

## To Wake and Find It Flown

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# To Wake and Find It Flown

by [Neeka](#)

## Summary

...But then to wake and find it flown,  
The dream of happiness destroyed,  
To find myself unloved, alone,  
What tongue can speak the dreary void?

## Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

# Chapter 1

*...But then to wake and find it flown,  
The dream of happiness destroyed,  
To find myself unloved, alone,  
What tongue can speak the dreary void?*

*A heart whence warm affections flow,  
Creator, thou hast given to me,  
And am I only thus to know  
How sweet the joys of love would be?  
Dreams  
Anne Brontë*

They say that time heals all wounds. That the gentle passing of time will flow like a cool stream over the agonising wound left by the loss of a loved one, soothing it until finally, it healed, leaving nothing but a scar.

Wrong. All time did was take you further and further away from the days you had with the one you lost. Those blessed days before they were torn from you. Every single day made the gap between you grow and grow.

Bilbo Baggins knew loss well; he'd felt it after losing his father, his health never really recovering after the hell that was the Fell Winter. He'd felt it after watching his bright, bold mother Wilt as a result, before she finally followed her beloved husband years later.

He felt their loss everyday of his life; it seeped into him until he hardly knew what it felt like to be without it. Time did not heal or diminish that pain. It just made him more used to living with it; made it easier to forget what it felt like to be without that numbing, constricting grief.

But Bilbo never knew grief could feel like this. It wound itself into every inch of him, mind, body and soul. It took up his every thought, every feeling. He ate grief, dreamt grief, breathed grief.

How could he go on with the pain of his loss like iron chains wrapped around his body? Everything he was or ever would be was tainted by the black stain of this grief.

The journey back to the Shire (not home, never home. Home was now behind him and would be forever more) was slow and uneventful. The Battle of the Five Armies had decimated the surrounding Orc and Warg population, leaving their path clear of anything with mall intent. Much to Bilbo's disappointment at times.

Despite the crushing weight of his sorrow, he did enjoy travelling with Gandalf. His friend was witty and wise, and when Bilbo felt alive enough, they passed many hours trading

riddles and tales of Gandalf's adventures, as well as Bilbo's life before he was accosted by a stubborn old wizard who wouldn't take no for an answer.

Though apparently said wizard saw it more as a helpful family friend giving a bored, stagnating Hobbit a chance to escape the sharp clutches of propriety before every ounce of adventure was bled from him.

His adventure turned out to be quite different than either expected.

Bilbo tried to hate Gandalf at first, he really did. If it wasn't for the meddling old man, he would never have walked out his door, never would have met the Company. Never would have had his heart broken beyond repair. Bilbo tried so hard to blame him, just to have something tangible to focus his pain and anger on. But it was no use.

Despite everything, the emotion Bilbo truly felt towards Gandalf was gratitude. He wouldn't trade the time he had with any of them for all the tea and pipeweed in Middle Earth.

They made him a better Hobbit, of that there was no doubt. Bilbo had done things he never would have thought he *could* do in all his wildest dreams. And as for his heart? Well, he could survive without it.

But sweet Yavanna, he ached for them. He missed the whole Company so fiercely, that he almost packed up and ran back to them about three times a day. The only thing that stopped him was the knowledge that *they* wouldn't be there.

Erebor would never be home for them, the shining princes and brave, beautiful king. Instead it would be their tomb. They would lie in rock eternally, part of the mountain they fought so hard to reclaim. Bilbo knew he could never step foot in the mountain ever again. He couldn't bare it.

And so he floated, suspended in his grief. He couldn't go forward and he couldn't go back.

Or so he thought.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Bilbo Baggins! Open this door right now! I know you’ve entirely lost touch with your respectability, but not even you would ignore a relative at the door! Open up this instance!”

*Oh Lobelia, Bilbo thought, you have no idea what I would or wouldn’t do.*

And wasn’t that one of the biggest issues; nobody here knew. Nobody in this tiny, safe corner of the world knew this Bilbo Baggins. The Bilbo Baggins who ran off with a company of Dwarves, who was chased by Wargs and Orcs, who tricked Trolls. Who stood in front of an evil abomination to protect a friend, who fought spiders and smuggled prisoners from the halls of a cold, immortal king. Who had actually *killed*.

And most of all; the Bilbo Baggins who tricked and stole from the person he cared for most, betraying him in the worst way. It was for his own good yes, but ultimately for naught. He still couldn’t save him. He still let his friends die.

No. This Bilbo Baggins was not made for the Shire any longer. It was too pure for him now, too innocent and good. He was stained and dark and twisted; his lungs were too full of foreign air from places far away, his body too bruised and marked by things these Hobbits would never even know existed. And his heart, that was too broken. Cracked to sharp shards and dust from grief, pain and regret.

So he would stay here, in his room, in his bed. He would close his eyes and mind to the world outside and think of days gone by. He truly didn’t care if he ever left his bed again.

“Oh for Yavanna’s sake! You can’t hide in there forever Bilbo Baggins!”

*Just you watch me.*

And that was how Bilbo stayed, his eyes red from crying and his stomach aching from eating the bare minimum a Hobbit could manage. It was so pathetic that he insulted himself.

Bilbo knew his friends would not want this for him but he just couldn't make himself move. He couldn't exist with the crushing weight of grief and loneliness that surrounded him, the silence of his home like sinking mud, clinging to his weak body, too thick to move through.

It could have been hours or days or weeks later when the harsh knocking started up again. Yavanna above could she not just leave him alone.

“Bilbo Baggins, you open this door right now. I have had enough! Your father would be ashamed, leaving a relative on the stoop like this! I have a bone to pick with you and if you don't open up right now I will cause such a scene, don't you think I won't! I am not leaving until I talk to you!”

Bilbo rolled over and shut his eyes.

Then the clanging began. It was loud and ruthless, obviously she'd brought her pots with her. His eyes shot open, heart stalling; the noise was like nails driving into his skull, reminding him far too much of Goblin Town. His hands shook, mind travelling back to that horrible place, the image so strong he could almost smell it.

He managed a few more moments, the clanging getting louder and angrier before he couldn't take it anymore. If he knew his cousin, and he unfortunately did, she would be true to her word and not stop until they'd spoken.

Bilbo dragged himself out of his memories and out of his bed, swaying on his feet as he stood up, black spots appearing in his vision for a few seconds. He waited until he felt like he could move without passing out before making his way unsteadily to the door. Limp, unwashed curls fell into his eyes and he brushed them back out of the way, he was a mess and he knew it but really couldn't find it in himself to care.

Finally reaching the door, Bilbo took a deep breath to steady himself in preparation for the agonising ordeal he was sure to have, before finally tugging it open.

Lobelia stopped mid strike, arms still raised holding two old pots. Her bright yellow dress was almost blinding, not to mention her ridiculous hat, her eyes looked him up and down and a strange expression passed over her face, wiping away the annoyance that sat there before.

Lowering her pots slowly, she said, "Well you look terrible."

"Charming as ever Lobelia."

Bilbo's voice was cracked and weak, like someone who hadn't spoke in a while. Which was exactly right come to think of it. Lobelia seemed to notice it too, shocked for a brief second before she all but barged through his door.

Oh for Yavanna's sake. Bilbo had been hoping to get rid of her without her stepping foot in his home. Maybe she'd get bored and leave when she realised he had no food or drink to offer her and would speak as little as possible. She always did get bored easily when she wasn't getting what she wanted.

She strode through the hallway and made her way to his parlour and by the time Bilbo had caught up with her, she was wandering around with her nose in the air, obviously judging the state of his smial and all the strange things he had lying around. A sword and shield for one.

"Look Lobelia, I really wasn't planning on entertaining today so can we hurry this up," he said with a sigh, exhaustion already getting its talons in him.

"Well cousin, your time with those Dwarves has certainly left you bereft of your manners," she spat, such judgment in her voice it was practically tangible.

"Not really, just shown me that sometimes the direct approach is the best."

“Indeed,” she sniffed. “Well if we’re being ‘direct’, “ Lobelia turned to look him in the eye, hands on her hips and nose in the air, visibly building herself up to what would surely be a tantrum of epic proportions.

“I think it’s wrong that you’ve gotten everything back. You’ve been away for a year Bilbo, a year! we thought you were dead! We would have rightfully inherited this house and many in Hobbiton had purchased your possessions honestly and with their hard earned money.

“So to just come back and demand your place again like nothing has changed is wrong! You can’t expect everything to just go back to the way it was, it isn’t fair!”

Lobelia had worked herself up into a fuss, only just stopping short of stamping her foot and screaming.

Her petulant voice was like nails down a blackboard for Bilbo, whose anger was rising by the second.

Lobelia’s face morphed into something far slipperier then, eyes narrowing as she looked at him. “And I’m sure you wouldn’t like the rest of Hobbiton knowing how you just came back after your disgraceful little adventure with those filthy Dwarves, looking like one too, and all but turfed us out of our rightful home.”

A year ago an irate Lobelia would have probably scared him, she was a formidable opponent and always had been, capable of causing extreme damage to a Hobbit’s reputation in no time at all.

There was also the time she threw a trowel at him after one particularly nasty argument. That hadn’t been fun.

But now? Oh she had no idea what he had seen or done. If she thought for one second she could intimidate or manipulate him now, she would be sorely disappointed.

Turning to face her properly, Bilbo stared her straight in the eye, unconsciously taking on a fighting stance, feet apart, one slightly in front of the other and arms tense and ready at his



sides.

“Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, listen to me and listen well. This is not your home. It was never your home and it never will *be* your home. I did indeed leave on an adventure and I have seen and done things you can’t even imagine.

“And as for those “filthy Dwarves”, he spat, “they have more goodness in their left toe than you’ve ever had in your whole life! They are kind and brave and loyal! I am honoured to have travelled with them and known them.”

Traitorously, his voice broke, a thick ball lodging itself in the back of his throat. Not wanting Lobelia to see, he turned his back on her, a rude gesture in and of itself, running a hand over his eyes and willing himself under control.

“Three of them were lost after fighting to reclaim their homes. They did everything to get it back for their people, including giving up their lives!”

Turning back to her, eyes burning, he spat, “So do not, do *not* expect me to let you bully me over my own home. It is mine and always has been, and I will fight tooth and nail to keep it that way. So do not test me Lobelia because you will not win.”

She must have seen something in his eyes then or in the way he held his body, possibly also backed up by the fact his sword was visibly propped in the corner. Whatever it was, she seemed to quickly come to the realisation that her attempts were futile.

Casting her eyes around the place one last time, an odd expression bloomed on her face. If Bilbo didn’t know better, he’d almost believe it was...concern. Or perhaps just indigestion.

Knowing a lost battle when she saw one though, Lobelia nodded sharply in farewell and stormed out the door without another word. Thank Yavanna for that!

Bilbo's energy seemed to flee the second his green door shut, his legs going weak as he slumped against the wall for balance. He was too tired to deal with the creature of Morgoth that was Lobelia. How dare she.

Unable to stand being conscious any longer, Bilbo slowly made his way back to his bed and collapsed into it, squeezing his eyes shut and willing himself back into unconsciousness where he couldn't feel the sharp shards of his heart cut up his chest with every breath.

Knocking once again made its way into his mind, drawing him away from the comforting emptiness of sleep. He had no idea how long he'd slept for and if he could have mustered the energy, Bilbo was pretty sure he'd have run at whoever was knocking with his sword.

The knocking continued for a moment each bang increasing his anger. When it finally died down, he heard a quiet clang, like something being put on his doorstep. His damn curiosity getting the best of him, Bilbo dragged himself from his bed, body barely feeling under his control, and staggered over to the door.

Upon opening it, he was surprised to see a large earthenware pot on his doorstep.

What was even more surprising was that he recognised that pot, it was Lobelia's. Unsure of whether it was some sort of trap, revenge for being rude to her, he very slowly crouched next to it, preparing to scarper should something go wrong.

But all he saw was a note tied to the handle with string reading, "Eat something for Yavanna's sake. You look a state."

Bilbo dropped the note, eyebrow raised in confusion as he lifted the lid.

Oh sweet merciful Valar. The delicious smell of lamb hotpot nearly knocked him off his heels. It was quite possibly the nicest thing he'd smelled for weeks.

Finally seeing proper food right there in front of him, all of his hunger seemed to hit him at once and he had to restrain himself from diving into the food right there on the doorstep, propriety be damned.

Quickly grabbing the large pot and standing, Bilbo looked around, not seeing Lobelia anywhere. Damn, he'd have to thank her soon. Still, if the smell was anything to go off, it would be worth it.

Hurrying inside as fast as his feet could manage, he made it to the kitchen, all but slamming the pot down in his rush to get a bowl, ladle and spoon. Yavanna above he wished he had some of Miss Marigolds fresh loafs to go along with it.

Mouth watering, he ladled out a huge bowl, drops falling on the table in his haste, before finally sitting down and taking his first mouthful.

Bilbo was not ashamed to admit that he may have groaned aloud. It was definitely the best thing he'd tasted in weeks, possibly even months, as he couldn't remember anything he ate in Lord Elrond's hospitality, all food tasting like ash in his mouth.

This was most certainly not ash in his mouth; it was divine. The lamb was juicy and tender, the potatoes crispy on the top, the juice packed with flavour. His hunger roared at him with every mouthful, demanding more.

The Hobbit knew he shouldn't eat so quickly after hardly eating a thing for so long. He could remember what it was like after the Fell Winter, how the shock of food after nothing for so long could make you throw up, pain gripping your stomach.

He forced himself to slow down, to leave the table for a moment and get a drink of water, before returning and eating at a much more sedate pace.

Once he'd eaten as much as his now much smaller stomach could manage, Bilbo stopped, sitting back in his chair and just on the cusp of being uncomfortably full.

As loath as he was to admit it, the food had helped a great deal. It was a huge part of a Hobbits nature to feel content and happy when their stomach was full of a good meal, and while Bilbo may have diverged from much of Hobbit culture, in this he was a Hobbit through and through.

And though Lobelia may be lacking in many areas, her lamb hotpot was not one of them.

The crushing grief was still there of course, a black pit where his heart used to be, sucking in everything happy and good, but he felt more able to bare it now. It was time.

Despite being back in the Shire for nearly a week now, he hadn't yet unpacked. It was such a little action, but to Bilbo it felt like a betrayal. That by unpacking the things from his adventure, he was leaving his friends behind, abandoning them and settling back into his safe, prosperous home.

It was preposterous of course, and now that he'd eaten a meal that wasn't just a tiny amount of dried fruits, nuts and cram, he felt far more in control of his mental state. In control enough to tell his unreasonable side that by doing this, he was not in fact leaving it all behind, packing his adventure away in cupboards.

It took longer than he'd be willing to admit for Bilbo to work up the courage to begin, using the excuse of letting his food go down, melting into his armchair with a warm feeling in his belly. And if there ended up being a measure of the Gaffer's home brew involved, a bottle still stashed by his bookcase, there wasn't anyone around to judge.

Unable to put it off any longer, and knowing that his courage would leave him if he didn't move now, Bilbo finally dragged himself over to his bag, propped in the far corner next to his sword and shield. Then, taking a deep breath, he emptied it carefully over his floor.

The mere sight knocked the air from his lungs and the thoughts from his head. This was his journey.

Looking at his sword propped carefully in the corner, his Sting, he couldn't help but remember all the creatures he had killed with it. And nearly killed. But it also reminded him

of putting himself in front of a friend, swinging it around with no skill or training, because he just had to do something to try and save him.

His shield was given to him by Balin, a strange, sad look in his eyes as he handed it over. The old dwarf said it belonged to someone he used to know and that he hoped it would protect Bilbo on his journey home. It was a beautiful little thing, all harsh angles and geometric patterns. It was so typically Dwarven and Bilbo loved it, just as he assumed the previous owner had.

It even had a little scratching on the back, a name perhaps. But as it was in Khuzdul, Bilbo had resigned himself to never knowing the name of its previous owner. It was no matter; he simply hoped they wouldn't mind that it was now Bilbo's and most importantly, that they had found peace wherever they were now.

His clothes of course reminded him strongly of Erebor, as they had been cobbled together before he left from spare Dwarven clothes and material, thanks to the skills of Dori and Ori. His Laketown clothes he had burned. He couldn't bare to keep anything stained with Thorin's blood.

Bilbo could still see it drenching his hands, the pale skin permanently stained red, he didn't need to see it on his clothes as well.

There was other little mementoes too, a carved wooden chess piece in the shape of a rearing bear given to him by Beorn. Though they'd had little time together, the enormous skin changer seemed to develop a soft spot for him.

Perhaps it was the fact he was not a Dwarf, perhaps it was because of the endless interest the Hobbit had shown in his home, garden and animals. Whatever it was, when he had caught Bilbo examining the beautifully carved piece, he had only chuckled, a deep rumbling thing like rockslides on the mountains, before offering it to him as a gift.

There was also the ratty, threadbare cloth a kind hearted Dwarf had torn from his own clothes for a fussy stranger before he ever even knew him. Bilbo would always be deeply, deeply grateful to Bofur; he was the first of them to accept him, the young Durin brothers following after. Bofur was his first friend and Bilbo would never forget that.

A folded up piece of parchment there was also, opening up into the map. He knew he shouldn't have taken it; it should have been kept and revered by the Dwarves of Erebor, a little piece of history. But it had called to him, he needed it, needed something he had seen pass through strong Dwarven hands time and again, something that showed the incredible journey he had been on. He needed proof that he had truly travelled that far, across open plains and over mountains, under towering trees and along raging rivers. He needed to remember that he was more than the simple Hobbit he had been.

And then of course, there was his acorn and mithril vest. Sweet Yavanna they hurt to look upon, a deep burning ache in his chest so fierce he nearly whimpered.

If he knew then what he knew now, he never would have accepted the vest. He'd have forced Thorin to wear it, or either of his joyful, bright nephews. Anyone other than Bilbo. Anyone who actually deserved it.

The acorn he could barely touch, barely even look at. It was a physical manifestation of everything he'd wanted but would now never have. It was the ghost, the shell of the life he could have lived if he hadn't failed the most important person in his life.

He would have planted it anywhere Thorin was. Because now more than ever he realised that home wasn't always a place, sometimes it was a person.

Bilbo knew he would never plant his acorn now, nowhere was worthy of it and all it represented. It would stay trapped in its stasis forever, unable to move forward and grow, just like Bilbo himself.

*Oh Thorin, why did you have to leave me?*

A broken sob escaped him as he stared down at all he had left of the adventure that changed his life, for better and for worst.

Biting his arm to muffle his heaving sobs, Bilbo gently, reverently, moved all of his belongings into his mother's glory box, laying it all out carefully. When he was finally happy that everything was safe, he took one last, lingering look at his hoard. A hoard far more precious than Smaug's.

This would be the last time he looked at these cherished things for a long while. He didn't feel like he could bare it all again anytime soon, but it also felt so truly difficult to close the lid. He didn't want to lock it all away, to sever the last physical links he had with the people he'd left behind. And those that he'd lost.

Finally closing the lid took far too much strength and as the lock clicked into place, cutting off his view, he saw a small scrape of mud on the side of the lid.

Kili. It was from Kili. The little rascal had cleaned his boots on it the night they first stepped foot into his life. By the Valar, Bilbo had been so irritated and indignant! How dare this little barely bearded Dwarf come uninvited into his home and scrape mud all over his mother's glorybox!

He'd give every item in his Hobbit hole for just one more day with those boys now. They'd been among the very first to talk to him and the Troll incident had seemed to cement him into the group in their minds, regardless of what anyone else thought. From then on, they would always talk with him, whether he wanted conversation or not! And the pranks! Good natured as they were, it certainly made him want to strangle the little buggers.

But eventually, Bilbo's blasted Took side came to the surface after putting up with one too many of their childish antics. It was safe to say that Dwarves just weren't prepared for Hobbit level pranks.

The memory of their reactions made him smile despite himself. Unfortunately however, it just made the boys look up to him, gracefully acknowledging one of a higher level of mischief. They refused to stop asking questions and pestering for tips or stories of his own pranks.

And if the level of their mischief increased, well, the Hobbit refused to take any responsibility for it.

With one last gentle stroke of the polished wood, leaving the mud where it was, Bilbo finally stood and made his way to his room. The soft mattress dipped under his weight as he sat himself down, legs weak and shaking. He felt empty, drained. Like he'd pulled out something integral from within himself and locked it away.

Yavanna he was so tired, so damn tired.

His emotions were dragging him around by the hair. He cried often, barely ate and couldn't seem to regain his composure no matter what he did. It was strange and unpleasant for him to freely allow this much emotion to escape the confines of his head.

Bilbo was a Hobbit who prided himself on being well put together, strong, 'respectable'. He had learned to keep his true thoughts and feelings to himself. But he hadn't always been that way.

All his youth was spent running wild and free through the fields and little rivers of the Shire, scandalising his uptight Baggins relatives and many more besides. His father despaired but never forbade him, often scolding his mischief with a bright glint of humour in his eyes.

And his mother, his beloved mother only encouraged it. She saw in her son the same curiosity and adventurous nature that she herself had, especially at his age and she would voluntarily hand over her best silver spoons to the Sackville-Baggins' before she tried to smother that within him.

But still, it isolated him from many of the residents of Hobbiton. When he was a much younger faunt, he had many friends in the Took and Brandybuck clans. They were all fairly mischievous and enjoyed pranking and causing chaos, romping all over the Shire. But as they grew, they all became more and more respectable as Bilbo grew even wilder.

He was greatly looked down on, especially by his Baggins family, and his mother was confronted often. But she never took any notice of them, allowing and encouraging her son to be happy, teaching him the Sindarin she knew, how to read a map and any other helpful tips she'd picked up on her own journeys outside the borders of the Shire.



Bilbo idolised his mother and felt blessed to be her son. Belladonna was sunshine, blindingly bright and when she died, she left her son in darkness. She herself had dimmed after the death of his father, her beloved, ordinary, sensible Baggins.

Nobody ever expected them to marry, never expected them to even be friends. But they loved each other with a fierce passion and not even death could keep them apart for long.

Bilbo never blamed her for Wilting and he understood that although she adored her son, she just couldn't hold on any longer. She died two days after his Coming of Age, comfortable and happy in her bed, her son holding her pale little hand.

After that, Bilbo changed. He adopted his father's fussiness and respectability, he mourned in private and kept everything hidden away around the other Hobbits. This change was met with considerable joy from the residents of the Shire, they were relieved that the head of the Baggins clan wouldn't be running off on adventures or anything else unnatural.

And that was how he stayed until a meddling grey robed wizard came to visit and all but dragged him out onto the adventure of a lifetime. Over the weeks, Bilbo's walls cracked, the old Bilbo coming out after so long locked away. It was frightening, to show his emotions again but it was also freeing.

Even then, even with him letting his true emotions show more than he had for a long time, he was still afraid it hadn't been enough. Did the Company really understand what they all meant to him? Did Fili and Kili know that he came to view them as nephews?

Did Thorin realise how much he was loved? Did he die knowing that Bilbo would have gladly swapped their places, done just about anything to make him live? Did he...did he *know*?

Now however, Bilbo wished with everything he had that he could regain that composure, that control over his emotions allowing them to be ignored and locked away. He felt everything with crystal clarity, like red-hot shards of glass in his chest. He just wanted to turn it off.

Bilbo clenched his hands into fists, his dragged nails digging into his palms. It was too much, it was all too much. Tonight, the pain was swelling to new heights and he was lost and alone in a raging river of grief. He couldn't breathe. Ragged, gasping inhales and exhailes echoed through his empty smial. How could he bear this? How could he go on with feeling like this everyday and night of his life? Would there ever be relief?

But these questions, just like everything else, went unheeded and unnoticed, nothing but empty rooms and echoing silence to keep him company.

A raw whine escaped his throat, his very soul hurting as he tucked his legs up to his chest and curled into as small a ball as he could. His legs fit far too easily up to his chest, the usual Hobbit standard of plumpness all but gone from him.

He felt a broken, empty shell of a Hobbit, a terrible comparison to the one that left Bag End that long year ago, so full of life and excitement, wings on his heels as he sped through the fields and winding lanes of the Shire to catch up with the Dwarves.

Bilbo gripped his unruly curls and tugged, the pain grounding him slightly so he did it again and again, harder until his scalp was burning. He only stopped when he feared he'd pull his curls out, remembering how much the Dwarves valued hair. How much Thorin had liked his honey curls, his occasional brief touches burned into Bilbo's memory.

Yavanna above, how could he bare this pain? If this was even a patch on what his mother had felt when his father died, then she was even stronger than he'd thought, fighting off the agony of the Wilting for 10 years.

Perhaps he would Wilt himself, despite them being nothing more than a possibility, a phantom future they both felt but couldn't yet acknowledge.

And now they'd never get the chance to.

Yet another ragged groan of agony escaped him. He couldn't do this anymore; he needed something, anything to numb this pain.

Alcohol hadn't worked, having tried that two days into his return to the Shire. Bilbo had broken out the strongest of the Gaffers homebrew and drank till he could no longer walk. All it had made him do was throw up what little food he'd managed and spend the next day in bed feeling like he had an axe in his skull.

Bilbo was seriously contemplating doing it again anyway, if only for the night of dreamless sleep he would get despite the heavy price, when the strangest feeling swept over him, like cold fog drifting over a field or smoke spiralling from a burnt out fire.

It was a prickling at the back of his mind, a yearning, a voice in the darkness calling out over a great distance. He shivered for no true discernable reason, only knowing that he had a bad feeling that he couldn't shake.

Bilbo couldn't truly say why, but his gaze fell onto his mantelpiece, his eyes catching on the little gold ring he kept there. The firelight glinted off it, illuminating it in golds and reds. A strange thing indeed, as there was hardly more than embers burning in the grate and surely the light could not reach all the way to the mantle above.

He should have given it no more than a few moments glance, but his attention was well and truly caught, a struggling fish on a line not yet realising the futile nature of its fighting.

An idea formed in his mind, but how the threads of it formed he could not say. A memory crept into the forefront of his mind; the cool, shadowy feeling of wearing the Ring, how it would dim emotion and sensation. He'd disliked it greatly at the time, but now the idea brought a tingling of hope through him. Would it dim this pain? Would it give him some blasted peace?

The idea, the yearning would not leave him alone, the voice in his mind growing louder and more insistent with every passing moment until he finally lurched up, his heart pounding and lungs heaving as though he had run the length and breadth of the Shire. Walking on shaking legs, he found himself in front of the dying fire, the dim light having no effect on the glint of the Ring.

Despite a sickly feeling building up within him, the pure need for even a moment of peace far outweighed it. Bilbo reached out and slowly took the Ring.

It felt...heavy. Not physically, or at least not in any way he could explain. It was more like a mental weight, a heaviness not in his hand but in his spirit. The sickly feeling intensified, the feeling of something not being quite right, and it made him reach out once again to drop it back on the mantelpiece.

Then from one second to another, he was back on Ravenhill. He could feel the ice sharp against his knees, felt the cold bite into every inch of skin, contrasting so sharply it hurt with the hot, thick blood under his hands.

And worse, so much worse, he could see the exact second Thorin Oakenshield left the earth, gone far away where Bilbo couldn't follow.

His knees hitting the floor jarred him out of the memory, tears streaming down his face and his breath trapped in his chest, hollow, broken sounds escaping instead of air.

Bilbo scrambled to his feet, one hand grabbing the mantle for support, his legs still numb and shaking with phantom cold as the other grabbed the Ring without a second thought.

He wasn't strong enough to bare this pain, he needed help. Just a moment of peace, didn't he deserve that after everything he'd suffered?

*Yes* a voice whispered in his head and the Hobbit couldn't rightly say whether it was his own. But his or otherwise, it spoke the truth and without any further thought, he jammed the Ring onto his finger and let the world fall away to grey, numb shadow.

Bilbo was vaguely aware of falling back to the floor but was far too lost in the numb blanket that had been tucked around him to care. He curled up and let himself be lost, feeling, for the first time since he returned, nothing at all.

No, that wasn't completely true. It was still there of course, the agonising stabbing grief, still poking at the edge of his consciousness.

But it was like the time he'd broken his arm as a young faunt, climbing trees to better look out for Elves. He'd been racked with pain until old Mrs Bolger had arrived at Bag End, splinted it and given him a special tea. After, he knew the pain was there, could still feel the dull ache, but the fierce burning insistence of it was blocked off.

But anything, any kind of relief at all after so long in agony was exquisite and he felt nothing about the sudden heavy exhaustion that came over him, chalking it up to his sleepless nights finally catching up with him now he had some peace.

*Yes, sleep*

So instead, he stopped fighting the weight of his eyelids and simply curled up on the floor and allowed the rushing blackness to take him.

The last conscious impression he had was of burning red flame, a piercing crimson that seemed to go straight through him, *see* straight through him. But surely that was nothing more than a tired mind and the fire he slept in front of, imprinted on the back of his eyes.

## Chapter End Notes

Hey darlings, chapter two is up! Much longer one this time and I really hope you enjoyed it. If anyone fancies dropping me a line or two you can imagine me sat in bed with my pugs victory dancing because it will make my night.

Hope everyone is doing well! Neeka xxxx

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bilbo Baggins awoke to the sound of birds and sunlight streaming in from his windows, the warm rays seeming to be trying very hard to blind him. He considered for a moment getting up and starting breakfast, but he found his mind was still hazy with exhaustion. Surely another hour or two couldn't hurt; it wasn't like he had anything of any importance to do, just another lonely day full of memories and ghosts.

Feeling satisfied with his decision, he rolled over in his bed and burrowed his face into his pillow.

And promptly shot up.

He was in bed. He was in his pyjamas and comfortably tucked up in bed. That wasn't right, he knew for a fact he hadn't got in bed, couldn't remember making it from the floor or getting changed for that matter. Unclenching his aching hand, he saw the Ring on his finger, throbbing gently as though it was on too tight. Which was strange as it had always fit him perfectly, as though made for him. Though, the longer he left it on and thought about, the more he came to think it was the Ring throbbing, not his finger.

Snatching it off quickly, his heart thumping, he also noticed that simple act was harder than normal, almost like pulling your foot out of ankle deep mud. Once it was finally in his palm and safely stowed in his pocket, he breathed a sigh of relief. But why, he did not know.

The sickly feeling returned, and with it came the pain once more. Pushing away the nagging concern in the back of his mind, for surely he had simply been too exhausted to remember his actions, Bilbo threw back the covers and made his way through his smial, heading for the kitchen.

Pain shot through his foot and he hopped back, spitting some curses that would make his father box his ears. Casting about for what he'd stubbed his toe on, his eyes fell on an old book trunk in his hallway.

But that...that wasn't right. That was one of the auctioned items he'd not been able to track down. How on Yavanna's good earth could that once again be sitting in his house? Perhaps it had been anonymously returned, but how did they get in?

"Hello? Er, is there anyone there?"

No answer. But did he really expect anything else? How would they have managed to haul a heavy wooden book trunk into his smial and leave without him even noticing? Maybe Nori could have managed it, the dear rascal, but surely no one in the Shire would even think to do it let alone be able to pull it off.

The uneasy feeling hit Bilbo full force once more. Something was very odd here indeed.

Moving slowly and quietly through his hole, his eyes spotted a few more items he'd not managed to track down, not wanting them anymore or that he'd simply left to the current owners, their need for the item being greater than his own.

One item he could have rationalised but not everything else. And it wasn't just the returned items that concerned him; the whole smial had a different atmosphere to it, a change so obvious it was almost palpable. Simply put, it looked like a home again, lived in and well loved.

It reminded him with a start, of the Bag End he ran out of a year ago.

The walls seemed to close in on him and the need to escape overcame him. Throwing on his favourite dressing gown, he stopped just long enough to grab his pipe and bag of Old Toby before all but falling out of his door.

A few moments of fumbling hands and shaking legs later, he was finally sat down with his pipe, inhaling the smoke slowly, aiming to calm his raging heart and rolling stomach. Finally, he started to relax, the morning sunlight warm on his face and the sounds of peaceful, happy life all around him.

Which was the exact moment a puff of smoke hit him right in the face.

Bilbo's eyes shot open and looked straight into the face of his old friend. "Gandalf!" he cried, jumping from the bench and smiling wide.

"Oh so you do remember my name *and* to whom it belongs Bilbo Baggins. I admit I am surprised, you were still rather young when last we met."

Surely this was a jest. Surely his friend was simply attempting a joke, a joke of very poor taste indeed. But as the confused Hobbit looked closer at the wizard in front of him, he saw no mischief in his eyes and no hint of knowing him as well as he did. And what was more, he also had his old staff.

Bilbo's heart pounded and his legs threatened to wobble right out from under him. He could no longer blindly deny that something very strange and very wrong was happening.

"Mr Baggins, are you quite all right? You're looking rather pale. Perhaps a cup of tea is in order hmm?" Gandalf moved forward, leading the shaky Hobbit back into his smial, sitting him down in an armchair before disappearing into the kitchen.

Bilbo's mind was racing. How could this be? One of his oldest and wisest of friends didn't know him, not properly at least. He had his old staff with him, one Bilbo knew for a fact was destroyed, not to mention the odd items around his house.

Soon, heat was between his hands, bringing him out of his confused and uneasy daze, the scent of tea soothing his mind.

“There we are my lad, that should help. You Hobbits can cope with anything so long as you have a nice pot of tea. Now, what on earth is the matter? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

Gandalf sounded an infuriating mix of mildly concerned and mildly amused, something only the wandering wizard could pull off so well. But it was just enough to allow Bilbo to pull himself together and mask his confusion with a smile, shaky though it must be.

“Oh it’s nothing,” he said, aiming for nonchalance but possibly not achieving anything like it. “I just had a bad night’s sleep I’m afraid and ended up missing breakfast! Which is never a good thing for a Hobbit, let me tell you.”

“Bad dreams was it? And yes, I do believe...”

The rest of Gandalf’s speech went straight over his head because of course! How could he be so stupid! It was a dream!

Relief hit him like a wave, for a moment there he thought something far more sinister was going on. But why he thought that first he’d never know. No matter the unsettled feeling he had, no doubt a now redundant instinct left over from his adventure, or the fact that everything felt remarkably like reality, it made far more sense for it to simply be a dream.

This newfound rational explanation allowed him to truly smile and relax at last, taking a large sip of tea made perfectly and exactly how he liked it strangely enough. Being a wizard actually did have some benefits then.

Interrupting said wizard’s rambling; Bilbo leaned forward and asked, “So then Gandalf, may I ask the purpose of your visit? I can’t imagine you came all this way just for a cup of tea and the pleasure of my company.”

“No indeed Bilbo Baggins, I did not.”

His friendly ramblings dropped away, as Gandalf leaned forward and said with great seriousness and, in Bilbo’s humble opinion, drama, “I’m looking for someone to share in an adventure.”

It took all his training as the head of the Baggins clan to keep a straight face, as dealing with annoying relatives had made him very adept at hiding the desire to either roll his eyes or burst out laughing,

Deciding to just enjoy himself, Bilbo simply nodded with a smile. If this was a dream and he could consciously make decisions, then he would behave how he wished he had in real life.

“An adventure you say? Well, usually I’d say there wasn’t a Hobbit west of Bree who would have interest in adventures. But lucky for you, you’re sat across from one.”

A wide smile spread across his old friend’s face. “Excellent! I knew you would be the Hobbit for the job. I always remember you as a young faunt, running off in search of Elves and



returning home just in time for tea with twigs in your hair and excitement in your eyes. Not to mention trailing mud all over your mothers floors.”

Bilbo smiled warmly at his response, remembering those times as well. They were good times, happy times, long before any grief or pain touched him, his days filled with love and fascination at the world around him. How he missed those days.

“Indeed. So, can I ask for more details of this adventure? It would be foolish to agree before I even knew what I was getting myself in for.”

Gandalf chuckled, “Wise indeed Master Baggins. However, it is not my story to tell. Those that can however, the very same that you will be travelling with, will be arriving later on tonight. You can hear all about it then and ask any questions you need.”

“Excellent. I take it they will need food and lodgings? Are they staying at an inn somewhere? The Green Dragon perhaps?”

A sheepish look passed over the old wizards face as Bilbo stamped down his desire to laugh. He was having more fun than he'd had for a long time. It was also the first time he'd smiled and meant it since he watched three of the most important people in his life lie cold and empty, waiting to be returned to the stone of the mountain they reclaimed.

“Ah, I was, well that is to say, I was hoping that you would be kind enough to grant them that. They are a good sort of folk, in their own kind of way and shouldn't cause you too much trouble. I hope...”

The last part was said under his breath and Bilbo had to cough to cover his laugh.

“And how many will I be expecting? And when will they arrive?” he asked, face and voice earnest whilst inside he was all but cackling. “They surely won't be coming tonight of course, nobody would spring something like that on an unsuspecting hobbit without at least two days notice.”

Oh yes, he thought, watching Gandalf splutter. This was entirely too much fun.

“I'm afraid it, well, travelling is always unpredictable and I couldn't get here any sooner so they, well that is to say that they will be arriving tonight. And, well, there's 13 of them.”

Bilbo raised his eyebrow, fixing his best disapproving glare on the wizard, even placing his tea on the table beside him so he could cross his arms, a perfect replica of his father when it was time to reprimand someone.

“And you thought it would be acceptable to throw 13 guests into my smial with no warning and expected me to give them food and lodging?”

“Well, I know Bag End is large enough to fit the Company comfortably and I assumed you'd be a gracious enough host to allow it.”

“Indeed I am Gandalf, but so many new people descending on me and my hospitality isn’t exactly the pace I’m used too.”

His old friend was obviously surprised and a little amused at the sudden parrying of comments between them, a small smile on his old face and a twinkle in his eye. Bilbo had to admit that he too was enjoying this exchange greatly. After so long alone with barely the energy to move, it was refreshing to feel the desire and enjoyment of conversation, mischievous though it may be on his own part.

“So am I to assume that you will indeed be letting us in? And joining our Quest?”

Smiling at the wizards attempt to change the subject from his own assumption and imposition, Bilbo nodded, finding no reason to play coy anymore.

“Excellent!” Gandalf exclaimed, a relieved smile on his face. “This adventure will be very good for you Bilbo Baggins, and most amusing for me!”

Bilbo’s smile faltered, good cheer and excitement vanishing like a puff of smoke on the breeze. Words echoed in his ears, words spoken in anger and pain, spat from bared teeth with all the wounded fury of a cornered, bleeding animal.

His surroundings blurred from his awareness as he was thrown, helplessly, back into a memory. One of many that he would rather bottle up and never revisit again.

They had been traveling back to the Shire, a place he refused to think of as home, Gandalf and he. Bilbo hadn't spoken more than a few, monosyllabic words since they'd set off from Erebor five days ago.

He was numb and cold, as though the blood stained ice and snow on which his love had died had been poured into his body. But this night was different, as they sat around the roaring campfire that did nothing to warm him. He'd reached that point of exhaustion where his head spun like a drunks, body sluggish as a toy winding down with its key lost forever.

Everything Gandalf did made him want to shout and scream, to lash out at the being who dragged him into all of this and finally, he could resist the urge no longer, the fury alight in his blood the only thing keeping him moving.

"So wizard," he spat out, voice as rough as rocks falling down a mountain. "Did this quest live up to your wise expectations? Was it good for me? Amusing for you?"

Gandalf's face became very solemn, his old eyes growing tired as his whole countenance seemed to age by a hundred years.

"Bilbo," he began slowly, voice sad and low. "You must know I regret those words. I did not expect it to end like this. And I certainly didn't wish to cause you pain. I'm so-"

"No!" Bilbo shouted, jumping to his feet, rage as hot as dragon fire burning through him, obliterating the ice that had held him frozen since Thorin's heart stopped beating. "You don't

get to say that! You don't get to apologise! No words from you oh wise wizard could heal the hurt that has been done to me. No amount of regret or apologise will bring him back to me! Or those dear, bright boys!"

He stopped, choking on his restrained tears. Bilbo's legs gave out and he slid back to the ground, dropping his head into his hands.

"Why Gandalf?" he asked helplessly, mumbling through his fingers. "Why did you bring me on this quest? If you hadn't meddled, I'd still be in my smial. I might have been alone there, but I barely even noticed. I'd put a stop to all that fanciful adventure nonsense and was content to live a safe, quiet life.

"But then you had to come. You brought those dwarves into my life and you, *they*, made me want...more. And now, I will never be able to go back to how I was. How can anybody in Middle Earth ever be the same again now that he's gone? How can I?"

The Hobbit broke off, finally lifting his head and locking his raw, red rimmed eyes on the wizard. "You've ruined me Gandalf."

Silence reigned for a few moments, Gandalf looking even older and more exhausted than before, not just in body but in spirit. He seemed unable to speak for once, his silver tongue full of riddles and half truths was silenced, the only sounds were Bilbo's ragged breaths.

"But was it worth it?" The wizard's voice was quiet, heavy; each word falling from his lips was coated in meaning and importance. "Was the pain, the fact you are forever changed, worth meeting them? Worth him?"

Silence. Then a sombre tired voice spoke out into the void between them.

"Yes Gandalf. Yes it was."

No more words were spoken that night; indeed, no words on the subject were ever spoken again. Gandalf knew for certain now what damage he had done and Bilbo knew that despite everything, he wouldn't change it for anything.

Bilbo snapped out of that memory, a faint echo of that same dragon fire entering him now, his eyes turning cold and fierce.

"Why did you say that?"

"I beg your pardon?" Gandalf replied quizzically, one bushy eyebrow rising at the Hobbits' tone.

Bilbo stood, drawing himself up to his full, admittedly less than impressive height and looked the ancient wizard dead in the eye.

"I assume this quest will be dangerous yes? That some of us may get hurt, possibly even worse? Well then, I cannot understand why you would find it amusing.

"I am leaving the safety and comfort of my home to help in whatever mad quest you are evidently insistent I join, but I will not stand for accompanying someone who believes any troubles I may face to be entertainment. Or worse, that the hurt we may face would be good for me. So I ask you again, why did you say that?"

Gandalf spluttered, confusion and insult warring for dominance on his face. "I don't believe I have to explain myself to anyone Bilbo Baggins, least of all you!"

"But you do!" he insisted, stepping forward in his urgency for the wizard to understand. "You need to! You are one of the Miar and I understand you must see everything in the bigger picture, your sight expanding far and wide, but you mustn't forget those around you.

"Those tiny little lives that may seem like nothing in the bigger picture but are still just as important. For all your power and wisdom and kindness, you must always remember the lives you are playing with."

For a moment, an admittedly terrifying moment, darkness seemed to draw to Gandalf from all around; the patch of shade under the window boxes, the shadow under the leaves of a sunflower. And then it stopped, they returned to where they belonged and Gandalf looked...of this earth again, approachable and relatable.

The Grey Wizard stared at the little Hobbit in front of him, seeing a glimpse of the true strength that lay underneath the unassuming surface. Then he gracefully nodded his head.

Relief surged through Bilbo, the tension leaving his body as his heart slowed down from its aggressive thumping.

"Well then, now that's all cleared up, I think I should begin to make preparations don't you think? Considering many hungry people will be descending onto my smial soon!

"I have food to cook, rooms to make up and general primping that needs doing. We Hobbits take pride in our hospitality you know, and I have a feeling these will need a little home comfort."

He quickly drained the last of his tea in a less than respectable manner and straitened his braces, smiling at his old friend once more.

"Indeed they will my good Hobbit, they have been through a lot. I will take my leave of you now, as I too have things to do before tonight. But I must say that I am extremely pleased you will be joining us on this journey. I have a feeling you will be very important."

And with that, he stood to his full, fairly intimidating and highly unnatural height, nodded to the Hobbit and showed himself out, whistling to himself as he stepped onto the path down into Hobbiton.

Shaking his head fondly, Bilbo walked over and closed the door, tutting at the mark Gandalf had subtly left on his freshly painted door.

Yavanna above what a wonderful dream this was turning out to be. It was the happiest Bilbo had felt since he'd come back to the Shire, since before his dealings with Smaug even. And instead of wondering at the way this dream felt, or when it would finally dissolve back into his grey, unhappy reality, he decided to revel in it, to fully submerge himself in this illusion and redo their first meeting as he'd wished he'd behaved.

So without further ado, Bilbo rolled his sleeves up and rubbed his hands together, surveying his kitchen with an almost feverish gleam in his eyes. He had some serious cooking to do.

Many hours and one market trip later, Bilbo stood once again surveying his kitchen, wiping the sweat from his brow and nodding in satisfaction at what he saw.

Every surface was piled high with food. He'd baked bread by the dozen; huge white loafs, seeded rolls, herb plaits and his mother's famous sweet buns, dripping in a sweet glaze and dusted with cinnamon.

There was more meat than he knew what to do with; three roast chickens stuffed with lemon and breadcrumbs, succulent roast beef with dripping juices as well as a huge gammon smothered in a honey and mustard glaze.

Huge earthenware bowls were piled high with crispy roast potatoes, thick chicken and lentil soup and a smaller one filled with roasted vegetables, though he, Bifur and Gandalf would likely be the only ones to partake in those particular items.

There was also two huge pots of beef stew and lamb hotpot, both a Baggins speciality with herb dumplings to accompany them. Not to mention the plethora of odds and ends that his friends could help themselves too; platters of cold cuts and cheeses, sauces and jams.

And as for pudding, Bilbo had really gone to town. He clearly remembered that his friends loved sweet things just as much as they did meat, and the Hobbit wasn't even remotely humble about his baking skills.

He'd churned out two apple pies, the pastry perfectly crispy and brown, the fillings deep, stuffed to the brim with sweet, sticky apples and plenty of cinnamon. Berry crumble was an absolute definite, as Bilbo definitely remembered Thorin grudgingly admitting to him that he actually loved blackberries. He used the entirety of his berry stores, but as this was still unfortunately a dream, he was sure he could spare it.

Though he really wished dream cooking would be less exhausting.

The tired and incredibly nervous Hobbit was just removing the final dish from the oven, a glorious looking sticky toffee pudding with extra butterscotch sauce, when he heard a loud, thudding knock.

Startling badly, only his extreme love of puddings preventing him from dropping the dish, he quickly rearranged the pots and dishes in his kitchen to make way for the pudding, finally placing it down on one of the only free spaces left in his kitchen.

So distracted was he by this, he didn't realise he was leaving a guest at the door until a much louder, much more insistent thumping echoed through his smial.

Bilbo knew that knock; he remembered it still, clear as day. He knew what he would see when he opened the door and Yavanna help him, he almost didn't. The Hobbit's heart was pounding a fearsome drumbeat against his chest, his stomach heaving and rolling. He wanted to see his Dwarves with a burning, terrible passion, but he wasn't sure he could actually bare it.

How could he see his friends, his family again, even in his dreams, when he knew what he knew? How could he experience the very first night he met them all over again only to wake to find himself in an empty Hobbit hole, with his friends, both living and dead, half a world away under a hard won mountain. He was only a weak little Hobbit with a shattered heart, how much more could he really take?

Another pair of heavy thuds, these even more impatient and insistent, much to Bilbo's amusement, decided it for him. Because he knew that when he woke up he would regret with all his heart not taking this opportunity to see their faces again, to hear their voices. Even if only in his dreams.

Straightening his clothes, brushing off any stray patches of flour or crumbs and running a hand through his unruly curls, Bilbo took a deep, steadying breath and opened his door.

Oh Dwalin. Gruff, loyal Dwalin. The sight of his battle hardened warrior friend froze him where he stood. Bilbo's eyes greedily drank in every inch of the familiar Dwarf as his heartbeat thudded in his ears, his legs feeling weak as jelly.

As his eyes met his friend's once again, Bilbo noticed a weariness he hadn't the first time, as distracted as he was with the sudden and unexpected arrival of a strange Dwarf on his doorstep.

His old friend looked...trodden down, exhausted and wary, as though he wanted nothing more than to just stop and rest but was resigned to the prospect of having to move on once more.

He was also eying Bilbo up and down in return, though with nothing even close to the admiration and joy that Bilbo felt. Instead he was suspicious, weighing up the creature in front of him and finding him wanting. Soon, his expression shifted into a mix of resignation and...disappointment.

"Are ya going to let me in or what? I won't hurt ya." Dwalin's gruff, rumbling voice startling the Hobbit, as he realised with a flush of shame what his actions must have looked like.

"Oh! No of course not! I wasn't thinking that at all Master Dwarf. I was just...surprised. I wasn't expecting, well, a Dwarf to be honest. Please come in."

Bilbo stepped aside swiftly, finally letting his old friend into his home. It seemed he'd made even more of a mess of their introduction than the first time! Thank heavens this was only a

dream.

He held his arm out for Dwalin's cloak and placed the heavy item on one of the pegs by the door, marvelling at the earthy, distinctly Dwarven smell of it. Yavanna, if you'd told him a year ago that he would one day relish the smell of Dwarf, he would have wished you an abrupt good day before striding quickly off.

Making the swift decision to make up for their rude second introduction, Bilbo hurried to follow his friend, sneaking around him silently as he stopped to peer around his parlour, seeming to be examining the architecture of the place, before moving through to the kitchen.

“If you would just come through here Master Dwarf, I’ll bring you out some ale and something small to eat to tide you over until the rest get here. As you can probably tell, I’ve, err, cooked up a bit of a storm for you all...”

He trailed off awkwardly, rubbing at his arm as Dwalin simply stared at the room, every spare surface covered in food. There were pots and pans still simmering, unleashing the most delicious smells, hot bread sitting in their baskets, roast birds in the oven, steaming sweet and savoury pies and all manner of other foods. Just like the first time, he’d emptied his pantry to the last prized tomato, but at least he knew he wouldn’t have to restock it.

“Is...is everything okay Master Dwarf?”

Dwalin pulled his eyes away and simply nodded. Motioning for his friend to sit, Bilbo busied himself getting the Dwarf a plate. He knew the look in Dwalin’s eyes now, having seen it so many times before both on the Quest and during the horrific Fell Winter. It was hunger, true, stomach-cramping hunger.

Yavanna knew how he’d missed it the first time, so caught up in his shock and indignation about these strange, chaotic Dwarves overtaking his home. He had been so selfish, denying them the comforts a good Hobbit should have offered. His mother would have been ashamed.

But now Bilbo had a chance to put that right, if only in his own head. But it felt so real that he could near convince himself that this was truly happening, he was truly seeing his dear friends again. It was a gift that he wouldn’t waste, not one second of it. Even though Bilbo knew he would suffer greatly when he awoke.

Deeming the plate full enough to tide the hungry Dwarf over, heaped as it was with slices of cold beef, a crusty roll, cheese (though not of the ‘riddled with mould’ variety) and the like, he returned to the table and placed it and a mug of the best ale he had in front of his friend.

“Will this be enough for now?” he asked, not wishing his dear friend to be hungry in his home for one more minute.

“...aye.”

Bilbo smiled to himself fondly, knowing Dwalin wasn’t a Dwarf of many words at the best of times, let alone with a strange, coddled Hobbit he’d just met. But he also knew that he would

be grateful for the food and enjoy it greatly, which was more than enough for Bilbo.

Leaving the Dwarf to his food, Bilbo returned to his parlour to breathe. He needed to calm himself before anymore of his old friends turned up. Unless he woke up, Balin would be here soon, one of his greatest friends in the Company.

They'd spent many long hours during the Quest talking about anything and everything. Balin was a clever, witty soul as well as a truly kind Dwarf. When the gold sickness was at its highest and he had no one else to turn to for advice, he knew he could trust Balin, knew he could subtly hint at his having the Arkenstone and ask what to do with it.

Bilbo had stood on tenterhooks, shuffling from foot to foot, his heart pounding a fearsome beat against his rib cage as he'd waited to see if not only would Balin understand what he was hinting at, but not actually march him to Thorin the second he'd finished speaking.

But his faith was rewarded, thank Yavanna, and he'd given Bilbo the last confirmation he needed to get the Arkenstone as far away from Thorin as possible. Even if it would break their relationship beyond saving.

But most importantly, he'd given Bilbo both the greatest gift and worst wound anyone ever could have dealt him.

Just when he'd felt his most alone, a painful secret held deep in his heart, Balin had looked at him, eyes kind and sorrowful. He'd understood. Balin had understood what Bilbo had meant to say but couldn't, all the words and thoughts and feelings that had gone unsaid for such a very long time.

And then he'd given him a sign that it wasn't all one sided. They had gotten to know each other's minds very well during their Quest, and that was more than enough to let them be understood.

Balin was much too clever and far too kind to say these words aloud. He knew that Bilbo had never truly spoken to Thorin about the truth of his heart, nor vice versa. And if the words were never allowed to be spoken to each other, then they shouldn't get to be spoken to another.

They were theirs and theirs alone; they would lie within their hearts eternally now. Or perhaps within an acorn.

A knock broke him out of his thoughts, his breath catching in his aching chest. "That'll be the door!" Came a gruff call from the kitchen, Bilbo rolling his eyes before straightening his vest and opening the door.

Balin, oh Balin. The white haired Dwarf was standing there looking as he always did; a kind smile on his face and a bright, almost mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"Balin, at your service," he announced with an elegant bow.



Refusing to cock up another greeting, thankful once again that this dream allowed him to not just experience these moments, but alter them as well, Bilbo bowed in return. Remembering the etiquette when it came to Dwarves and bowing, he made sure he bent lower than his friend to show his respect.

“Bilbo Baggins, at yours and your family. Won’t you please come in? I’ll take your cloak and anything else you wish. One of your party has already arrived and is in the kitchen. Just through there.”

“Aye Master Baggins,” he said, handing over his coat with a grin, eyes twinkling. “I do believe I can hear my younger brother stuffing his face from here. Not a sound one can forget or mistake easily.”

Unable to suppress a smirk, privately agreeing with the old Dwarf, he hung up the cloak and made his way through to his kitchen just in time to see the two smashing their foreheads together in greeting once again. No matter how much time he spent with Dwarves, he was still positive he would simply never understand that particular habit.

“Well Master Baggins, you have cooked us up a mighty feast tonight I must say! Did you do all this yourself? Or do you have your other half here somewhere?”

The question surprised him, but what surprised him even more was the fact that his mind instantly turned to Thorin. His expression must have shown something, as Balin’s grin softened.

“I’m sorry Master Baggins, I shouldn’t have pried.”

“Err, no no,” he stammered, mind blanking out. “it’s alright. I’m, ah, alone. Quite alone.”

Bilbo tried, he truly did, to keep the sorrow out of his voice and off his face, but the feelings swamped him all at once and he wasn’t entirely sure he managed. Fortunately he was saved from any further interaction on the subject by the door.

“I’ll just go get that, please take a seat Master Balin, I’ll be back in a moment.”

Hurrying out perhaps a touch quicker than was polite, Bilbo made it to the door, about to open it when it struck him.

This would be Fili and Kili. Those dear, bright boys who left the world darker and colder in their absence. It would be his first experience coming face to face with someone he’d lost rather than left. How could he hope to face them, knowing he’d not been quick enough?

If he’d just have run a little faster, left a little sooner, he could have reached Ravenshill before they went off scouting, before they walked straight into a trap that would cost Fili his life and eventually, Kili’s too.

He almost prayed to wake up right then, to never have to face them and know that when he woke up, they wouldn’t really be there. They’d be half a world away buried in the heart of a

mountain, along with their uncle.

But it was that thought too that finally convinced him to open the door, to prolong this dream a little longer. Who knew when he would dream of them again, a dream that wasn't a nightmarish blur of their lifeless bodies or violent deaths. This was the first time he'd been able to see them as they truly were since they'd died and it could be the last for all he knew.

For some reason, he'd been granted this wonderful, if painful, opportunity. A chance to relive their first meeting, to alter it as he pleased until it became the greeting he'd wished they'd had. He couldn't let that go to waste, no matter how much it hurt.

Bilbo steadied himself against the wood for a moment, breathing deep and steeling himself and before he could talk himself out of it, he all but wrenched the door open.

Oh Yavanna, sweet Yavanna.

There they were. Both of them. Alive.

The breath was punched out of him, his head span, his hands shook. So distracted was he that he barely even heard their greeting, barely saw their bows.

"You must be Mister Boggins! Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I know my brother is horrible to look at but surely it isn't all that bad."

A swift elbow to Fili's side from his brother is retaliation soon turned into a small squabble, which gave Bilbo just enough time to get himself together.

It felt like he was being held together by force of will alone and Yavanna knew how he would deal with seeing Thorin again. But he couldn't focus on that now, he had two tussling younglings to separate.

"Now now boys, enough of that," he managed to force out, interrupting Kili pulling on his brothers large ears. "You'd best come in and sit down. Two more of your company are in the kitchen and there's plenty of food. Let me just take your things."

He'd hardly finished speaking before he was all but thrown two cloaks and a vast array of weapons without a by your leave or nothing. Staggering under all the weight, he took a moment to inhale the comforting smell of their cloaks, leather and something faintly spicy, before he pulled himself together, carefully putting their gear away and followed them through the hall.

"Excuse me Master Dwarf, but if that foot goes anywhere near that box, I'll be dragging you outside by your ear and you'll get no food at all."

Kili stopped, foot hovering in mid-air over the box he'd just been about to use to scrape the mud of his boots, eyes wide at being firmly scolded by a tiny gentlehobbit. Locking eyes with his brother, who looked back in confusion and shrugged, Kili slowly turned on one leg away

from Bilbo's mother's glorybox before gingerly placing his boot back on the floor.

"Thank you. Now, if you indeed feel the need to scrape the mud from your boots, there's a perfectly good scrapper outside next to the door, but as your kinsmen seemed to also miss it, I'm not sure what extra damage you will do. So follow me if you wish."

The brothers once again exchanged a glance, shrugging, before following after Bilbo as he led them to the kitchen. Dwalin and Balin had obviously found the ale and were helping themselves to more cookies, Dwalin in particular.

Bilbo smiled to himself, remembering well the rough looking Dwarf's terrible sweet tooth. Luckily for him, the Hobbit had made a large batch of butterscotch cookies and a sticky toffee pudding, both of which being his friends favourite.

"Mister Dwalin! Balin!"

The boys rushed to the older Dwarves who let out a cry of delight, immediately swarming the young Dwarfs and plying them with all sorts of questions.

Bilbo might as well have slipped on his Ring with how invisible he became to them, so wrapped up as they were in catching up. But it gave him the perfect opportunity to simply take a moment and watch them all, to drink in the sight of them so gloriously vibrant and alive.

Seeing the joy on Balin and Dwalin's faces at the two excitable young Dwarves both warmed his heart and conjured up dark thoughts. It was a gift to see them all together, happy and talking without a care in the world, as the last time he saw those four together, two of them were dead.

Yavanna above, watching Dwalin witness Fili's death had been hard enough, the strong warrior who had seen so much death in his many years couldn't even bare to watch, flinching and turning his head to the side, eyes tight shut. As though blocking out the horrific vision of it could stop it being true.

If a tree falls in the woods and no one's there to hear it, does it still make a sound?

Dwalin stayed to protect the body all the same. He knew what Orcs did to bodies in battle, knew the chance to defile Thorin's nephews' body would be too good for them to miss. But so long as Dwalin had breath in his own body, he would protect Fili, would keep him safe in death, as he could not do in life.

They both found Kili together, or so he was told, and it was just another terrible wound, the knowledge that the Dwarves they'd know from the moment they were born, were dead and gone.

Then they found Thorin and the noises of pure agony took Bilbo's breath away.

The ringing of the bell thankfully pulled him out of his memories and he quickly hurried to

the door, once again taking a quick moment to get himself together. As wonderful as this dream was, it was also turning out to be quite stressful on his abused heart.

As distracted as he was, he barely managed to jump back before a rockslide of Dwarves crashed onto his floor, all groaning and blaming one another. Bofur bless him was holding up his broken bell and smiling sheepishly and behind them all, poking his abnormally large self through the doorway, was Gandalf, a twinkling mischief in his eyes.

“Well then, at least you’ve all turned up at once and saved my legs some walking. Stamp the mud off your boots outside please and come on through, there’s plenty of food and ale waiting for you after your journey.”

A small cheer greeted his words, happy faces and smiles passed between each other, though tinted with confusion. Some smiles even directed at him too, though still guarded. Bilbo couldn't say that he blamed them for being wary, even in the face of his open hospitality, but it still hurt to see friends that he felt such love for look at him as a stranger and nothing more.

But he shouldn't check the gift apple for worms, as his father used to say. He was blessed for this opportunity, this bizarrely realistic dream where he could see them again, safe and happy and together. After nights upon nights of no sleep or only seeing them bloody, hurt and dead, it was a welcome relief that he would cling to with all he had.

Soon the thunderous stomping of boots could be heard, as the Dwarves cleaned themselves up and began piling properly into his hallway, passing him cloaks and in Bofur's case, his own door bell.

They swept through his smial towards the slightly worrying sounds of the Dwarves already in his kitchen and Bilbo could only hope they'd stuck with the small plates of food he'd given them before the meal could begin properly.

They had never even glimpsed at the true splendour of a Hobbit's cooking in real life; only having grabbed whatever had already been made or was in his pantry. This time they'd get the chance to sample some of Bilbo's best dishes and a few specially made ones that he knew were his friend's non-Dwarven favourites.

The gasps and shouts of delight warmed his heart as they caught sight of the mounds of food taking up every available surface in his kitchen. Bilbo simply smiled fondly until he felt a heavy thump on his back, turning to see a widely smiling Bofur.

"You've made us a feast fit for kings 'ere Master Hobbit and a right sight for sore eyes it is!"

He didn't say thank you, it wasn't their way, or even stayed long enough for Bilbo to reply, he just patted the Hobbits back once more before leaving to help lead Bifur to the table, the other having gotten distracted by a wooden puzzle on Bilbo's shelf.

"Okay Master Dwarves," he called, shaking himself to attention. "I don't think we'll all fit in here, so if you could please help move the table into the next room, then I can start bringing the food through!"

They moved as one almost immediately, picking up the heavy wood table as though it was nothing, moving into the hall where there was much more space, just as they had in real life. Soon, everything was in place and Bilbo began moving between the kitchen and hall, carrying a seemingly unending number of plates and bowls full of food.

"Excuse me Master Baggins, can I be of any help?"

Bilbo turned, his hands full of the huge pot of stew to look at dear sweet Ori, looking so gentle and shy, so unsure of himself. Bilbo wished he could tell him how strong the Dwarf really was, knowing that right now, Ori was questioning whether he was good enough for this adventure.

He longed to reassure him, to tell him just how brave and clever he really was and that he would flourish on this journey, gaining the respect of the whole Company and making his brothers all but glow with pride, finally realising their young sibling, practically a son to Dori, was a Dwarf grown now.

"Oh! Yes thank you Master Dwarf, that would be much appreciated. If you could grab that pot of chips just there and follow me."

Bilbo smiled to himself as he saw the shy Dwarves eyes light up with the mention of his favourites, as he eagerly grabbed the pot and eyed the huge pile of crispy, golden chips. And if the pot made it to the table a couple of chips lighter, Bilbo wasn't going to mention it.

"How can we help Mister Baggins?"

Twin grins met him, so alive and bright, so different to the last time he saw them. It broke his heart just as much as it healed it and he wanted more than anything to pull them close, to enfold them in his arms and never let them leave. Bilbo knew he'd fight the whole of Middle Earth to keep them safe if it came to it. He just wanted them safe, was that so much to ask?

But it wasn't his job anymore; he'd missed his chance to protect them. He'd failed.

"Mister Baggins?"

"Sorry boys, I was in another world then! Yes, please take the cutlery and the pile of plates."

A gleam of pure mischief entered their eyes, just as Bilbo knew it would and he had to turn away to hold in his smile. He counted down in his head until he heard the tell-tale sounds of knives and forks flying through the air.

Soon the Dwarves were cheering, catching and throwing the plates and cutlery between themselves, banging a beat out with heavy boots and the bottoms of knives.

Unable to resist hearing it again, Bilbo moulded his face into a scowl of annoyance and turned to the rowdy rabble and called out "Mind the knives, you'll blunt them!"

Bofur immediately quipped "Oooh did you hear that lads? He said we'll blunt the knives!"

And just as it had in real life, Kili kicked off the infamous 'That's What Bilbo Baggins Hates'. He tried to look disgruntled, but it was just such a joy to hear them all sing again, to hear them happy and together.

Though to be quite honest, it still made his heart pound when they started throwing his mother's favourite tea set about. He was still a Hobbit after all.

By the end of their song, their laughter (both good-natured and not so much) ringing through his previously quiet smial, everything was laid out on the table and their feast could begin.

Bilbo stepped back, not wanting to be caught in the inevitable food fight. He lent against the wall, a small ale in his hands as he simply watched his Dwarves.

Well, all his Dwarves except one, perhaps the most important. The one that made his heart pound faster when he even thought about seeing him again, his stomach flipping and hands shaking in anticipation of the knock at the door that should be coming soon.

But if he wanted to be any kind of host to the Dwarves he had in his smial already, he would have to push those feelings aside for now and focus.

It was much nicer watching them enjoy a proper Hobbit prepared meal instead of the paltry spread they'd had in reality. This was how it should have been; he should have treated them like the brave warriors and honourable Dwarves they were instead of behaving as though they were invading vagabonds.

Bilbo now knew that, however unknowingly, he had added to the long, long list of people who'd turned them away and treated them like savages. It shamed him just thinking about it.

Bilbo wished with all his heart he could erase their first meeting and the few weeks after. He would give anything to make them feel that they weren't unwanted invaders, that they were welcomed in his home and would be treated with the respect and kindness they deserved. But if a dream was all he'd be able to get, he would take it gladly and thank Yavanna till the end of his days.

Two heavy thumps knocked him straight out of his pleasant observations, his heart beat pounding in his chest so hard, he was surprised the whole room couldn't hear it.

"He is here."

And so he was. Thorin Oakenshield, his Thorin, was stood right outside his door. A small amount of painted wood was all that stood between them but it felt like an immovable barrier to Bilbo. How could he stand this? The others were bad enough, but how on this sweet earth could he be expected to look into the face of the person he loved the most in all of Middle Earth, the face he'd lost and not break down?

The stunned Hobbit barely felt Gandalf sweep past him and the other Dwarves gather around the door, blocking it from view. For a few moments, he could breath, unable to see or be

seen. So he tried everything he could to pull himself together, to not seem as stricken as he truly was.

“I thought you said this place would be easy to find? I lost my way, twice.”

Oh Yavanna. That voice. *His* voice.

Bilbo’s legs shook and he was forced to lean against the wall or fall down, grasping onto the polished wood like a small child their mother. He had to pull himself together. He couldn’t face another meeting with Thorin looking down on him like a nuisance field mouse.

Gathering all the strength he possessed, Bilbo forced himself up. He would not waste this opportunity because of his weakness. He had been blessed by this dream, this strange, far too realistic dream and it would not do to meet his dear Thorin again as he was.

By the time the crowd of Dwarves in front of him parted, Bilbo had mustered up all of the courage and strength he possessed and was stood straight, head held high as he finally saw his first glimpse of the future King Under the Mountain.

By the Valar he was magnificent.

“Bilbo Baggins, may I introduce Thorin Oakenshield, the leader of our Company.”

“So this is our Burglar. Looks more like a grocer to me.”

It hurt to be looked down on so by the person he cared about most on this earth, and some long dampened spark ignited inside him once more.

He hadn’t riddled with a dragon or fought Orcs to be looked at like some useless and unwanted burden. He may have been just that before but not now and he’d be damned if he let this Thorin think that any longer. He would not be judged by this haughty Dwarf, not even in a dream.

“I beg your pardon?” he asked, eyebrows raised. “I see no grocers here! Just a Hobbit tired from cooking for a hungry group of Dwarves I was only told about this very morning!”

“He’s right Uncle, you should see how much food he made us! It’s fantastic!”

“Aye that it is. We saved some for you.”

Thorin did not look away from him, even as the Dwarves prattled on about the many virtues of Hobbit cooking, and neither did Bilbo. It was almost a game, which of them would break eye contact first.

By the time Kili moved between them to collect Thorin and usher him to where the food was, Bilbo thought he detected a change in his harshly beautiful face. Not quite respect, not yet, not even a little bit; more like consideration, the thought that perhaps he’d misjudged this seemingly spineless and sheltered Halfling. Perhaps one day he could come to be someone he did respect.

Bilbo watched as he was swept away into the swell of the Company, his excitable nephews sitting him down and all but throwing different dishes at him. The Hobbit had to admit, he was taking great enjoyment out of watching Thorin eat the food he'd prepared for him and enjoying it by the looks of things.

He wasn't so vocal as the rest of them about it, but Bilbo knew him well enough to notice how his eyes widened slightly and he reached for more food with a greater enthusiasm. It made something warm and content settle deep in Bilbo's chest.

He knew Thorin had spent so many years hungry, so many years sacrificing his own food without a word of complaint to fill the bellies of his nephews just a little bit more. Remembering the bowl of soup he'd had in reality made a brick settle in Bilbo's stomach. His dear Dwarf must have been so hungry, having travelled so far and he hadn't complained at all.

Bilbo knew he could have rustled up something more substantial with what little he had left; it was a skill he'd picked up during the Fell Winter, just like every other Hobbit. But he'd been confused and annoyed, so indignant that these strange Dwarves had invaded his home and helped themselves. So he'd pettily left the king with only a bowl of soup after a long journey and before an even longer one. How could he have been so cruel?

Gandalf was right, he had changed and certainly not for the better. Gone was the Bilbo Baggins who would tread out into the biting cold every morning, just a small thing barely out of his Tweens, a bag of whatever they had to spare over his shoulder to share around his neighbours, those less well off than the Baggins' or with more mouths to feed.

The young Hobbit had never thought of himself then, always willing to head out, even when the whispers of vicious wolves began. There was no one else to do it in Bag End, his father having been struck down with a horrible cough and burning fever, and his mother needed to care for him. It broke her heart to let her son go out every morning but she was too good of a Hobbit to let those around them starve.

The shame of Bilbo's selfish pettiness felt like a rock in his heart and he vowed to make the most of this strange dream and amend it.

Whilst he'd been lost in thought, Thorin had his fill of food and it was time to start clearing away the dishes. Bilbo knew they'd be getting on to serious discussion now.

The Hobbit moved quickly between everyone, piling up plates and moving them back to the kitchen. Soon everything was cleared away, the loud conversation quietened to hushed whispers, the atmosphere thickening with tension and anticipation.

Returning to his place hovering between Thorin and Gandalf, Bilbo asked "So what's this all about then? I'm sure I don't even know the half of it, as delightfully cryptic as our Wandering Wizard likes to be and I'd love to know what I'm really going to be doing."

The Dwarf king nodded, pulling out the map, all noise stopping as the attention focused on him and Gandalf. Bilbo set down a few more candles so they could all see better, getting a nod of thanks from the wizard.



“My thanks Bilbo. Now, far to the East...”

Despite himself, Bilbo zoned out. It wasn't surprising really; he had near enough worked himself into exhaustion, not to mention the mental and emotional turmoil of seeing everyone again. So when he realised the speech was going just as it had in real life, he believed it safe to let his mind wander.

He looked instead at each and every Dwarf and saw the tiny flicker of hope rise into a burning flame, saw the fear there too but it only served as fuel to that fire because it wasn't fear for themselves, not really; it was fear for their families, their friends, their entire race. It was the fear of what would become of them if they failed, or worse, if they never ceased this one chance at all.

Then Gandalf produced the key and all his attention zeroed in on Thorin. Bilbo watched the Dwarf's back straighten, his face going slack with shock. He saw how he hesitated, just for a moment, before reaching out and taking it, as though he was afraid to touch this impossible thing. Then he watched the strength and hope he took from simply holding this key, this integral piece of his homeland and more importantly, the last thing he knew for sure that his father had touched, the last thing his father ever intended for him.

Thorin's strong hands, capable of holding together his people, of carrying their hopes and safety, closed around the rough metal and his resolve solidified to mithril.

“That's why we need a burglar!”

Ori's sweet voice jolted him from his musings, the conversation quite carrying on without him. Forcing himself to restrain his smile, Bilbo hummed critically. “A good one too, an expert I'd imagine.”

“And are you?”

A small, wry grin broke its way onto his face as Bilbo ducked his head. “Perhaps not an expert, but I've been known to pinch the odd thing here and there.”

“I don't believe a word o' it. We need someone with proper skills, this one's hardly burglar material.”

Dwalin's voice broke the silence, Gloin grumbling in agreement and prompting a round of doubting him and his skills, arguing with each other and just general noise. Unbothered entirely, Bilbo simply hung back as the shadows in his smial began to gravitate towards Gandalf, surrounding him like a cloak as he somehow appeared to grow in size, standing and shouting at the rabble of rowdy Dwarves in front of him.

“If I say Bilbo Baggins is a burglar then a burglar he is! He has a great deal more to offer than any of you know. Including, perhaps, himself.”

No, Bilbo knew exactly how much he had to offer, how much use he had been. And the answer was ‘not enough’. Yes he may have helped here and there; he wasn't modest enough

to believe he'd been entirely useless, but when it came down to it, when it had really mattered, he was useless. He couldn't save them.

"Oh cheer up Master Baggins, it might never happen!" came the cheerful call of Bofur, having as usual, caught on to his change in mood. Smiling weakly at his friend, Bilbo nodded, looking back to Thorin when he cleared his throat in what can only be described as incredibly grumpiness tinged with impatience and deep regret.

"Enough of all that," he spat out with a scowl, as though any of his Company being friendly to this strange creature was repulsive to him. Bilbo would be lying to say it didn't hurt a little.

"We will trust the wizard on this," he continued, turning to Balin next to him. "Give him the contract."

Said contract was thrust into his hands and he spent a moment just holding it. He remembered so clearly what it felt like to touch it, feel the rough, thick parchment under his fingers, to marvel at the sheer detail the Dwarves go to in their contracts. He must remember it even clearer than he thought, as this dream was re creating it so very perfectly.

"Not scared you off has it Master Hobbit?" came Bofur's drawl, followed by a scattering of not so well intended laughter. Rolling his eyes, Bilbo moulded his face into that of somewhat bored nonchalance.

"Well the threat of incineration is a bit of a kicker, but I've got far too many family engagements this month so there's really nothing to lose."

Startled cackles burst out of a few of the Dwarves, Bofur, Fili and Kili especially. It was nice to hear them all laugh at him without scorn for the first time in this dream. It'd taken rather a while in real life, Bofur, Fili and Kili being the only ones even willing to give him a chance those first few weeks.

Smiling at them, he turned to Thorin and looked him straight in the eye. "Have you something for me to write with? I'd like to get this signed so we can all see about relaxing and turning in for the night."

And there was that strange look again on the Dwarf king's face; like absolutely nothing was going the way he expected it to, regarding the Hobbit, and he didn't know what to do about it. Bilbo had to admit, it was nice to mess with his expectations.

Accepting the ingenious Dwarven pen Balin passed him with a smirk and a wink, Bilbo returned the smile and barely resisted the urge to lean the contract on Thorin's back to sign, just to see his reaction. But as he didn't quite know what being beheaded would feel like in a dream, he managed to restrain himself.

He happily signed his name with a flourish, a giddy joy in his chest. What a blessing this dream was and even if it brought him pain when he awoke, it would be worth every second. Handing the contract back to Balin, he rocked back on his heels, barely restrained grin on his face as he took in the looks of shock on the Dwarves' faces.

“Well, everything seems to be in order. Welcome Master Baggins, to the Company of Thorin Oakenshield.”

A few cheers and whistles rang out in his smile, coming from two young brothers. “We knew you had it in ya Mister Boggins!”

Shaking his head, he gave a little bow, throwing a wink and a grin at them both. Oh if only he’d been different in real life! If only he’d jumped at the chance, done what he wanted deep down instead of covering it up with the usual mask of good Baggins respectability.

He could have saved himself a good deal of loneliness. All those weeks with them that he’d blindly wasted! What he wouldn’t give to fill those days with the laughter and friendship he’d had with them eventually.

“Well, now that the formalities are sorted, shall I show you where you can all relax and then turn in for the night? I’m afraid I don’t have enough guest rooms for everyone, even if you double up. But we can make the living room comfortable enough I should think.”

Agreements were all but shouted at him, the heavy scrape of chairs against his lovely floorboards still making him wince. He may have changed a lot, but some instinct stuck with you for life.

He led them into the living room, showing them what could be made into a comfortable enough bed for the night, receiving assurances that they’d slept on worse than a slightly too small couch or clean floor. And didn’t Bilbo just know it. Still, it made him want to make them even more comfortable, made him want to ensure they were warm, well fed and happy. It was an instinct he was trying very hard to reign in, lest he look far too helpful and made them suspicious.

“You can decide between yourselves who will sleep where in here, and there are two guest rooms. I assume you’ll be taking one of course?” he said, turning to face Thorin. Said Dwarf only nodded his assent with barely a flash of gratitude.

Bilbo rolled his eyes behind the king’s back before turning to Gandalf with a wry grin. “You’ll have the other of course, though it might be a tad small for you.”

“That will be perfectly fine Bilbo, I stayed here many times when your dear mother were younger. I always made do perfectly well.”

Smiling proper, Bilbo nodded, heart warm at the thought of his mother. Her loss still hurt him, as did his father’s, but enough time had passed that the sharp stab of grief had faded to something more manageable, allowing for the good memories and warm feelings to come to the surface.

During the actual Quest, he and Gandalf had passed many hours talking of his parents. He adored hearing all about the young, wild Took that ran off with a wandering wizard to parts unknown; as well as the quiet, unassuming Baggins lad who waited for her with a warm heart and open arms, never using them to hold her back, only to embrace her when she returned on her own.

“Now the bathroom has plenty of hot water, so feel free to wash if you like. You can smoke anywhere and help yourself to anything left in the kitchen if you get peckish. I’ll leave you all to it and retire for the night though I think, I assume we’ll be having an early start!”

“Oh aye Master Baggins, you’ll barely believe your arse ever made it to your bed we’ll be off so soon!”

Scattered laughter answered Bofur’s shout, making Bilbo chuckle too. “I’ll thank you to keep thoughts about my arse to yourself Master Dwarf!” he said in mocking reproachfulness, even wagging his finger at his friend, much to the delight of the Company.

“And on that note, I wish you all a goodnight.”

He even got a few calls of goodnights in return, which brought a smile to his face, as he slowly made his way to his room, taking in the scattered belongings of his friends.

He wanted to commit everything about this dream to his memory, such a beautiful gift as it was. He’d have gladly stayed with them for longer but the strangest feeling had begun to descend upon him; he was getting tired, exhausted even. He was fairly sure you weren’t supposed to feel things like that in a dream, but this hadn’t exactly been the regular run of the mill kind.

It felt as though he would simply fall down to the floor in a dead sleep if he didn’t lie down soon. Bilbo had to assume it was the dream coming to an end and as much as he wanted to hold on to it with all he had, he knew he was lucky to have had this and he wouldn’t grow greedy.

Finally in his room, he slowly shut the door and made his way to the bed, sinking gratefully onto it. It was odd, Bilbo mused, as he cast his eyes about the room; at this point in reality, Bilbo had passed the point of irritation, took a right turn at down right furious and finally stuttered to a halt into exhausted despondency.

He’d trudged to his room with barely a good night thrown over his shoulder, shut himself behind a door that seemed far too flimsy to block out the noise the Dwarves were making and collapsed on the bed. He’d been quite sure that tomorrow they’d all part ways and he’d be all the happier for it. Bilbo wasn’t cut out for adventures.

But still, something in his chest just wouldn’t settle and he’d remained sat on the bed instead of getting in it and simply stared at his feet.

When the music began, a deep humming reverberating through his smial, he couldn’t help but listen. Then that voice had rung out, as dark and heavy as drums in the deep places of the world. From that first note he’d been hooked, unable to even think of anything else, feeling every note deep in his very chest.

And as the words had made their way into his head, a strange, aching desire had risen in him. A desire to sit around a fire and watch the embers fly into the night. A desire to ford rivers, travers open plains, climb mountains. And more than anything, a desire to feel like he belonged.

He'd finally fallen asleep with the song in his ears and dreamt of all these things and more, all his deepest secrets and wishes escaping and making him wonder. What if?

Now of course, he knew exactly what all those things felt like. He'd done all the things he'd imagined and many more besides. And most importantly, he'd finally known what it felt like to truly belong, to truly be accepted for who he was. He'd known love.

And when that song began again, just as beautiful and achingly mournful as he'd remembered, Bilbo all but doubled over, his heart feeling like it would burst.

What he wouldn't give for another chance! What he wouldn't give to actually be able to go with them in the morning, to experience it all again, even the very worst parts, just for a chance to feel those things one more time. He missed them all so badly he felt he could die with it.

But it couldn't be and he was only hurting himself more by thinking on it. This had been a beautiful, blessed dream, a gift from his mind or the Valar themselves. He had no idea the why or the how but it was all he was going to get and he should be grateful for it.

So lost in his thoughts, he hadn't noticed himself slip sideways into the bed proper, the voices of his friends wrapping around him like a blanket, lulling him into the deep, dark blankness of sleep.

He also hadn't noticed his hand slipping into his pocket and gripping the golden Ring waiting there.

## Chapter End Notes

Well here we go guys, the plot does begin! I tried to shake things up a little so you weren't reading the same thing as canon, but there wasn't much to be done with this. But rest assured in future it won't just be a re telling, things will be much different!

I really hope you enjoyed this beast of a chapter and I hope to hear from you! Neeka  
xxxx

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Waking up on the hard floor, the cold biting his bones was even more painful than he'd anticipated. Once Bilbo remembered that despite how real it felt, what he'd experienced really was nothing more than a dream, his heart shattered all over again. His friends were dead or a world away and he was alone, lying on the floor with a hollow feeling in his bones and a pain in his soul so strong he curled in on himself and moaned aloud.

For a moment, he really had convinced himself it was real.

How could he bare this? It was bad enough before but now, after getting to see them, talk to them again, getting a chance to redo their first meeting? This was too much. How he didn't die from the pain in his body and soul he couldn't understand. He wished he would.

But Bilbo was a Baggins and even more importantly, he was his mother's son. And if she could hold off the Wilting until Bilbo had Come of Age, then he could hang on too. What he was hanging on for however, he didn't know, but he couldn't very well pass to Yavanna's Fields and look his mother in the eye if he didn't try.

This decided, Bilbo picked himself up off the floor, steadying his swaying body against the fireplace as the world suddenly spun around him. After a few moments of simply hanging on and breathing around the strange sucking sensation in his chest, it finally passed enough for him to stand unaided.

It was when he raised his head that he noticed the glinting gold on his finger; the Ring was still on. He'd nearly forgotten the almost overpowering need to put it on last night, just for a few blessed moments of emptiness.

He was tempted to just leave it on, to become invisible forever; wandering his halls and becoming the ghost he felt like. But he couldn't very well go to the market invisible, as much as he'd like too.

His supplies had all run out now and unless some kind member of Hobbiton (or rude family member) dropped round with some more food, which he highly doubted, he would need to stock up. Plus, he had one other errand he would like to make, something far too long overdue.

Bilbo moved to pull the Ring off his finger when the most peculiar feeling overcame him. He physically couldn't close his fingers around it, like all the strength had been sapped from his bones.

The empty ache in his chest increased so much he had to steady himself again, shaking it off after a moment and trying again. This time his fingers closed around the cold metal and he

pulled it off quickly, relief rushing through him.

The real world hit him like a wave, the sudden warmth of the colours shocked his eyes and the muted feelings he'd been avoiding snapped back into place. By Yavanna that hurt.

Bilbo shook himself off, ridding himself of the horrible ache in his chest as much as he could and putting all his feelings in a box for later. He had jobs to do and food to get, not even grief could stand in the way of that for long, not once a Hobbit got their feet back under them.

He blocked all thoughts from his mind as he dressed, refusing to let his gaze linger on the empty spaces of his smial, refused to listen to the silence where he'd finally heard noise again. It was hard but he managed, finally standing dressed by his door, a hand on the knob and fear in his heart.

This would be the first time Bilbo truly stepped foot out of his home since he'd returned. Yes there had been the journey back through the Shire, seeing the auction and breaking it up, collecting what things he could and letting the rest go, unimportant. But now he was about to step back into the world he'd left behind, was about to make the first move of returning to his old life.

He didn't want to. He didn't want *this*.

But this was the only option he had. Thorin, dear Thorin, had died trying to reclaim his home for himself and his people and it would be an insult for Bilbo to reject his own home, no matter how much he wished he could simply walk off into the Wilds and never return.

His breath sped up and he was hit with another wave of longing to put his strange little Ring back on, to disappear so no one would see him or talk to him. But that wasn't an option, so Bilbo fought it down and finally opened the door.

Yavanna it was bright. He'd almost forgotten how bright and warm the Shire was, how much colour was infused into the landscape. It was familiar, beautiful and full of memories. He still didn't want it but he had to admit, the sight of it once again filled him with peace. Maybe this trip wouldn't be so bad after all.

It took him to the end of his street to change his mind about that. Violently.

Hobbits were everywhere, as usual, tending their gardens, smoking a pipe, talking. But no matter what they were doing, they immediately stopped at the sight of him to stare unashamedly. Yavanna bless the nosiness of Hobbits.

Bilbo knew for a fact that those who hadn't seen him by the days end would be immediately filled in on how terrible he looked, not like a proper Hobbit at all, as well as passing around some highly inaccurate and downright made up stories on what he'd been doing whilst away.

Still, if he could face down a dragon in a battle of wits, he was sure he could deal with a few gossiping Hobbits.

Head down and walking fast, Bilbo made his way down the winding lanes of Hobbiton, forcing himself not to notice the way he was unashamedly stared at and talked about. It grated on his already frayed nerves but it really wouldn't do to shout at his neighbours on his very first trip out of his smial. His reputation was already in tatters, no need to wantonly destroy the last of it unless he really needed to.

It felt like an age before he finally made it to the market, the familiar sounds and smells overtaking his senses and for a moment, just a moment, it was like he'd never left. Never gone out his door on a mad adventure with even madder companions. Never found true friendship and understood his own strength. Never gave his heart away.

No, those thoughts were best left where they were, in a little box in his smial next to an acorn that would never grow.

"Master Baggins? As I live an breathe! I 'eard you were back but we hadn' seen hide nor hair of you for so long I 'alf thought it were just rumours!"

Bilbo turned to see a stout Hobbit with a wheelbarrow, a Hobbit he hadn't seen in a very long time. It was a scene from a year ago perfectly; he even had a bunch of tubers in his wheelbarrow. Bilbo nearly laughed aloud, no matter what happened in the wider world, things in the Shire never changed.

"Hello Mister Warring. Yes, as you can see I am back. I've been...indisposed. So much to sort out after my trip, I'm sure you understand." He said, trying to subtly sidestep out of the other Hobbits way and continue on. Mister Warring however, simply moved as well and continued on unawares, nodding earnestly at Bilbo.

"Oh aye, I'm sure there was. We all thought you was dead! Mighty sad I was abou' it anorl, mighty sad. It's such a relief to see you alright an back under't hill. Just weren't right it wasn't, Bag End standin' empty like that! Very glad you're back I am."

And bless him, he really seemed it. Bilbo was momentarily taken aback at the Hobbit's earnest tone. As a Baggins, he knew he was respected, but as a Hobbit, Bilbo knew he wasn't very well liked. He'd always been too different, even once he'd stomped it down as hard as he could, folding himself into the perfect Baggins. A Hobbit's memory was long and many still thought him too odd.

It was a surprise to hear someone had actually missed him and was glad of his return. It threw him and he had to take a moment to think of an answer, the busy market seeming a world away.

"I...thank you Mister Warring. Really. It's nice to know someone is happy of my return."

The Hobbit in question just smiled and nodded vigorously. "Aye indeed an I ain't the only one Mister Bilbo."

He paused for a moment, looking Bilbo up and down with all the subtlety of a Hobbit, which was to say, none at all, before continued hesitantly.



“You know, you ain’t lookin too healthy if you don’ mind my sayin. It’s none of my business o’course, but you look like you’ve been through the ringer an no mistake. You need a good meal or six is what you need. So if you’d like to visit for dinner one night, you’d be most welcome. Me wife is a glorious cook so she is, she’ll put some meat back on your bones she will!”

Again, Bilbo was shocked that someone cared enough to make sure he ate, looking so honest about his invitation and seemingly with no ulterior motive. He was about to respond when the rest of his comment caught up with him.

“Hang on a second, wife? You most certainly didn’t have a wife when I left!” he exclaimed.

Mr Warring turned beet red, a bashful smile playing on his face as he stared at his shuffling feet.

“Oh aye, a married man I am now Mister Bilbo. Rosemary her name is, she works the vegetable stand over by the Green Dragon. You’d spot her a mile away, most beautiful Hobbit in all the Shire so she is! We started courtin’ jus’ after you left an I finally got up the courage to ask last month. You shoulda seen it; our weddin’ was perfect I tell ya. Never been so ‘appy.”

Warmth spread through him the likes of which Bilbo hadn’t felt in a long time; melting away the ice he was constantly trapped in. The love and adoration in the other Hobbit’s face was plain to see and Bilbo was happy his...friend? Yes, friend, was happy.

“Oh Mister Warring, I am happy to hear that. I wish I could have seen it, but I’m sure it was perfect. And yes, I remember Rosemary too, a very lovely Hobbit. I’m very glad you’re both happy.”

And he was, he really was. A love realised and returned was a beautiful and all too rare thing.

Looking around, the other Hobbit seemed to realise they’d been standing in the middle of a busy lane chatting when he obviously had somewhere to be. The vegetable stand most likely.

“Well Mister Bilbo, I’d best be off. Need t’ get these to the wife before I head off. But think on what I said yeah, we’d love to ‘ave you. Be seein’ you.”

Bilbo just nodded with a smile, not wanting to make a promise he wasn’t sure he could keep. But the friendly Hobbit had warmed something in him and perhaps a proper Hobbit cooked meal in a welcoming home wouldn’t be such a bad thing after all.

They parted with a smile and Bilbo stood back and watched the scruffy Hobbit push his wheelbarrow through the heaving market and disappear into the crowd of happy, chattering Hobbits.

It’d been so long since Bilbo had seen the market that he stayed where he was for a moment to take it all in. Stalls were set up everywhere, full to the brim with breads and fish and

cheese, vegetables and flowers, housewares and anything else that a Hobbit might possibly need.

Little Faunts ran wild, weaving between legs and under tables, driving busy parents to distraction. Happy couples strolled arm in arm, baskets being filled, gossip being exchanged. The market was the hub of the Shire and the perfect opportunity for everything a Hobbit enjoyed in life.

It felt so strange.

By rights, it should feel exactly like home, exactly like everything a Hobbit wanted, but it just didn't call to him anymore, not like it used to.

But he refused to dwell on it, to let the ice come back. Bilbo was warm for the moment and he'd be damned if he wasted that. He had things to get and places to be.

Yavanna he'd forgotten how busy the market was though. Bilbo wove between the stalls, skilfully avoiding the eyes of the more upfront Hobbits and forcing himself to ignore the gossiping he knew was going around about him. But no matter how hard he tried, snippets of conversations still made it to his sensitive ears.

"Is that Bilbo Baggins?"

"...just up and left one day! No note, no nothing! Went on an adventu..."

"Knew he'd end up showing that Took side again someday. Just like his mother but twice as bad..."

"...should have just stayed away. Yavanna knows what he's seen and done."

"Look how thin he is! It's not right! Hardly looks like a Hobbit at all, certainly not a respectable one at any rate..."

Bilbo truly had no idea how he was managing to keep it together and ignore their awful words, weaving through the market like a swarm of flies, but so far he was. He nearly had everything he needed, his basket full to the brim and another bag hanging off one shoulder. He just had one more stall to visit before he could finally leave and stop feeling like a cow on display at auction.

He made his way up to the best flower stall in Hobbiton, the sweet smell of various blossoms hitting him and blanketing him in their comforting familiarity. Usually he'd be able to get most of the flowers he needed from his own garden, but after a year, only the sturdiest of plants had survived.

Hamfast bless him had stopped the garden from becoming too wild, but hadn't cultivated it as Bilbo did, what with not knowing if his neighbour would even return. Still, he was most grateful and would be taking a gift and some payment round to the Gamgees smial whether they liked it or not.

Steeling himself, Bilbo focused on the blooms in front of him, mentally figuring out which he'd need for his wreath. Nodding to himself when he was finished, he began selecting the flowers, fighting off the pain that each one brought.

"What do you think happened eh? He left with those Dwarves didn't he? Frightfully rough looking so they were. Surprised they didn't loot Bag End and leave him for dead!"

"Maybe they kidnapped him! Or blackmailed him into goin! Surely a Baggins wouldn't have left by his own choice!"

"But did you not 'ere him when he came back? Apparently one of 'em was his friend! Can you imagine, friends with a Dwarf! Rude and barbaric the lot of them, not a speck of respectability between them."

"That's what comes from wandering all over Middle Earth with no place to call home. Though maybe they're just as bad there as well!"

"Aye you're not wrong there. What do you think that sword and shield were about? Surely he didn' do no fighting!"

"Now that's a scary thought. You don't think he...killed anything do you? What if he has and we have a killer right here in the Shire!"

"Oh don' say that you'll give me a fright! It makes me sick just thinkin on it! Those damned Dwarves have ruined him! His reputation, such as it ever was, will never recover from this! I do 'ope he's rid of them for good now."

Rage filled him the likes of which he hadn't felt in a long time, too numb from grief. But the careless, disgusting words from the two Hobbits on the stall behind him awoke a terrible anger in him, which he couldn't have stomped down even if he wanted to.

And he certainly didn't want to.

Still holding his bunch of flowers, Bilbo turned around and stared directly at the two witches, their smug smiles dropping instantly in the face of his anger.

"How dare you," he said, voice flat, as though the weight of his rage had crushed it down. "How dare you say such things about my friends. How dare you talk about things you have no idea of! How *dare* you!"

Bilbo's voice grew with each word until he was all but shouting, stepping forward and swiping a row of gardening equipment off their stall and onto the grass.

The noises of the market had quietened considerably, as most of the Hobbits stopped in shock to watch. He knew he should have been ashamed of himself for making such a spectacle, but living with Dwarves for a year, fighting for his life along the way, being in a Valar damned war and losing three of the most important people in his life had kicked most of that stupid

instinct out of him. There were many, many worse things in life than causing a scene to defend his friends and put nasty Hobbits in their place.

The two in question were near clinging to each other, eyes wide as they watched him. With fire in his eyes, he stared them down, muscles tight with the force of his anger.

“Those Dwarves were indeed my friends, the greatest I have ever known or ever will. They were better than you even on their worst days. So don’t you ever insult them again. And certainly don’t presume to know what I’ve seen or done! The reality would give you nightmares for months, I assure you!”

He moved a step back, watching as they gasped at his words, hands clutching each other before he turned and slammed the money for his flowers down on the stall behind him, making the old Hobbit serving jump back in shock.

Turning to the two women once more he smiled, a cruel, broken thing.

“And don’t worry, I most certainly am ‘rid of them for good’. They’re gone forever and there’s nothing I could do. And I have to live with that. It’s hard enough without you gossiping about it.”

It was then that many on looking Hobbits put together the meanings of his flowers, sorrow and understanding spreading along the faces of the better hearted.

Aloe, Cypress and Scabious. Colchium, Saffron, Asphodel and Pheasant’s Eye. Zinnia, Yarrow and Mourning Bride.

An eclectic, clashing bunch of flowers indeed but with a deep and painful meaning.

Unable to cope with one more moment in the suffocating presence of what felt like every Hobbit in the Shire, Bilbo turned on his heel and stalked away. Hobbits parted before him like water around a rock, eyes on the ground, only darting up when they thought he couldn’t see.

The furious Hobbit marched all the way back to his smial, rage and grief around him so thick it might as well have been a black raincloud following him. He didn’t stop once, not until his green door was in sight and he was finally through it, shutting it quickly and bolting the latch.

Then his legs gave out from under him and he slid to the floor, his bags laying carelessly all around him, only the flowers still clutched in his shaking arms seemed to matter at that moment as all the pain Bilbo had shoved away came swarming back.

Shame soon seeped in like a noxious fume. Bilbo knew he really shouldn’t have done that; it wasn’t fair to the two Hobbits. As nasty and wrong as they were, making a scene that big in the middle of the Shire’s busiest market had probably darkened whatever was left of his tattered reputation for good. He had to apologise, once he’d calmed down, as much as the idea sent shivers of rage through him.

Bilbo forced himself to calm down, gently stroking the flowers in his hands and making sure he hadn't damaged any. Their colours were so bright, so alive, a direct contrast to what they represented.

He used to think that such meanings should be given to less colourful flowers, less beautiful. But now he recognised that in the middle of your mourning, when all light and colour and joy had faded from the world, you needed some sign that life continued on. These flowers were that sign; a colourful light in the darkness guiding you home and proving the world hadn't ended.

Clutching them gently to his chest, Bilbo heaved himself off the floor and headed into the kitchen. The flowers were placed on the table, the very same table he'd had all his Dwarves sat around last night, before pottering off to collect all the things he would need.

Seeing his friends last night had given him the strength he needed, strength to do what he'd left for far too long. It was time to follow the proper Hobbit mourning rituals.

He placed a silver bowl full of water on the table, along with a small pot of salt, a beautifully embroidered piece of cloth, a pair of scissors and a sharp knife. Next he gathered his flowers and split them into bunches, laying them out carefully on the table. Now the first part of the rituals could begin.

Bilbo pulled the silver bowl towards him, eyes tracing the beautifully engraved flowers within before reaching for the salt pot and sharp knife. Quietly speaking words as deep and ancient as the earth itself, supposedly handed down to them by Yavanna herself during the Wandering Days, he sprinkled a pinch of salt into the water, purifying it. He then sprinkled another pinch on the knife and dipped the blade in the water.

Bilbo then held his left arm over the bowl and made a shallow cut, allowing a few drops of his blood to fall into the water. Once he'd deemed it enough, he hastily wrapped a temporary bandage around his arm and turned his attention to the flowers.

He reached, hands shaking, for the first small bunch, Aloe and Cypress - Grief and Death, kissing the flowers gently before dipping them in the water. Bilbo spoke continuously, the sacred words flowing from his tongue like a river. He then allowed them to drip any excess water back into the bowl and placed them on the embroidered cloth to dry.

Reaching for the next bunch Bilbo repeated his actions.

Scabious and Colchium - Mourning and My best days are passed,  
Saffron - My happiest days are passed,  
Asphodel - My regrets follow you to the grave,  
Pheasant's Eye - Sorrowful Remembrance,  
Zinnia - Thoughts of Absent Friends,  
Yarrow - War.

Finally, Mourning Bride - I Have Lost All.

Once each bunch had been kissed and cleansed, then placed on the cloth, Bilbo took a moment to breathe whilst the flowers dried.

It was always a painful ritual, a cleansing and important one yes, but always painful. Each movement had to be done with emotion and thought and reverence, there was no time for the mind to wander because it must always be fixed upon the deceased to honour them.

Ideally it would be done sometime soon after the Returning to the Earth but Bilbo had no choice but to wait. It was hardly the usual scenario anyway, so he was sure allowances could be made.

Perhaps it wouldn't even have the same meaning when directed towards Dwarves, what with them going to the Halls of Waiting and not Yavanna's Fields. Bilbo just hoped Yavanna would understand and perhaps pass the sentiment on to her husband.

Finally, the flowers were dry and the next part of the ritual could begin. Bilbo gathered up his flowers and slowly, reverently, began to thread and weave them into a wreath, sacred words continuing to drip off his tongue with each movement of his hands. With one last twist, the mourning wreath was complete, a monument to his grief, dictating the way he was feeling and what he had lost.

Now he could begin the next part. Laying the wreath down carefully on the cloth, he moved to the kitchen and began preparing the meal offerings.

These could be anything, as long as it had some connection with the departed. Bilbo barely had to think when it came to Thorin; he knew the weakness the king had for anything with blackberries in it. He would make him a blackberry tart, the perfect mix of sweet and sharp. Much like the Dwarf himself in Bilbo's opinion.

It took him a few moments to think of the perfect offerings for Fili and Kili, smiling slightly when it finally came to him. The two brothers were as close as it was possible for two beings to be; yet they were almost the complete opposite of each other! But even then, they complimented each other perfectly, neither being completely themselves if they weren't together.

Knowing this, it felt wrong to have two separate offerings. So instead, Bilbo would bake a savoury bread, the kind Fili adored and plait it together with a sticky, sweet cinnamon filling that was perfect for Kili.

Their offerings would be joined together, just as the brothers were in life and in death.

Along with the regular ingredients, one extra thing had to be added, a few drops of blood. Bilbo unwrapped the bandage from the wound on his arm and pressed it once more, letting a few drops fall into the mixtures for both offerings.

The blood added to the deceased's meal signified the bond between the living and dead. It symbolized how the dead would have a part of the living with them forever and that there

would be something missing from the living now which could never be replaced or returned.

Once he'd rewrapped his arm, sniffing slightly but refusing to break down until his duty was done, Bilbo set about baking, humming and singing the old songs, descending into an almost trance like state, mind full of nothing but those he had lost; all the memories they'd shared and every feeling he held for them in his hurting heart.

Before he even really registered, they were made and in the oven, leaving him more time than he would like, a thick smog of grief seeping around his kitchen and mingling with the sweet smells of baking deserts. Life and death moving together, as it always has and always will.

Tears pricked at his eyes and Bilbo knew he must keep moving lest he stop completely. Moving back to the table, he laid everything in its proper place, checking and triple checking every part until finally, his offerings were done.

Making his way to the oven, he bent low over the door, closing his eyes and speaking more of the old words. He let their meanings fill his soul and change his eyes, before finally opening the door and letting the delicious smells wash over him, transporting him into that blessed trance that was gifted to all Hobbits participating in these ceremonies. The scent, the love, the words and the wishes of his soul descended over his eyes, changing the world before him.

Steeling himself, Bilbo turned, dishes in hand to see the Soul Called in front of him in the forms of Thorin, Fili and Kili. It took his breath away.

He knew the Soul Called were not truly his lost loved ones, simply apparitions in a slightly transparent golden hue, the versions of them he kept deep within his heart, mind and soul.

It was a particular kind of Hobbit magic they believed, fiercely secret and never, ever spoken of to outsiders. There was no record as to why Hobbits had these gifts, only the passing down of the ceremonies and old songs themselves.

Despite always wanting to know everything, his insatiable curiosity a constant itch demanding to be scratched, Bilbo found he didn't much care to know the whys and wherefores of their Hobbit magic. He simply felt blessed and grateful to have them, to be able to see his loved ones and share one last meal, the last meal of their souls.

Whispering the customary thanks to Yavanna, Bilbo placed the dishes on the table, slicing the blackberry tart down the middle with the silver knife and placing one half reverently in front of Thorin, his beautiful Dwarf.

"I honour you with this offering, remembering your soul and how it joined with my own. We may be parted, but this final shared meal will remain with us both until we meet again in..."

His voice broke off, unable to finish, as he was unsure if they ever would meet again. Certainly not in Yavanna's Green Pastures at any rate. Putting the other half of the tart on his own plate, he turned to the Soul Called apparitions of Fili and Kili.

Shaking himself, clearing his throat roughly, Bilbo cut the plaited bread and gently placed

half in front of them, repeating the words he'd said to Thorin, eyes stinging before adding the last half to his own plate.

Bilbo watched with burning eyes as Fili and Kili laughed joyfully, no sound reaching his ears but resonating instead deep in his heart. That was how he most remembered them, how he truly saw them in his soul; two bright, shining boys, laughing at the world together.

He was relieved, so relieved to know that death hadn't tarnished that in his heart, that the sight of them still and empty on their stones hadn't erased who they truly were.

And Thorin, oh Thorin.

It almost surprised Bilbo how his soul saw the Dwarf. If you'd asked him before, he would have said mighty and strong, looking like he could bare the weight of Arda on his wide shoulders, a proud look in his beautiful eyes.

But that wasn't how he'd been Called before him. Instead, he was gentle, a soft smile playing on his lips and such a look of...something in his eyes that it almost made Bilbo break down and weep.

He looked just how he did when he and Bilbo shared a pipe over the fire, the stars wheeling overhead and a feeling of utter safety around both their shoulders. They'd shared many nights like that, talking of everything they could think of some nights and others, nothing at all. Nights where the feelings between them grew and strengthened.

Really, it should be no surprise at all. This was Thorin. This was who he truly was and perhaps who he could have been more of the time, had his life turned out differently. Bilbo would have given anything to put that look on his face every day for the rest of his life.

A sob escaped him as he sat down, unable to keep it contained any longer. This was always the hardest part of the rituals for him because it truly drummed home that they weren't with you any more. That this was the last meal you would share with them, the last chance to say things that needed to be said.

Bilbo had many meals since he lost Thorin and his dear nephews, but he was a Hobbit and in their culture, this counted as the last time you would ever cook for your loved ones, and was one of the most important and sacred duties you would ever perform.

Sucking in air desperately, clenching his fists until his nails dug crescent grooves into his palm in an effort to hold it together, Bilbo raised his eyes and addressed the Soul Called of two young Dwarves he loved very much.

"There's things I want to say to you, all of you that I never...never got a chance to. So many things..." he trailed off, choking up, vision blurring for a moment.

"Fili, Kili. You boys, oh by Yavanna you drove me insane! All the pranks you pulled on me, especially at the start!" he broke off, a small chuckle escaping him at the memories.



“But I got you back in the end didn’t I? Showed you not to mess with a Hobbit when it comes to pranking. Especially considering who my mother was! Pranks are in my blood!”

Bilbo looked away from their golden faces, trapped like flowers in amber resin, perfectly preserved just how you want but never to be touched again, never to truly exist. He’d give anything right now to hear them laugh again, his strange dream last night only igniting that yearning even further.

Sobering once more, taking a few small bites from his half of their offering, Bilbo looked at them once more.

“But I loved you boys, loved you as though you were my own nephews. It quite snuck up on me, let me tell you! But one day I realised I thought of you...as family. You *are* family.

“I don’t know how I’ll manage to live the rest of my days without hearing your laughter, seeing your smiles. I don’t know how I’ll be able to walk through my smial and not see you wiping your feet on my mother glorybox Kili! Or Fili striding through my front door like he owned it, a true regal prince. I miss the smell of fletching glue and the sound of knives being sharpened in the night. I need you boys. I need you...”

A sob shot through him and he wanted nothing more than to drop his head into his hands and weep till there was nothing left of him. He wanted them back!

“You were too young! You were too young and you should get to live a full life! Not the few years you got, too full of suffering and fear! How is it fair? Why should I get to live the rest of my days when all they’ll be spent doing is pottering about this smial, lonely and empty. You would have done so much!”

The words felt torn from him, like his very heart was pouring from his mouth, the taste of copper on his tongue.

“I love you boys, I truly do. I will miss you every day of my life and I pray for more dreams of you, anything to be with you again. I will never, ever forget you.”

Dragging his eyes to Thorin’s softly smiling face, eyes shining with something neither of them had wanted to name, was one of the hardest things he’d ever done. With a sigh, he took the first bite out of his half of the tart, swallowing painfully past his closed up throat.

“Oh my dear Thorin. How can I say goodbye to you? How can I send off the person I...well, you know. I’m sure of it. And if I never got to say it to you in person, I will not sully the words now. You know them in your heart just as I do in mine. I will keep them safe I promise.”

Bilbo scrubbed a hand over his eyes, blocking their golden images for a moment, pulling himself together with all he had left in him. He had to do this, but no more words would come. There was still so much he had left to say to his dear Dwarf, but none of it would leave his mouth, trapped behind his teeth. Why was he such a failure? Why was he so weak he couldn’t even send the person he cared about most off to his rest?

“You gave me a chance to do something I never would have dreamed I could do. You made me realise the Hobbit I truly am. You gave me adventure. Family. You gave me *everything*.”

Another bite, another swallowed down sob.

“I will never be able to thank you enough Thorin. I will never stop thinking of you and I will treasure every moment of time we had together, it wasn’t nearly enough but if it’s all we’ve got, I am grateful. Thank you. I hope...I hope you’re at peace now. You deserve it. You can stop wandering now.”

Once he’d finally had his fill of staring at their golden images, Bilbo took the final bite, swallowing past the thick lump in his throat and watching as they faded into golden dust, blowing away to nothing.

Shaking, Bilbo put down his cutlery and bowed his head, wiling himself to hold it together for just a little longer. There was one final thing to do, one final thing before all the rituals had been completed and the dead would be at their rest.

Logically he knew it probably had no effect on their souls whatsoever, but the idea of not doing these had weighed on him heavily and each completed ceremony lightened the load.

Wearily dragging himself from his seat, legs as weak as a newborn foal, he slowly collected their halves of the food, bowing his head over them for a moment to gather his strength before heading to his front door.

After a moment of juggling the plates, he finished wrestling with the lock and stepped outside, taking a deep breath of the fresh, late afternoon air. The scents of flowers were all around and an underlying smell that was unique only to the Shire. He’d never noticed it before, but after all, the world had been much smaller then.

The final part of the ceremonies could be tricky for him, as the situation was so far removed from the norm. Bilbo could honestly say he didn’t think any Hobbit had ever done this for another race.

Usually, the food would be taken to The Pasture and buried above the place the Hobbit was Returned to. Obviously, this wasn’t possible for his Dwarves.

Hobbit customs dictated that the dead be buried directly into the ground in a ceremony called the Returning to the Earth. Unlike humans, there was no casket of any sort, the very idea of being so removed from the earth around them made any Hobbit shiver to imagine it.

Not long after they were Returned, flowers would begin to grow above the grave, their meanings of the upmost important. Some believed it told you what was truly in that Hobbits soul, others believed it was a message from Yavanna’s Fields to reassure those living that they were happy and at peace.

Whatever people believed about the flowers, they were sacred, never to be picked or harmed in any way.

It was meant to symbolise the union of Hobbit and nature, how each needed the other to exist. Nature had taken care of a Hobbit all their lives and now their bodies would nourish the land in return.

The Pasture was a stunning place filled with the buzzing of bees, the rustle of the soft breeze through grass, the scent of hundreds of different flowers. It brought peace to even the heaviest, most grief stricken of hearts. It was a blessed place.

But obviously, his Dwarves had been buried in stone, something that made Bilbo feel slightly ill, even though he knew it meant the same to Dwarves as earth did to Hobbits. The problem was, there was no place for him to bury the food. Casting about for inspiration, his eyes landed on the bench outside his Hobbit hole.

A smile came to his face. That could work, that could work very well indeed. That bench was really where his whole journey began after all; where a mad wizard first stopped to talk to him, dragging him head first into the adventure of a lifetime.

Yes, the bench would do quite nicely.

Dropping gently to his knees, Bilbo places the dishes to one side and slowly began to dig away at the soil under the bench with his hands, digging his fingers into the cool earth and moving it aside. Once the hole was big enough, he reverently places the halved tart and plait of bread into it, whispering the final words and covering them over.

He was done.

Falling back onto his haunches, Bilbo raised his head and stared at the sky, breathing deep, hands still curled in the dirt as though he could pull strength from it or comfort.

Exhausted, drained in a way he couldn't properly explain, Bilbo took one last look at the mound of loose soil underneath his bench, the bench he was sat on the day a wandering wizard made his way back into a dull Hobbits life, changing it forever, before slowly standing, legs shaking and making his way back into his home.

The marked green door closing behind him with an echoing click. Then his legs gave out and he collapsed to the floor, sobbing for all he was worth.

Hours later, Bilbo found himself tossing and turning in bed, unable to sleep for all the frantic buzzing in his head and pain in his heart, memories of his friends looping round and round, driving him crazy.

But worse was the itch he felt under his skin, a frantic, shaking energy that pulled him towards the Ring on the mantel. He tried to resist, something deep in his heart telling him it was wrong, that he shouldn't turn to his magic Ring to deal with the pain of his loss. And something deeper still, something that he couldn't translate into words, just a dark feeling of wrong, wrong, *wrong*.

But Yavanna did he want to sleep. He wanted to disappear and not have to suffer for a few hours. Maybe he'd dream of his Dwarves again.

And that was really what decided it for him. If he put on the Ring, muting his pain enough to let him sleep, there was always the possibility of seeing his friends again.

Last night had been wonderful beyond words, despite the pain of seeing them and experiencing it so realistically. It was the handful of wood on a dying fire, keeping him going when all he'd wanted to do was fade away. If there was even the smallest chance of him dreaming of them again, he'd take it.

Sitting up and swinging himself out of bed, Bilbo slowly made his way over to the mantel, following a pull deep in his chest and fighting off the voice in the back of his head telling him something felt wrong.

He was alone and three people he loved were dead. Everything felt wrong.

Bilbo stopped in front of the fire, the heat coming off far too hot for such low burning flames. Looking down he saw the Ring in the palm of his hand with a start. He hadn't even realised he'd reached for it. His stomach twisted, the hollow ache returning to his chest.

He almost put it back, almost abandoned his plan to try sleep again on his own, but the Ring almost felt glued to his hand, a force stronger than anything he'd felt before keeping it in his palm.

But his dear friends. If he used the Ring he might have a reprieve from the pain again, might sleep again. Might dream again.

It was worth the sick feeling for that. It was worth anything.

Holding his breath, Bilbo jammed the Ring on his finger and felt the grey curtain draw over the world, the numbness spreading through his limbs, calming the roaring pain in his heart.

Bilbo's legs shook with the relief of it, wobbling over to his bed and sinking to the mattress wearily. He laid down slowly, grateful to have made it before the world started to blur at the edges.

Shadows chased across his vision, his room lost to the darkness. Bilbo's body felt heavy, a numbness crawling over his limbs inch by inch and leaving them unable to move.

His mind drifted further and further away, attention slipping, unable to focus on anything. Not the dark, not the creeping paralysis, not the hollow ache in his chest, something pulling deep inside. Not the strange heat on his face.

Soon, everything fell away and he was lost to sleep.

Hello again my chickens!

I really hope you liked this chapter and all the bits of Hobbit culture I came up with. I'm such a sucker for expanding on cultures so you'll definitely be seeing more of that.

If you enjoyed it, I'd love it if you dropped me a little comment. It fuels us writers!

Hope you're all doing well! Neeka xxxx

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*“Unwearied then were Durin's folk;  
Beneath the mountains music woke:  
The harpers harped, the minstrels sang,  
And at the gates the trumpets rang.”*

Bilbo awoke to a song reverberating deep in his chest, a rhythmic, strong but sorrow-tinged melody that rang through every inch of his smial. For a few moments, he simply stayed there and listened, wondering at the vast change of songs in the Shire since he'd been away.

*“The world is grey, the mountains old,  
The forge's fire is ashen-cold;  
No harp is wrung, no hammer falls:  
The darkness dwells in Durin's halls;  
The shadow lies upon his tomb  
In Moria, in Khazad-dûm.  
But still the sunken stars appear  
In dark and windless Mirrormere;  
There lies his crown in water deep,  
Till Durin wakes again from sleep.”*

He blamed it on his sleep thick head that it took until the songs end to recognise that no Hobbit would have heard of Durin, let alone know enough to sing about him.

By the time familiar, boisterous voices made it to his bedroom, the Hobbit had already thrown himself out of bed and all but wrenched open the bedroom door.

“Why Master Baggins! What's all that rush about!? We haven't left you behind, don't you worry!”

“Actually Bofur, I think he's more worried 'bout the likes of you trashing his home!”

Good-natured laughter broke out as Bofur punched Nori in the arm and pulled a silver thimble from a cleverly concealed pocket under his upper right bicep with a reproachful look, and barely concealed delight if you asked Bilbo.

“Here y'are Master Baggins, you just can't trust some eh? Hurts me deep to know some Dwarves live up to the terrible rumours about us.”

He shook his head with exaggerated sorrow, ignoring the swift kick to his leg and handing back the thimble with a flourish. Bilbo took it, too numb with shock to do anything more than nod.

They were here. They were all still here.

“Oh! And unless you plan on travelling in naught but your night things, I’d hurry and dress if I were you. We’ll be off soon and you’d best not piss Thorin off too soon eh?”

With another kind smile, eyes twinkling with mischief, as they’d always seemed too, Bofur moved off, grabbing the scone a passing Bombur had been munching on and stuffing it in his own mouth, much to the betrayed look of his brother.

Remembering his state of undress, Bilbo quickly backed into his bedroom and shut the door, sliding down it until he was sat on the floor, eyes wide and mind turning a mile a minute.

They were still here. How could his dream have continued like this? What sort of dream was it where time passed chronologically? Why did it feel so Valar damned *real*?

Hearing another loud cheer go up from the vicinity of his kitchen, Bilbo managed to drag himself out of his panic, knowing they probably shouldn’t be left unattended in his home much longer. Yavanna knew what they could get up to.

Pulling his clothes on automatically, it wasn’t until he reached the door that he noticed that, minus the coat, he’d dressed in the same clothes he’d began the journey wearing in the real world. It brought a smile to his face to see the comfortable red waistcoat with its shiny acorn buttons once again. Buttons that were actually lying in a cave in the Misty Mountains, fated to eventually be covered in dirt and lost to time.

*Pull yourself together Baggins. You can do this.*

Polishing them quickly in an effort to calm his nerves, Bilbo took stock of what he knew to be true. The dream had carried on exactly as it would in reality. How could a dream follow the normal rules of time?

Things were starting to make less and less sense to him and Bilbo was feeling more unnerved with each new discovery. These weren’t normal dreams, that much he knew in his heart. But what on earth could they be?

Yet despite it all, despite the hollow sucking in his chest and the twisting in his stomach, he couldn’t help but be grateful for however these dreams were coming to him. Because for these brief but beautiful hours, he got to have his friends back. He could almost manage to convince himself that it was real, that they really were here with him. Really alive.

So whilst he couldn’t quite convince himself that this was normal, he resolved to ignore it for now and enjoy the time he got to spend with them, even within the confines of his own head.

Pulling open his bedroom door once again, Bilbo made his way through his smial, noting the mess left by thirteen Dwarves rushing to pack their belongings for the start of their Quest. If it was anything like this in reality, he truly had no idea how he’d managed to sleep though it!

Oin was rambling along to himself as he double-checked his medical kit, packing it carefully to keep it safe. Gloin was sat next to him, surrounded by little piles of coins that he seemed to

be counting and dispensing equally amongst the rest of them, to be hidden in various places both on their persons and in their bags.

Kili was maintaining his weapon, waxing his bowstring and polishing the wood, as well as fletching more arrows by the looks of things, the acrid scent of the glue in the air. Fili sat next to him as always, surrounded by more weapons than any one person should be able to carry, lovingly polishing and checking every single one, a whetstone in his lap ready to sharpen any dulled blades to a deadly razor edge.

This made him choke down a sob, knowing that in the real world, he'd talked about just those very things. He wanted to run at them and hold them close, to never let them go. He wanted to stay in this dream forever.

Shaking himself, not wanting to be caught staring at them with such naked yearning, Bilbo forced his eyes away to check up on the rest of his friends.

Ori was sat in between his brothers, alternating between scribbling frantically in his journal and sharpening the edges of the plethora of pens and pencils he kept on him at all times. Dori was mending a pile of clothes, often tutting at the state of them much to the annoyance of Nori, who was also sharpening his throwing knives and stashing them in various hidden compartments about his person.

Bifur was sat apart from the group in Bilbo's window seat, concentrating hard on delicately carving a little wooden toy. Bilbo had always loved his friends' creations; often happy to sit around the fire and watch the way he could pull the most beautiful of designs from the wood.

Bombur was staring at Bilbo's pantry, as though he would like nothing more than to rush inside and clear it out, both to pack and to devour now. If there was one thing Bombur loved in this world aside from his family, it was food.

Many a night had been passed on the Quest sat around the cooking pot with him, chatting about old family recipes and the difference of food in their cultures. It took some time to get him talking, as shy and quiet as the rotund Dwarf naturally was, but Bilbo had figured out early on that food was the key.

Bofur seemed to have finished doing whatever it was he was tasked with and was instead playing a joyful little ditty on his flute, the jumping tune keeping the atmosphere light and hopeful, almost fighting off the nerves all of them felt whether they would admit it or not. Bofur always had the strange ability to tell when the atmosphere of a room changed, as well as each individual's.

It wasn't until Bilbo had finally noticed and kept an eye out for it that he realised his friends skill, flitting between each Dwarf and keeping spirits up, whether with music, laughter or anything else he thought was needed. He always knew how to keep the bad feelings away. Bilbo didn't know what he would have done on those dark days walled in the mountain, everything hurtling towards disaster with no way to stop it, if he hadn't had Bofur. The Hobbit was sure that many, if not all of the Dwarves felt the same.



Wanting to take stock of everyone before he attempted to do anything, a deep yearning in his heart to make up here for every moment he was without them when he awoke, Bilbo made his way through the room as quietly as he could, which for a Hobbit meant pretty much total silence.

Once he caught sight of Thorin, Balin and Dwalin in the living room, crowded around the table deep in conversation, the pit of nerves in his stomach eased some. He constantly felt the knowledge that all of this could be taken away from him at a moments notice, despite the strange regularity of his dreams for the last two nights. Never had he felt such desperation to simply look at a person before in his life.

No. That was a lie. There had been one other time he'd felt it. When the rush of time slipped between his fingers along with hot blood, the bite of loss in his soul and cold in his bones. The urgent, mind numbing *need* to take in every single inch of his face, to memories every line, every strand of hair, every shade of blue in his eyes. Bilbo would have forsaken the right to rest in Yavanna's Gardens when his time was through if only to look at that face for a few extra moments.

Perhaps his heart had truly struck that bargain and this was what he was being given in exchange for his sacrifice. If that was the case, Bilbo truly couldn't say he would feel anything other than soul deep thankfulness.

As though sensing the eyes on him, Thorin looked up from the map on the table and straight into the Hobbit's face. Quickly moulding his face into something other than the sorrowful, longing expression he just knew it must be, Bilbo nodded and raised his hand in a little half wave, mentally kicking himself for the awkwardness of the gesture.

Without even a word of greeting, the frowning king growled out, "Be swift Halfling, we will be departing within the hour."

Scowling at him for the use of Halfling, Bilbo replied with force, "I'll have you know Dwarf, that I am not half of anything. I'd think you of all races would understand that."

Thorin looked momentarily taken aback, seeming shocked at both the Hobbit scolding him so easily and also a look of realisation. He too knew what it was to be judged for your height in a world filled with races taller than you and more than ready to use it to their advantage.

The king inclined his head slightly, making Bilbo grin brightly. "Excellent, with that cleared up, i'll go make us some breakfast."

"We don't have time to fill your belly Master Baggins, we must be on our way. I understand you're a pampered creature who expects bountiful food at any moment and has no idea what a lack of it feels like, but you'll have to quickly get used to reality."

Scowling darkly once more, the old familiar anger and irritation coming back, Bilbo turned back to the frowning Dwarf. "I don't suggest it to fill just my own stomach!" he spat, anger rising swiftly.

"And how dare you assume what I do and do not know! There is plenty left in my pantry that we cannot take with us and will perish. Why not make good use of them and set our Quest off right. Despite what you may think, we Hobbits never waste food and wouldn't you rather we all enjoy a good, hot breakfast while we still can. I'll wager you'd regret it in a few days."

"Oh please Uncle! His cooking is far too good to miss out on!"

"Indeed, I believe it'd be detrimental to our well being to miss such an opportunity."

"Detrimental?? Big word for you Kili. "

"Shut it you prat!"

The brothers fell into a wrestling match, each trying such time honoured tactics as biting, groin kneeling and tickling to beat the other. It was a sight Bilbo was well used to seeing and brought such joy to his sorrow filled, mourning heart that a smile overtook the angry scowl previously on his face as he'd glared at the obstinate king.

Chuckling fondly, Bilbo once again turned to Thorin, ignoring with all his might how the warm morning light shone through the windows and highlighted his profile, a golden glow around him, his piercing eyes softened as he watched his nephews. He was so beautiful. So unreachable.

"So what do you say Master Dwarf? Shall I set us on our way with a full stomach or not?"

With a grumpy sigh, obviously deciding agreeing was the better choice, Thorin nodded, "Very well Master Baggins. But be swift."

Fili and Kili halted their wrestling for a moment, the younger trapped in a brutal looking headlock, to cheer loudly, before Kili took advantage of the distraction and elbowing his brother in the stomach to break free.

Smile wide and bright once more, Bilbo headed off to the kitchen with a spring in his step. He was going to take every opportunity to stuff them full of proper Hobbit cooking. It still shamed him how inhospitable he'd been in real life; his mother would be so disappointed in him.

Walking back with a spring in his step, he called out good mornings to each of his friends and told them to be ready for breakfast. Bofur in particular responded enthusiastically, rushing up to him and bowing theatrically at least five times. "Master Baggins you spoil us! You are a true gentlehobbit and a scholar! We are blessed to have you amongst us!"

"Yes you are! Is there a god of food? If there isn't I nominate you!" came Kili's cry.

"Marvellous idea Kili!" responded his brother.

"Oh move you sickly sweet tongued cretins or the neighbours dog will get your share."

Exaggerated gasps of shock and horror met his exclamation, Kili going so far as to swoon dramatically into Fili's waiting arms.

“You wound us Master Baggins! That hurts me deeper than any blade could ever reach!”

Steps stuttering at Kili’s choice of words, mind flashing to the gaping wound in his chest that had ended his bright, young life. He would never know how untrue his words are.

But he had thirteen hungry Dwarves to feed and by Yavanna he would not ruin this strange dream with thinking about reality. He would not waste this; unsure as he was to when they would stop, leaving him alone and grieving once more.

“I’m sure you’ll manage to recover from it Master Dwarf,” he threw over his shoulder, making his way into the kitchen. The pantry was almost empty thanks to his cooking storm last night, but there was still enough left for a proper breakfast and some to pack.

Collecting the last of the eggs, half of the sausages, most of the bacon and a large bag of mushrooms, Bilbo made his way back to the kitchen, pausing at a wicker basket to grab a few large potatoes.

Soon his kitchen was alive with the sound of bacon, sausage and eggs sizzling away, mushrooms tossed in butter and slices of potatoes frying. Taking the last loaf of bread, Bilbo also decided to introduce them to a Hobbit favourite of his, something his mother would make him as a treat.

Smiling at the memories, he cut the loaf into thick slices and set them to one side, pulling over the last two eggs he hadn’t fried, he cracked them into a bowl and whisked them up. Once they were mixed enough, he took a slice of the bread and dipped it in the gooey mixture face down on both sides before dropping it into a hot pan on the stove.

It sizzled delightfully and the smell washed over him reminding him of simple, happy times. This dream was getting stranger and stranger if he could feel his surroundings as well as he was. If he didn’t know better, he’d have sworn this was normal life.

Flipping the egg soaked bread over he cooked the other side and once it was done, he sprinkled a touch of cinnamon and sugar over the top. He would do two versions; the sweet kind that he preferred and the savoury kind that he expected most of the Dwarves to take a preference too.

Smiling to himself, anticipating their reaction to the breakfast feast he was working hard to prepare for them, Bilbo continued making the eggy bread and cooking the rest of the food. He listened to their heavy, sturdy footsteps and the snippets of song they would break out in, as well as the more than occasional scuffle.

Yavanna above he had missed this. Missed it with such a deep, yearning ache that he had to rub his chest to relieve some of the pain. He would do anything on this earth to not be apart from them any longer.

When the finishing touches had been placed on the food, he carried it out to the table, shouting for someone to get some plates, “I’m sure you remember where they are.” A small smile on his face, hearing a few chuckles break out and the boys rush to grab them.

“Oh aye, we made the right choice here! Look at this!”

Bofur’s enthusiastic cry drew the rest of the Dwarves scattered about his home, more happy comments ringing out at the sight before them.

“You’ve truly treated us with your cooking Master Baggins! You have our thanks.”

Turning to face Dori, Bilbo flushed and waved his hand about. “Oh no, it’s no trouble, no trouble at all. Honestly, it’s nice to have people to cook for!”

“Have you no one to share your talents with then? Most Hobbits I’ve seen around here seem to have at least two more attached to them at all times!”

He obviously said it as a joke, the twinkle of mischief in his eyes evidence enough of that, but for some reason it hit Bilbo hard. His smile dropped of its own accord, breath hitching as he tried to find a way of exiting the conversation with any dignity at all.

“I’m sorry Master Baggins, I meant no offence.”

Obviously he hadn’t been as successful as he’d hoped to be in keeping his feelings off his face. Choking back the wave of loneliness and grief that had hit him, he waved his old friends apology off awkwardly.

“No no, it’s fine, it’s fine. Yes err, well, it’s just me. But that’s okay, that’s fine. I’m, err, fine...” He trailed off, inwardly kicking himself for the utter disaster that just crawled out of his mouth.

Taking pity on him, Dori simply nodded, a curious expression on his face that Bilbo couldn’t quite place. He turned back to the table, taking up a seat between Nori and Ori, giving Bilbo enough time to pull himself together before turning to the table and sitting down.

Once again all his Dwarves were sat around his table, all of them happy and alive, oh so alive. Their eyes burnt with the anticipation of their journey, the weight of responsibility. They were all so alight with passion, but none so much as Thorin. His Thorin.

He sat at the head of the table, as sturdy and unmovable as the very mountain they were trying to reclaim. His face was serious, eyes constantly moving over each of his Dwarves almost unconsciously, a fire in them that could not be put into something so inadequate as words.

It was a blessing to see those eyes again, to remember how they looked when not clouded with the horrid grip of Dragon Sickness, a serpent curled behind the shocking blue of his iris. To remember how they looked when the fire wasn’t burning out right in front of him. A candle in a storm.

It took him a few moments, so caught up in his thoughts to notice those very same eyes fixed on him; it stopped his breath and he wasn’t ashamed to admit it. It was a shock to have that old expression of judgment levelled on him once again, where he’d gotten used to a much gentler look.

Looks that Bilbo had hesitated to name, not wishing to speak aloud what they meant lest they broke the spell. But their warmth had filled him all the same; sunlight pouring onto a flower that had long seen only shadow.

But now they were back to the beginning and even the changes he'd made were not enough to truly alter the way Thorin must still view him. Though the Hobbit knew this was only a dream, he truly did, it shocked him how much that still hurt.

All of their history, their shared experiences, their hard earned trust, their...well, their whatever it was, was missing. But only from one side.

Something of his thoughts must have shown on Bilbo's face, as the wandering king looked confused for a moment, considering the strange, coddled creature in front of him. Refusing to be cowed by him, the Hobbit simply raised his head a touch, looking him in the straight in the eye. He wasn't the same Hobbit he used to be.

"Oh by Mahal! This is glorious!"

"Mpffs!"

Fili's exclamations and Kili's attempts to speak around the huge mouthful of food broke the spell Bilbo and Thorin had been under. They both looked away, Bilbo fighting a blush and Thorin probably fighting off disgust and annoyance.

He turned to the boys and watched in mild fascination the way they managed to stuff a good third of their food into their mouths at one time, cheeks bulging out and a happy gleam in their eyes. Bilbo had forgotten the truly astounding lack of manners the boys had but it brought a warm feeling to him, heating up the spaces in his heart that had long gone cold, like an old forge being slowly brought back to life.

Perhaps he could sleep forever and remain here in this happy world. It would be a blessing.

"Master Baggins?"

Bilbo snapped back to reality to see Kili looking at him, eyes wide with pleading. He'd seen that look so many times and it always meant the rascal wanted something.

"Yes Master Dwarf?"

The youngest Dwarf rung his hands, head bowed slightly, looking for all the world like he was innocently thinking over what he was about to ask, as though debating whether or not he should in fact ask it.

It was all rubbish. Bilbo knew that little Dwarf and he knew all his tricks. Kili could wrap anyone round his stubby little finger in about three minutes. Well, almost anyone.

"Would it be possible...I mean to say, if it wouldn't be any trouble...I wouldn't want to impose..."

"Oh just spit it out!"

Looking up at the Hobbit in front of him, Kili well and truly turned on the puppy eyes, leaning forward earnestly. “Is there any more of this wonderful food? It’s just that we’ve travelled an awfully long way and we’ll be travelling even further soon. And this is *so* very good, you are truly a talented cook. I’m so sorry to ask, I hope it isn’t too much trouble?”

Bilbo couldn’t help it; he burst out laughing. Oh Yavanna above, he had almost forgotten the young Dwarves mischief making and how he almost always managed to get what he wanted. He’d also forgotten just how good it was to laugh.

“Oh Master Kili, I am sorry,” he choked out, almost cracking up again at the look of utter surprise on his friend’s face, as well as the faces of the on looking Dwarves. “It’s just that you were so earnest! Your face! I have dozens of nieces and nephews and believe you me, if I haven’t seen or heard every variation of what you’ve just said, I will eat my best trowel.”

This was enough for Fili apparently, as he burst into laughter, smacking his shocked brother on the back, whose expression was a mix between a kicked puppy and utter shock.

Still chuckling, Bilbo pushed himself away from the table and stood up. “Luckily for you, there is indeed some food left and you’ve given me enough of a laugh that you deserve it. And don’t look so shocked, not everyone will fall for your butter wouldn’t melt act. Though it is a very good one.”

Mollified slightly, Kili turned to his brother and stuck his tongue out, now eagerly awaiting some more breakfast. That boy was like a bottomless pit.

Making his way into the kitchen, smiling at the warm feeling in his very bones, Bilbo moved over to the stove and began putting all the leftovers on a plate.

A sudden cheer erupted from the dinning room, startling Bilbo so much he jumped, forearm coming down to settling on the still scorching hot metal. A loud curse that would make any Dwarf proud escaped him as he quickly pulled his arm away, only a deep love of food preventing him from dropping the dish in his hands.

Bilbo hurried over to his sink, placing the dish down and quickly running his arm under the cold water with a hiss.

Then he stopped short. What in Yavanna’s great Green Pastures was a dream doing hurting him like this? Because the burn damn well did, throbbing and stinging away with every beat of his heart! And it wasn’t just a hurt that his dreaming mind was telling him logically should be there, but an actual, physical burning. That shouldn’t be possible. Should it?

A thick smog of unease seemed to materialise in the room, meandering around him like a rope about to tighten and stop his breath. He couldn’t see through its black smoke. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t *breathe*!

“Are you okay Master Baggins?”

Ori’s gentle voice drew him out of his confusion, cutting through the smog like a fresh breeze from an open window. Looking away from his arm, shaking his head to clear it, Bilbo

stuttered out, “Err, yes thank you Master Ori, I...I just burnt my arm is all. It’ll be fine.”

He smiled, aiming for reassuring but probably missing, trying his best to push aside the sick churning in his stomach, the knowledge that something was very strange here even stronger now. But he would think on it later, when he didn’t have a dinning room full of hungry, rowdy Dwarves to feed. Bilbo would rather dwell on the happiness he felt in their company, even just in his own mind.

Moving away from the sink, Bilbo patted his arm dry carefully, trying to ignore the soreness of it, collecting up his dishes again and nodding for Ori to go ahead of him. Banishing the last dregs of sickly worry to the far corners of his mind, Bilbo entered the dinning room, two cheers going up from a pair of hungry young Dwarves.

Their enthusiasm made him smile, the warmth banishing the last dregs of the horrible experience a few moments ago, their smiles were a balm on his burning arm.

“Yes, yes alright you young troublemakers! This is the last of it so do not hog it all, there’s plenty to go around! Oh for Yavanna’s sake...”

No sooner had the words left his mouth had Fili and Kili made a grab for the dishes, Kili lunging over them protectively as Fili defended from all sides. With a butter knife.

Bilbo dropped his head into his hand as a full blown war broke out across his dinning table. It seemed that even though he’d changed many things in this strange dream, their complete and utter lack of manners was not one of them.

Knowing when retreat was the better part of valour, Bilbo simply sat back and let the war rage on, munching away on his own breakfast, which he was surprised and pleased to see hadn’t been touched. He watched all of his Dwarves fondly, still marvelling at the fact he got to see them and talk to them at all.

He watched with slightly less fondness as the last two potatoes went skittering off a plate and onto the floor, prompting a mass grab for all.

Throwing his hands up in surrender, Bilbo didn’t even bother shouting about it; it’d just be a waste of air. He did however jump a foot into said air when gnarled fingers took hold of his wrist, pulling the arm down and under the beady eyes of Oin.

“You’ve burnt your arm rather badly here Master Baggins,” he said, voice just a tiny bit too loud as always. “I think you’d best come with me and get some salve on it. It’ll just get worse if not.”

Giving him no time to argue or even agree, the old Dwarf pulled him into the living room and over to his bags, pushing him to sit in the armchair by the fire as he rooted through them, pulling out two glass jars.

“Thank you very much Master Oin, but wont you miss out on breakfast?”

A slightly unnerving grin spread over his lined face. “Oh no worries there, my brother knows what’s best for him. He’ll save me some. He learnt the hard way a long time ago.”

Not even wanting to know, Bilbo smiled and nodded, obligingly spreading his burnt arm out straight at the old Dwarves insistence.

“Now, this one will cool the burn for now, as it must sting like a goodun. Then this one needs putting on every morning and night. Just a little but it works wonders it does!”

Smiling to himself fondly, Bilbo let his friend do his thing, sighing in relief at the first spread of cooling cream over his burn.

“Oh this is very good Master Oin!”

“Ahh,” he all but crowed. “It’s my own special mix. I call it an Ointment!”

The giddy joy and mischief in the Dwarves voice made Bilbo crack up just as much as the clever name did. When he’d been told that on the journey, sometime after the Carrock, he’d laughed even more. Trust that old Dwarf to come up with something like that.

“Aye, it’s a good name if I do say so myself,” he chuckled, wrapping up Bilbo’s arm to protect it. “There, all done Master Baggins.”

“Oh it’s just Bilbo if you don’t mind. We’ll all be spending a lot of time together and I’d much prefer it to any ‘master’ nonsense.”

“Alright, well it’s Oin to you as well then.”

Nodding with a smile, Bilbo flexed his arm testing it out. “Thank you Oin, this feels so much better! Now go back to your food. I hope for your brothers sake he has in fact saved you some.”

Oin chuckled darkly, quickly tidying away and pottering off, faithful ear trumpet dropped and now swinging round his neck. He always did have a habit of not using it when he expected opposition, a chorus of “what?” often defeating his opponents out of sheer frustration.

Bilbo slowly wandered back through his smial, eyeing the packed bags littered around and the frankly alarming number of weapons. Yavanna alone only knew how and where they stashed them all!

Making his way back through to the rest of them, he was surprised to find everything tidied away in its proper place. Looking at the Dwarves, Dori caught his attention.

“I thought it best we clean up for you, after you treated us to such a wonderful meal, both today and last night. It was the least we could do.”

Smiling wide, warmth filling him, Bilbo nodded at them all. “Thank you! That’s so very kind of you. And you are more than welcome, I was happy to do it.”

Well, this time he was at least.



“Enough. We need to move. We’re behind schedule as it is.”

Thorin’s sharp voice cut through their pleasant discussion, hiking up the tension as everyone realised this was it, this was the start of their Quest.

Swiftly, the Dwarves all dispersed, the sounds of bags being collected and distributed, last minute weapons and equipment checks and the general sounds of conversation.

There was an atmosphere in the air, one of excitement, nerves, anticipation. They all knew from this point on they were on their own, the responsibility and immensity of their task heavy on each of their shoulders, from king to toymaker, warrior to medic; they all felt it. They were it, they were the force that would conquer Smaug and retake Erebor.

“Still with us Master Hobbit?”

Turning to see the intimidating figure of said Dwarf king next to him, Bilbo grinned ruefully. “Well I’ve gone with it so far haven’t I? And with all the food we’ve eaten I’ve no choice but to come with you now!”

Two expressions warred across Thorin’s face, subtle but obvious to anyone who knew him, concern and, much more obviously, anger.

“I assure you Hobbit, you will be well compensated for your efforts,” he said stiffly, then, almost as if he couldn’t help himself, he snidely continued. “It must have been difficult giving up your food to Dwarves.”

Turning to face Thorin properly, Bilbo all but inflated with indignation, finding no reasons why pointing a finger angrily at a Dwarven king and esteemed warrior was probably a bad idea.

“I’ll have you know *Dwarf*, that I was joking. I’m sure you’ll have heard of jokes at least once in your long life!”

Bilbo paused to inhale, Thorin’s face morphing into pure indignation. “I beg yo-“

“No! Not finished! And as for finding it difficult, I should have actually. For reasons you clearly have no idea about! But I happily did it anyway because you were all hungry, I had food and I believed I should help you! So you can stop with that tone of voice right now!”

It wasn’t until he stopped that the angry Hobbit realised he’d drawn an audience, Fili, Kili, Dwalin and Bofur all poking their heads around the corner, eyes wide and mouths catching flies.

It was probably only his royal teachings that prevented Thorin from doing the same, what with the shocked look on his face. Clearly he’d never expected a Hobbit to put him in his place.

Well he didn’t know Bilbo, or at least, the Bilbo he was in the real world. He never would have dreamed of doing this if it truly was their first day together. But Bilbo had grown so

much, discovered himself and his courage, and knew Thorin as well as anyone probably could.

Plus, this strange dream offered him the security to do it, though he knew Thorin would never hurt him, stranger right now or not. It wasn't in his heart.

"You really are an impudent little creature aren't you!"

"Little? Little!" Bilbo exclaimed, indignation all but pouring from him. "I may be smaller than you but I don't know if you've noticed Master *Dwarf* but you aren't exactly the tallest creature in Middle Earth yourself! Though your ego may be another matter!"

"I beg your pardon!?"

"You heard me! I will not be spoken down to by you or anyone else thank you very much! Especially not in my own home!"

"Is there a problem here gentlemen?" came the calm but rather amused voice of Gandalf. Bilbo turned from where he was glaring at Thorin to share his glare with the meddling wizard; he had plenty to go around. If he wanted to shout at the stubborn, obstinate Dwarf he damn well could and he refused to be judged for it.

"I'm sure we'd all rather our burglar and leader didn't kill each other before we've even stepped foot out of the Shire."

Glancing behind the abnormally tall wizard, Bilbo noticed for the first time that they'd managed to draw the entirety of the Company, all of them looking on with a variety of expressions. In fact, Nori even seemed to be taking bets.

Steeling himself, not wanting to spoil the rest of the dream with arguments, no matter how much the Dwarf in front of him deserved a good talking too, Bilbo turned to face him.

"Fine," he ground out, refusing to apologise when he didn't feel it was deserved. Not to mention he knew for a fact he'd never receive one in return.

Thorin simply grunted and turned away, growling something in Khuzdul to the assembled Company. Always so eloquent that one.

After that, his whole smial was abuzz with last minute preparations, snatches of conversation thrown from one Dwarf to another, weapon checks and in Bombur's case, pantry checks. It was so exciting to watch, how each Dwarf moved as a small part of a whole.

Fili threw a bag to Kili, both without even having to raise their heads. Bofur and Nori were moving together like a whirlwind, easily doing the jobs of four Dwarves. Dori fussed over Ori like a puffed up mother hen, yet still managing to catch and pack the heaviest items with one hand, not breaking his concentration even a little.

It was a wonderful thing to watch and Bilbo had never gotten sick of seeing them like this, all so connected and in tune with one another. It made him ache to be a part of it yet he knew he never could, he was still an outsider no matter what he had done.

The loss of Fili, Kili and Thorin would leave huge, gaping holes in the group, permanently affecting their connection. They would never again move so in synch; never again have such a complete chain.

But Bilbo leaving wouldn't affect them at all. They would continue on as they always had and Bilbo's loss would leave barely a mark at all.

Bilbo finished making his own preparations and before he knew it, everything was done. They were ready. Gathering in his entrance hall, they all turned to Thorin, their leader, his head raised high and an inferno in his eyes.

He looked like he could devour all of Middle Earth if it gave him his home back.

"I understand that things haven't gone exactly to plan. We have been abandoned by our kin but it is no matter!" He raised his head to look each and every Dwarf in the eye, all of them straightening almost unconsciously.

"It doesn't matter because it proves that you few Dwarves have more courage than a whole army from the Iron Hills! Even without hundreds of soldiers at your back, you still have the courage to follow me across Middle Earth and right to the dragon polluting our home!"

Bilbo watched entranced as Thorin spoke, magnificent voice rising and falling, grabbing each person's attention and holding it. Thorin had the power to make you believe you could fly if only he spoke enough about it. It was a rare gift to inspire the best in people, to make them believe in themselves, to bring out the greatness hidden deep inside them.

"But no more," Thorin continued. "No more will that worm stay rooted in our mountain. We will take this chance to seize back Erebor!"

Cheers answered his shout, a giddy feeling rising in Bilbo too, until he found himself clapping along with the rest of them. The air was full of hope and passion, the belief that they would succeed permeated everything and Bilbo wished with all his heart he could just tell them, these dream spectres. He wished he could tell them they did win, that they did all the things they set out to do.

With the words of their leader wrapped around them, it was all too easy to open the door and step out. Such words seemed at odds, almost comical to Bilbo really, when he considered they were stepping out into the Shire. But everyone recognised that this was the first step on their journey, the initial jump into the unknown. They didn't see gentle emerald hills and an explosion of coloured flowers, they saw only the start of their Quest, the first stop on the map.

With that knowledge, they passed through his green door without a single hesitation, into the bright light beyond. It felt like freedom, glorious freedom to be escaping his smial, off with his beloved Dwarves.

It made him ache to do this in real life, to escape the claustrophobic walls of his Hobbit hole, the walls that felt like a prison more than a home. But he would enjoy this for what it was, a smile lighting up his face as he tilted it up towards the sun, the sound of his Dwarves all

around and the door of his shadow of a home closing behind them.

The journey through Hobbiton was very different than in real life, every Hobbit they came across staring unashamedly, one elderly neighbour going so far as to drop her loaf of bread in shock. Bilbo simply nodded to her with a wink, making her drop the bag of apples in her other hand.

A laugh bubbling out of him, Bilbo felt like skipping, his heart lighter than it had been in months, watching Fili and Kili run up and down the gentle hills like pair of giddy faunts, hearing Bofur start up whatever song he had in his head, simply feeling his friends all around him once more. The Company as it was meant to be.

They collected their ponies where they'd been stabled, loading their bags and weapons onto their sturdy bags with relief and mounting up. Bilbo was so happy he didn't even wrinkle his nose at the smell of horse or care that in a few hours he wouldn't be able to catch a pig in an alley.

Soon they were out of Hobbiton and into the outskirts of the Shire, the Hobbit holes spread sparsely along the emerald hills and fields of crops until they vanished completely, nothing but safe, gentle wilderness.

Well, it was safe until Kili decided to hop off his pony and try to filch some crops. There was silence for a few moments before a startled yelp rang out and Kili remerged from the field in a panic, chased by the angry farmer's dog.

Fili actually fell off his pony he was laughing so hard and Thorin looked like he was praying to Mahal for strength in dealing with his nephews or at the very least, for a reminder that he did actually need heirs.

Conversation flowed easily up and down the line and if Bilbo felt left out slightly, he hardly noticed it, simply happy to observe them so happy and *alive*.

By the time they decided to set up camp for the night, Bilbo had been strongly reminded of just how much he despised travelling on a pony. He ever so slowly climbed from the back of it, legs bowed and aching, his bum completely numb despite the nice amount of padding, if he did say so himself.

He spent his evening the same way, stretching out his aching muscles and happily watching the Dwarves around him. He was the outsider right now, the strange little creature brought along on the small promise of maybe being useful and no one was quite ready to try and make him more than that yet.

And that was okay, it really was. Bilbo knew he could simply sit and watch them laugh and live around him with a heart so full of joy it hurt. He missed them of course, missed the closeness of a song shared with Bofur, a conversation about family with Gloin, making something delicious out of meagre rations with Bombur, laughing with Fili and Kili, a shared pipe in the night with Thorin. He wanted that back, all of it and more, of course he did, but if this was all he was granted then by Yavanna he would clutch at it with both hands and be grateful.

Soon the night drew in, a comforting curtain of darkness drawing over the world, fire and moonlight illuminating the camp as Bilbo breathed in the night air, tinged with pipe smoke. This was the most peace Bilbo had felt in a very, very long time. He didn't speak for the rest of the night and no one tried to make him, and before he knew it, the Dwarves were organising watch rotations and turning in for the night. They didn't put him on the rota.

As they all retired to their sleep rolls, family's grouped together the closest but all settled comfortably near one another, Bilbo felt the distance between himself and his Dwarves keenly. It wasn't the almost open hostility he'd been met with in reality, given how he'd changed, but it certainly wasn't what he'd been used to in the end.

But still, lying under the open sky with them, stars wheeling overhead and the night's sounds loud around them, he felt at peace. It worried him that he'd had more joy and contentment from some strange dream than anything he'd felt in life for a good long time. It made him wish to never wake up; he'd give anything to simply stay in this dream and see it through to whatever end, anything to keep them with him for longer.

Snores soon rang through the camp, each one so familiar he could have identified the owner without a seconds thought. His owns eyes soon became heavy but he fought it off as much as he could. If it followed the same pattern as his first dream, the moment he fell asleep here he would wake up again in reality, all alone in his empty Hobbit hole, half a world away from his friends and his heart entombed in stone.

A burning heat shot through his palm and he only just stopped himself from yelling. Looking down in the dim firelight, his heart skipped a beat as he realised he'd been holding his Ring tight in his hand. He had no memory of taking it from his pocket at all, no conscious decision had been made to take it out and cling to it like a child with his mother's hand. Why had he been drawn to take it out? Why did it feel glued to his palm now?

A gasp escaped him, his eyes screwing up as a strange ache flared deep in his chest, a hollow sort of pull just behind his rib age. When it had eased, he found it was physically impossible to open his eyes again, panic filing him as he tried to move, even just his toes but found himself unable. It was like being dropped in icy water, everything going numb and sluggish until there was no power left in you to fight your way to the surface.

The last thought he had wasn't even a thought at all, more like an impression, something screaming a warning in the back of his mind as the fire seemed to flare up and burn bright, even through his shut tight eyes.

## Chapter End Notes

Hey my loves! How are you all?? Just wanted to say thank you so, so much for reading, giving kudos, commenting and subscribing. It makes me so, so happy and you're all awesome!

Hope you enjoy this next chapter! Toodle pip, Neeka xxxx

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bilbo knew before he'd even opened his eyes that he was back in his empty Hobbit hole; the silence of it was louder than any group of Dwarves could ever be. There was something deeper than that too, more instinctual; it simply didn't feel the same, as though his very being knew that he was alone.

Why couldn't he just stay in that odd, beautiful dream forever?

Getting up felt like far too much work this morning, his body aching painfully, legs cramping. Refusing to even open his eyes, the thought of actually seeing the inside of his bedroom abhorrent to him, Bilbo rolled over and curled into a ball, tucking his arms around himself in a lonely imitation of an embrace.

"Ah!"

Pain shot through his arm, sharp and burning; his eyes opened of their own accord as he sat up. His whole body felt like it'd been kicked but the worst pain was centred in his forearm. Holding it up to see what on earth was hurting so badly, Bilbo felt his blood run cold and time scream to a halt.

There was a burn on his arm. A burn that was completely, totally, undeniably identical to the burn he'd received in his dream. A *dream*.

Cold sweat broke out all over him as his mind turned over and over, other hand grasping his wrist to hold it steady. How? How on this good earth could he possibly have the same burn? Because there could be no doubt, it was definitely the same burn.

Something glinted from out the corner of his eye and Bilbo moved his gaze away from the burn to focus on his other hand, gripping his hurt arm just above it, the golden Ring still on his finger.

Now, Bilbo Baggins was not an idiot, he was in fact, a very intelligent Hobbit. His mind could turn over a riddle in moments, even under the threat of being eaten, he wrote often and managed the affairs of Bag End with ease. He could plan an escape and figure out puzzles both.

So he finally had to admit that he had been purposefully obtuse, knowing in the back of his mind that something wasn't quite right from the very first time he'd put on the Ring, a strange cold voice calling to him and convincing him to do it.

There could be no mistaking the catalyst; it wasn't an ordinary dream or a blessing from Yavanna, it was some strange magic from his Ring. Possibly fell magic.

Bilbo was scared, really scared; because this was something more than just a dream, more than a vision. He had a burn on his arm identical to the one he'd received from the stove and he now realised the ache in his body was from a full day on the back of a pony, thighs and back throbbing. A dream simply could not manifest the same feelings and injuries to him in real life.

The more he thought on it the more he was sure; he'd been cursed, he must have been. The first night he'd put the Ring on, he'd begged and pleaded for relief, offering anything, his life, his place in Yavanna's Pastures, anything to have his friends back. And he had, in a way, been granted that.

But what was it? Dream, vision or something else, something far stranger and more magical. Something impossible. Because there was no denying that it was, in some kind of way, real.

And wasn't that just terrifying; terrifying but also...thrilling. Because if there was even the slightest chance that what he'd just experienced was somehow real, he would accept any price he'd paid for it.

Black spots swam in front of his eyes, the hollow ache and tug in his chest returning, sending a pulse through the Ring still on his finger. Letting go of his burned arm, Bilbo quickly wrapped his hand around his finger and pulled. It was like trying to tug your foot out of sinking mud, each centimetre moved taking time and effort until, with one final tug, it released its hold.

The world righted itself once more and Bilbo felt a comfortable weight descend on him, grounding him into this world. Sighing in relief, he swiftly got up, groaning as his legs screamed in protest before staggering to his mantel and dropping the Ring onto it.

If it was truly causing all of this, with a curse or something equally as strange and dangerous, he wanted it kept as far away as possible. It was hard, actually hard to put it down and walk away but he managed.

First things first, he needed to address his burnt arm. He didn't have the salves and ointment he was given in the...dream? But he was still a Baggins, and the day a Baggins wasn't prepared for any outcome would be a dark day indeed.

He headed for his medical cabinet, stopping only to put the kettle on. It was painful and trickier to do himself, but soon he had a treated and wrapped wound, the pain dulling a measure now it had been properly tended too.

With that done he simply stood in the middle of his hollow home, trying so very hard to ignore the empty spaces, and had no idea what to do next. With nothing to focus on, the panic started to creep back like ice slowly taking over a pond.

"Okay Baggins, pull it together. The fact is your dream is not exactly a dream, your injury has followed you into the waking world and you may well be cursed. That's that. And there's no point worrying on an empty stomach."



That decided, he moved to the kitchen, made a pot of tea and started on some breakfast. Let it never be said that a Hobbit allowed a mild case of possible insanity and or Ring based curses to put them off their food.

He was starving, as if he had missed far too many meals and his stomach was busy gnawing on his spine. It was a strange change after having not been hungry in such a long while. But then again, it was a very strange morning so it was par for the course really.

One small breakfast of porridge with honey, a few rashers of bacon, two fat sausages, three eggs, a handful of mushrooms and two slices of fried bread later, Bilbo was feeling far more grounded. Actually, if he was truly honest with himself, now that the initial panic had faded, he was left with a sense of... relief. He no longer had the strange foreboding in the back of his mind screaming warnings at him but for what, he had no idea.

There was something more than that too, something far stronger and wilder; happiness. Because if there was even the slightest chance that whatever dream or trance he was in was somehow real, as the chronologically passing time and burn suggested, then it meant he had truly been with them, had truly been able to re do their first meetings and treat them how they deserved. It meant, should he be able to repeat the experience tonight, he'd wake up in their camp, about to begin a new day on the road.

Such giddy joy rose within him that a laugh bubbled from him, thick and unrestrained. He would have a new day with them, a whole day to see how grumpy Gloin was in a morning, to watch as Ori tried to continue writing on pony back, to hear the laughter of Fili and Kili. Oh Yavanna.

The feelings overwhelmed him, the Hobbit not knowing what to do with himself as his feelings overtook him, standing and pacing just to have something to do. Then he stopped. Why wait? Why on this good earth was he even thinking of waiting?!

If he simply retrieved the Ring, put it on and went back to sleep, surely he would be transported back to wherever it was he went, waking up with roots sticking in his back and tired, grumpy Dwarves all around.

So many questions and the only way to answer them was to try it. Suddenly he could wait no longer, all but scrambling back into his room. The Ring sat where he left it, glinting on the mantelpiece and calling to him, as irresistible as a full meal to a starved person. How was he meant to refuse that call when he knew his friends were waiting wherever that strange little Ring takes him?

Reaching out with a smile, giddy excitement building in his heart, he swiped the Ring from his mantel, sliding it onto his finger with joy.

Pain. So much *pain*. A hollow, aching agony in his chest, like a sinkhole had opened inside him and he was being pulled inside out. He vaguely felt his knees hit the tiles but that pain was relief compared to what gripped his body. His energy was leaving him, black spots swarming his vision, mind slipping.

Images flashed behind his eyes, impressions leaving phantom echoes of sounds and feelings. A woman, so blindingly radiant it hurt to look at. No, she was actually causing him pain, though he didn't feel like Bilbo at all, more like he was looking through another's eyes. He felt her power surge through him, fire lighting up his nerves, the clash of battle, a piercing inhuman shriek, a mountain of fire.

Fighting with everything he had left, Bilbo managed to pull it from his finger and let the Ring drop from his hand, the pain and images vanishing as it clinked once on the floor.

He slumped against the wall shaking, face damp with cold sweat and tears, heart pounding and chest heaving. A splatter of red hit the tiles below his bowed head, another following shortly after, then another.

It took him longer than it should have to realise his nose was bleeding, finally reaching up and wiping it away. He felt as weak as a newborn foal and drained to his very bones.

Well, that answered that question then; it obviously didn't work on command.

Bilbo wasn't sure how long it took him to recover, his very being feeling drained of life, the empty end of an hourglass that energy was only just beginning to trickle into again.

When he could finally move, Bilbo clawed his way up the wall, hanging from the mantel as he finally found his feet. That hadn't gone exactly to plan.

Leaving the Ring where it was he made his way to the kitchen, a good cup of tea sorely needed right then. And if he happened to give the Ring a comically wide berth, well, there was no one there to see.

Mind still blank, the Hobbit took comfort in the mindless task of making a brew, thinking of nothing but the next step; water in kettle, kettle on stove, tea in pot, hot water in pot, wait to steep, pour, drink. It settled him, as it would any Hobbit worth their foot hair.

The heat of the mug between his hands seeped into his skin, each sip making him feel more alive, brain slowly beginning to clear and function again. But as his thoughts began to circulate once more, so did panic; what if he'd broken it? What if by trying to force it, he'd ruined any chance of returning to that place, of seeing his friends again.

No, he couldn't think like that, he couldn't allow panic to overtake him before he had any more facts. His father would box his ears for working himself up before knowing all the information. Perhaps it was something that only worked when asleep.

The Hobbit stopped and ran it through his head a few times. It felt right, something deep in him telling him he was on the right track. He was sure, almost positive in fact, that the Ring could only send him wherever it was he went when he was asleep. He'd tried to force it before it was ready, before it had stored up its power again perhaps. No wonder it went so wrong.

Relief rushed through him; he hadn't broken it, of that he was sure. But by Yavanna, how would he make it through the day? Night was far too many hours away and he had nothing to

do but sit and wait for its arrival.

Knowing he would go insane if he was forced to wait with nothing to take his mind of it, Bilbo needed distractions. Many distractions. And looking around his badly neglected smial, he knew just what he could start with.

That decided, Bilbo was off like a hunting dog scenting a rabbit. There was a fire in him now, a spark of life he hadn't felt since his heart had been buried in stone.

He had a purpose again, something to hold onto, even if it was some unknown and probably dangerous magic. He honestly didn't care what was doing it or how, he just wanted his friends back, however he could.

Knowing that, if things followed the previous two night's pattern, he would see them all again sent lightning bolts of excitement and yearning up his spine.

But for now he must wait, so he threw himself into cleaning and organising with a manic fervour. Every window was opened, fresh air circulating and filling the smial with the scents of cut grass and flowers.

He rushed around hauling his returned belongings to their rightful places, not just stashed wherever he'd dropped them, not caring a jot about the ones still missing. There were far more important things in life.

Rolling his sleeves up, Bilbo washed down his kitchen, mopped his floors, dusted everything and when he was finally done, he stood looking around, breathing hard and felt...accomplished. Proud even.

It was strange feeling anything other than bone deep grief and utter exhaustion, like trying a kind of food he hadn't eaten for a long time; the taste new yet familiar at the same time, the echo of old meals on his tongue. It wasn't unpleasant.

His stomach decided to have words with him then, the rumbling comically audible in his empty home. Surprised yet again at actually wanting to eat, as well as how much time had passed during his cleaning frenzy, he made his way through to the kitchen and took stock of what was left from his disastrous market trip. There wasn't much after his breakfast that morning but just enough to bake some scones; an absolute favourite of his.

With a small smile, Bilbo went about baking for the first time in a year, when his feet crossed his threshold and took him on the adventure of a lifetime.

It was heavenly, instinctively knowing the amount of flour and sugar needed, adding the butter before finally getting his hands dirty; kneading and rubbing it all together before adding the last of his milk, using his mothers trusty wooden spoon to mix into a thick batter.

The smell almost made him choke up, as silly as that was. It just took him back to a happy place, comfort draping like a blanket across his shoulders. He could almost hear his mother in his ear, echoes of her teaching him as a child.

Bilbo shaped the batter into balls, humming as he did, and put them in the oven to cook. The Hobbit cleaned up his mess, everything going back in its proper place (though not before licking the spoon and bowl of course) until finally, he was left with nothing more to do.

Tension bolted through his nerves, an anticipation the likes of which he'd never felt before. He needed the night to come, he needed to see his Dwarves.

He was still confused and concerned over this new magic, it was just too impossible; something would bite him in the arse at some point, he just knew it. But he also just didn't care. At all. If there was a price to be paid to see his friends again, he would give it gladly.

But one thought kept running through his mind, just how far would this magic go and how much could he change?

The very idea of being able to alter things, to help his friends in greater ways, made Bilbo's breath quicken and his heart pound. Could he... could he *save* them?

The smell of cooked scones drew him back to the here and now. It was too much to think on yet, it must be put aside until he knew more. It wouldn't do to get his hopes up too soon.

Removing the scones from the oven, his mouth watered at the sight. It'd been so long since he'd had one, the very smell of them reminding him of home, of family. It was a comfort and as Bilbo slathered them in clotted cream and jam, biting into it with a groan, he felt more settled than he had in months.

The hungry Hobbit ate half the batch in one go, putting the rest aside for later. The food had brought him a measure of peace, something he sorely needed and reminded him that the feelings of home could be found in the strangest of things.

It gave him enough strength to admit he needed to go outside.

As loath as he was to admit it, Bilbo needed to thank Lobelia and return her pot. The very thought made his toes curl in annoyance, already envisioning just how the experience would go. It would not be pleasant, but she was family and she had done him a kindness, despite her own vocal dislike of him.

He groaned aloud, remembering one more thing he probably should do, he really needed to apologise to the witches at the market. That he definitely had no desire to do, his anger still warm in his belly, but they were just small minded idiots who didn't know what they were talking about.

It didn't excuse it, not even a little, but perhaps he'd gone a little far in scaring them and if Bilbo knew the residents of Hobbiton, various versions of the events would still be being thrown about, growing more outlandish and more believed with every day he stayed holed up inside.

It was only the lingering good feeling about seeing his friends tonight that got him to move, dress and prepare to leave. The earthenware pot was balanced on his hip and after juggling it for a second, he was out his door and breathing in the fresh, flower scented air of Hobbiton.

Bilbo sent a quick prayer to Yavanna, all but begging her to ensure he didn't have to talk to anyone else, before starting out on the path with a sigh. He knew there was no way he was getting out of today with dignity, he might as well just accept it now.

Lobelia was his first stop, the mere thought of it sending shivers down his spine. Her smial wasn't too far away, only ten minutes or so on foot. Plenty of time to plan what he would say, though knowing her, she would manage to throw all his carefully thought out words into the fire in two seconds flat, drawing him into an argument with sharp words flying about leaving paper cuts on the both of them.

Far too soon, her smial was in front of him; smaller than his own, much to her continual displeasure, with a meticulous garden full to the brim with flowers and vegetables. She'd always been very proud of her garden, showing off to any who went by. Admittedly, it was a very lovely garden.

With a deep sigh, steeling himself for this no doubt unpleasant encounter, he pushed open the bright yellow garden gate and made his way up the winding path, the smell of flowers so strong it was almost overpowering.

He wouldn't put it past her to have some poisonous flowers hidden in the back somewhere, just waiting to be slipped into a visitors tea, finally killing him off and claiming his home...

Okay, maybe he was being a little dramatic now. She always did bring out the worst in him.

Shaking the nonsense from his head, Bilbo reminded himself that he was a grown Hobbit and was simply here to thank her and return the pot. He would not be drawn into any arguments and she would *not* get the better of him.

That decided Bilbo quickly knocked on her door before he changed his mind and ran, drawing himself up to his full height, head held high.

He was barely given enough time to pull himself together before the door was being pulled open, Lobelia's saccharine smile greeting him, before dropping into a scowl once she registered who had come calling.

"Bilbo. Returning my pot at last I see. I was beginning to think you'd stolen that as well!"

*Breath Bilbo*, he told himself, gritting his teeth in a bad imitation of a smile.

"Good day to you too Lobelia," he said dryly. "I am indeed returning your pot and I..." he swallowed, the words having to fight their way up his throat, loath as he was to say them.

"I also wanted to thank you. It was... very kind of you to do that for me."

"Yes well," she huffed out, shifting on the spot. "You did look a frightful sight. Far too skinny, not proper for a Hobbit at all."

Lobelia seemed to look closer at him then, eyes roaming up and down his person while Bilbo shuffled uncomfortably.

"Yes," she finally said, seeming done at last with her observation. "You look...better I suppose. Still too skinny but your eyes are brighter. Less dead."

Bilbo was shocked that she'd noticed so much the first time, let alone now, as well as the fact he'd so visibly changed. He knew exactly why of course, seeing his friends again and knowing that it was somehow, in some way, real; well, it gave him life again. Maybe he shouldn't be so surprised that it affected him visibly.

"Err, thank you, I think."

She nodded, before the slight gentleness of before left her face and she scowled at him once more.

"You haven't even said how nice it was! That was my famous lamb hotpot don't you know, it deserves some appreciation!"

Barely restraining himself from dropping his head into his hands, Bilbo nodded obligingly. "Yes yes, it was absolutely delightful, honestly. And I was *just* about to say so but as usual, you had to speak first."

Lobelia all but puffed up in her indignation, her layers and layers of puffy skirts making her look like nothing more than an angry yellow bird.

"Oh you are even ruder now! Though I shouldn't be surprised, spending a year with Dwarves of all creatures!"

All tenuous goodwill left him at the mention of his friends, face morphing into something sharp and dangerous in his anger.

"I wouldn't speak of them if I were you Lobelia. I'm sure you heard about what happened at the market and I am holding your best pot."

"Don't you *dare* Bilbo Baggins, you give that back right now. I know you've no appreciation of what you have, but not everyone can simply replace anything lost or broken!"

Always back to money with her. "I don't know what on earth you're talking about Lobelia. As usual, you're running your mouth whilst making no sense!"

But still, he handed her the pot in one violent motion, the other Hobbit grabbing it and drawing it to her swiftly, holding it with care. Perhaps he had been a little cruel to threaten something that clearly did mean a lot to her.

"Look," he sighed, thumb and forefinger pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration. "I just came here to thank you for the food and to return the pot. I shouldn't have said what I did and I'm sorry."

She simply huffed, raising her head and looking away. Suddenly he was struck with sadness, memories of their childhood rising to the forefront of his mind.

Stepping forward slightly, he tried to catch her eye. "What happened to us Lobelia?" He asked gently, sadly. "We used to be friends, we played together as children. What changed?"

But as her head shot forwards, eyes meeting his, Bilbo was shocked by the pure anger in her eyes.

"You know perfectly well Bilbo Baggins," she spat, voice venomous. "Now get away from my home!"

And Bilbo did just that, stepping back in shock and flinching when she slammed the door in his face. He turned and walked away numbly, her words running through his mind. What on earth had she meant?

He was deeply confused, racking his brain for any clue, any memory that would explain what on earth she was referring to. He found none, nothing that could justify her vicious anger.

Shaking his head, Bilbo decided to bench his confusion for another day; Lobelia did have a tendency to be petty, stealing his spoons and other such things as well as doling out plentiful tongue lashings and spread rumours, so perhaps it was yet another thing she threw at him.

But still, something about her anger felt too...raw for that.

No, he would think on it no more, he had far greater things to occupy his mind. His stomach twisted at the thought; pure excitement and yearning rushing through him. It wouldn't be too long now until he could return to them, should everything work as before.

Unfortunately, Bilbo still had one last job to see to before he could return to his home and prepare for sleep and all it would bring. He had to apologise to the nasty Hobbits from the market.

A groan almost left his throat at the thought, dreading the very idea of it. But he knew various versions of the story would already be meandering their way through the Shire; barmy Baggins who ran off with Dwarves shouting at good, respectable Hobbits, in the middle of Hobbiton market of all places!

No, he needed to nip with in the bud before he couldn't show his face anymore. With a sigh, Bilbo began his walk to the sister's smial, knowing they should be there at this time, the warm day fading into the clear evening, golden light spreading over the land before it would have to surrender its watch to the moon.

Despite his dread, Bilbo found himself enjoying his walk, the fresh, alive smell of the Shire calming and filing him in a way it hadn't since before he ran off after a company of Dwarves and travelled half a world away.

The smells and sounds and feelings reminding him of simpler days, happier days when his only worry was making sure he made it home in time for tea after a day of hunting for Elves in the woods.

Lost in his thoughts, Bilbo almost walked right past their smial, only the sight of their prize rosebushes jolting him from his memories. The Hobbit stayed watching the garden for a moment and sighed, he so desperately did not want to do this, to dirty his tongue with apologies to the people who so callously spewed rubbish about his friends.

Bilbo would much rather take the Dwarvish approach in this, as they never apologised unless they deeply, truly meant in. That's not to say that feuds weren't settled, they were resolved by a number of means; duelling, paying reparations, contracts in which the two parties promised not to come into contact with each other anymore and so many other ways. But they never actual apologised if they didn't mean it.

However, this was the Shire and they were Hobbits, and that meant smiling and offering up your most sincere apologies whilst gritting your teeth and swearing at them in your head, possibly even insulting them to trusted friends or family afterwards.

Yes it was quite possible that Bilbo currently felt a little bitter towards the people of his homeland and their ways of doing things. He honestly thought that Hobbits desperately needed a glimpse of the wider world, needed to be less closed minded and judgmental.

The very thought that if it wasn't for a mad wizard dragging him out his door, he would have continued to be like the rest of them sent shivers of disgust up his spine. He was ashamed of himself for losing his childhood beliefs and allowing himself to become petty and prejudiced, never thinking to look beyond the small lands of the Shire.

"What are you doing here?" Came a shrill voice, jolting him from his thoughts and back into the here and now. Bilbo focused his eyes and saw Miss Hyacinth stood in her garden, clutching her basket of gardening tools to her chest with a slightly fearful look in her eyes.

That felt like a bucket of cold water tipped down his back; she was afraid of him. And thinking back to how he'd behaved, remembering that the people of the Shire were not used to such aggression, he could understand it.

Shuffling on the spot, Bilbo tried to smile at her comfortingly, though it probably resembled a grimace more than anything.

"Ah, Miss Hyacinth. I err, I need to talk to you if that's possible. You and your sister. It's, well it's about my behaviour at the market..." He trailed off awkwardly, ringing his hands as he waited for her to decide if she wanted to invite him in or not.

She seemed to come to her decision, bending and placing her basket of tools on the soft, emerald grass of her beautiful garden, before straightening and running her hands over her ginger curls, trying to neaten them up.

"Well, I suppose you can come in for a minute or two."

The other Hobbit still didn't sound too happy about this, but moved forward to open her gate all the same, allowing him entry and leading him through her colourful explosion of a garden, flowers taking up every spare space.



Bilbo followed her into her smial, taking in the warm, cosy atmosphere of it before he was lead to the sitting room and invited to sit.

"Right," said the other Hobbit, still eyeing him with caution. "I'll just go get my sister from the back. Please stay here and give us a moment."

Bilbo nodded and watched her swiftly move through her home presumably towards the back door. Once she'd left, he relaxed slightly, sinking back into the sinfully comfortable couch and nosily looking around their home.

It was on the smaller size but no less lovely for it, decorated tastefully as it was and reminding him of the garden outside. Most surfaces had some form of flower on it, whether dried and displayed in frames, living in various pots and vases, or used as a decoration motif in paintings or tea sets. It truly spoke of their love for the growing things of the world and somehow made him relax slightly.

Bilbo was thinking over what he was going to say when he heard footsteps making their way into the sitting room. He raised his eyes and met the gaze of the other sister.

"Hello Miss Heather."

She didn't return his greeting, glaring at him instead. Hyacinth looked like she'd tidied herself up from working the garden and he assumed Heather had too, her curly blonde hair pulled back from her face by a blue headband and her nice but practical dress free from soil.

"Your garden is stunning," he said, when the silence reach too uncomfortable a peak for him. "It's even better than last year! I'll wager you'll be accepting yet another prize or two at the Summer Fair."

That at least, gained him a reaction, the sisters smiling the exact same smile simultaneously and nodding. "Yes we've been working rather hard haven't we Heather? I believe it's going to pay off."

Bilbo smiled and nodded his agreement, not just in hopes of getting them to warm to him, but also because he genuinely meant it. The Hardbottle sisters were easily the best decorative gardeners in the Shire, their stall visited not just thanks to their excellent assortment of gardening aids and equipment, but for the excellent advice they could dispense.

The silence reigned once more, the Hobbits sat on the twin armchairs in front of him obviously deciding to make him sweat and speak his piece first.

Not wishing to drag this on much longer, the yearning to return home and try his Ring growing with each inch of the sun's descent, Bilbo sighed under his breath and sat forward, looking at them earnestly.

"Look, my behaviour at market the other day was...well it was out of order. I'm sorry."

They nodded in agreement, faces a mirror image of smugness which started to boil his blood once more. Yes he came to apologise, but if they thought he would humbly offer his

apologies and scuttle off with his tail between his legs then they were very much mistaken.

"However," he began, voice hardening as he looked between the two Hobbits. "You did say some horrible and rather hurtful things about my friends, people I care about more than life. I reacted badly yes, but can you blame me after you said such closed minded and nasty things?"

Hyacinth looked like she'd swallowed a lemon, opening her mouth more than likely to argue, but then Heather placed a hand on her arm, shaking her head slightly when the other turned to look at her.

"No, we can't," she said, her soft voice seeming to carry a measure of remorse there. "I...I saw your flowers. And I remember well your words. You lost someone didn't you?"

"Yes, yes I did," Bilbo replied quietly, looking at his hands digging little crescent grooves into themselves.

"Two young brothers not long out of their Tweens in Dwarvish equivalent. And...our leader, their uncle..." He trailed off; despite knowing he would see him tonight, in the here and now Thorin was still dead. And it still hurt.

"He was important to you."

It wasn't a question but he nodded anyway. "They all were...but yes, he was special."

Heather's eyes held understanding and sorrow, even the notoriously loud-mouthed Hyacinth seemed subdued.

"We obviously need to apologise to you also," Heather said, leaning forward and covering his hand with her own, looking him in the eye. "I am sorry we spoke so badly of you and said such things about your friends. Especially those you lost. It was wrong and nasty."

Hyacinth seemed content to let her sister speak for the most part, but she too whispered an apology.

Throat tight with emotion, Bilbo could only nod, smiling weakly at them both. This visit was certainly not going how he expected at all; he thought he would have to bite his tongue, apologise and leave as quickly as possible.

He didn't anticipate them listening and feeling remorseful for their words, let alone how genuinely sorry they seemed. It had rather thrown him for six.

"I..." he coughed, clearing his throat and shuffling in his seat. "Thank you. Thank you for your apology and your understanding. I hope you accept my apology also."

They smiled, nodded and offered him tea, and much to Bilbo's own surprise, he accepted. For the next quarter of an hour, they chatted amicably about their gardens; the sisters offering him some great tips on how to get his garden back up to snuff after his long absence and Bilbo telling them of the foreign flowers he saw on his trip.

They seemed strangely interested in the bizarre foliage of Mirkwood and if there was anyone who could fix the disease in those woods, it'd be the Hardbottle sisters.

By the time they'd finished chatting, the sun was well on its way down and Bilbo was surprised to find he'd rather enjoyed his evening. In fact, as they said farewell and sent him out of their smial a plate of finger cakes the richer, he felt as though he'd potentially gained two new friends.

With a disbelieving chuckle, Bilbo just shook his head and walked up the winding path through their beautiful garden, the night smells mixing deliciously with the varied scents of the plants around him.

The sun was a tiny sliver of weak golden light on the horizon, the curtain of night beginning to draw across the world, stars slowly appearing above him as he made his way along the little paths of Hobbiton.

By the time the sun had disappeared completely, giving up its watch to the silvery moon, he finally set foot on his own garden path, juggling the plate in his hands to open his green door, the faded little rune teasing him with its presence.

Excitement gripped him then, anticipation an iron hand around his heart tightening with each passing second. Oh Yavanna, soon he would see them again. He'd be with them again.

Breathing sharply, he moved through to the kitchen and placed the plate of rather excellent small cakes on the counter. He still had some time to kill before night proper, so he decided to have a good long soak, his body still aching with phantom pains.

The hot water did wonders for his body, carefully cleaning his burn which stung, then simply lying back, the smell of his lavender soap and the heat all around him soothing his nerves. Bilbo stayed that way, head tilted back and staring at his ceiling, until the water began to cool.

What was to come sent shockwaves of nerves and excitement through his veins so strong he was almost shaking, legs feeling like jelly as he stepped out of the tub and dried off, changing into soft comfortable sleep clothes and moving through to the kitchen.

He wasn't hungry, stomach far too knotted for that but a cup of tea was always a good idea, even if the water seemed to take an age to boil, the tea seeping slower than it ever had before in his life.

Cup of tea finally made, Bilbo made his way through to his bedroom; he placed his cup on the nightstand and set about lighting a fire to fight off the slight chill of the room.

With one eye on the task in front of him, he couldn't help but become transfixed by the glinting of the Ring on the floor in front of the fireplace where he'd dropped it that morning.

It seemed to call to him, a pull deep in his chest making him yearn to hold it, to put it on. It was a completely different sensation to the yearning he felt for what putting the Ring on

brought and Bilbo wasn't entirely sure he liked it. It felt...tainted in some way, weaved with the sense of danger he'd felt from the start.

But it would take him to his friends, and for that the Hobbit would do anything.

When at last the fire caught, merrily burning away and warming the room, Bilbo knew it was finally time, he could finally return to them.

There was a strong pull now, the echo of an echo seeming to call his name, telling him to put on the Ring. Not hesitating, Bilbo reached out and took hold of the weighty gold, heavy not in any physical way but in a way he couldn't yet put into words, before standing and moving to his bed.

Waking up on the floor of his smial the last few times had taught him well and this time he would make sure he could wake up in at least one place without aches from sleeping on hard ground. Settling in, he finished his cup of tea and took a deep breath, excitement squeezing his lungs and twisting up his stomach.

The call was getting louder, the pulling sensation a strong tug under his ribs now. Not wanting to wait any long, he plunged the Ring onto his finger, the grey curtain falling over the world immediately.

Bilbo sank back onto his pillows, the creeping paralysis beginning from his feet and working its way up. The world grew blurry along the edges, his Hobbit hole falling away from him and leaving only a deep, impenetrable darkness.

## Chapter End Notes

Hello my chickens! I'm so sorry for the delay in posting! I've been busy with work and struggling with my health and this got lost on the wayside.

Also, this story was meant for the Hobbit Big Bang, but thanks to a hospital stay, I was late joining up and my writing was delayed. The last day of the Big Bang is today, but I will continue to update this story until it is finished, as I have so many plans for it and I'm really excited to carry on!

So I hope you guys will like to continue on this journey with me! So for now, here is this chapter and the next shall be along in a day or two :)

Thanks, Neeka xxxx

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bilbo was quite sure that he'd never been so happy to wake up with rocks digging into his back, a crick in his neck and loud, sleepy Dwarves traipsing all around him. He sat up, slipped the Ring off his finger and looked around greedily at his friends; some of them beginning to pack up, some seeing to the ponies, some cooking and some waiting for said cooking.

It was beautiful. His heart felt like it would burst with happiness, head dizzy with relief. They were here, wherever 'here' was. He hadn't broken the Ring, it still worked and he was finally back with his Company.

"What are you smilin about eh Master Baggins?"

Bilbo turned to look at Bofur, sat on a stump rolling up his bedroll with a quizzical look on his face. Bilbo's face ached and he finally realised why he was being looked at so curiously; he was smiling, really, truly smiling as though his every wish had just been granted. Which in all honesty, it had.

"Oh nothing Master Bofur, just excited to be here is all."

Bilbo hoped it came across believable enough, what with it being partially the truth.

"Oh it's just Bofur if ya don't mind. No need for all tha' master business with me."

Smiling yet again, Bilbo nodded. "Well it's just Bilbo for you also."

"Oi Bofur, get over here!"

Standing, said Dwarf nodded his head over to where Nori stood, the suspicious thief sending odd looks his way, as if trying to puzzle him out and failing. "Sorry Bilbo," Bofur said, flashing him a charming smile. "Duty calls. Be sure to get packed up an get your breakfast quick. We'll be off soon I reckon."

"Thanks!" Bilbo shouted at the Dwarf's retreating back. It seemed that once again, Bofur would be his first friend, the joyful miner never one for letting a chance to be friends pass him by. He was a Dwarf who could walk into a tavern full of wary strangers and come out with lifelong friends. He was special like that and Bilbo always felt lucky to have his friendship.

Sighing in contentment, Bilbo spared a moment to thank whatever it was that was sending him here. Whether it was a curse or not, he felt blessed for this chance. But there were still so many questions he had and no idea how to answer them. Where was he? Why was he there? Just how real was this?

Well, sitting in his bedroll contemplating his situation wasn't going to answer anything, the only way was forward, see it through and hopefully pick up answers as he goes. He would operate under the assumption that this was somehow actually, impossibly real and with the Valar as his witness, he would protect his friends with everything he had.

The morning passed quickly once Bilbo made his decision; breakfast was had, conversation flying as always around the Company. Bilbo managed to draw sweet Ori into conversation too, despite Nori and Dori looking on suspiciously. He asked the young scribe about his book, something Bilbo knew would light a fire in the shy Dwarf's eyes.

They talked all through breakfast and by the time they had broken camp and mounted their ponies, Bilbo was as cheerful as could be and much closer to at least one member of the Company. He planned to work his way around all of them in time; desperate as he was for the friendship he'd once had with them.

Though whether it was right to use the information he already knew about them to get closer quicker, he didn't know. It was a moral conundrum he was far too happy to be examining right then, tucking it away in the back of his mind for another time instead.

"So, what weapons do you use then eh? Or are you as unskilled as the rest of your race?"

Turning to Nori, the thief looking at him curiously, Bilbo raised his eyebrows in indignation. "I beg your pardon Master Dwarf but 'my race' isn't unskilled at all! We just have different things we specialise in thank you very much! Tell me, when was the last time you grew a field full of produce from scratch to feed your people, or are you as unskilled as the rest of your race?"

Silence met his angry outburst, Nori and the few Dwarves near enough to overhear staring at him. Luckily, Bilbo was still too annoyed to worry if he'd cocked up by shouting at him so soon into their journey. Unskilled indeed! How dare he.

Continuing to stare at the ginger thief, refusing to be the one who looked away, Bilbo was the first to see the Dwarf smirk, huffing in amusement and nodding his head at the Hobbit before trotting forward to re-join his brothers.

Confused and still more than a little angry, Bilbo just huffed, muttering "Dwarves!" with great force, not caring one whit if other said Dwarves heard or not. Hopefully they would learn quick that he would not be standing for any of their nonsense, not this time, and quit poking at him to see where and when he'd snap.

As much as he told himself he didn't mind how they behaved towards him now, he knew deep down it was a lie. It hurt, it bit at him more and more with every look or comment, every time he saw them and knew they were thinking badly of him.

He was useless right now in their eyes, at best, and at worst a liability, someone who could get another killed with his lack of fighting skills. It made him want to pull his hair out in frustration, to scream at them.

*Don't you see? I have fought and suffered and survived! I have seen Trolls and Orcs and Goblins. I have fought in a war! I'm not useless!*

But he didn't. Because in truth he feared they were right, that he was useless. Yes he'd survived these things the first time around but that was more luck and quick thinking than skill, what if it didn't work this time around?

And what was more useless, more abhorrent, than someone who lets three people they love die?

Suddenly, his good mood from the morning seemed like a far off dream and Bilbo was now so glum, so lost in the deep quagmire of his thoughts that he didn't notice the concerned glances Ori and Bofur shot at him, looking at each other quizzically.

When they finally stopped for lunch, Bilbo had fallen so deeply into one of his black moods that not even the sight of Fili and Kili could draw him from it, the brothers chasing each other with stones, bouncing them off each other's body parts and counting up the points they corresponded too.

In fact, it drove home further his failure, seeing them here so alive and joyous made him face the fact that he wasn't enough to stop their lights from going out. If only he ran faster through the battle he could have warned them of the trap before the brothers set off scouting. He could have prevented their capture, they all could have retreated.

But he hadn't. He wasn't enough. He'd failed them all.

When Bilbo was handed his lunch rations by Bombur, the rotund Dwarf looking concerned despite the layer of suspicion they all held for him, he found the thought of food made him sick. His stomach barely grumbled anyway, his appetite usually barely half that of a normal Hobbit, much too used to the ways of travelling.

It was that thought that made him think of something other than the deaths he'd caused. He realised with a start something he hadn't noticed until now, too distracted with confusion and the joy of seeing his friends again; his body wasn't how it should be at this point in the Quest, barely a days ride from the Shire.

Where it should be nicely plump and soft, used to the ways of a wealthy and proper Hobbit, it was unchanged from real life; far too skinny with lean muscle hiding beneath pale skin, where it should be golden. His feet were harder than ever, used to walking miles over rough, unforgiving terrain, his hands were slightly calloused and small scars littered his body.

So not only did his burn travel with him into both places, his body was definitely the same too. Perhaps it was a sort of fixed point, his body remaining unchanged even as he hopped between these two...worlds? Times?

He would have to be careful and avoid injuries wherever possible, it wouldn't do to turn up in the Shire with an arrow sticking out of him or the like.

"Is this all we get Dori? I'm starving." Came the quiet voice of Ori on Bilbo's left, looking morosely at his empty plate, leaning in to talk to his brother.

"Yes it is and I won't hear you moaning about it. I told you when we signed up for this, it won't be comfortable. You'll have to wait for dinner tonight. It's hardly the least food we've ever had."

The little Dwarf nodded, chastised. Dori collected their plates and stood, heading over to Bombur to hand them back. Unable to stand seeing his gentle friend hungry, Bilbo scooted over and nudged him.

"Hey, I'm not hungry so you're more than welcome to finish off my portion."

Ori turned to him, his open face set in disbelief and confusion, as though he couldn't believe anyone would willingly offer up their lunch.

"Are...are you ssure?" He stuttered, moving closer to the Hobbit and looking with barely concealed desire at the food Bilbo was holding out. "I I wouldn't want tto take your food off you..."

All but pushing the plate into his friend's hands, Bilbo smiled reassuringly. "Ori, believe me, I wouldn't have offered if I wasn't sure."

Hesitantly accepting the plate, as though waiting for Bilbo to change his mind, Ori finally smiled shyly and stuttered his thanks, hungrily digging into Bilbo's lunch as the Hobbit looked on fondly, some of the ice that had overtaken him melting.

Bilbo spent the rest of their break watching the Dwarves, happily observing how Fili and Kili ran around with their particular brand of youthful energy, causing chaos but also making everyone smile, even Thorin and Dwalin's usually grim faces softening as they watched.

Soon they were packed up and mounting their ponies once more, Bilbo barely even wincing anymore. Mind still turning, his dark thoughts never far away, simply hovering like a storm cloud just behind him, he didn't immediately notice that he had a riding companion.

Turning to his left, he started, which was usually a normal reaction when Dori was staring at you with an intenseness he usually reserved for Nori.

"Erm, can I...can I help you?" he hedged, not quite sure how to get himself from whatever shit list he'd obviously stumbled onto.

Dori just continued to stare, as though trying to puzzle out every inch of the Hobbit's being. Eventually, just when Bilbo was about to make a hasty retreat, Dori spoke.

"So, why did you give Ori your lunch?"

Bilbo was definitely confused now. The way Dori spoke of it, you'd think he'd done something horrible or suspicious, not simply shared his food.



"Because...he was hungry? And I wasn't?" he said, confusion obvious in his voice as he really couldn't figure out what was wrong with that.

Still Dori's face didn't lighten. "And what will you ask in return? Is he to do your bidding now? Will you hold the debt until you need something?"

Utterly flabbergasted, Bilbo simply gawped at him; jaw practically trailing along with his pony's hooves.

"You...you think I gave him my food...so I could hold a debt over him?" he finally forced out, insult beginning to seep into him alongside bafflement.

The Dwarf nodded sharply. "Yes. Why else would you, a stranger, offer something as precious as your lunch to someone you met just days before?"

"Especially," he continued, looking Bilbo up and down. "With you being a coddled Hobbit, I know how much you value food and have no doubt had plenty of it your whole life. You won't be used to going without so why would you voluntarily hmm?"

Now Bilbo was definitely mad. Turning fully in his saddle to properly face the Dwarf beside him, he fixed him with the best glare he could muster.

"Because he was hungry!" he exclaimed with force, gesturing with his arms for more emphasis. "A lovely young Dwarf had literally just said how hungry he was, whilst I was not, so I thought I'd give it to him so it wouldn't waste and he'd have a full stomach! We Hobbits never waste food and I wasn't about to let someone I consider a new friend go hungry when there was something I could do about it!"

Bilbo was well and truly angry now, voice rising, sharp as a knife. "So how *dare* you suggest there was anything else afoot! I'd heard Dwarves were a suspicious lot but this is ridiculous! To think I'd do such a thing! I'm baffled and insulted! I know you love and protect your brother, I understand that. But surely you have enough common sense to see when someone is simply being nice!"

With a last glare at Dori, shock clear on his face, he pushed his pony forward to ride next to Gandalf. A "damn suspicious Dwarves!" thrown over his shoulder for good measure, exuding anger like a thunder cloud. How *dare* he!

No one dared talk to him for the rest of their ride and Bilbo was glad of it, feeling sick to his stomach that his old friend, someone he cared so very deeply for, thought he would do something like that. To little Ori no less!

He couldn't help but shoot the Dwarves subtle looks, trying to figure out what they all must think of him. If Dori believed he would do such a thing, they must all have some kind of insulting idea about him. What did the boys think?

What did Thorin?

"They will warm to you with time."

Turning to look at the gently smiling wizard next to him, he couldn't help but scoff. Yes they would indeed, but it would take weeks for some, even after they'd fought Trolls, Orcs and Wargs together. And for others it would take a suicidal dive in front of their king to save him from the most dangerous Orc in Middle Earth!

Bilbo already knew the silent treatments he'd receive, the snide remarks, the obvious mistrust. And now he finds out they all must have some highly unsavoury ideas about him no matter what he does! He'd hoped he'd have changed something, even just a little bit.

He wasn't sure his broken, lonely heart could cope with weeks of such treatment from the people he loved more than life, but who cared not a jot for him right now.

Seeming to understand his reluctance to talk, Gandalf merely peered at him from beneath his bushy eyebrows, as though to remind him not to dwell on it and allow it to ruin him. As if his Dwarves hadn't ruined him already.

The rest of the day passed slowly for Bilbo, the conversations of the Dwarves never reaching him, only his black mood for company. It grated on him and by the time they made camp on a rocky overhang overlooking the valley below, he just wanted to crawl into his bedroll and end the day. But as usual, Bilbo was doomed to never get what he wanted.

He dutifully assisted Bombur in preparing their dinner of course, a thick rabbit stew with a loaf of the crusty bread he'd baked himself and brought from his pantry. It was rather delicious in all honesty, and as he savoured each mouthful, the night falling around him and stars wheeling above his head, Bilbo found his mood lightening.

Bowls tidied away, the Company fell about and relaxed. Thorin leaned back against a rock, eyes closing but otherwise remaining alert, Fili and Kili were smoking and carving by the fire, Ori was scribbling away in his journal with Dori by his side and Nori sharpening his knives with a passion that slightly worried Bilbo. All the Dwarves were relaxing and the Hobbit found himself mirroring them, the tension slowly seeping from his body as he relaxed.

Then of course, a horrible, grating screech echoed through the valley, Kili's call of "Orcs!" making every Dwarf snap to attention; despite knowing the danger was far away, they were unable to control their instincts.

Thorin in particular jerked from his somewhat relaxed rest against the rock and Bilbo couldn't help but see the split second flash of panic on his face before it was hidden, drawn back behind the Dwarf's walls.

So focused on Thorin, it took Bilbo a moment to notice his breathing had sped up, chest tight like an iron band was wrapped around it. All he could remember was that battle, *the* battle, the one that took Thorin, Fili and Kili away from him.

Not for the first time, the sounds of the fight filled his ears, drowning out all else; the dying screams of Men, Elves and Dwarves, the horrifying sounds of the Orcs and their Wargs. He could smell the blood and filth, choking him to the very back of his throat until he was sure he would drown in it.

He even felt the biting cold under his feet, the burning pain in his limbs as he pushed himself to run faster, *faster*, he had to get to them, they were counting on him, they were running into a trap! They were going to *die*!

“...okay Bilbo, nothing’s here...in your head I promise...”

A strange voice was flowing on the wind, twisting through the battlefield over the sounds of fighting. It felt familiar, safe even. But why was it here? Confused, Bilbo listened for it more, focusing in on the gentle but firm tones.

“...take my hand Bilbo, feel that? This is real; we’re here, together. You aren’t where your head is telling you right now. Come back to us, follow my voice...”

Slowly the battle faded away around him, the cold snow melted into pleasantly cool grass beneath his knees, the screams faded to familiar voices and the crackling of the fire, the sword he’d been gripping with all his strength became a strong hand holding him back just as tightly.

“Ori?” he whispered, words grating their way up his throat as his eyes finally focussed on the smiling Dwarf in front of him.

“That’s right! Back with us now?”

Shocked, Bilbo collapsed down from his knees to sit properly, young Ori guiding him with a strong grip. The gentle but firm voice of his friend surprised him, even knowing Ori as well as he did he had never heard him speak in such a way. It had drawn him from the depths of his mind with an iron grip and he couldn’t help but follow.

Soon a flask was pressed into his free hand. Drinking blindly, mind still stuttering over being thrown back to that cursed place, he got a bit of a shock when the huge gulp of water he’d taken turned out to be some hellish form of incredibly potent Dwarvish alcohol.

Coughing and spluttering at the burn, the few Dwarves he was coming to realise were surrounding him chuckled softly, Bofur patting his back as his throat finally got over the liquid fire he’d just poured down it.

“Aye that is a bit strong I’ll give you that, probably shoulda warned ya. But I bet you feel a bit more present now eh?”

Glaring at Bofur for allowing him to gulp down that much, he did have to hand it to him; the shock of the burn had shook off the last of the battle, leaving him finally aware of where he was and who he was with.

It also left him incredibly ashamed.

“Now now, none o’ that, I know that look. Nowt to be ashamed of an don’t you forget it!”

Bofur’s large, sturdy hand fell upon his shoulder and if he wasn’t already sat down, the force would have surely knocked him to his backside. Damn Dwarves not knowing their own strength.

Shame still burned inside him and despite knowing it would only bring him pain, he chanced a look around the camp, seeing how all the Dwarves were staring at him, either obviously or ‘subtly’. All but Thorin.

Somehow that hurt even worse.

“By Mahal Mister Boggins! Didn’t know you would get scared just by the *sound* of an Orc! You really are sheltered in the Shire eh!”

Bilbo flinched despite himself, not wishing to see his boys think him a coward. The hand on his shoulder gripped tighter, Ori shooting a vicious glare at the two grinning Dwarves by the fire.

But Thorin, he turned with a burning look in his eyes and moved towards his nephews.

“Be silent! You think this is a laughing matter? You know nothing of the world so hold your tongue!”

Despite his often harsh way of speaking, it was very rare he spoke to his beloved sister-sons with such venom and they knew it too. Shock was clear on their faces, shock and confusion.

“We didn’t mean anything by it, honestly!” stuttered Kili, desperate to wipe the look of their uncles face. But it was too late; he had already turned away, walking off to stand by himself, tension in his body clear as day to any who truly knew him.

Knowing their uncle was a lost cause right now, the brothers frantically turned to look at the rest of the Company for help and finding none. Scrambling to their feet, they hurried over to stand awkwardly in front of Bilbo, Ori and Bofur flanking him like some strange mismatched guards.

“I swear we didn’t mean to make fun of you so bad! It’s okay to be scared, we know this is all new to you!”

Bilbo couldn’t help but scoff in response, that assessment wrong on so many levels it was hilarious. None of this was new to him.

“Still you do not realise,” spoke Balin, shaking his head at the boys. “You are young and untried, you cannot yet see and understand this is not a reaction of someone who has never encountered the vile Orcs before.”

Fili and Kili looked shocked at Balin’s words, voice gentle but firmly reproachful, ever the teacher.

The old Dwarf looked at Bilbo kindly, understanding in his eyes and not an ounce of judgment. “Am I right laddie?”

Feeling his heart beat in his head, throat constricting, all he could do was nod, a shiver running down his spine. Ori held his hand tighter, the rough scratch of his knitted mittens grounding the Hobbit, preventing him from sliding back into the thoughts of that hellish time when it was thick, hot blood between his fingers instead.

The two young Dwarves made their way over and knelt in front of him, despite trying to avoid their eyes, Bilbo could see the genuine sorrow and shame on their faces.

“Truly Master Baggins, we are so very sorry.” Came Fili’s strong and genuine voice, bowing his head low to the Hobbit.

“Yeah,” continued Kili’s earnest voice, a hint of desperation leaking through. “We honestly didn’t realise it was so serious. We really didn’t mean it. Please accept our sincere apology.”

Feeling much warmer than before, Bilbo found it in him to smile, small and weak though it was. No matter what was true when he awoke, in the here and now, his boys were safe in front of him, apologising for a silly youthful mistake with all the genuine sincerity they possessed. He could never be angry at them, certainly not over a bad timed and inconsiderate joke.

“Of course I forgive you boys, I knew it was never intended maliciously. Just try to think a little more before you speak yes?”

They nodded vigorously, braids and hair flying every which way in their enthusiasm.

“Oh we will Master Baggins, don’t you worry.”

Smiling again at them, they stepped back to give him some space to breathe. Thankfully though, Ori and Bofur continued to flank him, providing a furnace like warmth and a feeling of safety familiarity.

Though they didn’t really know him yet, for him they were two of his closest friends and to have their support was beyond what words could say.

Aware he was still being watched, embarrassment flooded him again. It wasn’t the first time he’d had such attacks, but it was the first time it had happened in front of anyone.

The fact that these brave Dwarves, who he valued more than anything else in his life, had seen him panic so very badly sent shame rushing through him. He felt exposed and needed the attention to leave him right now before he ran.

Coughing awkwardly, he shuffled into a more comfortable position, Bofur seeming to understand his thoughts and stepping back, close enough to still feel his support but not close enough to crowd him.

Likewise, Ori squeezed his hand once more before letting go, moving to sit beside him so the Hobbit could reach out and grab his hand once again if needed.

“Rest assured laddie,” said Balin, the kind Dwarf meeting his eyes once more. “You aren’t the only one here who hates Orcs.”

Relief rushed through him, as Bilbo realised the attention was leaving him at last. What followed next was the old Dwarf’s account of the Battle of Azanulbizar, the familiar story still sending shivers down his spine, the image of a grief stricken prince taking up his sword and a tough branch of oak and changing the tide of the battle.

The words overlapped with images in his head of Thorin emerging victorious from throwing off the dragon sickness, sword held high and Company at his back as he charged forward, rallying all Dwarves to his side.

It was the last time most of his Company ever saw him alive, burning with such glorious fire it was inconceivable to think of it ever going out.

He felt his friends around him rise to their feet and face their leader, the admiration and respect almost tangible. Bilbo simply looked on, his feelings too strong and too immeasurable to allow him to move. He just stared at the one being in Middle Earth who had ever held his heart and the only one who ever would.

When the spell over the camp was finally broken, the rest of the evening passed quickly and easily enough. He wasn't hassled by anyone and for that he was glad, his thoughts and feelings still too raw and mixed up to allow him to converse properly. Bilbo simply wanted to sit calmly and subtly watch his friends. Three of them in particular.

He needed to reassure himself that in this strange version of reality, they were still safe and alive. It would be hard enough when he awoke back in Hobbiton, solitude and silence pressing in on him and three people he loved dead and buried. For now he simply needed to watch them, to engrain everything they did in his mind to keep him company in the day.

As one by one, the Company began to retreat to their bedrolls, yawns and calls of good night echoing through the camp, Bilbo too felt that pull, the sharp aching tug under his ribs that told him soon he would return to his lonely Shire life. He wasn't ready yet, he didn't want to leave yet.

He wanted to listen to the crackling of the fire and the various snoring of his friends, he wanted to see Gloin grumpily wake for the next watch, he wanted to silently chuckle at the way Fili and Kili would gravitate to each other in the night, clinging to each other in their sleep as though afraid the other would be torn away.

Mostly he wanted to sigh in relief when Thorin finally laid down to sleep, his tense face relaxing making him look younger, more carefree. Unless his nightmares struck, jolting him from his sleep with a swallowed cry, hands going instinctively to the sword close by his side.

Bilbo simply wanted to be there, as he had many times on the journey once they became friends, to leave his own bedroll and make his way over to whichever rock or stump the king in exile has sat himself on, an immovable sentry keeping those he loved safe from whatever harm he'd seen in his dreams that night.

Many nights they'd shared a pipe, not a single word passing between them, nothing but honest support, the kind with no expectations attached, just the wish to make sure someone suffering knew they weren't alone.

But the pain in his chest was increasing and although he'd managed to resist the tug so far, lost in his thoughts and watching the others, he knew he had to give in now. But Bilbo couldn't help but wonder if he truly could resist the tug, the pull back to the other world. Could he stay here? Could he be with them properly?

The answer however, wouldn't come tonight, as he laid down properly in his bed, staring at the stars wheeling above in the velvety sky. The pull was strong now, the edges of his vision blurring and the quiet noises of the camp distorting. Once again, his Ring had somehow found its way into his palm.

Somewhere between the last moments of waking and sleeping, the crackle of the fire increased to a roar in his ears, heat surrounding him on all sides and the smell of thick, acrid smoke in the air.

## Chapter End Notes

Hello chickens! Sorry for the wait, I honestly hadn't meant for that to happen! Long story short, health decided to play up, then work decided to bury me, then I went travelling to Copenhagen with my best friend. So busy time my dears!

But here's the next chapter and I will try and make sure the gaps aren't so long in future. However, little warning and not to be too personal or anything, I know you all aren't here for that, but I am sick. I have a genetic disease that likes to wreck havoc with me and sometimes I will drop off the face of the earth. So any long gaps crop up there's a good chance it's that but I will never, ever abandon a fic.

Anyway! Hope you've enjoyed this and any comments left will be greeted with the upmost joy and love. Hope you are all doing well chickpeas! Toodle pip! Neeka xxxx

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Waking was slower and altogether more painful than usual. His chest hurt, like a deep bruise and every muscle ached. Bilbo finally forced his eyes open, the light from his window stabbing into his brain and alerting him quite violently to the headache building behind his eyes.

With a distinctly pathetic moan, Bilbo gingerly sat up, feeling incredibly worn out like he'd somehow overexerted himself massively. But why? The day he spent with his Dwarves was easy going so far as journeys go and he shouldn't be feeling anything other than a slight ache in his thighs and backside after a day on a pony. So why did he feel like he'd run miles laden with the entire Company's belongings? And possibly one of the Dwarves too!

The sight of the Ring still clutched in his hand stalled his attempts at standing. Was that it? Mind racing, Bilbo thought of his efforts to stay awake, to deny the urgent, almost painful tug under his ribs, the call to sleep. Is that what had worn him out so thoroughly?

As with many things that had happened since this ability began, he felt that this was the right answer, the knowledge slotting into place within him. But it opened up a whole new chapter of questions; could he train himself to stay in the other place longer? Could he force himself to? Could he fight to stay there even if he would pay the price when he eventually woke up? Was it possible or would trying kill him?

If he succeeded, could he stay with them forever?

There was so many questions and so few answers and Bilbo's damnable curiosity was overpowering, his need to know as much as he could an itch on the inside of his skull.

With a final heave, he managed to leave the bed, legs aching and weak even as he vowed to keep testing, to keep pushing how long he could stay awake for. If there were no answers to already be found, he would discover them for himself.

The rest of the morning was spent hobbling on weak legs around his smial, fighting off nausea long enough to get some breakfast in him before staggering outside to his garden, the need to sit on his bench in the sun and the fresh air overpowering.

Collapsing onto the bench with a sigh of relief, Bilbo turned his attention to the mound of recently disturbed earth right next to his left foot. With a sad smile, he reached down and laid a hand over it, whispering an old saying of love and remembrance. Soon the offering would nurture the earth around it and hopefully, flowers would begin to grow.

That done, the Hobbit sat back and tilted his face into the sun, breathing in the clean air; the scents of freshly cut grass and flowers clearing his groggy head.



Unfortunately, this also allowed for memories of last nights... reaction to the Orcs to come flooding back. With a groan and a hot wave of embarrassment, Bilbo berated himself for not having better control. He should have remembered that they'd heard Orcs that night and prepared himself for it. He should have been strong enough not to react in the first place.

No, that was unfair. It wasn't a case of weak or strong when it came to phantom memories of traumatic situations. He knew this from the Fell Winter, as many Hobbits were sent into flurries of panic when winter hit the following year. Even Bilbo's bright, steadfast mother couldn't escape it, needing to hold him close when a storm hit and there was nothing even remotely weak about his mother.

Bilbo also knew that many of the older Dwarves in the Company suffered from various issues concerning their many battles and hardships, and they certainly weren't weak by any stretch of the imagination either.

So perhaps Bilbo should remember that and stop being so hard on himself. Being haunted by what he saw in that horrific battle was nothing to be ashamed of.

Feeling slightly better, he patted the mound of earth at his feet once more before standing and returning slowly to his smial, his mind lighter and cleared but his body still aching. He'd have to whip himself up some tea for the pain and hopefully it would ease it to a manageable ache.

An hour later and it had indeed managed to dull the pain some, much to Bilbo's great relief. Thanking Yavanna for his fathers excellent home ready for such things, Bilbo finally succeeded in leaving his smial.

There wasn't much urgency to his plans for the day, it was more like desperately trying to fill the time until he could sleep again. His mind had always been his best and worst quality, aiding him so very much but also taking a toll on him. When there was something he just couldn't figure out, no matter how hard he tried, he could not simply just let it be. It would swirl round and round his mind like water down a drain, spinning faster and faster till he felt all but mad with it.

Bilbo couldn't bare a full day of nothing but thinking, just waiting for the moment he could jump thankfully into sleep and see his friends again. He needed to fill his time or the waiting would be torture.

With that in mind, Bilbo set out of his smial and began the leisurely walk into Hobbiton. Wandering around the market stalls and getting some things he'd long been without would do the trick he supposed.

He passed by many Hobbits on his way, chuckling to himself as he made a mental tally chart of who smiled, who scowled, who avoided his eyes completely. It seemed that not everyone had accepted his return just yet. Funny how it bothered him less and less with each visit to the place and the people he truly cared about.

"Mind out Master Baggins!"

Snapping out of his thoughts, Bilbo quickly side stepped out of the way of a large cow pulled cart, smiling at the Hobbit who alerted him.

Once the cart had passed he noticed non other than Lobelia walking not far in front of him, her atrociously bright yellow sundress and hat drawing his attention immediately. Bilbo groaned to himself, and hoped she wouldn't turn around and see him, he was simply not in the mood to deal with her today.

It was such a beautiful day, the kind of picturesque day the Shire was known for. The sun was out but not too hot, a soft breeze carrying the scents of flowers, baking bread and cut grass, the sound of bird song and Hobbits chattering away mingling in perfect harmony with each other.

As much as he didn't want to be here at times, Bilbo couldn't help but be grateful that a place such as the Shire existed. No matter what horrors he'd seen or would likely see again, the Shire would always be here, always be pure and untouched.

He didn't deserve it; he was too tainted now for such a bright, shining place. But Bilbo could never deny that he was a selfish Hobbit. He'd lost so much and was unwilling to lose his homeland too.

Lost in his thoughts as he strolled down the main path of Hobbiton, he almost thought the shouts and screams behind him were echoes in his head, taunting him with memories of horror even as he walked through the very picture of beauty. But when he was banged into from behind by a stout Hobbit, running scared from something behind him, Bilbo realised with a swooping stomach that it was very real.

Turning in a panic, Bilbo immediately saw what had Hobbits shouting and fleeing in fear; the large cart he'd passed only moments ago had come loose from the cow pulling it and was now rolling back down the hill, picking up speed with every passing second.

Bilbo cast his eyes about, wanting to make sure no one was in its path and spotted Lobelia just in front of him, her face stricken with fear as her body was frozen to the spot.

Terror shot through him as he dived back into the path of the cart and tackled her out of the way, just as the cart thundered passed them, missing hitting Bilbo by inches before it crashed into a tree at the bottom of the hill, apples and potatoes spilling like blood from its cracked sides.

All was still for a moment as people took stock of themselves, before ever so slowly looking up to check on everyone else. Bilbo groaned, the dull pain still left in his body flaring up and his head feeling dizzy with the exertion.

A groan came from beside him as well and Bilbo blamed his aching head that it'd taken him a second to remember Lobelia, flattened to the ground and partially beneath him.

He shifted, ignoring the aches and pains of his joints as he looked at her urgently.

"Lobelia? Lobelia! Are you alright?"

He shook her gently, pushing her hair off her face. No matter what unpleasantness had passed between them since, they had been friends once, good friends. They were family and regardless of his grudges or how badly she grated on his damn nerves, she would always be family and he'd never wish her hurt.

Her eyes opened, squinting from the sunshine before finally focussing on Bilbo, pushing him away from her as she tried to sit up. Bilbo let her, knowing her pride would be sore from freezing in the face of the cart and needing to be rescued. From him no less.

Shuffling back, he watched her push herself to sitting and suddenly gasp as she moved her foot, hand shooting to grip her ankle.

"My foot! You've broken my foot!"

Her shrill voice rang painfully through his head and Bilbo resisted the urge to throw his hands in the air in exasperation. He literally just saved her life and still she finds some way to criticise him. Typical.

"Oh my beautiful foot!" She moaned with, quite frankly, far more drama than he felt the situation warranted. "You clumsy idiot!"

Bilbo sighed, moving back to sit on his heels. "You're welcome," he muttered darkly, "Not like I saved your life or anything. I'm sure being hit by a speeding cart wouldn't have fazed you at all!"

"Well I was going to move of course! You just dived at me before i could!" She huffed; cheeks slightly pink, belying her words and a strong scowl on her round face. "Always having to play the damn hero!"

Bilbo blinked in confusion before rolling his eyes, graciously deciding to drop it. Her foot did not in fact look broken, more like sprained, swelling beginning to show on her ankle and the cream skin beginning to darken. There was definite pain in her eyes though and Bilbo couldn't find it in himself to bait and argue with her like he usually would.

Sighing, he heaved his aching body to his feet, swaying slightly before brushing the dirt off of himself and wincing at the deep grazes on his palms and knees. Turning back to his cousin, sitting in the dirt in her bright yellow sundress and wincing at the pain in her foot, he held out his hand.

"Come on Lobelia, let's get you home." His words were kind, soft even.

She hesitated for a moment, her already bruised pride obviously making her want to refuse, before finally reaching out and taking his hand.

Slowly and with many curses against his person, they managed to get her up. She clung to his arm with a vice like grip, standing on her uninjured foot, the other hanging just above the ground, her face pale and sweaty with pain.

Even with their regular arguments, Bilbo disliked seeing her in pain, quiet and shaking. It was so different to how she usually was that he knew she was serious.

"Do you think you can manage to walk back with me?" He asked, wincing slightly at the tight grip she had on his arm, digging into his already sore muscles. "Or should I sit you down and run ahead to find a cart or something?"

"Bilbo Baggins," she all but shrieked, hand tightening even further on his aching arm. "If you stick me in a cart like a sack of potatoes I swear on the Green Lady I will pull up every single one of your prized tomatoes!"

"Okay okay! We'll walk!"

Still wincing at her shrill tone far too close to his sensitive ears, he wrapped his arm around her back for better support and with a last check on her, dodging the smack aimed at his arm in answer, they began their trek back up the hill.

It was slow going and many times they were forced to stop and let her rest for a moment, breath coming in short gasps, round face pale and sweaty.

She was a far sight from her usual immaculate state and her pain aside, it was almost nice to see her this way; clothes covered in mud, hair in disarray and face glistening with sweat. It took him back to their days as faunts, back before rivalry and bad feeling came between them, back when they were friends running through the open fields of their home, Lobelia organising her side of the full scale tag battles with an iron fist.

Bilbo smiled, even as it made his chest ache to remember.

"What are you smiling at?" she panted, glaring at him from the corner of her eye, as she focused on walking with as little pressure on her foot as possible.

Huffing a small laugh, he said "Just remembering the days we would tromp all over these hills in our games, back when we were young and still friends."

Bilbo's voice held a wistful, melancholy tone, despite the happy memory, something that she seemed to pick up on. The other Hobbit said nothing, she just looked at him with a strange expression before turning her gaze back to the floor.

They limped in silence after that, the only sound being the odd quiet grunt of pain that managed to escape from between Lobelia's clenched teeth. After what felt like an age, her smile finally came into view, a glow of relief coming from Bilbo at the sight.

The pair hobbled up her little cobbled path, the faded yellow door a welcome sight. Feeling his cousin sigh in quiet relief, he pushed open the door and made his way into the smile.

It was just the same as it had always been, small but homely; missing some of the luxury he was blessed with but none the less pleasant for it. He did however, notice a few items that he was sure hadn't started their lives with her.

Spotting the thread bare armchair by the fire, he steered her towards it until she could finally collapse down into it and breathe a sign of relief.

Shaking out his aching shoulder, Bilbo offered her a smile. "Well I'm sure that's much better now. Is there anything else I can do?"

As much as he knew he'd probably saved her life, or at least prevented great injury, he still felt guilty for not being careful enough and getting her hurt. It was strange to suddenly care so much. Before his journey, he had still cared for her distantly as family but barely tolerated her company. But now he felt different. Maybe it was because he knew the value of life and how quickly that life could be taken away.

But despite his words and tone of care, Lobelia stiffened and huffed, a scowl carved deep into her round, rosy face.

"No, I don't need your help, you've done enough."

Taken aback, Bilbo was silent for a moment, knowing instinctively that she was talking about more than just today, her expression and voice too cutting and full of pain for this simple incident.

Slowly, as though calming some wild thing, he edged his way over, watching as she glared at him through her eyelashes, refusing to make full eye contact with him. He crouched down in front of her and took note of her heavy breathing, her slightly shaking hands still with mud ground into them from their fall.

"Belia?" he whispered, the old nickname he used for her as children making her flinch slightly. "Please. Tell me what this is about. What it's really about."

Nothing. Everything seemed to still and hold its breath.

"What happened to us?"

She finally snapped, head shooting up with fire in her eyes as she set a harsh push his way, knocking him from his crouch to sprawl backwards on the floor.

Lobelia leant forwards, face twisted with anger.

"What happened? What happened!? The fact you can't even think, can't even remember is worse! How dare you!"

Despite his confusion and bafflement, a sickly feeling began to grow inside him as her face reddened with the feelings she was holding back.

"Let me see if I can jog your memory yes? Seeing as you need everything handed to you." She said in mock sweetness before dropping it like a hot rock.

"How about this? The Fell Winter."

The sickly feeling flared like a wildfire, heart plummeting to his feet. Wherever he expected this conversation to go, it wasn't there. He never expected the answer to be buried under mounds of snow, the unforgiving wind bringing the howls of ravenous wolves and the shrieks of something much worse.

"So you still remember that at least," she spat with a cruel smile. "Haven't completely forgotten it after everything went perfectly for you."

That broke him out of his cold memories, shaking off the phantom feeling of snow settling on his stiff shoulders.

"Perfectly?" Bilbo repeated incredulously, a dark tone entering his voice and face falling into a stiff expressions, trying to hide the writhing feelings within him.

"Perfectly? Are you joking? How could it possibly have gone perfectly!? My father died because of it! I nearly died! I still have scars down my back from what happened! So how, exactly how, could it have gone perfectly!?"

Bilbo was nearly shaking through the attempt to stamp down his desire to shout. Shouting matches were never a good idea with Lobelia.

"But you didn't lose everything! You still had a home! You didnt lose a brother and a grandmother! You didn't have to watch them slowly freeze and starve! You were holed up in your huge smial with food and fuel for the fire! You were safe!"

"And I left that safety!" he cried, patience finally running out.

"Yes we had a big home and a fully stocked pantry and guess what? We were left with a quarter of it once I was finished! We rationed it out and then every day, I traipsed out into the snow to bring food to smials I knew didn't have enough! I nearly died near the end!"

"But you didn't come to us!" She screamed, face turning red with anger. "You went to everyone else but us! You left us till it was too late! By the time you finally reached us, my baby brother had just died and my grandmother was hours away from joining him!"

Her fury fled all at once, leaving her slumped over and defeated, head down and tiny shakes racking her body. She looked small, something her loud personality never usually allowed for. He didn't like it, it just seemed so wrong.

"I did my best okay? You know that right?" He asked quietly, sorrow weighing down his words.

Just one more thing he'd failed at.

"I tried to reach everyone I could. I stepped out each morning with a basket of food and a kitchen knife and I waded through snow so thick it came up to my hips in places. Every day I set off knowing I might not make it back! I knew that but I still did it. I was a tween Lobelia!"

"But it wasn't enough!" Her anger was back, head snapping up to pin him with her gaze.

"You with your huge, safe smial full of food and fuel. You had so much that you could actually afford to go out nearly every day and give it to others!" She spat, leaning forward and staring him down.

"You never felt pure starvation! You never felt what a frozen smial was like! I would have done anything to have all of that for my family! If we'd had everything you did, it wouldn't have been half as bad! They'd... they'd still be alive."

Her voice was pure desperation, the kind of agonised desperation he remembered so very well. The distressed Hobbit lowered her head once more and spoke to the floor, but her voice held the tone of a vow, a promise out to the whole of Middle Earth.

"I will never feel that way again. I will do anything to make sure I have everything to prevent my family ever having to feel that, to go through that again."

Despite the pain in his own heart at being blamed for what happened, Bilbo felt for her. He felt for her and finally, after all this time, he understood. All these years of coveting wealth and food and a large, safe smial, was all to compensate for the lack of what she'd had in the Fell Winter.

It was a desperate, scrambling attempt to ensure she had everything she'd ever need to protect her family.

Leaning forward in his chair, he slowly, tentatively reached out; as though towards a scared, cornered animal and touched her hand. She stilled, saying nothing, not even looking at him. Taking this as confirmation that he wasn't about to have his head bitten off, he moved until he was holding her hand. Nothing, and then she grasped back, fiercely, as though that grip was all that was tethering her to this earth, the only confirmation she had that she was here and safe.

A shudder shot through her, a smothered sob deep in her chest. For all her venom Bilbo couldn't help but admire the strength this Hobbit possessed. But even the strongest were allowed a moment to feel their loss, to feel the fear and let it run its course. He knew that better than anyone and if he could help, he would.

At the first choked back, animal sound in the back of her throat, Bilbo moved. He slid from his haunches until he sat on the floor proper, tugging gently at Lobelia's hand until she too all but fell forwards, helpless but to follow. Sat together on the woven rug beneath them, the two cousins instinctively reached for each other, a port in the storm. Bilbo's arms slid around her and she fell into him, her tiny hands gripping the back of his jacket in the typical strong grip of a female Hobbit. Her whole body seemed so small in his arms, shaking like a bird and gasping.

Time passed but neither noticed. Bilbo held her and gently rocked, stroking her hair and simply being there. It was what she needed and it seemed to him that it'd been a long, long time since Lobelia had been given what she needed.

Gradually, the atmosphere in the room changed and Lobelia sniffed, pulling herself together before gently extracting herself from his arms, muttering something about Otho coming

home soon. She rubbed her hand over her red eyes, brushing away tears and avoiding his eyes. But Bilbo knew the look and feel of shame and he would not have that. Taking her hand one more time, their eyes met.

"It's okay," he muttered, voice heavy with understanding and sincerity. Lobelia held his gaze for a moment, before nodding, a small, genuine smile flitting over her round face.

For a moment, time rewound and they were but little faunts again, huddled in a blanket fort made from the pilfered washing of both their families.

"I'm sorry for what I said," she whispered. "It wasn't fair."

"Some of it wasn't yes, but I'm sorry too. I hadn't realised how much you suffered, not really. I knew something had changed between us and I never thought what it could be. I never even tried to find out and I lost you as a friend. I'm sorry it happened, I'm sorry you suffered. I was selfish and spoilt for many years, I never even realised it. But..."

Bilbo's voice cracked but the gentle squeeze on his hand gave him strength.

"But, when I went away, I changed. I realised so many things, experienced so many things. I can see things now that I didn't before. Can...can you forgive me for my part in what happened? For not realising?"

A stray tear fell down her face as she took his other hand and looked him in the eye. "Yes, yes I think I can. I resented you even when I shouldn't and I treated you badly for years. And then you came back, so obviously suffering and...I was glad." She broke off with a choked sob, averting her eyes.

"You're my cousin, you were my friend and I was actually glad you'd suffered. Then I tried to turf you out of your home. I'm sorry. I can forgive you if you can forgive me. I...I'd like to be friends again. Family again."

Relief poured through him and he smiled, almost giddy with the rush of so many emotions in such a short space of time. Bilbo nodded and they embraced once more. He savoured it, knowing this was the start of their new relationship. He'd been given a chance here, a chance to right a wrong that had existed between them on both sides for so many years. He would take it. He was sick of losing people.

Careful of her ankle, they both rose, returning to their armchairs and once he'd finished wrapping up her injury, the rest of the afternoon was spent talking, simply talking, something they hadn't done in decades. Bilbo busied himself about her kitchen, gracefully accepting her bossy instructions as he prepared afternoon tea.

They sat together and though the dark bruises left by their years of animosity remained, they were being soothed. He believed that soon they would disappear entirely and both their souls would be all the better for it.

When the sun began its decent, bathing their little corner of the world in a deep golden light, Bilbo left his cousins smiling, laden with cakes and the warmth of a new friendship. He



promised to return soon and started home with a heart lighter than it had been in a long time, despite an aching and bruised body.

By the time Bilbo let himself into his own smial he felt like he'd lived two days in one. Technically he supposed he had been doing that, but this day felt particularly full and tiring. His mind felt exhausted and stretched thin and his body wasn't much better, aching from the exhaustion of his time on the road with the Company, not to mention body slamming a Hobbit out of the way of a runaway cart.

All in all, Bilbo had had a very long day and felt absolutely no guilt in simply eating the cakes he'd been given from Lobelia and running a hot bath. The steam filling the room felt soothing and warm, the smell of lavender permitting the air from his favourite bath oils.

Leaving it to fill his large tub, Bilbo stripped off and busied himself around the room, putting a towel over the rail, lighting more candles around the room. But as he passed the large mirror against the wall, he stopped short.

He looked nothing like a Hobbit.

Bilbo gingerly touched the deep black and blue bruises all along his side. His ribs were still visible and his stomach was no longer respectably plump, instead utterly flat, lean muscle from his adventure still hiding just beneath the pale skin.

He looked worn out; his old self pulled and stretched and shaped into an entirely new form, something so different both inside and out that at times he barely recognised himself. Gandalf was more right than he'd ever know, he really would never be the same.

Turning away, Bilbo gingerly stepped into the tub, sighing with relief as he sank down into the hot, lavender scented water. Tilting his head back against the side of the bath, he closed his eyes and let the heat seep into him, warmth finally reaching his bones.

He had a few moments of blissful quiet in his mind, a rarity for far too long, before it inevitably began buzzing with thoughts and questions again.

Bilbo was just so very confused, his emotions in a constant state of turmoil. Right now, Thorin was dead. Fili and Kili were dead. His friends were half a world away trying to rebuild the kingdom they had payed for so dearly. His heart still felt this pain, he still felt the ice cold bite of grief in his very bones; an offering buried under his bench and a collection of objects as proof of his mad adventure.

But at the same time, in some other world, some other time, only accessible through his dreams, his friends were alive. They were camped together on the cold hard earth, hope and fear alive in their hearts, upholding the dreams of their people as they journeyed to take on a dragon and reclaim their home.

And Bilbo was with them. Just a stranger to them right now, with no life threatening experiences under their belt to bond them together. When he's there, his heart knows this as surely as he knows his mothers name.

So which was real? Was it possible for both of them to truly exist at the same time?

Resting his head back against the side of the tub, steam swirling around him, coating the room in a hazy, dreamlike quality. These questions had been chasing each other around his beehive mind ever since this mad situation had started and he was no closer to figuring out the answers.

All Bilbo knew for sure, was that he felt an undeniable pull to this other world and both felt as real as each other. It was surely powerful magic and if he was utterly honest with himself, there was a nagging thought that dogged his every step, a dark feeling like a black mist lurking just at the edge of his vision.

What was the price? Nothing this powerful, and this desired, could possibly be free. There was always a price to be payed.

The other question was what truly tugged at him; was there anything he wouldn't accept to stay in that world, to stay with his friends?

Soon the water began to cool and his eyelids grew heavy, the burning pull beneath his ribs growing stronger and stronger with every moment that passed. Part of him was tempted to see how long he could resist, but truthfully his heart wasn't in it. This wasn't the world he'd rather try to stay longer in so why waste the energy. Best to save it for the next night when he'd be lying on the cold hard ground surrounded by the warmth and noise of the people he loved most in this world.

Managing to drag himself from the water, Bilbo towelled himself off, blew out his candles and moved to the bedroom. Lighting a fire in the grate to warm the cold room he found himself staring into the flames; the heat and dancings ribbons of fire in front of him triggering something in him, some deep seated moment of recognition, the dark, tight coil of dread rising in him.

Confused and concerned, Bilbo managed to draw himself away, suddenly feeling the strongest need to stop looking, stop thinking and trying to puzzle it out. It wasn't often he felt the need to drop a line of thought, especially something he was so curious about, but the urgency of it left him no choice.

Utterly thrown for six, he readied himself for bed, the Ring held tight in his hand as he slipped between the soft, warm covers. It still felt odd that despite spending half his nights in a soft, comfortable bed, his body still felt as though it'd never stopped travelling; full of the aches and pains from days spent walking and nights spent sleeping on rocks under the cover of stars.

The tug returned with a vengeance, eyes suddenly turning to lead. Soon the undeniable need to put the Ring on over took him, his body almost feeling like a puppet, hands moving almost without his instruction as he slid the Ring onto his finger. A perfect fit as always, almost as though it'd been made especially for him and no one else.

The world faded as surely and easily as crepe paper in water. He slipped into the empty space that existed almost between one blink and the next.

Bilbo fell gratefully into sleep. The Void gratefully caught him.

## Chapter End Notes

Bloody hell guys. I cannot believe it's been so long since i updated! I'm so sorry! Life, as always, grabbed me by the bollocks and wouldn't let go. Between me health going south, work refusing to let up and my computer with all the stuff for this story dying, I've just not been able to work on this fic and I did loose momentum with it.

But I'm back my loves! Only problem is, I've had to bite the bullet and just re write this chapter on my iPad and post it from here too. So if there's any mistakes i am very sorry, it's always just harder to see unless it's on a word document isnt it?? 0.o

I'm also aware this chapter feels a bit fillery but if I spent any more time going over it I'd have gone mad! I hope you like what I did with Lobelia and her backstory! I've found I've gotten tired of just seeing her as this flat antagonistic character and I really fancied doing something else with her for this fic. So fingers crossed you liked it :)

So yes, i truly am very, very sorry for such a bloody long wait! I really hope people haven't given up on this story! Posting will definitely pick up now I swear!

Hope life is treating you all well and if you drop me a line to let me know there's people still reading this it really would make my day ^\_\_^ xxxx

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Master Baggins! Master Baggins, it's time to get up!"

Gentle shaking of his shoulder slowly dragged him into consciousness, a soft and hesitant voice reaching him in the smokey dark.

With a groan, Bilbo opened his eyes and moaned at the aches in his body. He felt like he hadn't slept a wink and a dull undercurrent of pain had settled itself deep in his bones.

"Master Baggins?"

"Yes, yes, I'm up Ori. Just feeling slow this morning." He sat up, smiling tiredly at the hesitant Dwarf in front of him, getting a shy one in return. He really did adore Ori, he was so sweet and gentle but had the strength of steel under his skin. Bilbo couldn't wait to see the young Dwarf discover that for himself.

"These pampered Hobbits don't know a thing about proper travellin'." Came Dwalin's rough sneer.

"Oh go suck a nettle you old boot!" He snapped back, relishing in the huge warriors look of shock and the laughter from the other Dwarves, he rose to his feet, brushing off his clothes and winking at a gaping Ori.

The usual morning routine passed quickly, they ate what Bombur prepared, happily helped along by Bilbo. Once again, food had been the key and finally, after some prompting and encouragement, the Hobbit and Dwarf enjoyed a lovely conversation, Bofur merrily interjecting from where he was sat by the fire eagerly awaiting his breakfast.

Far too soon, the simple but tasty meal was done, the camp packed up and Bilbo once more had to mount his pony and head off. As much as he liked his sweet little mount, he most certainly did not enjoy riding. Hobbits were not made to be off the ground; much preferring to walk, feeling the good earth beneath their feet. Not to mention the fact his entire body felt like one huge bruise.

"If you dont mind me asking Master Baggins... I'm not sure how to put this, but you don't really... look like I expected."

He looked over at Bombur, sat on his, well, his slightly unfortunate mount, wringing his hands awkwardly. Bilbo smiled at him reassuringly. "And how did you expect me to look then Master Dwarf?"

Bombur sneaked a look to his brothers for support, both of whom were riding suspiciously close and very obviously focusing hard on anything but the conversation. Meaning of course,

they were listening to every word.

"Well, you err, you aren't exactly as...plump as the rest of the Hobbits. They all looked to have eaten many a good meal and you... don't."

Bilbo opened his mouth to respond and was quickly interrupted by the Dwarves earnest voice. "I only ask 'cause I wondered if you were ill or needed anythin' in particular. I don't like to see anyone looking underfed and unhealthy. But of course, I apologise if it was too forward of me to ask."

It wasn't often that Bilbo found himself speechless, but this was certainly one of those times. He just gawped at the rotund Dwarf for a few seconds, mouth opening and shutting as he tried to think of something to say. It was a surprise, not only to know that the quiet Dwarf had noticed all that, but also that he cared to ask if he could help. They may have had a few short conversations over the cooking pot but he certainly didn't expect his friend to care about him just yet.

"Oh dear, oh I've gone an buggered this all up haven't I. I really am sorry Master Baggins. I didn' mean any offence."

Shaking himself out of his surprise, Bilbo cleared his throat and tried for a reassuring smile.

"No no, you haven't offended me Master Dwarf. I'm just... surprised is all. I didn't expect for anyone to notice anything much about me, let alone care. So, err, thank you for that I suppose."

Bofur, who had given up all pretence of ignoring the conversation, exchanged a look with Bombur. They both had a strange expression on their faces.

"But as for your question, yes I suppose I do look a bit different from my fellows. Hobbits usually eat about seven meals a day, we burn through energy quickly you see. But I haven't eaten that much in a long time and I suppose it's started to show."

More odd looks. "But you had all tha' food in your pantry! And you're an excellent cook! If I 'ad all tha', I'd be bigger than Bombur!"

Even though he knew they meant nothing by it, Bilbo couldn't help but feel a rush of shame burn through him. How must they see him? These brave dwarves who'd lost everything they ever had, wandering throughout Middle Earth, frequently starving. And there he was; a pampered Hobbit, wealthy, a large home and more food than he could ever need. There he was, taking all of that for granted and refusing food that they would give an arm and a leg for. How dare he?

"Well...I haven't had that much food in my pantry for a long while now you see, I just stocked up for you lot. We Hobbits hate wasting food, so I haven't really had a lot in," he tried to explain quietly, something inside him twisting at the thought of them seeing him as a food waster, one of the worst things a Hobbit could be.

Bombur was ringing his hands, throwing looks at his brother before he spoke again. "Is there...any reason you haven' been eating? Are you sure you aren't sick? Should I do somethin', anythin'?"

"Oh no, nothing to worry about. Just, not much apatite really..." he trailed off, uncertain of what to say to the very people who had caused him to stop eating. It was a very strange situation and Bilbo was starting to look for a way out of the conversation.

"Are yo-"

"Bilbo!" Came a call from a few ponies behind, turning around in his seat to see Ori waving to him. "Could I just pick your brains for a second?"

Feeling a rush of guilty relief, the Hobbit turned back to the Ur brothers and made his apologies. Probably swifter than was polite to be honest, but they didn't seem to mind, before he moved Myrtle out of the line and dropped back to ride next to Ori.

"You seemed like you needed rescuing," he said under his breath, a shy smile on his face.

"I really did Ori." Bilbo admitted with a laugh, sighing in relief. As much as he loved his friends, and truly appreciated their efforts to get to know him more, it was an avenue of conversation he just wasn't comfortable with. It was too raw.

The best thing about travelling with Ori, is that whilst he was always great conversation, he was equally as happy to just be together in companionable silence. It allowed Bilbo a few moments of distraction before giving him space to think over his situation.

It was a curious business, how nothing about him changed when he travelled to each place; his injuries, aches and body came with him. It seemed to indicate that he stayed the same, even as his surroundings and times changed. Perhaps Bilbo himself was some sort of fixed point? And what happened to his body? He was sure he didn't simply vanish or his Dwarves would certainly have noticed, so was his body simply vacant whilst he was awake in the other place?

How did he wake up in another time with a Ring clutched in his hand that he only had in the other?

There were so many questions going round and round his head and simply not enough information to formulate any answers. And not having answers always drove Bilbo mad.

The rest of the day passed fairly easy as far as travelling goes. Snippets of conversation and laughter passed up and down the line, Fili and Kili frequently breaking rank and making their way round everyone, usually to cause some sort of trouble. They really should learn to pick their battles, as for some reason, Kili decided it would be a great idea for Fili to distract Dwalin whilst he subtly attempted to pick a knife from the huge warriors pack.

This of course ended with Dwalin grabbing his arm, twisting it and knocking him from his horse, all without breaking eye contact or conversation with Fili.

Squawking and vowing to one day liberate that knife, Kili clambered back onto his horse and fell back giggling with his brother, as though he hadn't just failed spectacularly.

Shaking his head at their antics, Bilbo felt his heart lighten considerably, falling back into his usual routine of quietly watching his Dwarves. It was easier that way; he could pretend that they were still the Dwarves he'd so recently left. That they still had shared memories together, still cared for each other equally. From quietly at the sidelines, he didn't have to remember that these Dwarves didn't really know him yet.

The day drew on, as it always did, counting down till the time he would have to leave them and return to his lonely little life in the Shire. For a while, he believed that was the cause of the sinking, growing pit in his stomach, but soon, the sense of dread was too strong to ignore or pass off as something else.

Despite the warm light of the evening, Bilbo felt a darkness following him, closing in slowly on all sides. His heart beat sped up, muscles growing tight with tension. Looking around, he couldn't see any sign of the Dwarves feeling the same way; still laughing and talking as normal. Yet he felt as though danger was closing in, its clammy, inescapable hand gripping his throat.

The Ring burned cold and throbbed in his pocket, but with the almost overwhelming feeling of panic, he barely noticed.

Somehow, he knew, Death was waiting around the corner. Waiting to tear into his whole world once more and swallow it whole.

"Halt! We'll camp here for tonight."

Thorin's voice drew him from his panic for a brief second, drawing his gaze to him like a moth to a flame. Then he saw it; the farmhouse. The destroyed farmhouse.

Of course. Trolls.

How could he be so stupid as to forget! This was the night they fought the trolls. But why the terror? Why the blinding fear and growing sense of darkness, of death? They'd fought them once before and had won, surely they could do it again?

But no, something deep inside him was telling him, screaming at him that this time would be different. He just knew.

Perhaps? Perhaps if he made them move on a little further, just away from where he knew the Trolls would be coming through, seeing the ponies and then taking them. Maybe they could avoid them all together?

No of course not, they needed the contents of their horde didn't they? The idea of Thorin continuing on this Quest without his Orcrist was almost obscene as well as absurd. And besides, Bilbo was loath to leave his beloved Sting behind lost and forgotten beneath the filth of Trolls. That little sword had seen him through much, and it just seemed unlucky to abandon it now.

Okay, so they somehow had to manage to avoid the Trolls, but also make it into their cave. And the only time they'd be out of their cave would either be at night, or if they were dead.

Well, that sounded very easy didn't it, Bilbo thought, shaking his head. The Dwarves were dismounting and he knew the best thing to do would be to move further on, reduce the risk of attracting the Trolls. Then he could find a way to get to the cave. A half baked plan it might be, but that was all he currently had.

"Err, excuse me?" Nothing, they didn't even look up. Clearing his throat, he tried again.

"Hello! I really don't think we should stop here." Still nothing. Sod it then.

"OI!" His loud shout finally got their attention, every Dwarf and one bemused wizard turned to face him.

"Finally! Now look, I really think we should find somewhere else to camp for the night."

Thorin raised one eyebrow that perfectly showed his almost amused contempt, as he put down the bag he'd been moving and stepped forward to loom over the Hobbit.

"Oh really? And why would you think that? Please enlighten us to your expertise on the subject."

Well if he thought that would work, he's got another think coming. Hands on his hips, Bilbo stared straight into those piercing blue eyes and injected as much sarcasm as possible into his voice.

"Hmm, it might have something to do with the fact that the farmhouse over there has recently been ransacked and burnt down! With no sign of its former occupants. Not to mention the whole area looking trampled! But I don't know, I'm just a Hobbit. Maybe an utterly destroyed home is a good sign!"

A few Dwarves had sudden coughing fits as Thorin's other eyebrow lifted to join the first. As dire as the situation felt, Bilbo had to admit that surprising Thorin always gave him such a rush of entertainment.

"Look," he continued, when it appeared Thorin wasn't going to reply. "I'm fully aware that you all know what you're doing, but I just can't help but feel this is a very bad idea. We have no idea what recently did that to the house and whatever did might still be nearby. I've just... I've got a bad feeling about it okay? So can we move a bit further on? Please?"

He continued to stare at Thorin, eyes all but pleading with him to listen. The bad feeling, the terror inside him was rising with every moment of light they lost.

Finally, Thorin inclined his head and turned to the waiting Company. "Fine, we will move further on."

Looking back at Bilbo, he drawled "Happy now Mister Baggins?"



Beaming, Bilbo nodded. A strange look passed over Thorin's face, almost... no, it couldn't possibly be a small blush. Probably just a trick of the light.

Coughing, Thorin gruffly replied, "Well good. Now get a move on and help."

Beaming once more, Bilbo all but skipped off to the waiting Company, hardly noticing their surprised faces.

Packing up what few things they'd begun to remove from their ponies took only a few moments thankfully, and they were mounted and moving on swiftly. With every inch they moved away from that farmhouse, he felt a little better. The fear didn't leave him entirely, but he was grateful not to be in the exact spot they were last time. It just felt far too much like tempting fate, daring it to do better this time around.

There was still one problem though, one that still gnawed at his insides; how would he manage to resist sleep for long enough to make sure everything would be okay? The sun would go down soon, already beginning its descent. They would eat, talk and then the urge would start, till it was almost unbearable and he'd be lost to the other world, leaving his Dwarves to face everything alone.

There was only one thing for it, he would have to resist the Ring, resist the call to sleep for as long as possible. Yavanna knew he'd suffer for it when he woke up back in the Shire, but if it would save his Dwarves, he would do it without question. He would do anything.

"Is this acceptable to you Master Hobbit?"

Thorin's dry question jolted him from his plans. Repressing a smirk, Bilbo made a show of looking around, examining the terrain both for show and internally, to actually see if it seemed safe. Deeming it good enough for the night, he turned back to Thorin with a smile.

"Yes thank you Master Dwarf, I think it looks safe enough."

Raising an eyebrow, Thorin nodded regally. "I'm overjoyed."

Turning to hide his grin, Bilbo dismounted and joined the rest of the Company in setting up camp. The clogging feeling of fear was still there, but it was easy to get lost in the hustle and bustle of his friends; their loud conversations, the smell of food on the go, Fili and Kili causing trouble as always, the faint but comforting grumble of Thorin and Balin talking.

Luckily, their new camp had plenty of space to tie the ponies within eyesight, something that brought Bilbo great relief. Maybe not having the ponies so close to the Trolls cooking site would mean they'd simply pass them by, find some other poor thing to cook and eat.

But still, how would they retrieve their swords? There was nothing else for it, Bilbo would have to do it himself. The sun had nearly finished setting, and as soon as night fell, the Trolls would leave their cave, off in search of food. It was a half baked plan but the only thing Bilbo could think to do was wait near their horde until he saw them leave, run in, take their swords and hightail it back to the camp.

Yes, that might work. He would tell the Company he was taking a walk, just happen across the Trolls horde and like the look of some swords to bring back for them. What's more, he would then have an excuse to warn them Trolls were in the area. Then once he believed they'd taken enough cautions, he could finally give in to the urge to sleep knowing they were more aware and ready than they would have been otherwise. He would still worry himself sick until he saw them again, but it was the best he could do.

Feeling slightly better with something resembling a plan, Bilbo sat back and waited for a few more minutes, until the sun was almost completely down, bathing the camp in a dark blue gossamer blanket, dulling details and making everything seem smaller than it was, the whole world compacted into the circle of firelight, everything outside of it a mystery.

Deeming it late enough, he rose and brushed himself off, heading over to the few Dwarves milling about the cooking pot. They greeted him as he approached, a warm feeling blossoming in his chest.

"Evenin' Bilbo! I must say, little old you standin' up and givin' Thorin his orders, tha' was a sight to see!"

Bilbo grinned and nodded his head at Bofur. "Oh you know, it just didn't seem right and I had to at least try. Just grateful he listened to be honest."

"Oh aye, so were we! I'd die for him, I would. But he is as stubborn as rock sometimes. If he's listenin' to you already, I think this Quest might go better than I expected!"

Feeling warm at the praise, he ducked his head blushing. Though it also did make him think for a moment; Thorin had listened to him at a time when, in the original Quest, he couldn't even say a civil word to him. Maybe things could be changed if he managed that!

Forcing himself back on track, he turned to Bombur, stood at the cooking pot as always. "Erm Bombur, I don't want to overstep, but I remember seeing some wild mushrooms a little way back that I think would go lovely with tonight's meal. I was thinking of going getting them."

His friends face lit up, never one to reject help or others opinions. "Oh that would be very nice, thank you Bilbo!"

Feeling slightly guilty that he would be bringing back swords, not mushrooms, he smiled and began to walk away.

"Wait Bilbo, you probably shouldn' just go wanderin' off by yourself! Anythin' could happen! I'll come with you if you like?"

Panicking, he turned back to his friend, Bofur stood with a wide smile on his face as always, perfectly earnest in his offer to help.

"Oh no no, it's fine. I'm perfectly fine! I err, I can't quite remember exactly where they are so I'll, err, I'll have to track them you see, and you Dwarves can be rather loud you know, what with your boots and everything."

The scepticism on Bofur's face could have stripped paint. "You have to... track mushrooms..."

"Erm well, it's a Hobbit thing you see. We're very connected to the earth and can tune in to it. It's, sort of private though you know?"

That did the trick. "Oh! Needn't say anymore Bilbo, I understand completely. Just be careful!"

Thanking his friend, he all but snuck out of camp, not wishing to encounter anymore generous offers of help or, in some Dwarves' cases, an order to stay where he was.

The sun was moments away from being fully set, so Bilbo quickened his pace and headed straight for where he knew the Troll horde to be. It wasn't as far away as he'd have liked, but he still hurried to reach it. He wanted to be there the moment they left their vile hole, then he could collect the swords and see if he could pick up a clue as to which direction they would go.

And if they happened to be going the direction of the camp, Bilbo knew he could easily lure them into turning around and following some strange small creature. One who happened to be much quicker and far cleverer than themselves.

Bilbo plunged deeper into the trees, the silence falling around him, blanketing him in unease. His steps were all but silent as he headed towards the horde. Surprisingly his fear for himself was all but nonexistent, he would happily waltz into the worst of dangers to ensure the safety of his friends. The only thing sending his heart racing was the thought of being unable to resist the call to sleep, leaving his friends defenceless.

Night fell completely at last and noises erupted from not far ahead, heavy thumps Bilbo knew to be footsteps and the sounds of cracking as they broke any branches in their paths.

The Trolls had left their horde.

Speeding up, he ran through the trees until they were finally in sight. Ducking behind a fallen log, Bilbo watched the final Troll leave the dank darkness of their cave, crowding together.

As Bilbo watched them, he couldn't help but notice...something. He wasn't sure what it was, but they seemed different. The Trolls he knew were bumbling, if still dangerous, idiots. But these? They moved different; they seemed quicker, power evident in every swing of their arms and stomp of their feet, each also seeming to have more than the filleting knife and rough blade he'd seen before. They had brutal looking daggers, a club with jagged shards of metal sticking out of it and each had a bundle of rough sacks and rope tied to their belts.

Unease began to rise in him, the sick sensation of true fear washing over him, just as it had at the campsite.

One of the Trolls, William if he remembered rightly, was swinging his head side to side, as if he was scenting something. The other two shifting on their tree trunk legs, attention focused on him, like hounds awaiting their orders.

Moving as one, their heads shot up, expressions blank and terrifying, devoid of the personalities he'd seen last time. Bilbo froze in place, heart pounding so hard he was sure they must be able to hear it.

"Dwarf." William ground out, voice like rumbling boulders as Bilbo's breathing stopped. How? How could they know they were there?

With little to no warning they began to move towards the camp, their focus so strong they didn't seem to acknowledge anything else around them, stomping through fallen tree trunks and low hanging branches alike, never changing their course or speed.

The second Bilbo saw them pass him, he shot out from his hiding place, panic shooting through his every nerve. He was so stupid! His friends were sat at camp now with no idea what was heading towards them, all because Bilbo thought he was clever enough to avoid the Trolls all together. He should have found some way to warn them!

No, he needed to calm down and think. He was on the clock, every moment passing brought him closer and closer to feeling the call to sleep. He had to fix this before then, or who knows what might happen.

Shooting into the mouth of the cave, he gagged at the foul air inside, trying so very hard not to think about what he could feel himself stepping on. Bilbo had never been properly inside the cave, choosing last time to stay away from the foul place, but now he couldn't help but marvel at the huge amount of things they'd collected. Piles of treasure were strewn about, shields and armour half buried under filth and bones. There would be an absolute fortune in here, if anyone was brave enough to clear it all out.

But that wasn't what he was here for, he needed to find the swords and get back to his friends. Darting to a stand of swords at the back, Bilbo immediately recognised the distinctive hilt of Orcrist.

For a moment, he froze. His last memory of that sword was seeing it clasped in the hand of his beloved before he was returned to the stone. But no, that would not happen this time, it would not! This time the only place he would see that sword was in the very, very alive hands of its rightful owner as he burned bright and beautiful on his quest to reclaim his home, his birthright and his throne. Bilbo would accept nothing else.

Pulling the sword free he staggered slightly under its length and weight, before looping the strap over his shoulder, settling the large sword over his back. It was almost as tall as he was, so adding another large sword would not be fun for the sprint back to camp, but needs must! Grabbing Glamdring, conveniently located right next to Orcrist, he somehow managed to loop the strap over his other shoulder, the two long swords now crisscrossing over his back.

There, two down, one to go. Bilbo cast about, his keen eyes looking everywhere, each second that passed increasing his panic and intense need to get back to his friends. Where was his little Sting in this blasted cave? He couldn't see it with any of the other swords or stacked with the armour.

Darting around the cave once more, desperation finally won out. He'd have to leave Sting behind for now, even though his heart ached to do it. It seemed silly to be so attached to sharpened metal, beautiful though it was; but Sting had gotten him through so much that it almost felt unlucky, a bad omen to go into any fight without it.

But needs must. Shifting the swords on his back to a more comfortable position, Bilbo sped out of the filthy darkness of the cave, the fresh air hitting him like the sweetest lemonade after a long hot day of gardening, before he took a deep breath and began to jog as quick as he could back to camp.

It was cumbersome to say the least, but once he'd picked up a rhythm, Bilbo was able to gain more speed and soon began to hear faint sounds from up ahead.

Following the noises of a dying scuffle, Bilbo reached their camp, hiding behind an overturned log he saw the three Trolls, hardly speaking; just grunts and growls as they tied up the defeated Dwarves, so unlike the Trolls he'd known before.

Guilt and anger flooded through him; anger that the filthy Trolls would dare touch the people he loved, and guilt for leaving them so undefended. He should have found some way to let them know about the Trolls, prepared them somehow for the possibility of fighting them. Instead, Bilbo had run off, thinking himself clever enough to get the swords without having to risk a fight with the Trolls. Thanks to him, the Company were caught totally unawares, the blasted creatures coming to them and not the other way around.

"...is...it?"

Moving closer, silent even on such large feet, Bilbo listened to the Troll's stilted, broken glass and gravel voice. He seemed to be asking the Dwarves for something, something that by the looks on their faces, they obviously didn't have.

"We have nothing you vile swine, now let us go before I strike the heads from your bodies!"

Ah yes, the calm and reasonable response of their dear leader. Of course that would work Thorin, why wouldn't it?

"...give us or...we...break you."

See? Worked like a charm.

Aaaand now the rest were joining in. Shouts of insults and threats rang out, more futile attempts to escape. It was obvious they wouldn't get out of this on their own, and it was becoming very apparent that they were being held for a higher purpose than simply being eaten. Meaning it would be a lot harder to trick these Trolls, or simply even distract them until dawn.

Speaking of, where on this good earth was Gandalf? Bilbo had tried specifically to make sure that Gandalf didn't go stomping off just so he'd be there if anything happened! Honestly, did he have to do everything himself?

Luckily he hadn't been captured at least, which left the only option of him hanging around like Bilbo was, waiting for dawn or for some kind of plan. He could try and find the blasted wizard and come up with something, but it just didn't seem like he had enough time. The Trolls needed distracting now and he trusted his old friend enough to be able to adapt to any situation, just as he had the first time.

Well then, all Bilbo had to do was distract the Trolls till dawn. Simple.

"Unhand him now you miserable, foul creature! Put him down!"

Thorin's angry growl rang out clearly, tinged with enough fear to draw Bilbo's attention immediately. He only ever sounded like that when one of his nephews was in danger.

Looking back, sure enough, Bilbo had a hold of Kili in his large hand. One wrong move and he had no doubt that the Troll would crush the young Dwarf as easily as one could a grape. And it would destroy the hearts of every single member of the Company, Bilbo included.

"Give us now...or he dies..."

"We don't know what you want! We have nothing you could possibly want!" Thorin was panicking now, though you'd have to know him well to realise it.

"Argh!" Kili struggled in the Trolls grip as his hand slowly tightened, terrible gasps leaving his mouth, twisted in pain as he tried to draw air into his screaming lungs.

"Kili! Let him go please!"

Hearing Fili's anguish, Bilbo had to move. He had no plan but if he waited any longer, the young Dwarf would die horribly right in front of them.

Leaping out from his hiding place, he rushed into the clearing, stopping right in front of the three Trolls.

"Err excuse me! Could you please stop squeezing that Dwarf for a moment? He'll burst if you carry on much longer and believe me, you wouldn't want Dwarf guts getting all over your hand! Toxic that stuff is!"

The Troll tilted his head to the side, staring hard at the Hobbit. But he did loosen his grasp a little, allowing Kili to heave in great lung fulls of air. Relief rushed through Bilbo, but he knew he wasn't out of danger yet.

"You...you feel like...darkness. You know where it is..."

The rock slide sound of William's voice was tinged in malice, as his eyes burrowed into Bilbo. So he was looking for something and seemed to think Bilbo knew, okay, he could work with that.

"And what exactly is it you're looking for? I'm very skilled at finding things you know? In fact, it's my speciality. How about you drop the Dwarf and I'll find it for you. It's obviously very important."

His heart was pounding, the screaming in the back of his head increasing constantly. He needed to sleep, to leave this place and return to Hobbiton, but he refused to give in. It could wait. He'd deal with the consequences later.

"Bilb-" Thorin began, but stopped as the Hobbit threw him a warning glance. The Trolls couldn't know he was connected to the Dwarves.

"You... know..."

Oh sod it. "Yes, yes I know," he said placatingly. He needed to get Kili away from that thing before he realised none of them had any clue what he was on about.

"I know exactly what it is and where it is and if you drop the Dwarf, I'll get it for you."

The Dwarves held their breath, Bilbo held his breath, Kili unfortunately was having his breath held for him, but finally, the Troll nodded and his hand loosened.

Kili sucked in air again, looking dizzy. Unfortunately, the Troll obviously didn't care enough to set him down on the ground. Bilbo realised what was going to happen, rushing forward just as Bill opened his hand and dropped Kili like a rag doll.

This was going to hurt. Bilbo made it just in time, trying to grab the falling Dwarf or at least break his fall. With a clatter of metal and a groan, Bilbo grabbed his young friend, ending up half underneath him as the impressively dense weight of a Dwarf landed on him.

That was unpleasant. It was a good thing Hobbits were stronger and sturdier than they looked because by Yavanna, Dwarves were heavy buggers.

Ignoring the shouts from the others, Bilbo heaved himself from underneath Kili, laying him out to check on him. Damn, he was in and out of consciousness, drowsy from the lack of oxygen and a cut on his forehead. Bilbo must have just missed his head, letting it get banged on one of the many rocks that littered the ground.

Smacking his face slightly, Bilbo felt relief flood through him as the Dwarf opened his eyes.

"Bilbo?" He muttered. "How did I get down here?"

Smiling, he leant close to his ear under the guise of checking his head and breathing.

"No time for that. Now listen, these things are obviously after something. I'm going to try and lead them off either all together or one by one. You need to pass the message on to the rest of the Company. Gandalf is still out there and I trust him to help when I present him with the right opportunity. Dawn can't be far off. Do you understand?"

Kili nodded, out of it but still a trained warrior. Bilbo needed to know he had someone in on it with him.

"Okay, now in a moment, pretend to be unconscious. Do you have a knife or something?"

He shook his head ever so slightly. "No they made us drop our weapons, but if I can get to Fili, he'll have plenty still stashed on him. Much like yourself apparently!"

"Story for later I'm afraid," he replied with a grin. "Okay, we best get moving then. Try and cut all the bonds you can but don't make a move until you're either desperate or there's a good opening. I watched these things move, they're faster than they should be."

Nodding again, he did a rather impressive swoon, head falling back on the floor with a thump. Well that was probably unpleasant considering the knock his thick scull had already taken, but points for commitment.

"Thank you for releasing him, there really was no reason to keep him around when I can help you with everything. I'm afraid he's completely passed out though. I didn't know Dwarves were so weak! Or more likely you're just much stronger than this little thing."

The Troll let out a pleased sounding grumble, Bilbo nearly smirking when he felt a sharp pinch on his thigh, a gift from his indignant friend.

"Well then, how about I just drag him over there and tie him up yes? Then they're all out of the way and we can set off!"

Not chancing him saying no, Bilbo stood up anyway, grabbing Kili under his arms and dragging him with a grunt. Blimey they really were heavy. Desperation and adrenaline gave him enough strength to get him over to the others swiftly. Conscious of all the Trolls eyes on him, he couldn't chance speaking.

Instead he brought Kili right in front of where his brother was trussed up, manoeuvring them close enough that Kili would be able to subtly get to Fili's knives without the trolls seeing. He mimed tying him up and winked at Fili, easing the look of worry on his face.

Standing up he steeled himself, once more catching Thorin's eyes. Forget the Trolls, he was very nearly done in right there! After seeing nothing but contempt, resignation and suspicion in the Dwarves eyes, it was a shock, a wonderful shock to see something else. He wasn't quite sure what it was yet, but there seemed to be something bordering on respect in there, mixed with surprise and his typical level of constant worry. Bilbo also noticed that he kept glancing at Orcrist with definite jealousy. Ha! He knew Thorin had loved that sword from the start, Elf made or not.

Breaking away, he moved in front of Bill, heart thumping like a jack rabbit. Time to do or die.

"You show...now...where."

There was definite threat there, the huge hand clenching and unclenching menacingly, no doubt a second away from squashing him like a bug if it pleased him.

"Yes yes, I'll take you straight there. If you'll just follow me."



The leader pointed at the smallest and dullest seaming Troll, he thinks his name was Tom, indicating that he should follow Bilbo. Okay so he'd apparently have to lead them off one by one. He could do that.

Feeling sick and dizzy with the almost painful need to sleep, Bilbo forced a smile and set off back into the trees, turning to make sure he was being followed.

Soon, the sounds of the other Trolls and Dwarves faded, leaving just his own quick breathing and the loud, dragging sound of the Trolls feet. If he remembered rightly, this was the Troll who first caught him, sweeping him up in his disgusting hanky and sneezing all over him. He shuddered just at the memory. But it also drove home just how different the two experiences were. This Troll was silent, eyes feral looking and devoid of the small bit of intelligence he'd originally had. How were they so different? What had happened to turn them this way?

By Yavanna, Bilbo hated the endless questions he had, any kind of answer only leading to more questions. He'd have to put them to one side for now, to examine and fret over once the threat of imminent death had passed.

Now how to give this Troll the slip. Outsmarting him wasn't the problem, but he needed to keep him far enough away from the camp and the other Trolls as possible. If he split them up in the trees far enough apart, he could make it back to the Dwarves and they could leg it. The sun couldn't be that far off now, and if they had enough of a head start, surely they couldn't catch up to them before the sun turned them to stone. Right?

Well, it was the only plan he had so it'd have to do. He was just hoping he would run into Gandalf at some point, that would make life a lot easier.

Displeased grumbles began to resonate from the Troll following him, sending his heartbeat through the roof. He needed to leave him soon or suffer the same fate meant for Kili.

At last! Just up ahead was a passage too small for the Troll to fit; two intertwined trees between a crevice of two boulders.

"Okay, I'm pretty sure it's through there." Bilbo stopped, looking the Troll up and down, humming in concern. "But now that I think about it, you're probably too large to fit through. That's a shame."

He allowed his comment to sink in, the Troll frowning and looking back at the small space. Gasping as though he'd just had an idea, Bilbo looked to the Troll in earnest. "I've got an idea! How about you wait here and I'll go get it for you! That way we get what you need quicker. Yes? Okay I'll be right back!"

Hardly allowing the horrid creature time to think it over, Bilbo bounded over to the gap, shooting one last reassuring smile at the Troll; standing there awkwardly and luckily showing no sign of following or complaining, before ducking into the shadowy space.

Once out of sight, he leaned against the cool rock and allowed himself a second to breathe. He didn't realise he'd shut his eyes until he lost his balance and nearly fell head first into the

stone. Damn, he was so tired! He'd simply have to keep going, not sure if he could stay awake should he lose momentum.

Shaking himself, Bilbo carried on, emerging out from the other side. Okay so he needed to double back and return to camp. He started jogging, so grateful that he had the level of fitness he had at the end of the Quest, used to walking and running. Yavanna knows how he would have done this if his body had been as it should be at this point in the journey.

Soon he began to hear voices once more. He needed a cover story, some reason for returning minus a Troll. Hopefully they didn't have the intelligence to question or examine his comments, or else he'd be done for. Ah well, nothing for it but to do it.

Emerging into the clearing, he felt all eyes land on him. Ignoring the Dwarves, he went straight for the two Trolls. Ignoring the deep growls they greeted him with.

"Now now none of that. I'm helping you aren't I? No need to sound all angry." He was scolding Trolls. He, a Hobbit, was actually scolding two huge, very dangerous Trolls. And what's more, he sounded completely at ease. When on earth did that happen?

"Okay so it turns out that we need one of you taller ones. There's a cave on the side of that hill, you know the one? Yes well I'm pretty sure it's in there. But neither of us can reach it. Will one of you come and help?"

Bilbo tried to inject as much calm and honesty as he could into his voice. Not for one second allowing any of him to project the fact he was very, very much speaking out of his own arse.

Luckily there really was a cave in the side of the steepest face of the hill, and if they lived around here they surely would have at least passed it.

Turning to each other, William considered his words before grunting at the other Troll and pointing to Bilbo. Smiling at his new travelling partner, he headed back into the trees.

So just get rid of this one, Bert the cook if memory serves and then deal with the leader. Simple.

Taking the other path that led away from the first Troll, hopefully still waiting where he left him, Bilbo led them towards the hill not far ahead. It was closer to the camp than he would like, but still far enough away to delay Bert and buy himself some time. Besides, this one seemed the physically slowest, so that would surely give them a head start if needed.

Bilbo walked, one foot in front of the other, desperately holding on to this world. Though he was feeling sicker and weaker by the moment, shaking and cold, he would not abandon his friends to the Trolls. Not when he could do something about it.

At last they reached the side of the hill, a cave sitting high above them just as he said. It wasn't until the Troll started to look around and growl that he realised he may have cocked up. This Troll was looking for the first, who should have been here and was, of course very much not. Damn.

"Hang on a minute, where on earth is that Troll?" Bilbo made a show of looking around, surprise and annoyance clear on his face and in his voice. Or so he hoped. "Honestly, does he understand speech? I told him! I said, you stay here and mind the cave whilst I go get one of the others! I was sure he nodded and understood but apparently not. Honestly! Does he often wander off?"

The other Troll just stared at him, this tiny Hobbit with his hands on his hips, before letting out a noise that sounded suspiciously like a scoff before turning back to the cave.

Swaying with relief, he stepped forward. "Now I'm sure it's up there but I'm much too small and weak to climb up. But you could easily I'm sure! Then just go inside and it'll be there."

A moment passed, sweat dripping down Bilbo's spine as he fought to keep his expression trustworthy. Finally, the creature nodded, stepping in front of the hill face and beginning his climb. His huge legs easily found a crevice to step, hands digging into the cracks in the stone. He finally reached the cave, dragging his head, torso and finally his body into the dark space.

What happened after that, Bilbo did not know, as he raced away back into the trees. This would be the hardest, of that he had no doubt. He'd have to keep it together, be convincing. And most of all, quick.

Running as though his life depended on it, which it rather did now he thought about it, Bilbo broke into the clearing. Panting and shaking, he sprinted to the final Troll, his angry growls only helping him seem more desperate.

"Help! You... must... help!" He wheezed out, folding forward to lean his hands on his knees, gasping for breath and desperately ignoring the very real black spots that kept blooming in the corners of his vision.

Straightening, he gazed beseechingly at the Troll leader, pointing back into the trees. "They're trying to... take it for themselves! Found it, just like I said! But now... they're fighting over it! Want to... get all the credit themselves! Hurry before... one of them wins and... takes it!"

A roar of fury left the Troll, making Bilbo cease up in terror, sounds of alarm coming from the Dwarves that he was still trying so hard not to look at. The sky was beginning to lighten, they only had to hold out for maybe 10 minutes, 15 tops. They could do that. He could do that.

William would run off and then Bilbo and the Dwarves could make a break for it whilst they were distracted. He quickly turned to look at his friends, mouthing 'get ready' at them, watching them all tense up, ready for a sprint.

Then he watched their eyes widen, fear on their faces as a huge hand grabbed him brutally from behind and lifted him up. Bilbo had just enough time to see Thorin start to rise, fear clear on his face before he was plunged into the trees, carried along by a furious Troll.

"Bilbo!"

Then he heard nothing but the angry bellows of the Troll, breaking branches as he thundered towards the cave in the rock. This was it, Bilbo had failed. Yes his friends would have ample time to escape now, once the Trolls realised they'd been tricked and exacted their revenge in the most brutal of ways, but the fact of the matter was that he didn't want it to end yet. He didn't want to leave them.

The movement was making his head swim, body aching like he'd taken a tumble down in Goblin Town again. If he managed to somehow survive this, he knew the fallout once he awoke in the Shire would be terrible.

They stopped, the suddenness jolting his head forward, pain blooming behind his eyes. Yavanna above his head hurt, a sick pounding that radiated through his body.

The hand opened, dropping him without thought or remorse onto the hard earth. Pain erupted everywhere, his body a huge bruise, hands scrapped as he tried to stop his head hitting the rocky ground. He wasn't quick enough to stop himself landing on his back though, the crossed swords digging painfully into his spine. His back would be black and blue by the end of this.

Forcing his spinning head to look up, he focused just in time to see the huge fist that had been carrying him, smash into the face of the Troll he'd left in the cave. They began fighting, growling and raging, a rockslide of viciousness. An answering sound came from the left, the stamp of heavy feet and a lumbering body making its way through the trees towards them.

Fear and adrenaline filled him; if he didn't get out of there now, they'd quickly realise they'd been tricked. The sun was surely minutes away from rising but in their furious quest for whatever damned thing they were looking for and now their fighting, the Trolls seemed to have forgotten.

Rising slowly and quietly, he crept away. The smallest Troll broke through the trees and was immediately caught around the throat, scrambling and scratching at William's fist.

Turning, he ran as fast as he could, slowed down by the weight of the swords and the heavy exhaustion of his limbs. But Bilbo forced himself on, heading for the clearing and hoping to Yavanna the Dwarves had been smart enough to run.

Finally breaking through the trees, panting in air that felt like knives to his lungs, he saw that he was half right. The rest of the Dwarves had indeed left, but Thorin was waiting, his angular Dwarven sword ready.

"What are you...doing you...idiot!" He gasped out, almost wanting to laugh at the Dwarf's indignant face, opening his mouth to snap back.

He never got the chance though, as three piercing roars of pure fury erupted into the air, thundering shudders coming towards them.

"Run!"

Luckily the king didn't need telling twice; reaching forward to grab the Hobbit's arm and drag him along.

They raced together out of the clearing, reaching the path and following it. Not too far up ahead he saw the rest of the Dwarves, obviously waiting despite orders if Thorin's angry groan was anything to go by, waving furiously at them to carry on.

Luckily they did just that, but it was probably down to the fact three huge, terrifyingly angry Trolls had just thundered out of the trees and onto the path, eating up the distance between them in a sickeningly short amount of time.

They ran faster, Dwarf and Hobbit sharing a look between them as the roars got closer and closer.

But there, coming up in front of them! The sun! Warm rays of light were beginning to show, coming up along the path in front of them as it rose. If they could just reach it, they'd be safe. They were so close, the rest of the Company safe in its light and turning to watch them, terror clear on their faces.

"Duck!"

The shout from their friends came too late, as a rope was swung by one of the Trolls so close behind them, hitting Thorin in the side first and knocking him into Bilbo. They fell in a heap, cries of fear from the friends mingling with the sounds of triumph from the Trolls.

Jumping up, Bilbo pulled Orcrist from its sheath behind him and stood in front of the dazed Dwarf. If he could somehow hold them off until the light reached them, mere moments away, then at the very least he'd save Thorin. Anything was worth that.

So many things happened at once, in the blink of an eye that felt like eternity. William reached his hand out to grab the Hobbit, to crush him or squash him in revenge. Bilbo raised the heavy sword to strike at his fingers, determined to buy every second he could get. The Dwarf king behind him cried out.

Then the light hit, flooding the valley and path in its blessed rays. The hand centimetres away from grabbing him was hit first turning to stone, the rest of them crying out as they soon followed, bellowing their anger to the last.

Then it was over. In front of him, the Troll leader was frozen forever; face a picture of pure anger, hand reached out to crush the life from him. Behind him, the two other Trolls were frozen, bodies hunched up. It was a tableau, a testament to just how close they came to death.

Turning to the king, the face his heart knew and recognised beyond all others, Bilbo saw him looking back in concern, something vulnerable and shaken. Then Bilbo swayed on his feet; vision blurring, head pounding, the aching pull in his chest hitting him like a spear, his whole body feeling pulled apart at the seams. He clutched his hand over his heart and gasped.

"Bilbo?"

Then it all went black.

## Chapter End Notes

You guys. My dudes. My babies. Loves of my life. I am So Fucking Sorry. I had no intention to ever leave it this long but, life being what it is, decided to fuck me sideways with a cactus. Repeatedly. But I was inspired today by a lovely commentor (you know who you are bless you) to edit and post. I did my best with it so please forgive any mistakes, I'm actually currently sat in the hallway of an old house in Menorca desperately trying to get as much internet as possible!

So I can only apologise with my whole heart and I really, really hope you guys still enjoy this and want to keep reading. This chapter gave me headaches for so long and I'm just so happy to have it done and out of the way. This is the chapter you really start to see that one Middle Earth isn't quite the same as the other...

Much love, Neeka xxxx

## End Notes

Hello guys, welcome to my Hobbit Big Bang 2016 fic! I know there's not much to go on this chapter but I hope you all enjoy it and the next chapter will be up tomorrow or the day after.

Special thanks to my awesome artist, her pics should be up soon and to my dear friend Badskippy for always being there for me and inspiring me with your talent.

Neeka xxxx

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!