori at Needlehole, their guides waving them off politely before disappearing out of sight, thoroughly disturbing Thorin as he listens and watches for any sign of their departure.

“They’re probably watching us leave,” Nori mutters to them in khuzdul, before looking to the boys, catching their attention. “Oi, little royals, when we get back to Ered Luin, if your ma and uncle don’t mind, my Ori would do good to make friends with ye.”

“Ori? Is that not the dwarfling trying to convince Balin to be her craft-master?” Thorin questions with sudden amusement, “Fiery-haired, aye?”

“Aye, she’s a stubborn ‘en,” Nori shakes her head, rolling her eyes, “Wants to be a scribe, working in the great library of Erebor. She’s got some fanciful dreams. Though, she might get to apprentice under Balin if she tries hard enough. He knows about her, see.”

“Knows about her?” Kili’s brows stitch together. “What does Balin know about her?”

Nori smirks a little, Thorin shaking his head. “Quiet now, Kili, it would not do to learn too much about a future friend before you have even met them.”

“Right…are you going to introduce her to us?” Kili looks alarmed at the prospect, Fili’s head tilting sharply.

“You’re related, so no,” Thorin says shortly, getting a mild look of surprise from Nori, probably at the prospect of her daughter being unofficially recognised as a Durin.

“How?” Fili asks, frowning as he looks to Nori. “You’re a Firebeard, though, not a Longbeard.”

“Ori…Ori’s father is of Durin. Not- not directly,” Nori hastens to explain, panic clear despite her focused look. “There’s a large gap, you are distant cousins. Not…too distant, but still…”

“Like Uncle Dwalin and Balin?” Kili concentrates hard, staring into the distance as he forms the words, “They’re related to us, but they don’t have any other close relatives. Their mama and papa died in Erebor.”

“That is enough,” Thorin ends the discussion, finality in his voice. “It is impolite to speak of the dead. Their time in this world is done.”

“Just like Fili’s father?” Kili adds on rather cattily, even as he sulks. Fili recoils and Thorin hands the reigns to Nori, turning in his seat on the cart to face his nephews in the back, reaching over to grip Kili by the neck of his shirt.

“Apologise. Now. That was uncalled for. May Vili live in the Halls of Mahal peacefully, even after your cursing words.”

“I’m-I’m sorry, Fili,” Kili mumbles, chin wobbling. Thorin lets him drop onto the blankets, looking to Fili silently to see if he was sound. His blond-haired nephew looked shaken, but not broken – good, in Thorin’s opinion. He would worry more if Fili had truly been upset. Vili had died twelve-year ago, when Fili was aught but three, Kili not even born. To miss ones father was natural, however Fili had never known him.

*May you live easy with our Allfather*, he prays to his brother-in-law, more out of habit than personal grief, before taking back the reigns from Nori.

“Onwards down the road, safely may we go,” she says as they pass the border-marker for the Shire.
“Safely may we go,” Thorin nods before looking forwards, past what shadow the sun behind them caused.
When you were a fauntling, you searched the East Farthing woods for elves. You were caught up in
the make-believe, not everything impacting you as it should, considering the average hobbit’s
awareness of the world. You knew you would grow up at one point, but thought that awakening
would be a little before your majority – after, even. You can’t quite remember.

The beginning of the end of fauntlinghood was when your father had taken you aside one day, when
your mother went on an adventure with Gandalf with only an hour notice, despite how it had
apparently been planned for months. He brought you to your Yavanna Patch, on top of Bag-End,
where white edelweiss littered the ground, stalks of marigold and magnolia poking through and
casting shadows. You had giggled before diving into your patch, the flowers making room for you
rather than being crushed by your small weight. Your father had watched you, sadly happy, before
he reached over, brushing a hand over the tiny pebbles lining the circular rim.

“Bluebell, flower,” he had caught her attention, voice quiet and rough around the edges as always
from his avid consumption of Old Toby. “It’s time for you to let Yavanna take your flowers back to
the Fields.”

You had stopped smiling at that.

“Back- back to the Fields? But papa!” You had shot up, hands gripping stems that didn’t mind the
abuse, even moving their heads to cover you from sight as you stared at your father. “Papa, these are
both Yavanna’s and mine – I’m from these flowers.”

“You are my most darling,” Bungo had sighed, before reaching to his necklace, bringing out
his locket. “Just like I was from mine. I had to do this too and I know how much it hurts to say
goodbye.”

“They’re my flowers,” you had started to cry, feeling the warm, familiar presence of your Gardener
rise up around you, flowers brushing over your shoulders in an act of comfort. “Papa, don’t make
me.”

Bungo only opened his locket, showing you the petals hidden within, that looked as fresh as the day
they were picked. “These were my flowers. Can you guess what they were?”

You had leant over, sniffling as tears swelled in your eyes. “L-Larkspur?”

“And what else?” Bungo had encouraged.

“Forget-me-nots, for…remembrance and faithfulness. What do you have to remember, papa?”

Bungo had smiled a little wider, the sides of his lips widening even as his eyes twinkled sadly. “I will
always love your mother, Blue. I just have to remember that I’m one of many that share her
affections like that.”

“Mama loves other people?” it started to click then, when you were given this new information,
eventually inspiring a cascade of revelations in your mind. “But larkspurs are for first loves!”

“Purple larkspur is for first love,” Bungo corrected. “Larkspur in general, however, usually
represents strong bonds of love and an open heart. Your mother’s heart is so open and true and she
loves so many, so very, very much. She loves you, she loves me, she loves Gandalf and she loves
not just one, but two dwarfar. Belladonna…Belladonna, your mother, is the most amazing thing in
my life – but only after you, my little one.” He shut his locket then, tucking it back under his shirt before taking a shining new one from his pocket. “This is your Valar Locket, Bluebell.”

“I get one?” You had stared, amazed, crawling over the good earth of your Yavanna Patch to the circle of pebbles. You reached up, taking it from your father reverently, eyes not leaving the gold plating, inscribed with a beautiful magnolia blossom. Bungo had put the silver chain around your neck, pressing a kiss to your downy golden curls before opening it for you, showing the empty inside.

“Yes, you get one, my flower. Now you must take one petal from your most precious of each flower and place them in your locket. Then, you must say goodbye to your Yavanna Patch.”

You trace your neck now, where your father’s locket used to sit before you’d buried it with Thorin’s braid. It feels so strange not to feel in around your neck – your own is waiting for you in your safe, but you won’t touch it yet, not until the Second Giving. Your father’s locket had two petals in it – it used to be three, before he gave his third petal to you for your original Planting. You knew it had been unorthodox to bury his entire Valar Locket, but Thorin had given an entire braid. So much magic, so much power and influence – you’d had to equal out the gift, somehow, never mind how you would have had to put in two petals in any case.

_Dammit, two Planted fauntlings_, you think of your two drops of blood with only the slightest regret. Freylin in your arms shakes her rattle, hitting you in the chin. _Three young ones and then Fili and Kili too, if they visit with Thorin._ You dread to think of what everyone in the Shire might say – because Planted fauntlings took their own time. It might be years yet before they Sprouted. _The Shire’ll pronounce me a Greenwife if Thorin doesn’t return often enough to help, if it takes a longer than usual._ Valar knew your pregnancy with Freylin lasted a time – two years, in fact!

You know Thorin will always have duties. Those duties might even be shared with you one day, if the dwarrow accept you. You’re not quite sure how dwarrow marry each other, though considering that Kili’s father wasn’t Dis’…yâsith? _I think that was the right word._ Yâsith. Most likely, given the context, the dwarrow word for ‘wife’. You wonder what the equivalent is for husband. You think being Thorin’s yâsith one day might not be too bad…

“Adad?” Freylin asks, question in her voice. You still can’t believe she’s talking.

“Your papa isn’t here, sweetling,” you brush your hand over her head, lips twisting at the lack of throbbing egg – you’d been pleasantly surprised at the fact that you wouldn’t have to worry about any truly severe head-injuries like those of hobbit fauntlings if Freylin, as a babe, hit it off something.

It was still slightly unnatural, though.

“Adad!” Freylin fusses, before you distract her with a piece of poached pear and raspberry coulis.

The next morning, Primula and Asphodel come for tea, accompanied briefly by Drogo and Rufus before the two disappear off to Hobbiton market to see about the giant fish that Fisher Fram had boasted about. The two gush over the active Yavanna Patch and you briefly bring them up to see it, though not for too long as you know it’s just not in good taste to be present so early along in the Planting, nevermind how closely related each girl is to you.

“The dwarves will return, then?” Asphodel asks, “Kili and Fili were such sweet boys, it’d be a shame for them to never cross our borders again.”

“They’re returning after the first snowmelt in the Blue Mountains, hopefully. Thorin, at least, will be. Dis might not allow them away from her after so long away – they’re a little young for dwarrow,
I’ve been made aware. Not too young, but…young.”

“I couldn’t believe him when Fili said he was fifteen – the thought of it!” Primula laughed, dipping a biscuit in her tea. “I know the dwarves- darrow, grow slowly, but to think, his peer would be double his height!”

“Fili is rather small,” Asphodel hums. “Kili’s barely any shorter and he’s nine, isn’t he? Much more slender, though. I think he’ll be a bean-sprout of a boy, once he’s a little older.”

“Maybe, but I think Fili might surprise us,” you cut into a jam and cream scone, pinching a crumb as it falls off the side. “Unless his father was shorter than most darrow, I’d guess he might meet Thorin in height, or taller.”

“Mmm…Rufus gave me a bouquet,” Asphodel says out of the blue. You and Primula gasp, looking over at your grinning friend. “It was just so sweet – all the meanings it held made my heart flutter.”

“Rufus is a romantic, I’m calling it now – I bet he sprinkles your apple pie with fairy-sugar and cinnamon,” Primula says quickly.

You watch Asphodel blush prettily as you eat a serving of your scone, glancing over to Freylin, who still sleeps peacefully onwards through Primula’s loud japes and teasing. You even join in briefly, before curling your feet up under you, leaning back in your father’s wingback with a small journal of your mothers. Primula and Asphodel know you aren’t too social a hobbit, for a hobbit at least, so are content to continue their own conversations while leaving you to read. Occasionally, you chime in as you listen with half an ear, or they politely interrupt you when you turn a page to ask your opinion on something or other, but truly, their presences are not a burden, not in the slightest.

Not like Fennec Bristleharth is.

The Bristleharth’s area somewhat new family, only established in Hobbiton for the last ten years – they’d previously lived in Frogmorton, a hop and a skip away from Hobbiton itself but just outside the border, under the jurisdiction of a different Shirrif and set of Bounders. Fennec’s own father had been Shirrif briefly, when the previous Shirrif died suddenly, leaving the title behind to a son who was barely more than a fauntling. Hobbiton is a rather…particular area in the Shire, full of the wealthy and the upper classes of hobbits, along with the Gamgee gardeners, who had always lived in Hobbiton and would always be welcome, no matter their financial situation or respectability.

When the Bristleharth’s moved into the area, it was safe to say that many looked down on them, even as they were polite and invited them over for teas and other drinks. You had never liked them and neither had your mother, but your father was a Baggins and Baggins’ did not just leave off meeting newcomers. The Baggins seal of approval – a literal signed, filed document – was all the Bristleharth’s needed to be accepted. You regret not being more vocal about your distaste for the lot of them.

Fennec Bristleharth is uncouth and uncomplimentary. He badgers you constantly and puts on an act about caring for Freylin when you know for a fact that he has said he would rather see her drowned than live a year inside the ‘glorious Bag-End’.

When his signature knock, long and complicated, a pattern most distasteful and long, echoes through your smial, you immediately let out a noise of frustration. Asphodel sighs as you get up, giving Primula the latest details she’d missed out on by always bringing up your lovely darrow. Leaving the sitting room, you approach your round door, fixing a neutral expression on your face.

You take a second to breathe, then open the door.
“Miss Baggins, how are you this fine day?” He says cheerily, plump cheeks stretched into a grin. “Lovely sunshine for November, isn’t it?”

“I thought it a bit nippy – you can see frost smoke through the sun-rays, even.” You close the door a bit, playing with your skirt, as if it were the cold that bothered you. “What brings you to Bagshot Row, Mister Bristleharth?”

Fennec’s smile falters slightly at the mister, knowing exactly what it implies he’s forgotten, but he renews himself with ease. “Ah, your lovely face, Mistress Baggins.”

“Very bold of you to say so, Master Bristleharth. I will ask you to cease that kind of complimenting. It is not appreciated or wanted, as I have told you before. Also, your unwillingness to follow proper station protocol is simply not on.”

“Oh, but Mistress Baggins, it is true! You really are the loveliest hobbit in all the Shire! I truly believe so!”

“And I truly believe it, however there’s no point in saying so, as I already know,” you reply with a heavy dose of snobbery, sneering just to complete the image you borrow from your nemesis, otherwise known as Lobelia Sackville-Baggins. “Good-day, Mister Bristleharth.” You slam the door, anger sweeping through you as you hit the door for good measure, spinning swiftly.

Primula cackles slightly, “Oh Yavanna, you’ll be the talk of the town, knowing Bristleharth’s mouth!” Asphodel just shakes her head, lifting Freylin up from her bassinet as she waves her arms about, letting you pace with the freedom to cross your arms tightly.

“He’s an absolute savage, I despise this- this-”

“Savage?” Asphodel questions with no small amount of sarcasm, quiet as she might be. You snort, falling silent as Primula rattles on about how Rupert Tarming had been like Fennec when they were younger, giving her hastily-thrown together bouquets without her permission to even begin courting, let alone get through the gifting stage.

Thorin would hate this, you think, maybe. He isn’t seem like the type to let rudeness go unchecked. Unexpectedly, your memory of Lobelia’s face when Thorin forcefully took back her forks causes you to laugh, causing Primula to halt in her story.

“Something funny, Bilbo?”

“Oh, no, maybe. Just- I was remembering when Thorin disinvited Lobelia from my home for tea.”

“Disinvited?” Your young cousins exclaim, before Asphodel puts her hands to her mouth.

“Have you invited her back?”

“I’ve not gotten around to it,” you avoid the question, “You were saying something about Drogo?”

“Oh, yes, it was the first time we met – he told Rupert off for his behaviour in front of his own mother, oh, it was the best thing ever.”

“Enough of that,” Asphodel waves Primula off. “You let Thorin disinvite Lobelia for tea! You let Thorin disinvite her!”

“It’s not that big of a deal,” you try and fail to keep pacing, as if it would help retain your prior mood.
“Big- big of a deal? Bilbo, now you’re being deliberately obtuse. We know that Thorin is helping you Plant a child in your garden.”

“Well, it’s pretty obvious,” you snap, immediately apologetic for your tone.

“Don’t be petty,” Asphodel glares lightly. “You’re doing everything backwards, Bilbo. You’ve had a child, you’re Planting, you’ve let him have authority in your home, the Baggins Seat-”

“Alright, enough, I know how it looks!” You glare right back at her. “I know how it looks, Asphodel and yes, I am doing it backwards, but as it may have not occurred to you, Thorin is a king and that gives him more than enough a right to be an authority in my household.” Freylin starts to cry in Asphodel’s arms. You want your daughter, but stay still as your cousin attends to her, calming her down.

“Sorry,” you say, sitting down, “Everything has been very stressful recently.”

“I know, I’m sorry too,” Asphodel murmurs before standing Freylin on her feet. “Can dwarrow learn how to walk as early as hobbits, do you think?”

“Mental faculties. I started to look over some things about her and comparing it to hobbit traits, trying to find the inaccuracies. I think dwarrow are…mentally sound faster. I don’t quite know how that works with their advanced ages, but certainly her hobbit traits are to do with physical growth, as you may see for yourselves.”

“So, maybe she can walk on her own soon then?” Primula questions, looking slightly wistful.

“Perhaps,” Asphodel tilts her head, before letting Freylin stand on her own.

You forget Fennec was even over when Freylin looks over to you with a gummy smile and toddles forwards on unsteady legs, right into your waiting arms.

The winter is mild that year. You thank the Valar, for the price for chopped wood has gone up in recent years due to the Fell Winter and what destruction and need for heat it brought. The leftovers from last winter’s stash of logs is more than enough this turn and only once did you get cold enough after accepting the drop in temperature to have a nightmare. Freylin loves the small layer of snow that comes around Yule and has fun with other fauntlings in the roots of the Party Tree, come the twenty-fifth anniversary of Fortinbras II’s Thainship, a few weeks later.

You hope dearly that it is the same in the Blue Mountains and that Thorin will come sooner – and to your delight, he does, after somehow finding his way to Tookborough. To be quite fair though, he didn’t have a guide, but seeing as he’d already been down the roads and had been unofficially welcomed to the Shire…

“Try navigating a dwarf mountain, let’s see how well you do,” Thorin mutters a little sourly as you plate him up a piece of steak and sprout pie.

You consider leaving it there, giving him the last word, but as he shovels down his dinner – acceptable considering what poor rations he had been carrying – you actually think on it.

“Perhaps in the future, we can show each other around our respective domains,” you say carefully and it must get through to Thorin, after a moment, as he looks up at you, frowning slightly.

“You would come to the Blue Mountains?”

“You come to the Shire – now, tis the second voluntary holiday you’ve made to my home. You
could have taken Fili and Kili immediately, the first time. It would be good to see where you come from, I think and not just for me.”

Delight blooms on his face, “That would be most satisfying, to see Freylin and yourself amongst my kin. Though, I still do not think you would be able to navigate a mountain.”

You let out a short laugh, “I will tell you again, Thorin, perhaps though this time I will explain truly, as to why our smials are underground. Did you think that the first hobbits appeared in the Shire, well and hearty?”

Thorin scrapes his plate, patting his beard and mouth for any stray crumbs before leaning backwards, arms raising. “Regale me with your histories, fine hobbittess!”

“Ha, well,” you sit down with your own portion, dipping bread in your pie-gravy. “First of all, hobbittess is not a real word. Gentlehobbit is the correct term for one of my station, I’ll have you know – I am also head of the Baggins Clan and the entirety of Hobbiton is under my purview.” You try to ignore how Thorin’s amused look suddenly disappears. “Officially, I am in fact, Mistress Baggins. But back to my regales of hobbit history.”

You chew your bread, taking a moment before continuing. “Hobbits are children of Yavanna. We were grown in Her good earth, in a valley east of the Misty Mountains, south of the Great Peak, north of the Greenwood and west of the Grey Cloud Valleys.”

“I do not know where you speak of, except of the Misty Mountains and the Greenwood, though I have come to know it as Mirkwood – a much more fitting name than green.” Thorin grimaces slightly, before you shrug.

“From my maps, I haven’t been able to isolate a specific area, but I would not be wrong if I called the Great Peak and the Grey Cloud Valleys each something completely different – Erebor and the Iron Hills.”

Thorin’s eyes widen, “Truly?”

“Mmm, I believe so,” you eat more of your dinner, taking your time. “The hobbits of old were wanderers. We did not stay where we originally Sprouted from very long and tried to find a place for ourselves. We journeyed south-west past the Greenwood- Mirkwood, staying there between the Misty Mountains along the Anduin. Half an age later we ventured south – much of our Hobbitish Westron has roots in Rohirric, in fact – and then we west, discovering the Shire and claiming it as our own. Some stayed behind on the trip and you can still find the some Stoor hobbits east of Bree.”

“Stoor hobbits?”

You hold up your hand to the light, eyeing the dark gold, almost brown tan. “I am mostly Harfoot and Fallohide hobbit. The hobbits used to be divided into three distinct types – similar to that of the elves with theirs and you dwarrow with yours. Like comparing Firebeards and Longbeards, except most hobbits are a mixture nowadays. There are too few of us for any one hobbit to be of anything less than two tribes. Stoors are the hobbits who had most contact with the race of Men, preferring water and flatland. Broader, heavier, large feet and hands…”

“And the Harfoot and Fallohides?” Thorin questions.

“Harfoots are small. Usually, the smallest of hobbits have the most Harfoot blood. Browner, darker skin and most likely the originators of the infamous hobbit feet,” you smile brightly at that, nudging Thorin lightly on the shin under the table. You take half a minute to eat, finishing most of your pie.
“Harfoots like hillsides. They actually travelled west before any other hobbit tribe, across the Misty Mountains rather than around.”

“They sound hardy.”

“They would be – they were associated with dwarrow, more often than not, just as the Stoors talked with Men and the Fallohides with the elves.”

“Fallohides liked elves?” Thorin looks as if the very sentence does not agree with him. You think of your mother, pale of face and lean as any elf she might have met in her travels.

“Yes, they did. They looked a little like them, too. More slender than other hobbits, fair-haired and tall – oh, that’s where everyone thinks I got my height, for certain. I’m one of the tallest hobbits in Hobbiton!” You smile widely at that, memories of your mother painfully – joyfully – passing through your mind. ‘Baggins’ are of Harfoot stock. Tookins are mostly Fallohide. Fallohides get on with elves, as I said, however the old records – despite their sparsity – would call the Fallohides most wild. Hunters, rather than farmers and singers and linguists, are the Fallohides.”

“And what of Harfoots? Did they have any special talents that connected them with the dwarrow like those with the elves?”

You pause to think, briefly. Surely, there must be something… “Yes, yes of course there is!” You beam at your dwarf, proud of yourself for remembering. “Harfoots developed the hobbit braids!”

“Braids?”

You want to continue, to talk on about how the Harfoots created the courting braids and the braids of valour, creating tradition and a part of hobbit culture that survives today, but one look at Thorin and you realise that something is terribly wrong.

“Thorin?”

Thorin is silent, but his eyes betray his steadily growing fury. His mouth opens to speak, an angry growl already beginning to voice a sentence, but then Freylin comes running into the room.

“Mama, mama, mama, mama, mama!” She bumps into the table, bouncing off it onto the floor. You don’t rush to help her, though you do speed over – however, Thorin, upon seeing his daughter on the floor by his boot, scoops her up and pops her onto his lap.

“Freylin, nanithaz’Durin!”

Freylin squirms at the sudden hold but looks up at the familiar voice, the cry that had been building in her throat disappearing as she sees Thorin’s face.

“Adad, adad!”

Thorin stops speaking, scowling darkly. He leans over, picking her up and setting her on his lap, speaking to her in thick, guttural Khuzdul. You wonder if he’s angry at you or the subject of your conversation – you know braids are important. Fili had only let you brush out Kili’s hair once in his entire three and a half months with you and that was only surrounding brushing.

Clearing the table, you don’t know why, but you feel petty. Coughing quietly, you interrupt their conversation, speaking to Freylin in the Greentongue.

“Freylin, do you want honey milk before bed or vanilla milk?”
“Vanilla!” She replies after a short grunt, hitting the table. “Vanilla, vanilla, vanilla, vanilla.”

“Is that…your language?” Thorin blinks.

You nod a little, pouring hot water into a ceramic bowl, placing Freylin’s milk into a metal mug in the middle. Dropping a vanilla pod into the milk, you let it both steep and warm.

“The Greentongue. We don’t use it in front of outsiders, usually, but you don’t count as an outsider anymore and neither do your family members. However, because it can’t exactly be learned by anyone else, we’re not that worried about it being spread.”

“Can’t- that’s ridiculous,” Thorin scoffs. You glare at him lightly.

“You try speaking in this language and if you manage it, I’ll call it Yavanna’s blessing – she gives us this ability, this language that flowers and plants and trees recognise as Yavanna’s. Other than knowing it exists and that hobbits – and dwobbits – can speak it, Greentongue is none of your business. And you understood none of that.”

“No, I did not,” Thorin’s lips twist into a scowl again and you glare at each other again. He stands, twisting Freylin onto his hip and for a moment you can’t help but think he’s going to take her away. Panic slips past your anger, even as you remember how Thorin promised that if he ever took Freylin away, he would take you too. “I will take her to bed.”

“She’s not had her milk.”

“Do you not feed her?”

“Hobbits only produce milk for the first six months. Fauntlings don’t need it for much time at all. Supper comes with warm tea, usually. Freylin still asks for milk – I’ll assume that is yet another dwarven trait?”

“Aye,” Thorin mutters, before an awkward silence fills your kitchen, only interrupted by Freylin’s shout for vanilla. You turn back to the milk, swirling it lightly with a spoon before taking out the vanilla pod. “What is a courting braid like, for hobbits?”

You dry your hands, dusting them of pastry crumbs before reaching up to your long curls. The weight of them is familiar and it’s vaguely annoying to release the front strands from their tight hobbit knot – a braided thing, most likely long-ago inspired by the decorative patches you’d seen on dwarven clothes. Brushing it through with your fingers, you focus, shutting your eyes as you reach up on either side, deftly braiding two loose braids around either side of your head, reaching down to the back before you tie them together briefly with a handy piece of rope. Then, you take a few strands of hair from your large bundle, plaiting them simply, then using them each as markers for a larger plait, undoing the rope up at the base of your neck and using it instead as a tie-off.

When you’re finished, you turn, letting Thorin see. He’s silent as you run your hand down it, wondering if you’d done it right. You can barely remember. Your mother had taken the entire winter and spring to teach you all the braids until you could do it in under a minute, rather than the something-around-ten you’d just taken now.

“In hobbit courting, you accept courtship from your suitor and make this braid. Then, you’re expected to put the flowers so get from your suitor in the gaps. It’s hard to be unique, so when someone comes up with a braid full of unusual flowers, you’re the talk of the Shire. New trends pop up after that and it’s a cycle. My father gave my mother a semi-average bouquet – he got a little talked about when she wore his flowers, though. The Baggins’ Yavanna Patches aren’t forgotten
“easily.”

“Yavanna Patch?”

“We have one growing above us,” you remind, before sighing, lowering your arms. The braid rests on your back, heavy and long, reaching the small of your back, a feat seeing as your hair was only a little longer than that, usually. *I should have had this,* you think as you fish Freylin’s milk out of the now-lukewarm water, mixing it again before drying the outside, passing it over to the dwobbit. “Do the dwarrow have a similar courting braid?”

“We have multiple.”

“We have three,” you add, causing his eyebrows to knit briefly before he sits down again. “After the second stage of courting starts and you become semi-official, it’s braided in a circle around your head – we call it a crown braid. Third stage braids aren’t quite braids – they’re three circular ones, level with your ears. Like rosettes.”

“Aye, I think I understand,” Thorin nods, watching Freylin drink her milk as you brush over your braid again. You wish you could keep this. You sigh, reaching to undo your it, but Thorin catches your eye and you go still.

“Yes?”

Thorin swallows, audible in the quiet kitchen. Then he places Freylin on the belted child-chair, strapping her in after a little observation of the ties. You toy with the end of your hair, watching him carefully as he comes over, taking a plain silver bead from the braid nearest his ear. He holds it up, stepping close to you – closer than a friend might, or even a relative. Your clothes brush and you feel hot, hearing a light thud.

“Uh, um, Thorin, what-”

He interrupts you, “Lady Bluebell, you are, first and foremost, the mother of my child. Truthfully, unless you made an impact upon my life in another way, I might have passed you over. Despite your beauty, despite your personality – which I have come to appreciate over the time we have spent together – I still might have passed you over. You are a hobbit and I am a dwarf. This is my courting bead and should I engrave it and place it here…” he motions to the braid closest to his face, brushing over a space between two bronze beads, at the level of his eyes, “it would inform those that looked for it that I were courting a female. T’would be lower down, t’were it a man.”

“Oh,” you breathe, gripping your hair tightly. You glance over to Freylin, who is falling asleep at her chair, milk finished and cup on the ground. That was what the thud was for.

“I would court you, if you so chose.”

You snap your eyes back to Thorin’s, mouth opening and closing, sound escaping your mouth but no words. You breathe in deeply, calming yourself.

“And if I accept your proposal, how would it work? Dwarrow are different from hobbits in these things. Would we go by both customs? Our own customs? Neither? Backwards?”

“I would think dwaven custom easy to integrate with hobbit.” Thorin says, bringing his bead up to your head, against one of the braids against your head. “When we would court, you would get your own bead, to customise according to my personality. If you have no skill in metal-working, do not worry. Ask and my sister should do it for you, or Dwalin.”
“Not Fili or Kili?”

“Nay, they are dwarflings still. Fili is only just learning how to carve anything other than wood.” Thorin shakes his head, “and I would not trust him with your bead, my Bilbo.”

You stomach does flip-flops. My Bilbo, oh my. “Well then, I must meet Dis.”

Thorin gives a wry smile, “Aye then, you must.”

You nod and keep nodding, your thoughts going a mile a minute before you finally stop and reach up, hands clutching at Thorin’s sleeves to pull you up far enough to reach his lips. He meets you just as you reach your limit, height-wise, lips a familiar steel against your own. You sneak in your tongue experimentally, something you hadn’t done that near three-year ago. You hadn’t even kissed that near three-year ago, caught up in sex rather than connection.

Which is why, obviously, you get a surprise when you feel cool metal and make a noise, yanking back.

“What is that in your mouth?” You question, startled. His eyebrows rise quickly, before he lets out a laugh along with a happy smile.

“Tis a piercing – I thought you liked them? You seemed a mite fascinated with those in my chest and under-parts that long night.”

You make another noise, mortified. “I thought- I- I’d never seen them before! I just didn’t expect one to be in your mouth!”

He grins, poking out his tongue, wiggling it, the silver curved bar studded with dark crystal. You make another noise of shock before he leans over, pressing another kiss to you. You let him, before leaning back, hitting his arm.

“Allright, I get it, I get it! Now I get to tell you something about me you didn’t know before.”

“And what is that, my lady love?” Thorin asks, still grinning. You smirk, lifting your chin and feeling a heavy, joyful feeling rise up in you, a badger in want for a kill.

“You’re going to have to go to the Thain of the Shire – our equivalent of King, oh mighty dwarf-lord – and beg permission to continue our courtship, because he’s the only one in the entirety of the Shire ranked higher than me and my grandfather at that.” It feels good to see his smile drop, a properly dumbfounded look of shocked consideration appearing on his bearded visage.

“You- Fili said- we talked- why do I have to talk to him? It is your decision, yes?”

“Yes, but it’s a custom that you have to take part in, or our entire courtship won’t count. Then we’d just be eloping.”

A vaguely panicked look. “But I’m a king, surely I don’t have to-”

“You could be Eru Ilúvatar and you’d still have to ask for permission to court me,” you declare, before leaning up to kiss him again gently, continuing softly. “It’s alright. He doesn’t actually have to say yes. He could say no and banish you from the Shire, but as long as I say I want to, we’re courting. It’s just a stuffy old tradition that has to observed. It’s a courting law coupled with a hobbit law that says only men can be Thain, so unless all my male relatives die and Fortinbras doesn’t say otherwise, it’ll stay in place.”
“Oh,” Thorin mutters, “In dwarrow society, everything is complex, but hobbits are very different.”

“We’re unique, just like you – Yavanna is our Gardener, as Aulë is your Mahal.”

“I like hearing you speak in dwarvish as much as I like you speaking in your wind-speech,” Thorin admits, reaching up to cup your face. “You truly are extraordinary.”

“No, I’m not, I’m just odd – and we call it the Greentongue.”

“Odd, extraordinary,” Thorin shakes his head, “You will be mine as I will be yours.”

“Hopefully.” You take his other hand, holding it tightly, feeling the rough callouses and scars. “What are the trials of dwarven courtship?”

“There are seven gifts of extravagance, the meeting of blood-kin, thirteen vows and a- there is a word in dwarvish that I would translate to something similar to touching foreheads softly. It is a sign of great respect, the softer the more intimate, the harder the more casual.”

“Like this-” you let go of his hand, before gently touching your fingers “-but with foreheads?”

“Aye, like that. Then, with no less than eleven witnesses, you repeat your fourteen vows and sign legal documents.” He pauses and you tilt your head slightly, encouraging him to speak. There are a few long moments, before, with a sense of finality, Thorin speaks. “Then, there is a final secret vow, the most sacred of all vows and a blessing upon the one that hears it.”

“What kind of vow is that sacred?” You murmur in confusion.

Thorin brushes his thumb over your nose and lip before lowering his hand and stepping back, bowing – then going from the kitchen, leaving the vow a mystery.
The Yavanna Patch above Bag-End attracts much attention over the course of the next few months. You manage to get Thorin to help you tend to it a whopping two times a day while he stays with you through from second-month to fourth-month and it shows when he disappears. You wonder what to do when the sprouts that fill the entire Patch start to brown in sadness. You speak to them in the Greentongue and add in what Khuzdul words you know, mostly adad and amad, along with the occasional yásûn and yásith when you tell them about dwarven-hobbit courting and the soon-to-be’s.

Your aunt Mirabella is the one to offer you advice as you weed the Patch in the summer under the hot sun. She tilts back her straw hat, tucking a greying curl of hair behind her ear, speaking softly.

“Dwarves are Aulë’s creations, aren’t they, Bilbo?”

“Yes,” you say shortly.

“Then why don’t you give them something belonging to Aulë? Don’t dwarves crave treasure, gems and gold?”

Her words inspire a flurry in you. The Baggins family has all sorts of possessions – the occasional gem included. You tuck the small ruby chips you find in a bag, hidden behind the ale casks inbetween where green stalks meet the ground, watching them bloom to life over the next few hours with a joyful heart. You scour your home for everything you can find – any diamond, any ruby or emerald. You find pity few.

“Metal,” Primula says next, before handing over a satchel of scraps she’d hand-picked from the floor of the seldom-used smithy down at Bywater. You are more hesitant to tuck small shards of steel and silver with your Planted Fauntlings, but you straighten your back and say to yourself, they’re dwobbits before showing Freylin and placing her beside her siblings’ Yavanna Patch.

When she doesn’t hesitate to tuck the metal in the soft earth they’re buried in, you join in with vigour.

However, not everyone is so supportive. You get into an actual physical shuffle with Lobelia when she, out loud for all to hear, wonders whether dwobbits can be grown in Yavanna Patches at all. She sports red scratches on her cheek for a whole week and Fortinbras gives you both a stern talking-to, though you’re lucky to have most of Hobbiton on your side regarding that matter – even Otho shakes his head at his steaming wife because you don’t insult someone’s Planted Children. You just don’t.

A few days after, however, the green sprouts change, growing and transforming into different stalks. You recognise asters and delicate harebells on one side, neither with bloomed or coloured buds, still simply green. The same happens on the other side, but instead of aster and harebell, there are rose stalks and marigold buds. Asphodel is the one to spot the forget-me-nots hiding below the marigold greens.

“People are wondering,” Asphodel says after you’ve finished fawning over them. “You Planted them in early autumn, before the harvest festival. You took a perfect year, apparently – at least, that’s what my mother says.”

“Aunt Mirabella would know,” you nod your head, having a feeling she was right. Your mother probably told you at some point – most likely when she told you about her longest break away from
adventuring. She had stayed home a full year and a half before breaking away to Bree for a month, when you were very small.

“You were pregnant for two years having Freylin.”

“I remember,” you mutter, shaking your head at the reminder. “Trust me, six months is blissful compared to twenty-four. Everyone thought I was insane, not letting Aunt Don and Aunty Pansy encourage labour.”

“That would have been a bad idea,” Asphodel states quietly, giving her a silent nod as you work a weed out, tucking a dislodged shard of some silvered metal that you didn’t think was silver back into the ground. “He has to come back soon, Bilbo.”

You stop, leaning on your hands, looking down at your Yavanna Patch—your children’s Yavanna Patch.

“I know.”

“He has to, Bilbo – the Elder Planted are already convening small meetings every second day. Aunt Mirabella was invited to the latest one and she told me.”

“She would, all the Planted have to get a vote when it concerns another Planted,” you whisper, “I don’t want them to come near me. I can do this. Thorin will come back and help me.”

“I know he will. He just isn’t here now, Bilbo,” Asphodel comes down to sit beside you, knees brushing your thigh. Her hand comes up to clasp around your upper arm. “Bilbo- Bluebell, you know you can ask us. The Tooks will come to your aid. We love you so much, Bluebell, we will come.”

You let them come – ask them to come. Donnamira is the most bold, looking around Bag-End and snorting at the lack of hobbits, before sending Hugo to get some tweens rounded up to run messages to the other Tooks-by-blood, calling them to Hobbiton. You tend your garden with two other people at a time, mostly your aunts and uncles, or your close cousins – like Asphodel and Sigismond, Sigismond who’d been the one when he was little to never get your name right, the one who first called you Bilbo instead of Bluebell. He’s only a fauntling, barely if at all a tween and he looks at the Yavanna Patch in awe, pressing his hand to the ground, between the flower stalks, whispering in the Greentongue.

It’s enough, for a time. The fact that Thorin comes at the end of autumn and stays over winter is a big help, but one visit a year, no matter how long – five months is long, it’s a brilliant amount of time considering Thorin is an actual king with actual duties – is not enough.

Thorin himself gets confused by how people act when he’s there. Your young Took cousins, Sigismond one of your most frequent visitors, don’t say much whenever they share a space with him, but are quick to start dissuading you from letting him stay at Bag-End when he’s not in hearing-range. Asphodel is one of the more polite and frankly, you’re lucky she can control her sister, because Primula is either over-enthusiastic about Thorin living on Bagshot Row or an absolute idiot, wanting to start a fight with her catty and downright rude comments.

Honestly, you’re horrified at her behaviour sometimes.

“Have I done something to offend your friends, my lady?” Thorin asks one day the second winter he comes, after Saradoc has been especially caustic. You shrug, inwardly panicking – you don’t want Thorin to panic at the thought of anyone else Tending to his children, you’d been traumatised
enough by the thought of the Elder Planted ordering other Planted to help, not to mention naming you a Greenwife at the same time.

“No, no, nothing you’ve done, not really.”

“No really?” He says slowly, stepping forwards as you turn hurriedly to the stove. “What have I not done, then? I know that I come at the wrong time of year to give you flowers and that I don’t have the artistic knowledge of their meanings as I do gems.”

“No, it’s fine, the bouquet things…” you breathe in and out, before continuing, calmer, “You’re leaving come the beginning of spring again, like last year, yes?”

“Aye.”

“Well, extend your trip one week, two weeks if you can. My uncles will help you with your bouquets and you’ll be able to bring one to me every afternoon for two weeks and hopefully, you can get that out of the way before you leave again,” you wring your hands in your tea-towel, smile slightly strained.

Thorin eyes you, vaguely suspecting, “And what of what I have not done?”

You struggle to come up with something on the spot, but luckily your cranberry pie is right behind Thorin’s shoulder, on the windowsill and you get inspired. “They don’t think your baking will be up to hobbit-standard. I mean, the second stage of courting is- uh, important, yes, very important. It’s all about proving you can provide suitable dishes and, uh…you aren’t quite a hobbit, so they- they doubt you can make a proper pie and suchlike commodities. Food is important.”

“Food is important…” Thorin repeats.

“Yes,” you breathe, relieved, “food is important. Do you do much of your own personal cooking in the Blue Mountains?”

“A little,” Thorin shrugs his head sideways, uncertain, “but if I am supposed to make something like your baked goods, my lady love, I… I am afraid I would disappoint, like your relatives would believe.”

You feel bad for pointing out a flaw in his skillset to get around admitting you’d needed help with your children’s Yavanna Patch. But you smile through your guilt, leaning up to kiss him softly.

“Then we’ll have to teach you. I have top-notch gardening skills and my pie-fillings are the best in Hobbiton, but I am not the expert in pastries and other things that you think I am. My cousin, Asphodel, has the best tasting pastry I’ve ever known and Primula is excellent when it comes to forming a base and lids for meat pies- oh, I am rubbish with pie-lids. Even Sigismond is better at pie-lids than I am.” You hum, eyes focusing on blank space as you imagine all the kinds of dishes you could teach Thorin how to make. “We’ll have to use my own vegetables for soups – but onions from Gaffer, my onions haven’t kept very well over the winter, despite those renovations you did on my cold cellar.”

“You look like a craft-wed,” Thorin says introspectively. You blink back into focus, looking to him. “The craft-wed of Dwarrowkind do not marry or take a partner, too focused on their craft to have any other personal responsibilities.”

“Oh, very good for them,” you say, before Freylin reminds you she exists as she calls out for Thorin from the outside. “You’d better see what she’s dug up again.”
“She does like digging, doesn’t she,” Thorin detaches from you, walking to the back door to your garden, where Freylin is undoubtedly waiting with some form of trinket to show him.

Thorin goes off to your relatives every few days after that, studying flowers and flower language. Your uncle Hildifons sends you letters about his progress and the hijinks he somehow gets into, eventually informing you that the Tooks are teaching Thorin how to cook. You, Primula, Asphodel and Aniseela from down the road are teaching Thorin to bake properly – he’s taken to cupcake decoration very well, in truth. He can pipe butter-icing better than you can.

Eventually spring comes and Thorin gives you your first bouquet. You think it lovely – full of blue hyacinth and forsythias. Freylin helps tuck them into your courting braid the next morning, Thorin bringing you another bouquet the same day, of pretty purple and blue windflowers. You smile and the next day they too are added to your braid.

It goes on. You receive a bundle of crested irises the next day and five different colours of marigold to finish the first week. The new week begins with saffron crocuses after Freylin causes a joyful food-fight in your kitchen, the day after fritillarias and then pink phlox. Quince blossoms come the second fourth day, snowdrops the second fifth. You blush at the deep red carnations he gives you and kiss him lightly for it, to the scandalous noises of the other hobbits in the market.

The second seventh day, you’re given a bouquet with every flower you’d received, a single full-bloomed rose in the centre.

“What happens now?” Thorin questions as you bring your face close to the sweet-smelling bunch, breathing in deeply, your spare hand resting gently in the soil of the Yavanna Patch. Thorin sits close to you, feet brushing your knees and Freylin, bless your daughter, works in the Yavanna Patch, dirt on the face, weeding with hard-earned dexterity – Yavanna’s magic kept the Patch alive all year round, strong and powerful.

Meaning, lots of weeding, especially seeing as all they take are a few hours to grow back.

“I change my courting hair for three days, wearing your last bouquet in a six-strand braid, then I take it all out and wear the crown braid every day until stage two is over.”

“Stage two is this food stage, aye? The one I have been learning and practicing for?”

“Yes,” you reach up to your hair, where you have a bead in your hair. “Though, mayhaps we can extend it until I meet your kin, then we might do it properly.”

“Meet my kin?” Thorin frowns a little, “Gifts come first.”

“Then bring gifts with you, on your next visit,” you place the bouquet to the side, kneeling up and over, leaning on his shoulders, letting him press your heads together gently, holding him there as he thinks deeply.

“My ghivashel, I would not be doing things correctly if I were to give you courting gifts over so little amount of time. Five weeks between every gift is custom – I am not here long enough. Meeting kin comes after the gifting stage.”

“In the Shire, they are at the same time,” you murmur, “The back and forth of goods – you share your courting partner’s food with your family, gaining their approval just as much as your partner’s. Mayhaps, this next winter you come, you give me one gift a month and then next winter, you bring your family and give me the last few while we exchange courting goods.”

“That is sound, however my sister would think me most disturbed should I tell her such a plan. She
would insist on waiting somewhere else in the Shire until the last two gifts were given.”

“That’s fine – so long as Kili and Fili can visit Bag-End,” you press a gentle kiss to his lips before leaning back, hands reaching to your braid. “Freylin, help mama take her flowers out, please?”

“…Yes, mama,” Freylin says after a moment, coming to attention. She crawls over, wiping her dirty hands on her gardening dress before reaching up to take a snowdrop from your braid. You look to Thorin, who stares at you both with a familiar warmth and subtle awe.

“Is it against dwarvish custom to undo another’s braids before becoming family?” You probe, getting a hesitant look, before you motion him to help. His eyes widen slightly – you wonder if you’ve said something wrong, but then he shuffles across the grass slowly, moving your bouquet to half-rest on the Yavanna Patch. You stare at it, sucking in a breath as you see the change in the bouquet – the flowers swelling, blooming brighter, happier.

In the Greentongue, you hear a whisper, the words so quiet you can’t hear, but the Yavanna Patch itself shifts in the non-existent breeze and as Thorin touches your head, hands slipping down your braid to pluck an iris from its perch, the first rose blooms – a beautiful white tea with dark pink edging.

“Thorin, look,” you whisper and he looks over, physically pausing before making a noise of interest.

“A flower really did bloom, like you said it would.”

“Yes,” you say, watching, waiting…but no other flowers bloom. “If one blooms though, so shall they all. Yavanna is taking her time in Sprouting them.”

“Aren’t they already sprouted? They are above ground, are they not?”

You shake your head, “Of course, the flowers are sprouted, though not bloomed. I meant the two Sproutlings underneath – that’s why I was annoyed those years ago, when I dropped two blood spots into the Patch. Two take more time to grow.”

“I see. So, in any circumstance, you would have only dropped one spot?”

You whip your head around to face him, eyes wide, “Of course! Not that it’s bad that there’s two – it makes it even more special! The Green Lady simply has more to think about, by our supposed wanting of two. It’s a blessing, I’ve told you before-”

“Calm yourself, my beloved Bilbo,” Thorin interrupts you, hand coming to rest on your cheek, “I meant no harm in it. An accident two might have been and longer for them we have to wait, but my Maker’s wife is to be respected and so I shall do so. Two flowers – Sproutlings, you called them, yes?”

“Sproutlings, yes,” you mumble, chewing on your tongue briefly. Thorin smiles widely, leaning down to kiss you. Reciprocating, it’s only when Freylin grumbles, calling you both icky in Greentongue, that you let out a laugh and reply, telling her that is was their icky ways that caused her to be born. Despite his unawareness of the conversation, Freylin’s horrified face still makes Thorin laugh.

Thorin is gone when spring truly arrives, the last snows up on the high hills north of Bindbole Woods and Greenfields disappeared from sight. It’s almost dizzying how fast the Tooks all arrive again to help with the Yavanna Patch but this time, they’re kinder about Thorin than before. You think it would be hard not to, considering how much time he spent learning how to cook and bake like a proper hobbit and how he learned and memorised Nana Elladollia’s entire flower journal in
under two months.

You’re especially happy when a letter comes in summertime from Thorin, addressed to both you and Freylin in dark, blocky Westron. Thorin talks of his safe journey home, of how he knows the route well by now and that Balin told him to write, if he was missing you both – something he realised he could do now that he actually knew your entire address. He even leaves one for you to send letters back to and you’re embarrassed, almost, by what it is.

“His Majesty Thorin Oakenshield, King Under the Mountain and King of All Kings, son of Thror, son of Thrain, descendant of Durin the Deathless, of Ered Luin, the Blue Mountains’ – whopping big title he’s got there, barely even a proper holding afterwards,” Donnamira scoffs after reading it out, your cousin Rugo snickering into his tea. Donnamira doesn’t hesitate to whack him over the back of his head. “Quiet, you little imp – don’t think I haven’t read those little epistles you send to Phloxfee Mossmole before the postman collects our correspondences.”

“Aunty Don?” Freylin frowns, eyebrows drawing together just like her father’s do when he’s thinking hard. “What’s an epistles?”

“Epistle, plural epistles,” you correct, before Donnamira laughs, explaining as Rugo goes red.

“Epistles are love-letters to the ones you want to court, darling – and I caught cousin Rugo sending multiple letters to a young hobbit lass his age. They seem to want to be courting soon.”

Freylin looks to Rugo, wide-eyed, “You’re going to court like my mama and adad?”

“Aye, maybe, me and Phlox have been talking,” he says, embarrassed as the fauntling rushes over to him, leaning on his knees, asking questions about his Phlox girl. You and Donnamira watch in amusement before conversing about her between yourselves, Donnamira noting that she came from an off-shoot branch of Lily and the Breeman blacksmith’s family.

“There’s a quarter of Man in her – her own mother almost two feet taller than Lily herself and let me tell you something, Lily’s mostly Fallohide and was taller than you are before she shrunk with age!”

You raise an eyebrow, knowing you were one of the tallest hobbits in Hobbiton currently, if not the Shire – your mother and most of your uncles were of a similar stature, but you still neared three foot eight, though certainly passing three foot seven. Bullroarer Took, one of the most infamously tall hobbits in recorded history and your close ancestor had been four foot five and could even ride a man’s horse. For Lily of Bree to once be taller than you…

“No wonder she married a man,” it slips out before you can help yourself and you put a hand to your mouth immediately, eyes widening. Donnamira lets out another laugh.

“Cheeky, all Baggins are cheeky, I’m telling you now – Frey’ll be worse, I think, with how you’re raising her.”

You try to change her mind on yours and your daughter’s behaviour with no luck, shaking your head as you pour another cup of tea. Later, you sit with Freylin and Donnamira at the Yavanna Patch, finishing your careful weeding around the tea rose and you get to see close-up as a purple aster blooms in the opposite side of the Patch.

Slowly, over the spring, summer and autumn flowers bloom, one each new month. When Thorin arrives again the next winter, a little later than usual bearing his gifts, an entire square foot of harebell’s bloom to life. Thorin is enthralled by the sight, witnessing it for himself while your back is turned.
“It’s a strange sight, beautiful yet odd,” he says later when you’re curled up into his chest, hand resting in the short bristles of his beard. He’s let it grow a little longer from when he first completely shaved it, that summer he’d arrived to find you with Fili and Kili, when he’d discovered Freylin’s existence. Your little girl is going to turn four come springtime, a month after Thorin is due to leave for Ered Luin again and you…

“I’m turning thirty-three this autumn,” you whisper to yourself. “I’ll be a proper hobbit.”

“…would it be appropriate for me to be there?” Thorin questions, causing you to blink out of your slight daze of remembrance.

“Oh, Thorin, you couldn’t – my birthday is two months before you usually arrive! I’d hate to tear you away from your people for so much of the year.”

“I could leave after a shorter time,” he mutters, “then depart earlier, in summer. Then I might bring Dis and my nephews, maybe even…” You know that he wants to say Frerin, but you have heard more than just short mentions from Kili and Fili now, you know that his warriors mind sickness and night-terrors are not something you’d be able to ignore.  

“No,” you say firmly – quietly, but firmly. Thorin gives a short nod before you both fall silent.

That summer you know everyone is preparing a surprise party. There are too many of the type of whispers, whispers that you came to know when you were actually part of the planning committee in your tween years. You wonder if it’ll be big, or if it’ll be small – you’re a Baggins, no matter how much you associate with the Tooks and Baggins’ are the Baggins. You’re in charge of all the land of Hobbiton all the way to Needlehole and then back again all the way to the river running between Bindbole and Brockenborings; one day, Freylin will be in charge of all that. Or maybe your Planted Sproutlings will. Damn the patriarchy.

They seem like they’re going to turn at any time, rise up from the ground and breathe fresh air. People think that they might appear on your birthday or sometime after, when Thorin was in the Shire again – Yavanna apparently won’t let an underage hobbit look after three fauntlings all on her own, or so Lobelia sends a rumour around. You hate that hobbit with a fiery hatred but you leave it be. She’s wrong. You know she’s wrong. You put your hand in the Yavanna Patch, pressing down against wet earth, between flower stems and sprouts, feeling the tiny shards of metal beneath your palm and you know that they aren’t going to turn this year. They aren’t going to bloom.

But it’s not long off, you think in the privacy of your own mind, when Freylin chatters to Saradoc about dwarrow living longer and needing more time, her own excuses that you don’t need to tell her to say. Truthfully, she’s most likely right, however there’s something else, you think.

You stare at Freylin, methodically pinpointing all her dwarven features and you think of Aulë, the dwarrows Mahal – and you think that he’s with you, sometimes, rather than Yavanna. Heat from the fire is soothing, even when you know you’re too close and every piece of dwarrow-made utility in your smial shines in the light. Please, Gardener and Smith, you think in the sacred Greentongue, praying to your Valar. Please, just give me a sign, something to have faith in.

Your birthday passes by and Thorin isn’t there like he said he’d be – he doesn’t even come that winter but the Yavanna Patch stays ever-green, even when you fall ill from cold snows that give you nightmares, nightmares that Thorin had chased away with his dwarven heat at night and you can’t Tend your beloved Planted children for a full entire month.

“They’re still there, mama, they’re doing fine,” says Freylin gently after coming in after dark, hands
dirt-full and scraped. You shakenly tend to her cuts, worrying over your daughter’s health even as, in the back of your mind, you think of blood and Planted and dirt and Yavanna and Mahal-

The Yavanna Patch thrives without you and Freylin grins before showing you how she’d kept her siblings alive while you were bedridden, uncovering a rock from underneath the ground, a dwarven rune written in blood traced upon it.

“I dreamed of a man like adad, mama, of Allfather the Maker, who told me how to help them stay warm.”

Aulë gives you faith in Freylin and you truly believe in the Green Lady’s Smith.
Dis once was a wanderer by choice, rather than necessity. She’s meandered across the western plains, visiting village and townstead, searching. Searching for what, she hadn’t known, not until she was with Kili and felt the draw of her forge once more, hidden away in the depths of the Blue Mountains. The need to feel cool steel and blistering hot jewels didn’t abate until well after her youngest boy grew past five.

Now, she can feel the call to go east again, an itch in her bones and fingertips. She feels like she’s been shot with lightning, nerves tingling with disquiet of her solemn, steadfast existence. Dis though knows she can’t leave – not now, not when Thorin could potentially have the seven armies of the dwarves at his beck and call. The truth of Thorin fathering a child in the Shire had spread quickly from the Blue Mountains, not helped by Thorin’s proud proclamations of how his two treasures of treasures were to be his Queen and Princess.

Oh, Dis so wanted to punch her brother when she heard, but then again, she can’t exactly talk, can she – not with how she’s produced not one, but two extra male heirs to Durin’s line.

Her brother – oldest and most idiotic of her two u’nadad – doesn’t tell her where they are, however, making for many a screaming match. Fili and Kili know that Bilbo and Freylin – oh how that name causes her heart to ache – but they cannot tell her anything past ‘the Shire’ and ‘Needlehole’. Dis knows those names, only twelve year before that she took up with a voluptuous hobbit woman of the fine farmlands there. The only problem is that Belladonna had been travelling herself at the time and Dis had never entered her homeland, let alone came anywhere nearer to it than Bree, to her knowledge.

Dis wants to meet her sister-in-law-to-be, before there’s to be a true meeting of kin. She wants to know that this person isn’t a thief in the night – that she isn’t lying about her daughter’s heritage and that she isn’t just in it for a crown. Thorin is so caught up in it all – he smiles! – and he does not seem to see the dangers that she does. Dis knows other dwarf talk of such things in the quiet nights, her contacts in the shadowed guilds telling her whispers. On all accounts, Bluebell ‘Bilbo’ Baggins is Thorin’s perfect match – his One, even.

On all accounts but her own.

When the end of summer comes that fourth year and Thorin does not leave, sending many, many letters of apology before the snows cause the messages to stop being sent out, let alone received, Dis makes the decision in early autumn. Come spring, she will secret herself, Kili and Fili – and perhaps one of Bifur’s cousins, for good measure and protection – out of Ered Luin in a caravan, heading for the Shire under the guise of travelling to Bree.

The winter is spent planning – but it still comes as a surprise when it shouldn’t have, when Frerin questions where she’s planning on taking the heirs to Erebor.

Dis squares her jaw, glaring at him. “On a holiday. Is that so much a surprise, what with my own travels?”

“If you were growing restless, you would leave Fili and Kili in the care of Thorin or some others – your so-called ‘friends’,” Frerin’s lip curls briefly before he limps out of the doorway, further into her chambers. “You’re taking them somewhere they’ll want to be. The only other place that could be is with this Bilbo woman Thorin’s making a life with – shame on you for meeting her before tis proper, namad.”
“Shut up, you know it’s not like that,” Dis snaps, glaring at him differently, disgruntled. “Why are you so interested? What can be so intriguing about my plans that can pull you from the depths of an ale cask?”

“Shut up,” Frerin snaps back at her in the same way she had before, reaction the same. “I want to go with you.”

“Absolutely not.”

“If I don’t get to go with you, then I’ll go visit her myself,” Frerin says, causing Dis to make a noise of disbelief.

“As if anyone would let you out of the city! You’re a drunken wreck who can’t be bothered to replace his own prosthetic leg properly-”

“To be quite fair, it’s not as if we have the resources to spare,” Frerin interrupts, knocking the leg-shaped block of steel against a nearby chest. “You’re just vane, sister. You want me to have a proper prosthetic like Dain.”

“Dain at least has some pride and decorum, unlike you,” Dis seethes, pointing at his chest, “who is not coming with us.”

There’s a back and forth. Frerin wins.

The journey is smoother than Dis would have thought it to be, but Frerin is a part of that, rather than a reason it isn’t. To Dis’ surprise, he’d recruited his own band of followers – namely, Gloin, his son Gimli and daughter Gimris, his wife Kimris and a green-haired, dark-skinned Longbeard by the name of Famul.

“It is an honour to ride with my Warriors Equal’s caravan,” the strange dwarf says and it is all Dis needs to know he’s from Azanulbizar, most likely the dwarf that Frerin takes company with – the one that saved his life that fateful day. For to be a Warrior Equal is no small thing – it is more than a shield-brother, more than even a One. It is a name given to a pair of dwarrow by Mahal himself in dreams.

The Shire comes into view at the beginning of summer after two and a half months of travel, when the sun shines down hot on their faces. Dis’ pale skin is a soft gold under it’s wrath, as is Fili’s and Frerin’s – Kili hides under the tent with Gloin’s family, a thick grey sheet of oiled leather lifted over the back of the cart. His cheeks and nose are a bright pink and Dis does not want to deal with sun sickness in anyone in their caravan, let alone her own son. Only Durin knew how much he’d whine and complain, or worse, how much he’d hide how bad it truly was and only make it worse.

The hobbits of the Shire, however, seem to thrive in the heat. In many a garden, as they get closer to the centre of the hobbit homeland, they can see small men and women sunbathing and eating many a treat and snack. Dis even feels herself start to salivate as she gets a glimpse of a glistening strawberry tart with a dollop of cream just as big on top. The guide they picked up at the border cheerfully whistles, saying hello and good-day to every person they see, every so often glancing back to Fili and Kili. Dis can see he recognises them, even if they don’t recognise him.

“This is Hobbiton,” he declares once they reach the other side of a bridge, the market having basically stopped to a halt at their appearance. Dis sees them eyeing Frerin and Famul with their warriors tattoos and braided hair, weapons visible on their person, passing over the seemingly-unarmed Gloin but halting and whispering at the sight of Dis herself and Kimris.
“Master Thorin?” One hobbit scratches his hair under his straw hat, small eyes squinting, “Are you wearing dresses now?”

“Thorin is our brother,” Frerin grunts in a remarkable impression of said nadad, in opposition to his true personality, which is much more like Fili and Kili combined than Dis and Thorin Oakenshield himself. “We are here to visit our niece and eventual good-sister, with some friends of our own. This hobbit has been a good guide but has already informed us he has to return to his patrol – if anyone could direct us to Bag-End of Bagshot Row, we would be most grateful.”

There’s a short silence before a haughty-looking woman steps forwards, sneering at them all in a manner Dis finds most unpleasant.

“Where is the great dwarf king, then? Bilbo’s had an awful time without him – you’d think her a proper Greenwife, with all the help she’s been given.” There’s something in that, other than the obvious blame, that causes Dis alarm. The woman is petty, jealous even, but her voice is full of protective fire.

“Who are you to question Thorin’s absence?” Gloin unfortunately yelps, “He’s our King of All Kings – he’s a little busy!”

“Family is far more important than any inheritance,” the woman sniffs, raising her chin and the other hobbits around her seem to begrudgingly agree.

“Aye,” says another, with a large nose but kinder blue eyes, “and if we’re agreeing with Lobelia on something regarding Mistress Baggins, then surely there is something actually wrong with Thorin’s absence.”

“The Elder Planted have been fighting about it for years now, enough on the subject – if you aren’t Planted Hobbits, you don’t have any say,” someone in the crowd says firmly, getting murmurs of agreement before Dis decides she’s had enough of the confusion, just as she sees a new hobbit enter the fray from behind everyone else.

“Welcome strangers – who might you be?” The new hobbit greets cheerfully, causing what seems to be a hurricane – the noise of wind and whispers echoing through Dis’ ears like a thunder storm, but without the physical or visible dangers. The hobbit recoils immediately, seemingly hearing whatever Dis does, but then she glares.

“SILENCE!” The hurricane stops, the market falling to quiet again. “Frankly, you should all be ashamed of yourselves. Any of those that live in my boundaries should be even more so.” The Hobbit stands tall, walking calmly through the crowd, which parts, moving, all except the first hobbit who had stopped. “Lobelia.”

“Blue.”

‘Blue’ scowls, “You haven’t had a right to call me that since we were fauntlings together. Now move out of the way and let the dwarrow through – I shall welcome them where you did not.”

Lobelia huffs before flouncing off, brushing her dark hair back from her as equally-pale skin. ‘Blue’ rolls her eyes before looking to their convoy, stopping on Dis for half a second before becoming visibly nervous. She grasps her skirts, curtseying neatly.

“Your Highnesses,” she greets, before looking back, past the her, causing Dis to stiffen lightly – only for a sudden shriek to echo from Kili that has Dis’ heart beating a hundred leagues a second.

“BILBO!”
Dis’ eyes widen, her sons rushing from their places, Kili jumping down from the cart neatly as Fili makes his way to her, arms wrapping around her neck tightly.

“Miss Bilbo, we’ve really missed you.”

“Oh- oh Fili, it’s been years, you’ve grown so much!” Bilbo, her brother’s hobbit, the mother of her niece – Dis stares, watching as she runs a hand down Fili’s golden mane, reaching an arm out to take Kili’s hug too. “You’re so tall! You’re nearly a tween!”

“What is a tween?” Dis questions, slightly lost for words. Bilbo looks up and over, smile fading slightly.

“A tween is a child who is not yet an adult, but can do adult things. Merry meet, Princess Dis.”

“Merry meet, Bilbo Baggins.” Dis glances around, noticing how the other hobbits had yet to get back to their own business, still watching – some even whispering to others, their eyes locked on the spectacle. “Don’t you all have better things to do than just stand around all day?” Some jerk into focus, seemingly slightly ashamed, but others simply look at her, whispering all the louder.

Bilbo rolls her eyes again, before releasing Kili and Fili, “Saming, have a barrel of fish brought up to Bag-End and three sacks of potatoes, plus my usual weekly fare – oh and Freylin especially asked for sweet-sugar cotton, if any’s been rung for the spring yet.”

“Just made a batch this morning – my boy’s twirling it now, see?” The hobbit Dis assumes is Saming motions to a small boy even smaller than a dwarfling on a strange contraption that turns a wheel inside a glass box, where a white substance is furling. “Maybe even the dwarves would like some, eh?”

“I think their parents would kill you if their children became even more hyperactive,” Bilbo jokes, before motioning Dis to come. “This way, along the road to the Hill.”

Bilbo leads them up the dirt track, awfully quiet. Dis signs to Kimris in Iglishmêk behind her back, asking the other dwarf woman her opinion on the woman in front of her and gets mixed reviews from various other dwarrow in the party, before Kimris says that she looks to be rather important among her own kind, if rather strange in comparison, when seeing them speak to each other like they had just beforehand.

“This is Bagshot Row,” Bilbo interrupts their conversation, moving to the left of the path- and it’s as if a new road appears out of nowhere, like finding a sudden bend to somewhere else on a straight road. Gloin is the loudest in his surprise but to Dis’ surprise, it’s Kili and Fili who mimic the hobbit woman they still walk beside, lips quirking sharply in a triple movement before neutral expressions return. Dis narrows her eyes, wondering what secrets her boys know.

“Bag-End!” Kili chirrups once they’re a little down the road, set into a slope that bends and gives them all a surprisingly vast view of the Shire. Dis looks forwards, away from the view, raising an eyebrow at the sight of a home set into the hill, garden and fence outside blocking it off from the road. Bilbo grins at them, before motioning them past the gate, rather than to stop.

“I had a piece of land dug up big enough for a dwarven travelling cart – there’s even a new backdoor into my home, though it’s locked most of the year. Fili,” she addresses Dis’ son, “do you remember where the spare room is, by the Oak Hall?”

“Yes, I do – straight forwards, past the entrance hall? Made for Big Folk?” Fili questions.

“The door to the cart-hold is in the corridor between the spare room and the Oak Hall, where the Big
Folk cloakstand is. Undo the bolt for me?” Dis watches with a raised eyebrow as her son – quickly followed by his brother – jumps the fence, to Bilbo’s obvious consternation, rushing up to the large red door. The red paint on the step draws her attention and momentarily Dis is struck dumb, because there are handprints, with black dwarven runes writ in the centre.

“You didn’t tidy your step,” it tumbles out of her mouth as Kili and Fili open the door, disappearing into the hobbit’s home, Dis feeling as if she were drifting, overwhelmed by the amount of information she’s discovering. That’s always been a problem for Dis, but usually, in dwarven society, things are slow to change and there aren’t…surprises like this.

Bilbo looks over, smiling a little fondly, “They said they were going to come back. I certainly couldn’t do away with one of the few things I have to remember them by – and Freylin likes it, her ones are here.” She points her finger at a different step – the one just inside the gate, almost hidden by the dark wood. Dis can see where Thorin has written her name in Cirth, the blocky writing unmistakably his.

Just as Dis has problems processing information, Thorin – and Fili – have trouble with writing. Kili just has too much energy. Challenges such as those are common in dwarven society and it’s seen as a great feat to overcome it and make it your Mahal’s Virtue. Dis has to wonder if Freylin is dwarf enough to have such a Challenge that she can make into a Virtue.

“It’s open!” Comes Kili’s shout, before he comes to the door. “Where’s Freylin? Her cot isn’t in your room anymore!”

“Freylin is in her siblings’ Yavanna Patch, weeding.”

Dis suddenly leans against Kimris, feeling exhausted all of a sudden. “Thorin did not tell us you had more children, Mistress Baggins.”

Bilbo gives her a slightly puzzled look. “They haven’t Sprouted yet – won’t until Thorin gets here, most likely. It’s difficult enough without him to help Tend their Yavanna Patch, I don’t want to think about what would happen if he wasn’t here when they were born.”

“Yer making no sense, lass,” Gloin interrupts slowly. Dis exchanges a glance with Frerin and while Dis can’t think of anything other than the strange, confusing information she’s been given, Frerin’s eyes gain a glint, before he looks to Bilbo again.

“The hobbits have their own way to have Stone Children, don’t they?”

There are a few gasps from various dwarrow – Dis included – before a young voice calls out. “Mama!” Dis looks up, where the voice comes from, dwarven hearing making the shout seem so close – and then a girl appears, all blue eyes and black hair, with a brown-gold tan to match her mother. Freylin stares at them all, eyes widening as she sees Dis before she abruptly makes a confused face.

“You’re not adad.”

“I…I am your namadaz’adad and this is you nadadaz’adad.” Frerin bows on queue, fist on his chest.

“It is a wonder to meet you, nanith’nadadaz.”

Freylin’s eyes widen, before she squeals unexpectedly, jumping up and down. “Mama, mama – it’s Aunt Dis and Uncle Frerin!” She jumps down from the roof of the hobbit home into Kili’s arms –
Dis’ son reacting rather quickly in order to catch her, his Challenge giving him a boon in this instance – before scrambling down, seemingly not caring that she’d just used a stranger as a ladder and rushing to the fence, only to be stopped from opening it by Bilbo.

Bilbo, who is staring at Frerin in narrow-eyed wariness.

*Thorin, what have you told her about Frerin?* Dis thinks, head clearing as she has something to focus on. *What does she think he is going to do?*

“…I do not want you in my home,” she says in a low voice, looking directly at Frerin. At least she has the courage to do that, at the very least, rather than go through Dis or even Gloin. “Nor do I want you around my children yet.”

Frerin’s face goes stony, looking just as Thorin does sometimes, but rather than argue or grow angry, he nods, quiet. Bilbo nods sharply to him before looking to Freylin, who – *Mahal bless her* – looks rather upset by this point.

“Freylin, you are not to go within two arms-lengths of your uncle.”

“But mama-”

Frerin interrupts her. “Freylin, I agree with your mother. Along with that, do not speak to me unless there is someone else in the room – do you understand?”

Dis feels pity for her niece as she continues to be upset, Bilbo picking her up over the gate and placing her on her hip, leading their caravan around the bend a little more until they come to a moon-shaped dip in the hill, cobbled immaculately – Dis can see Thorin’s work merged with average craftsmanship – with flowering vines covering the sides.

“Bring your cart in here,” Bilbo directs, moving off to the side as Dis, Frerin and Famul lead the ponies in the correct manoeuvre to get the cart in backwards. “The ponies are welcome to stay in the apple orchards you can see down in the valley.”

Dis glances over, only the bright red against green letting her see so far in the distance. “Indeed. Boys, do you know your way around this Shire?”

“Yes amad,” they say in unison, Fili coming forth to take the reins.

“Miss Bilbo, would Freylin like to come for a ride with us?” Kili asks, bouncing on the balls of his feet. Dis sees Bilbo eye the ponies with mild distaste before looking to her sniffling daughter.

“Did you finish what you wanted to do in the Yavanna Patch?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Freylin nods, wiping her nose on the sleeve of her dress. “Can I go ride the ponies with the dwarves?”

“Dwarrow,” Bilbo corrects, putting her down. “Yes, you may. Say thank-you to Fili and Kili for offering.”

“Thank-you,” Freylin says as she raises her arms up to be lifted, Fili reaching down to take her up even as Kili complains that he wants Freylin to ride with him instead of Fili. Dis watches the three move down the road, giggling and chatting away.

“Now that Freylin’s away with the boys, may I meet my other strange guests?” Bilbo questions, as if expecting an answer. Gloin clears his throat, introducing his wife and two children, Gimli and Gimris
coming out of the cart to clutch their mother’s travelling coat.

“I am Famul, companion to Frerin,” Famul introduces himself, bowing deeply, “an honour to meet you, u’Thorin mahanelhekhel.”

“Ooh-Thorin what?” Bilbo blink in confusion as Dis’ jaw drops – for even if she would be made Thorin’s Queen of All Queens, it was not proper to speak of it out loud in khuzdul. In front of non-dwarrow. “Wait, no, I’m not supposed to ask, sorry.” Bilbo shakes her head before eyeing his green hair. “Were you naturally born like that? With all the…” she tugs a strand of her own honeyed blonde-brown, “green.”

“I change its colour with plant mixtures.”

“Oh, oh, I see…so, let me see if I can get this right.” Bilbo purses her lips, pointing at them each in turn. “Famul. Frerin. Dis. Gloin, Gimli and Gimris…Kimris. Was I right?”

“Aye, lassie,” Gloin grunts, before pointing to the roof of her hill-buried home. “Now will you explain how in Mahal’s name you have your own version of Stone Children?”

“It is not quite your business, Master Gloin,” Bilbo replies, sounding more miffed than anything. Dis licks her lips.

“But mine, it is, if they are both yours and my brother’s. But let us unpack some and talk later, once the other children have returned.”

Bilbo agrees with Dis and it is not until a few hours later that, restless, Frerin and Dis are led up on top of the ‘smial’, as Bilbo’s has said it is called. On the grass, way above the Shire, able to see it from four entirely different angles, Dis feels exposed.

“Before I give away any more hobbit secrets, might I first ask what Stone Children are?”

“You may not,” Dis says sharply, a silence laying between them before she gives in a little, “Though you may assume and we may say if dwarrow do not do it.”

“Right,” and the hobbit woman gains a glint in her eyes as she sits in front of a ringed patch full of flowers that have a strange feel to them, even feet away. “Sit down. There’s no need to stand.”

Dis presses her lips together and she doesn’t want to sit – but then Frerin sits, taking off his prosthetic leg even. Dis sits, not at all comfortable on the soft grass. It’s a kind of gentle dagger against her skin that tickles and itches, a fire on her nerves – fire itself would be kinder.

“…Stone Children are carved from stone and given life by Mahal.” Bilbo hits the nail with the hammer first time, Frerin tilting his head in a maybe motion. “The dwarrow carve baby dwarflings.”

“No,” Dis says shortly, placing her hands on her lap, resisting the urge to readjust her wool sock inside her shoe – it’s been out of place for a while but this stillness brings her attention to it more sharply than before.

Bilbo eyes them, gaze flickering to the flower-patch that she gently rests her hand on before answering. “The dwarfling carve dwarflings of toddling age.”

Frerin gives his maybe motion again, Dis’ opinion of this hobbit’s intelligence level rising a little.

“A proposal,” she invites, “Back and forth questions, vague replies equating to yes’ and simple no’s for negative.”
“Mmm, a fine game,” Bilbo smiles a little, crossing her legs and drawing Dis’ attention to her feet – much larger than any other hobbit’s she had truly met. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to ask first: do dwarrow carve the entire outer appearance of a Stone dwarfling?”

“Nearly – replacing the eyes and heart with jewels is a requirement,” Frerin replies.

“And dust their chin with diamond dust,” Dis’ adds, causing Frerin to give her a dirty look. “What?”

“Diamond dust – diamond dust? No wonder you prefer blood-borne children, if you’ve been told they need to be sprinkled with diamond dust.” Frerin shakes his head, looking a mix between disgusted and amused. “Oh, anad will be beating father over the head in Mahal’s Halls for that.”

Dis shakes her own head, glancing at Bilbo, “I’m sure you have much similar arguments among your family members, if hobbits do anything similar to dwarrow.”

“Well,” Bilbo seems to be framing her answer carefully, “I would not say we choose, though I’m certain that my grandparents bemoan the fact that they never payed attention to what flowers bloomed in my mothers Yavanna Patch – every flower has it’s meaning and you are meant to heed them, for they can be warnings, oft-times.” Bilbo pauses long at that, expression uncertain as she looks back at the flower patch behind her. She glances at Dis, before lifting up the head of a flower.

It’s a soft, delicate looking flower, with a gentle purple head.

“Harebell. One of its meanings is grief. If this Sproutling was not Thorin’s child, I would think less of it, for grief can come in many forms – if Kili had been a Planted fauntling, for instance, I’m sure he would have had a harebell on his Patch. It would mock you, thinking back on it when Kili is acting mischievously.”

Dis snorts at that, nodding in understanding. “So there is a child under there that will cause you grief.”

“And Thorin, too. Most likely, Freylin, too. She’s been helping me Tend them – more than anyone else, even Thorin in recent years. She saved their lives.”

“Lives?” Frerin and Dis say at the same time.

Bilbo eyes them in amusement. “Did Thorin not say? There are twin Sproutlings underneath this flowerbed.” She motions up and down the middle, where only now does Dis notice the clear divide in flowers.

“Thorin, to be fair, did not actually mention this flowerbed in relation to children,” Dis says, voice strained. “He said you buried his braid, as that is how Shirelings accept formal apologies.”

Bilbo shakes her head, “He must have been misleading you. We’ve had several conversation about them.”

Dis and Frerin exchange a foreboding glance. Oh, the bells of Erebor- Thorin!

“Sister,” Dis addresses the hobbit for the first time, moving forwards to take her hands tightly. “Did you ever say to Thorin that they were anything other than- Sproutlings? That was the word, yes? Did you ever call them children?”

Bilbo’s mouth opens and closes briefly, a disquiet entering her eyes. “I- we- we talked, but…no. No.”

“Oh, Thorin, you idiot!” Frerin cusses in khuzdul, calling their brother all sorts of different names.
The hobbit’s chin trembles and Dis doesn’t hesitate to draw the small woman into a large embrace, arms wrapping around her firmly.

“We will send him a letter, immediately. He is to come here and I will return to Ered Luin to rule in his place,” Dis says, making plans even as Bilbo shakes her head.

“No, no, you don’t need to go.”

“Thorin must come here and stay here, namad. There is no argument against it. You will have three children to care for and the Maker’s Wife must treasure you dearly if she lets a half-dwarf grow form her magic. You said that young Freylin helps you with them?”

“Yes,” Bilbo sniffs, wiping her eyes as she retreats from Dis’ grip, staying close. “Yavanna’s magic is strong and weeds grow – we must take them out and not let them grow, for Sproutlings have been strangled by the roots of them before in the past.”

Dis tightens her grip on Bilbo, “Teach us. We will help.” Bilbo’s eyes widen.

“You- you would? I- thank-you. Thank-you very much. Maybe now, my Took relatives won’t have to come help me all the time…though, I think I’d like Asphodel, Prim and Sigismond to still help out. They’re some of my most beloved.”

“We’ll do anything to help,” Frerin swears, “if you let us, we will help.”

“You may help, Frerin and you too, Dis.” Bilbo is quick to say, before she just cries, no noise emitting from her. Dis brings her into another embrace, feeling Frerin reach over, arm brushing hers as he rests his hand on Bilbo’s shoulder.

“We are here.”

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