In the Shadows of Bag End

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/59980492.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	The Hobbit - All Media Types, The Hobbit (Jackson Movies)
Relationship:	Bilbo Baggins/Thorin Oakenshield
Character:	Gandalf (Tolkien)
Additional Tags:	Post-Canon, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Post-Quest of Erebor, Thorin Is Not Amused, Hurt Bilbo Baggins, Ghost Thorin, Spirit Guides, The Shire (Tolkien), Paranormal, The One Ring | Sauron's Ring of Power (Tolkien), Happy Ending, Angst and Hurt/Comfort, Comedy
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2024-10-23 Completed: 2025-03-27 Words: 18,817 Chapters: 5/5

In the Shadows of Bag End

by mordelle

Summary

Bilbo Baggins has been struggling with strange occurrences in Bag End—objects moving, items disappearing, and an unsettling sense of a presence—that have left him questioning his sanity. Desperate for answers, he reaches out to Gandalf. When the wizard arrives, they unravel the truth together. Bilbo realizes that Thorin Oakenshield might be closer than he ever imagined. Faced with the mysterious hauntings, Bilbo must confront the specter of his past and the deep, unspoken bond that refuses to let him wither away.

Notes

Just a tiny break from As the Raven Flies, do not fret. but it's almost my bday and Halloween so I just needed to bring out this old plot bunny for Ghost Thorin.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Bilbo Baggins sat at his kitchen table, staring at the teapot that had inexplicably moved from one side of the counter to the other. He couldn't remember shifting it, nor could he recall seeing it move. Yet, there it was—teetering on the edge of the counter as if someone had placed it there just to irritate him.

It wasn't the first time he'd noticed things in his smial out of place. Small things. His favorite chair turned slightly toward the hearth, the heavy brass key to the back door resting by his bedside instead of hanging on the hook where it always should be, and the books on his shelves no longer in their meticulous order. At first, he thought it was simply his mind playing tricks on him, that perhaps he was slipping, growing forgetful. The grief still weighed on him from time to time, creeping up in the dead of night, or when a familiar melody caught his ear, or when a scent would suddenly bring back a vivid memory—what Bilbo liked to call "An Inconvenient Episode."

He had thought that with time, the pain of Thorin Oakenshield's passing would fade, yet it lingered like a wound that refused to close, reopening at the smallest provocation. Perhaps it was making him careless. Perhaps it was making him mad.

He had started noticing these odd occurrences almost a year after his adventure. At first, they were rare and subtle, but as time went by, the strange happenings became more frequent and bolder, as if something—or someone—was testing his sanity... or trying to get his attention.

Bilbo closed his eyes and took a breath. "You're fine," he murmured to himself, hands gripping the edge of the table until his knuckles whitened. "Just another bad night."

But the truth gnawed at him, a quiet fear growing louder with each misplaced item, each faint whisper of movement just beyond the edge of his sight. He had always been prone to moments of dissociation since the quest—lost in the swirling memories of fire, blood, and the cold, endless battle of Five Armies. He'd catch himself standing in the middle of a room, unable to remember how long he'd been there or what he had been doing.

Tonight felt different. There was something in the air of Bag End, a feeling so familiar, yet so impossible, that it raised every hair on his feet. He turned toward the hall and froze.

The faint scent of leather, earth, and dwarvish pipeweed lingered, a scent he hadn't smelled since…

No. It couldn't be.

He shook his head and stood abruptly, trying to brush away the ghost of a memory, the echo of a presence that his mind must have conjured in a fit of delusion. It had been almost two years, and still, the grief clawed at him. He walked toward the sitting room and found the book he'd left open hours ago—only now, it was closed and neatly placed on the shelf.

Bilbo frowned.

“I didn’t…” His voice trailed off. He hadn’t closed that book. He was sure of it.

"You're losing your mind, Bilbo Baggins," he muttered as he slumped into his chair by the fire, pulling his hands over his face.

But in the quiet, where the crackle of the fire filled the room, there was another sound—so faint, Bilbo nearly missed it.

A sigh. A deep, tired sigh.

He froze, a prickling sensation traveling up his spine and into the roots of his hair as he focused on the stillness of the room, his eyes wide.and afraid. The sound had come from behind him, near the window.

Bilbo’s pulse quickened, and his hand trembled as he reached for the poker by the hearth. Slowly, he turned to glance over his shoulder, expecting to see nothing more than the empty space behind his chair.

But there was something there. A shadow, faint and familiar, lingering near the edge of the firelight.

For a brief moment, his heart leapt into his throat. His mind raced with disbelief, and a wild hope seized him. No… it couldn't be. He'd seen Thorin fall. He’d held him as the last breath left his body. Thorin Oakenshield was gone.

But the shadow did not fade, and the air was thick with the scent of pine, sweat, and iron—the scent of a dwarf king long lost to the world of the living.

Bilbo dropped the poker, the sudden clatter echoing harshly in the quiet room, jarring him from his stunned disbelief. His hands shook as he turned fully toward the specter. "Thorin?"

Silence. No response. Only the quiet crackle of the fire and the weight of the empty room pressing in around him.

He squeezed his eyes shut, willing the vision to go away, but when he opened them again, the shadow had drawn closer. The firelight flickered, casting long, trembling shadows across the room. There was no mistaking it now. Thorin's presence, his silhouette, filled the space.

Bilbo stood, his chest tight with both hope and dread. “You can’t be here,” he whispered, barely able to believe his own words. "You’re dead. You’re—"

The air stirred, and a warmth he hadn’t felt in years brushed past him like the fleeting touch of a hand on his shoulder. Bilbo’s breath hitched, his legs threatening to give out beneath him.

Thorin was here. Somehow, impossibly, he was here.

But why? Why would he come back only to haunt the hobbit who had loved him so deeply and lost him so tragically? Although Thorin had never truly known how deeply Bilbo had felt for him—how he still felt for him—did he? Perhaps his ghost was still angry about the

Arkenstone. But no... They had made their peace before Thorin left the world. So why was he here? Why now? Bilbo's mind spiraled, questions piling upon themselves, but no answers came. Only the soft echo of Thorin's sigh and the quiet rustle of his cloak as the ghost of the king lingered just beyond Bilbo's reach.

For hours, Bilbo sat by the fire, his eyes locked on the spot where the shadow had been. The flames died to embers, and still, he could not bring himself to move. He was not mad—he was sure of it now. Thorin was here, watching him, but why… why wouldn't he speak?

As the dawn crept through the windows of Bag End, Bilbo finally rose, his bones aching from sitting so long. He glanced at the chair by the window, half expecting to see Thorin's ghost sitting there, staring back at him with those piercing blue eyes.

But the chair was empty. The room was silent once more, save for the birds chirping outside.

Perhaps... It was finally time to face whatever was happening. Bilbo straightened his back, resolve hardening within him. If Thorin wanted his attention, then he'd give it to him. For what purpose? He did not know.

But perhaps a certain wizard could help shed some light on what he should do next.

Dear Gandalf,

I hope this letter finds you well and that your travels have brought you to somewhere comfortable, or at the very least somewhere interesting. I find myself in a peculiar situation here in Bag End, one that is perhaps better discussed in person, but I will endeavor to give you some sense of it nonetheless.

Of late, I have noticed some oddities at home—small matters, really, nothing too troublesome, but enough to make me wonder if I might benefit from the perspective of an old friend. Things have been shifting about, and there is a lingering sense of something unspoken. I do not wish to alarm you, nor do I wish to overstate matters, but I find myself a touch unsettled.

If your path brings you anywhere near Hobbiton, I would very much appreciate the chance to sit and talk things through. You know how I can get—perhaps this is just a touch of overactive imagination. Still, it would ease my heart to have your company, if you have the time to spare.

I have tried to manage things on my own, as hobbits are wont to do, but I must admit that this time... well, it's a bit beyond me. It is not easy for me to ask, but I could use a bit of your wisdom. There is something here, Gandalf, something I cannot quite put into words, and it makes my heart ache in a way that is both familiar and terrifying.

Your friend,

Bilbo Baggins

Gandalf adjusted his hat as he approached Bag End, the early afternoon sun casting a shining upon the hill. He paused for a moment, admiring the quaint beauty of Hobbiton before making his way up the familiar path. When he reached the round, green door, he rapped on it firmly with his knuckles.

From inside, Gandalf could hear a muffled voice muttering—a familiar grumble that made his lips curl into a small smile. After a few moments of scuffling and a clatter that sounded suspiciously like a pot being knocked over, Bilbo opened the door. He looked like he was ready to give someone a piece of his mind, his eyes narrowed and mouth half-open in irritation, but when he finally looked up and saw Gandalf, the expression softened, replaced by one of surprise and delight.

"Gandalf!" Bilbo exclaimed, his face breaking into a tired smile. "Well, bless me, if it isn't you! Come in, come in!"

Gandalf took a moment to study the hobbit as Bilbo hurriedly stepped aside to let him in. It was nearing the second anniversary of their quest, and Gandalf had expected to see Bilbo back to his usual robust self by now. Yet, Bilbo looked thinner than he remembered, his face pale and his eyes shadowed, as if sleep had become a rare and fleeting visitor. The wizard's brows furrowed slightly, though he said nothing, stepping through the door and ducking his head to avoid hitting the low ceiling.

"Make yourself comfortable! I'll just get some tea ready," Bilbo said, already bustling off toward the kitchen. Gandalf watched as the hobbit hurried about, his hands trembling ever so slightly as he worked. The kettle was set to boil, and Bilbo began gathering cups, his voice bubbling with a stream of questions.

"Where have you been, Gandalf? I haven't heard a word from you in ages. Are you here for long? Have you eaten? How's the weather been... wherever you've been? And have you heard any news from the South? I heard something about trouble near the borders—"

Gandalf opened his mouth to answer, but Bilbo barely paused long enough for him to get a word in. The hobbit continued rambling as he bustled about, and Gandalf soon gave up trying to answer, simply watching the flurry of activity with a patient smile. It wasn't until Bilbo had finally set the teapot and cups on the table and sank into the chair across from Gandalf, his energy visibly spent, that the wizard finally spoke.

"It's good to see you too, Bilbo," Gandalf said gently, his eyes softening. He reached into his robes and pulled out a folded piece of parchment—Bilbo's letter. He laid it on the table

between them, tapping it lightly. "But I believe we have some business to discuss, do we not? You mentioned something in your letter, something about a... presence?"

Bilbo's gaze flickered to the letter, and he swallowed, suddenly looking a bit sheepish. "Ah, yes. Well, you see, it's… it's nothing, really," he began, his voice hesitant. "Just a feeling, you know. A... something, lingering about. I thought perhaps I was imagining it at first, but it's been rather persistent."

Gandalf raised an eyebrow, watching as Bilbo fidgeted, his fingers tracing the rim of his teacup. "I believe you called that 'something' a 'presence,' in your letter to me."

Slowly, as if unsure whether to answer at all, Bilbo nodded, his eyes avoiding Gandalf's. "Yes, yes. Quite persistent lately, actually."

The wizard hummed. "And these oddities you referred to?"

"Ah. Yes, um... you know, the usual things you'd expect a-a-a presence would do... or at least from what I learned in stories, anyway. Moving things about... noises... a crossing shadow where there should be none. It's... well, it's rather unnerving, to be frank."

Gandalf leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "And this presence, Bilbo... do you have any idea who or what it might be?"

Bilbo hesitated, his mouth opening and closing as if he were trying to find the right words. "I... I think… it might be someone I knew. From the journey," he said finally, his voice barely above a whisper. He looked up at Gandalf, his eyes pleading for understanding.

Gandalf regarded Bilbo carefully, the pieces slowly coming together in his mind. A presence, familiar, from the journey. Someone who would matter enough to haunt this hobbit, to drive him to write a letter asking for help, however reluctantly.

"Thorin?" Gandalf asked, his voice gentle, and Bilbo flinched, his eyes dropping to the table as he nodded, a faint sheen of tears gathering in his eyes.

"Yes," Bilbo whispered. "I think it's... Thorin."

The morning sun filtered softly through the curtains of Bag End as Gandalf rose from his guest room, stretching out the stiffness in his old bones. The night had been restful enough, though his mind had been preoccupied with thoughts of what Bilbo had shared. After dressing and preparing himself for the day, Gandalf stepped into the kitchen where Bilbo was already busying himself, though there was a nervousness to his movements.

"Good morning, Bilbo," Gandalf greeted, his voice warm. "I hope you slept well."

Bilbo turned, offering a small but slightly strained smile. "Oh, well enough, I suppose. Tea? Breakfast? I apologize, I don't have much. Haven't gone to the market in... in, um, well, it's bin a minute."

"Thank you, my friend, tea is just fine for now," Gandalf replied, settling himself at the table. He watched Bilbo for a moment before speaking again. "I was thinking, Bilbo, that it might be helpful for you to show me around Bag End and tell me about each instance where you've felt or seen something unusual."

Bilbo hesitated, his eyes widening slightly. He shifted on his feet, clearly uncomfortable with the idea. "Oh, well... I suppose I could," he began, then trailed off. His fingers fidgeted with the edge of his waistcoat.

Gandalf nodded encouragingly. "It might help to put everything in perspective, Bilbo. Sometimes, speaking things aloud and walking through them can bring some clarity."

With a reluctant sigh, Bilbo set the kettle down and nodded. "Very well, then," he said, gesturing for Gandalf to follow him. He led the way to the sitting room, where he paused, his gaze moving to the counter. "The teapot... it always seemed to move. I could swear it was on the other side of the counter each time."

He moved through the house, pointing out the different places where things had happened. The pots and pans in the kitchen that had been out after he was certain they had been put away, the brass key to his garden that had mysteriously appeared on his bedside table every so often. "I always keep it on the hook by the door," Bilbo said, his brow furrowing in frustration.

They moved on to the hallway, where Bilbo gestured toward the cloak hooks. "My cloak fell off these hooks more times than I care to count," he muttered, the irritation clear in his voice. "It was almost as if it was being pulled down deliberately."

Gandalf listened attentively, nodding as Bilbo spoke, following him to the small room where Bilbo kept his chest of treasures from the journey. Bilbo hesitated here, his fingers brushing over the chest as he spoke. "This chest... I've found it pulled out or opened in the middle of the room more times than I care to remember. And once, my brandy was hidden under the bed. I only found it because I dropped something and happened to see it under there."

As Bilbo spoke, his voice grew more animated, his gestures more expressive, as if the telling of it all was finally releasing a burden. He dragged Gandalf from room to room, pointing out each spot where something strange had occurred, and Gandalf nodded thoughtfully, never once showing any sign that he doubted the hobbit's words.

By the time they returned to the kitchen, Bilbo was breathing heavily, his cheeks flushed. He glanced at Gandalf, a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes. "You don't think I'm mad, do you?" he asked, his voice uncharacteristically vulnerable. "I thought you'd say I've gone mad."

Gandalf studied Bilbo for a moment, then shook his head, a gentle smile on his lips. "No, Bilbo, I do not think you are mad. Quite the opposite, in fact." He paused, glancing toward the doorway, where, for the briefest of moments, he thought he saw a shadow cross his path —a shadow that seemed to linger, as though watching them. Gandalf turned his gaze back to Bilbo, deciding it was best not to mention what he had seen.

He could almost see Thorin Oakenshield leaning against the doorway, arms crossed, his expression stern. But it was gone before he could give it any further scrutiny.

Gandalf laid a gentle hand on Bilbo's shoulder, guiding him to sit at the table. "Come now, sit down." He poured a fresh cup for Bilbo, setting it before him as Bilbo sank into his chair, the energy from his earlier excitement fading.

"Why is this happening to me, Gandalf?" Bilbo asked quietly, his eyes wide and filled with a mix of fear and confusion. "Why would Th-Thor—my friend—haunt me like this? To drive me mad? Is he... do you think he's angry with me?"

Gandalf shook his head, his expression softening as he took his own seat across from Bilbo. "I do not think he wishes to drive you mad, Bilbo." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "Tell me, do you eat enough? Get enough sun? Do you go out much these days?"

Bilbo blinked, frowning at the unexpected line of questioning. "What does that have to do with anything?" he asked, clearly deflecting, his gaze dropping to his tea.

Gandalf sighed, his eyes kind and knowing. "Well, if it is Thorin, I think he's made himself perfectly clear."

Bilbo stared at him, bewildered. "What do you mean?"

Gandalf leaned forward slightly, his gaze holding Bilbo's. "Think about it, my dear Bilbo. Your cloak—he wants you to go outside. The pots and pans, the food—you are not eating enough. The brandy hidden away—perhaps he thinks you imbibe a bit too much these days. The chest of treasures, pulled out—perhaps a reminder of what you have lived through and how strong you are."

Bilbo fell silent, his eyes shifting to the side as if replaying each incident in his mind. Slowly, realization began to dawn on his face, his expression softening as he pieced it together.

"It appears your friend is just trying to look out for you," Gandalf said gently, his voice filled with compassion.

Bilbo's breath caught in his throat, and his eyes filled with tears. He visibly tried to hold them back, but the emotions that had been building up for so long finally spilled over. He let out a choked sob, his shoulders trembling as he buried his face in his hands.

Gandalf moved closer, resting a comforting hand on Bilbo's back, his heart aching for the hobbit who had lost so much and was now faced with the lingering presence of a lost love that could never quite leave him. "There, there, my friend," Gandalf murmured. "You are, in fact, not alone. And that's an encouraging thought."

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I'm so sick and had to cancel my Halloween/bday party tomorrow. :(
But it's okay. We are going to save all the food for my actual bday on the 29th and just go wild.

Okay! Are you ready for some more Poltergeist Thorin? lol More wrecked Bilbo? More cryptid Gandalf? Some chuckles maybe? Let's go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had been a few days since Gandalf's arrival at Bag End, and the wizard had taken care not to crowd Bilbo. He knew that his friend needed time to process everything—time to accept that perhaps, Thorin's spirit had indeed found its way back to him. In the meantime, Gandalf did what he could to gently encourage Bilbo. He coaxed the hobbit out into the garden, the two of them smoking their pipes in companionable silence as the morning sun filtered through the leaves, warming their faces.

One particularly fine day, Gandalf had managed to convince Bilbo to accompany him into the village to visit the market. Though reluctant at first, Bilbo eventually agreed, and so the two of them found themselves walking down the familiar paths of Hobbiton. The market was lively, with hobbits bustling about, stalls overflowing with vegetables, baked goods, and wares of all kinds.

Gandalf walked beside Bilbo, his sharp eyes noticing the way other hobbits looked at his friend as they passed by. The whispers were subtle but unmistakable, and the stares were hard to miss. Most of the time, such whispers and stares were directed at Gandalf himself, but this time, the attention was focused entirely on Bilbo. And Bilbo, for his part, seemed to shrink slightly under their gaze, his shoulders tensing as he kept his eyes ahead. A few hobbits greeted him kindly, their faces brightening at the sight of him.

"Good to see you out and about, Mister Bilbo! It's been far too long," said one elderly hobbit, her eyes crinkling with a warm smile.

Bilbo forced a smile in return, his voice light but lacking its usual cheer. "Ah, yes, well, you know how it is. Busy days and all that. I must keep moving—I'm hosting a guest, after all."

Gandalf glanced at Bilbo, watching as his friend deflected the well-meaning comments with practiced ease. It was clear to him that Bilbo wasn't entirely comfortable being out and about, not yet. The townsfolk's curiosity—their well-meaning concern—only served as a reminder of how long Bilbo had kept himself shut away in Bag End.

Still, Gandalf was determined to help Bilbo regain his footing. He walked beside him, offering the quiet support of his presence as they made their way through the market, stopping at a few stalls to pick up items that Bilbo insisted he needed for the smial. Though Bilbo's smile seemed strained at times, there were moments—small, fleeting moments—where Gandalf could see the old Bilbo shining through, a soft laugh here, a genuine smile there.

Back at Bag End, the peculiar occurrences had subsided, as if Thorin had decided to give Bilbo the space he needed to adjust to the idea of his presence. The pots and pans stayed where they were meant to be, the cloak remained on its hook, and the chest of treasures remained untouched, he also stopped reorganizing the books. It seemed that Thorin was content to let things settle now that Gandalf was here to look after Bilbo's well-being, but he had certainly not left, nor did he show any intention of doing so anytime soon.

Gandalf, too, was content to wait. He knew Bilbo well enough to understand that his friend took time to decide things, to make up his mind. But once Bilbo did decide, Gandalf had no doubt that he would face whatever lay ahead—even if it meant confronting the ghost of a love that had never been fully spoken. For now, Gandalf was patient, allowing Bilbo the time he needed, and offering his quiet encouragement as they shared their days together.

All in good time, Gandalf thought to himself, as he watched Bilbo carefully pick out a head of lettuce from a market stall. All in good time.

It didn’t take long for Bilbo to begin fretting about the sudden quiet though.

"Do you think he’s… gone?" Bilbo asked all of a sudden after a long stretch of staring at his open book, which had been on the same page for the better part of an hour.

Gandalf took a moment to study him. Bilbo had his eyes locked on the page. His expression was mostly neutral, but Gandalf caught the little nose twitch that his friend did when he was not pleased. Gandalf took another moment to concentrate on his periphery, and there, in the shadowy corner behind Bilbo’s chair near the hearth, he saw the shape of Thorin. Thorin shifted, and the floorboards creaked.

Bilbo froze, his entire body tensing as he slowly looked up at Gandalf, his eyes wide with silent questioning, asking if Gandalf had heard it too, if it was Thorin without actually saying a word.

Gandalf shook his head and stroked his beard. "He remains steadfast by your side."

Bilbo seemed to relax, though his discomfort was evident. "Can you see him?" he asked, clearing his throat as he shifted in his seat.

Gandalf looked directly at the looming shade, which, of course, made the figure vanish from view. Still, he could feel Thorin's presence as though he were physically there. "In a sense. Communicating with spirits is not my specialty, but I can sense him quite clearly."

Bilbo nodded thoughtfully before asking, "Can you… hear him? Does he… has he said anything?"

"Oh, he has said plenty, though he has no way to voice the words," Gandalf replied.

Bilbo gave him a peeved look, but it quickly turned to sadness. "Is he… that is, I've read that spirits linger when they have unfinished business. Is he… stuck here," Bilbo gasped, visibly trying to rein in his emotions even as his eyes brimmed with tears, his voice strained through clenched teeth, his hands gripping the book as if he might rip it in half. "Is he stuck here because of me?"

Gandalf sighed as he wondered if it was finally time to move forward with his plan. "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

Bilbo's eyes widened at the wizard's cryptic suggestion. "But—I can't..." he sputtered, his eyes shifting as he struggled to find his words. Finally, his shoulders drooped, and in a vulnerable, high-pitched voice, he breathed, "How?"

"There are ways," Gandalf said with a shrug, offering no further explanation. He waited patiently for the hobbit to take the bait. After all, Bilbo had to genuinely desire to speak with the dwarf king, or none of it would work.

The Baggins in Bilbo flared just as Gandalf expected. Bilbo scoffed, a myriad of expressions crossing his face, each one clearly reflecting his frustration with Gandalf's cryptic words.

But, true to his Baggins nature, Bilbo managed to ask politely while still sounding anything but, "And would you perhaps like to enlighten me on what those ways are, my dear Gandalf?"

Gandalf widened his eyes in feigned innocence, tilting his head slightly as he clasped his hands together on his lap thoughtfully. "Hmm, well, I suppose, if you truly wish to know."

As though praying for patience, Bilbo closed his eyes before pursing his lips and shooting a glare in Gandalf's direction. He then turned to the fireplace, brow furrowed, nose twitching—clearly wrestling with the same question.

"Yes," he whispered, his eyes lost in the flames before he cleared his throat and sat up straighter. "Yes." This time, his voice was clear and resolute as he met Gandalf's gaze.

"Ah! Well, then, that's good," Gandalf declared with a smile. "We can start simply."

Bilbo's eyes fluttered, and a hint of apprehension gleamed in them. "You mean right now?"

"No time like the present, I say." Gandalf clapped his hands and rubbed them together before leaning forward and giving Bilbo a wink. "How about you tell me where you think our dearly not-so-departed is standing right now?"

Suddenly alert and sitting stiff in his seat, Bilbo looked around the room. "But I can't see him. I have before, but only the once."

"You were likely in the right state of mind by pure accident. Not to worry. Just pick something in the room to focus on. Keep your gaze steady and try not to blink initially."

Bilbo swallowed audibly, a small whimper escaping him as he tried to follow the instructions. Despite his best efforts, his body remained tense, his posture rigid and unyielding.

"Take some deep breaths and try to relax," Gandalf advised.

Shifting restlessly as he struggled to find comfort, Bilbo fidgeted in his chair for a while. But finally, after some effort, he relaxed enough for Gandalf to continue.

"Now, look at me and just focus on me at first." Once Bilbo's eyes were still and unblinking, Gandalf continued, his voice calm and encouraging. "Without shifting your eyes, broaden your view. Try to see if there is anything or anyone out of place in the room."

A small wrinkle appeared on Bilbo's brow, and the lines of his frown deepened, showing his concentration. Then, suddenly, Bilbo's eyes widened. He shot up from his chair, whipping around to face exactly where Thorin was, before backing away until he reached Gandalf's side, gripping onto his sleeve with trembling fingers. "There! He... he was just there but now —"

"If you look directly at him, you will most-likely not see him, the mind must be tricked into it and that takes skill, the right state of mind, and a deep bond," Gandalf explained gently.

A small sound of grief escaped the hobbit, but he quickly collected himself, rubbing his eyes with his fists before letting out a deep sigh. "Okay," he said, nodding, "okay. Now... how do I... speak to him, or—or how can he speak to me, rather?"

Gandalf offered a reassuring smile. "You have a few options, but let's try something simple first. Mind, he won't be able to physically speak, as he has no physical vessel." Gandalf cleared his throat and spoke with clear authority, addressing the spirit. "Thorin Oakenshield, son of Thrain, son of Thror, if you can hear me, knock once for no, and twice for yes."

Silence enveloped the room, and Bilbo shot Gandalf a wary, questioning glance, one eyebrow arched in doubt. Just as he was about to voice his misgivings, two distinct knocks echoed from the direction where Thorin stood.

Bilbo jumped, gasping, his grip on Gandalf's sleeve tightening until his fingers went numb. The corners of his mouth twitched, caught somewhere between a smile and a grimace as if he couldn’t decide whether to be relieved or terrified by the new development.

"Do it again," Bilbo rasped, so still, his ears twitching in anticipation.

Again, the two knocks came, echoing softly yet unmistakably through the room.

"Oh," Bilbo whispered, his other hand lifting to cover his mouth, his fingers trembling as they pressed against his parted lips. His eyes were wide, filled with shock and something close to hope. Then, without warning, he swayed on his feet, his body giving out as he promptly fainted right onto Gandalf's lap.

Gandalf caught him with ease, quite expecting such a reaction, to be honest. He could feel Thorin suddenly move closer, and even saw his shadow, the spirit’s concern palpable despite

his incorporeal form, hovering protectively over Bilbo.

"Not to worry, Thorin," Gandalf chuckled softly, his eyes twinkling with a mixture of amusement and sympathy. "Our dear hobbit will be just fine." With a gentleness that his friend needed and deserved, he lifted Bilbo in his arms and carried him to his bed, tucking him in carefully.

"Rest now, my friend," Gandalf murmured, smoothing the blanket over Bilbo and giving a knowing glance to the unseen Thorin. "There is much yet for you both to say."

Bilbo's eyes fluttered open, blinking sluggishly as he began to wake up. He stared at the ceiling, momentarily disoriented, his mind foggy from sleep. Something didn't quite feel right. How had he ended up in bed? He didn't remember climbing under the covers, nor falling asleep in the first place. His brow furrowed as he tried to piece it together, his memories a jumble of fragments.

Suddenly, his eyes snapped wide open, and Bilbo shot up, sitting ramrod straight in his bed, his heart pounding in his ears. The events of the previous night rushed back to him in an overwhelming wave of clarity.

Thorin had answered him.

Two knocks. Clear as day. Bilbo had seen Thorin's shadow beside him even when he had thought Thorin wasn't there at all. He swallowed hard, his thoughts racing. All this time, he had assumed that Thorin came and went as he pleased, which might have explained the quiet days, the moments of eerie stillness where everything seemed so normal. But now... now he couldn't ignore the possibility that Thorin was truly stuck here, bound either to Bag End or, more frighteningly, to Bilbo himself.

His fingers fidgeted restlessly with the blanket as his thoughts tumbled over one another. And to top it all off, if Thorin had been present, as Gandalf had said, "steadfastly by his side"... Did that mean Thorin was with him every moment of every day? The implications nearly made him swallow his own tongue.

Surely not. Surely he wasn't here right now. Surely not in the bedroom. Bilbo's face turned a deep shade of red at the thought. Where Thorin had hidden the brandy. His bedroom—where Thorin's name had escaped his lips countless times, sometimes whispered in grief, sometimes groaned in moments of longing and pleasure, raw emotions spilling forth in the privacy of night. *Oh, my Lady of Green Things!* The idea of Thorin witnessing all of that—

Bilbo buried his face in his hands, groaning aloud, both mortified and flustered. "Surely not," he whispered, his voice muffled by his palms, but the doubt lingered like a stubborn shadow in the corners of his mind. He peeked between his fingers, his eyes scanning the room,

searching for any hint of Thorin's presence, any flicker of movement, any sound. He did as Gandalf had taught him the evening prior, but perhaps he was doing it wrong!

Nothing. Just the morning light filtering through the curtains, dappling the room in soft gold. But the absence of proof wasn't exactly reassuring. Not when he knew Thorin could be there without him seeing. Not when he had felt Thorin's presence so clearly the night before.

Bilbo let out a shaky breath, his chest tightening. "Thorin," he whispered, his voice hesitant, almost a plea, "If you're here..." He hesitated, unsure of what he even wanted to say. Did he want Thorin to answer? Did he want proof? Or did he want to be blissfully ignorant, to pretend that his private moments had truly been private?

He shook his head, his curls bouncing slightly, and fell back against the pillows, his eyes staring up at the ceiling, his mind a mess of tangled thoughts and feelings. "This is madness," he muttered to himself. "Absolute madness."

Gandalf sat at the breakfast table, leisurely munching on tea and biscuits. The late afternoon sun filtered in through the kitchen window, casting a delightful and peaceful glow over the table. Bilbo had slept so late that Gandalf had decided it was best to let the hobbit catch up on the rest he so desperately needed. Truly, he couldn't be blamed for muttering a small spell under his breath when he'd tucked him in.

The wizard was just about to help himself to another biscuit when a clatter and hurried footsteps met his ears. Moments later, Bilbo stumbled into the kitchen, his hair a wild mess and his clothes still sleep-rumpled. His cheeks were nearly glowing red, like embers in a fire, as he suddenly blurted out, "Are there any, I dunno, restrictions ghosts might have regarding the haunted party's privacy?"

Gandalf, mid-chew, paused in surprise. The biscuits were quite dry, and Bilbo's question had come entirely out of nowhere, lacking any of the hobbit's usual pleasantries first thing in the day. Gandalf found himself struggling not to choke on the crumbs as he processed the unexpected inquiry. He took his time, swallowing deliberately, washing down the stubborn crumbs with a sip of tea. Then he coughed lightly and sighed, all while Bilbo stood there, clearly trying to be patient but failing miserably—his teeth gritted and his hands flexing at his sides.

"Good afternoon, dear Bilbo," Gandalf finally said, a twinkle of amusement in his eye. "I slept quite well, thank you. And you?"

Bilbo's cheeks flushed an even deeper red, a fresh wave of color washing over his face. "Gandalf..." he said, his tone carrying a clear warning.

Deciding that it was best to be forthcoming for once, Gandalf sighed. "Not that I know of—"

A soft, despairing noise escaped Bilbo as the color all but drained from his face. Gandalf watched with some concern as the hobbit swayed slightly on his feet, looking as if he might swoon at any moment. Quickly, Gandalf reached out to steady him, leading Bilbo over to a chair and gently guiding him to sit down.

"Whoa there now," Gandalf said, his voice gentle. "What's this about, Bilbo? Are you worried that Thorin might stand over your shoulder while you bathe or something of the like?"

Bilbo's eyes widened in horror. "Oh my lord, I hadn't even considered that!" he groaned, burying his face in his hands. His shoulders slumped as he let out a pained, muffled groan.

Gandalf chuckled softly, patting Bilbo's shoulder in a reassuring manner. "Come now, Bilbo. We are speaking of Thorin Oakenshield—a noble and honorable dwarf. Do you truly think he would turn into some kind of lecher just because walls are no longer barriers for him?" Gandalf cast a stern, warning glance at the corner of the room where Thorin's shade stood, his wizardly power subtly intensifying as he spoke. His voice dropped low, carrying a dangerous edge. "Surely, he has not intruded upon your privacy in such ways."

The shadow in the corner seemed to recoil for a moment before stubbornly returning, arms crossed defiantly. Though Thorin’s soft scoff went unheard by Bilbo, Gandalf noted it with a flicker of amusement.

Bilbo shook his head, groaning intermittently. "Oh, of course, you're right, Gandalf. Thorin wouldn’t... do that. Not purposely, anyway. But that doesn't mean I haven't possibly—and colossally—embarrassed myself!"

Gandalf, unhelpfully, nodded in agreement. "That may very well be true, my friend."

Bilbo's head snapped up, his eyes narrowed in indignation as he glared at the wizard, who simply raised an eyebrow. The hobbit's lips pressed into a thin line, his expression full of exasperation, until Gandalf's laughter finally broke through the tension in the room. Slowly, reluctantly, Bilbo’s scowl softened, and a smile began to tug at the corners of his mouth. He tried to fight it, but before long, he was chuckling alongside Gandalf, the absurdity of it all easing the weight on his shoulders, if only for a moment.

The days following Gandalf's strange demonstration were a slow unfolding of change. Bilbo found himself becoming slightly less melancholic the more he opened himself to the idea of communicating with Thorin properly. Though he hadn't yet tried again, there was a sense of something shifting inside him. The mere thought of speaking to Thorin left him feeling a tangle of apprehension, embarrassment, and hope.

Despite all this, Bilbo wanted their first 'conversation' to be proper. He didn’t want to collapse into a heaping pile of useless grief over what could not be changed. He didn’t want to dig up old hurts that had never truly healed, even though he knew Thorin had parted from

the world with forgiveness on his lips, exonerating Bilbo's actions with the Arkenstone. But what did Bilbo truly want now? He had questions, certainly. Deep questions that had haunted him since before the mountain, but he wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answers. Yet, he owed it to Thorin—and to himself—to give an honest try at communication.

If Thorin was tied to Bilbo because of his own grief, that would be a hard tonic to swallow. If Thorin lingered because Bilbo couldn’t let go, then it was Bilbo’s responsibility to do the right thing and help Thorin move on by healing himself. And that… that was a frightening prospect. Because if he healed, Thorin might leave. He might finally find peace. And the thought of that felt like losing him on Raven Hill all over again—it was perhaps the most selfish thing Bilbo had ever felt.

This was going to be hard. But neither a Baggins nor a Took would ever curl up and wither away just because something was hard. And dammit, Bilbo was determined not to!

It was time to face the unknown.

Finally, Bilbo approached Gandalf with more questions. He had mulled it over long enough and knew he needed answers. The yes-or-no questions were too limiting, and could easily lead to misunderstandings. He needed something more—something real. He needed to know if it was even possible to have an actual conversation with Thorin.

"It is," Gandalf said with that mysterious twinkle in his eyes. "There are many ways, Bilbo. Some use runes, cards, or other arcane methods. But there are even clearer paths. For instance, a person could serve as a temporary vessel for the spirit to speak through. It’s not usually advised, but in Thorin's case, he could be trusted not to harm the conduit. Then, of course, there is the Plane of Dreams."

Bilbo perked up, his curiosity instantly piqued. "The Plane of Dreams?"

"Indeed," Gandalf continued. "The plane where spirits exist is shared with the realm of dreams, and they can often communicate with the living there."

"Then why hasn’t Thorin tried that already?" Bilbo asked, his brows furrowing.

"Ah, well, as I mentioned before, it requires skill, intention, and a bond deep enough to transcend death. Without those, it’s a challenge for even the most willing of spirits."

Bilbo deflated a little at that, his heart heavy with the reminder of their lack of a meaningful enough bond. It had not been deep enough after all—proof that the love he felt for Thorin was only one sided. "That explains it then…" he muttered, heart shattering at an alarming rate.

A loud crash suddenly tore through the air, making Bilbo nearly jump out of his skin. He looked to Gandalf, wide-eyed, before rushing to his study. There, he found the chest of treasure flung open, and the mithril shirt that had been hidden within—the very one Thorin had given him—lay atop the desk, glinting in the light.

"Hmm," said Gandalf, his voice annoyingly calm.

"Hmm? Hmm what?! What is the meaning of this, now?!" Bilbo demanded, his hands flapping about in agitation.

"Isn't it obvious?"

Not for the first time, Bilbo had a mind to wear boots just so he could kick one right up into the wizard's—

"He's telling you that your bond is not the problem," Gandalf said with a knowing smile. "And I agree. Your friendship and shared perils should be enough. It's the skill and the knowledge you lack."

Bilbo blinked, taken aback. How did they both know exactly what he had thought? He stared at the mithril shirt, his heart lifting with an emotion he dared not name. Relief, perhaps. Thorin still… he still saw him as a friend. 'A token of our friendship,' Thorin had called it. And it seemed that bond was enough.

Bilbo straightened his shoulders, determination setting in. He shook his hands as if shaking off his nervousness, a spark of courage lighting within him. "I wish to learn," he said, his voice steadier. "I must learn."

Gandalf beamed at him, his eyes twinkling more brightly than ever. "Well, now, it's fortunate we know someone who may teach you!"

And that was how Bilbo found himself packing his bags once more, setting out for the Last Homely House—the House of Elrond.

Chapter End Notes

Will ya'll leave me comments so I have something to distract myself with and maybe recommend some shows... except I'm still not on speaking terms with Prime or Disney Plus so none from there please lol!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Happy Halloween, everyone! Thank you for the continued kudos and comments as they have kept me going through some tough days lately!

Stay safe out there!

Peace, a kind of tranquility that felt familiar, surrounded Bilbo, almost like the healing magic of Rivendell. He took in a deep breath, savoring the serenity, and his surroundings seemed to sharpen suddenly. Yes, Rivendell. He remembered now—he had made the journey. He was in Rivendell, and everything seemed as it should, though... there was something about it that felt... not quite right.

The moon hung in the sky, full and enormous, impossibly large, casting its silver light over the curved elven architecture. The city lay empty and silent, not even the sound of a cricket or a breeze in the air. A stillness that immediately clued Bilbo in.

"Am I dreaming?" He was dreaming!

The realization struck Bilbo with a strange clarity, and he felt completely awake, staring in wonder at the scene. How was he lucid? And then it came back to him—he had been learning to wake while dreaming!

What had Elrond said to do? Ah, yes! Bilbo had unwittingly accomplished the first step: "Ask yourself often while awake if you are dreaming and look at your hands."

He remembered now—he had been reality-checking for weeks in his waking hours. Without hesitation, Bilbo brought his hand to his face and studied it closely.

It looked like his hand, but something was off. The lines were not quite right, and for a fleeting moment, he swore he saw an extra pinky finger. His vision shifted, and the details sharpened again, more grounded now, even more real. He even felt the firm stone beneath his feet and the soft caress of a breeze against his skin. It felt astonishingly real for a dream.

This was the first time the lucidity had held, and it felt so vivid, so utterly real. Bilbo tried to recall more of what Elrond had taught him.

"Eventually, the habit of checking your reality will follow you into your dreams, and you will reach lucidity when your mind takes hold of oddities that do not belong to the waking world. Keeping your wits will be the hardest task. The dream will easily take a drifting mind, and you will forget you dream at all. So until you can master it, keep one hand in view to ground yourself."

Bilbo felt a little foolish holding his hand up, but as he did so, he found it helped. He could look past his hand and take in the world around him with startling clarity. He took a few steps, his bare feet padding on the smooth stone. How could a dream feel this real? And what now?

"Then you summon him," Elrond had said.

Bilbo froze at the memory. "How?" he had asked the elven lord.

Elrond smiled kindly. "Simply call his name. Your desire to see him and invoking his name should bring him to you. But beware that you do not find yourself too lucid. Your logical mind, so used to the waking world, may think it impossible and thwart your attempts. You must believe—trick your mind into accepting the impossible. It is a delicate balance."

Bilbo took a few deep, steady breaths, trying to calm his racing heart. He whispered softly into the quiet night, "Thorin?"

The air shifted. A movement flickered in his periphery, just beyond his upraised hand. There, in the dark shadows, something began to take form. The unmistakable shape of Thorin started to emerge, the glow of the moon catching on his armor first, the same one he'd worn for most of the quest. The moonlight glinted off his beautiful face, half-revealed, his eyes intense and kind as he raised his hand, as if reaching for Bilbo.

"Nope!" Bilbo blurted out, and promptly woke up.

Bilbo walked through a sunlit field, the golden light warm on his skin. This felt different, calmer. He took a deep breath, focusing on his hands, trying to keep calm. He saw Thorin in the distance, standing with his back to him. Bilbo hesitated, unsure if he should call out or just approach. The weight of loss pressed on his chest, but he swallowed it down.

He called out, his voice barely a whisper, "Thorin…"

The figure turned, but as he did, the light faded, the ground turning to snow, and Bilbo was once again on that wretched hill, Thorin bleeding out beneath him. He shook his head frantically, trying to change the dream, to force it back to the field, but the nightmare clung to him like a vice, wrapping around him and dragging his mind under its influence.

He fell to his knees beside Thorin with a sob. "No, please!" He took Thorin's hand in his and wept.

"Bilbo…" The voice he'd missed for so long was a faint echo at first, the tone not matching the heartbreaking scene before him. Thorin's brow furrowed, and he lifted his other hand to Bilbo's cheek.

Memory and dream overlapped as Bilbo stared into the pale, bloodied face of his love. Why did he have to look so peaceful? "Don't you dare, Thorin, don't you dare," he rasped out. "The eagles…"

Suddenly, Thorin's hand wrapped around the back of his neck and he pulled Bilbo so close to his face that their noses almost touched. "Enough. Wake up."

Bilbo awoke in a cold sweat, trembling and heartbroken, shooting upright in his bed with a shout. "No!" Frustration surged, and he grabbed his pillow, hurling it across his cozy room in Rivendell.

He had been so close! So, so close! Tears welled in his eyes, and he buried his face in his hands, trying to stifle the sobs that broke free. When it occurred to him that Thorin might be watching, he hastily wiped his tears away.

"I'm sorry," Bilbo whispered into the darkened room. "That was awful. I'm sorry I took us back there. I didn't mean to. I keep failing. I can't... As much as I wish to see you, something keeps getting in the way… It's me... I'm getting in the way. And I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Usually, that memory haunted his nightmares, and he'd be a mess, but with the failure on top of it, and the guilt of having made Thorin relive that moment—

A sudden soft puff of chilled air brushed against his nose, making him freeze. He blinked, startled. "Thorin Oakenshield," Bilbo muttered, his bloodshot eyes widening, "did you just boop my nose?"

He sat there, incredulous, staring into the darkness. Then, he heard it—a faint, breathy chuckle. Bilbo's heart leaped, his eyes growing as wide as saucers. The chuckle—it was unmistakably Thorin's.

Despite himself, despite everything, a beaming smile spread across Bilbo's face. He could not contain it. He held onto that smile for the rest of the day, a spark of hope rekindled in his heart.

Over the next few days, Bilbo spoke often with Elrond about his failed attempts, each conversation revealing more of Bilbo's pain and frustration. Elrond reassured him gently that if his heart and mind were not ready to truly see Thorin, then it simply wouldn't happen.

"Seeing the dead is a shock to the living that most cannot comprehend," Elrond had said, his voice gentle, like a breeze rustling through the leaves. "The solution is to not think of them as dead at all. But that is easier said than done, I'm afraid. Grief often impedes progress, which is why most spirits cannot make contact. And your grief, my dear friend, runs deep."

Bilbo couldn't argue with that. The weight of Thorin's death pressed down on him like a constant boulder on his chest. He looked at Elrond, eyes wide and filled with a desperate kind of hope. "So what can I do? Will I ever master it?"

Elrond put a comforting hand on Bilbo's shoulder, his eyes filled with a warmth that seemed almost paternal. "Grief is a heavy burden, and it cannot be rushed. But, I have an idea that may help..."

It was evening when Bilbo found himself sitting with Elrond in the elf lord's private sitting room. The situation felt surreal, his heart pounding furiously as he stared at their clasped hands resting atop the polished table. He could feel the weight of the late afternoon settling in, the shadows stretching across the room, deepening the silence between them.

Elrond's eyes were closed, his face serene as he focused. Bilbo, on the other hand, felt anything but tranquil. He was painfully aware of how clammy his palms were, and how his fingers twitched despite his best efforts to remain still. He swallowed nervously, and the seconds stretched into what felt like eternities before Elrond finally broke the silence, his voice calm and steady.

“Are you with us, Thorin, son of Thrain?”

Bilbo's breath caught in his throat as he waited, the silence growing heavier still.

Two soft knocks echoed through the chamber.

Elrond nodded, his expression unwavering. “Will you speak through me to your dear friend who wishes to make contact?”

There was a pause, then two firm knocks, louder than the first, resounded through the room. Bilbo's eyes widened slightly in surprise—Thorin had never been fond of elves. Yet here he was, agreeing to use one as his vessel.

Elrond took a deep breath. “Then I offer you a contract, Thorin, as long as your intentions are pure. I give you permission to voice your words through me. Now.”

A long silence followed, a chill settling into the room. Bilbo shivered as a cold breeze brushed against him, making the hairs on his arms stand on end.

He felt a sudden squeeze from Elrond's hands. After another awkward heartbeat of silence, Elrond's lips quirked into a lopsided smirk—an expression that Bilbo had never seen on the elf before. It was startlingly familiar, unmistakably Thorin’s. Bilbo gasped, his heart skipping a beat.

“Hello, burglar,” the words came, still in Elrond's voice but with a depth, a slight shift in tone and cadance that was undeniably Thorin. Bilbo's eyes went wide, and he instinctively tried to pull his hands away, but the elf lord’s grip tightened, keeping him anchored. The smirk faded, replaced by a pout. “Did you not wish to speak to me?” The question held a hint of hurt, a vulnerability that tugged at Bilbo's heartstrings.

Bilbo blinked, the sight of a pout on the noble face of Lord Elrond utterly jarring. “I… yes,” he breathed, his voice barely audible.

The lopsided grin returned, a glimmer of mischief. “You have questions. Ask them of me. I cannot share a vessel for long.”

“Oh! Um, w-well…” Bilbo stammered, his nerves fraying further. “This feels a bit odd, I must admit. How… how do I know it is truly, eh, you I’m speaking with?”

The smirk widened into a full grin. “It is wise of you not to trust an elf. Ask me something he would not know.”

Bilbo huffed, some of his nervousness dissipating at the typical dwarven jab. “Um…” he began, but before he could continue, Elrond—or rather, Thorin—interjected.

“Should I tell you of Balin’s atrocious taste in pipe weed? Or the time Gloin nearly sobbed over a rock that he claimed shared the likeness of his wife—though we all thought it resembled his brother's bunion more? Or perhaps the cloud of stench that haunted whoever had the unfortunate place near Dwalin’s backside, for he farted terribly in his sleep?”

Bilbo’s jaw dropped, his shock quickly turning into a snort. He giggled despite himself, a nervous yet genuine laugh spilling from his lips. El—Thorin—squeezed his hands again, and a softer, more amused smile formed on the elf’s face before it turned wistful, the mirth fading.

“Bilbo,” Elrond’s voice spoke, but the tone—the inflection—was unmistakably Thorin's, gentle and warm, just like it had been after the Carrock.

Bilbo stopped breathing, his heart suddenly aching.

“You went back to your books… your armchair…” Thorin continued, and Bilbo felt tears prickling at his eyes. “But you’ve yet to plant your trees to watch them grow.”

The words broke something within him. Bilbo's throat constricted, his vision blurred as he tried to yank his hands free, but Thorin—because Bilbo knew, without a doubt now, it was Thorin—held firm, his grip unrelenting.

“If my presence pains you so, I am sorry for it,” Thorin whispered, dipping his head somberly. “But I cannot leave your side.”

A boulder seemed lodged in Bilbo’s throat, and he tried to clear it, failing miserably. Finally, he choked out, “Is it because I’m… I’m not well? Does my… please tell me, Thorin, am I keeping you here by the chains of my grief?! Am I keeping you from your rest? Your—your family?” His voice broke, the words dissolving into a choked sob.

Thorin’s vessel leaned a little closer, thumbs tracing circles on Bilbo’s skin. “I am here of my own will, and by the grace of my Maker. That is all I will say for now on the matter. But know this—” Elrond’s body leaned forward, his face solemn, “I am exactly where I wish to be.”

Bilbo stared, his heart thudding in his chest, the words sinking in. “Really?” Bilbo whispered, bewildered. “So, so h-how long will you, um, be visiting… me?”

The vessel’s head tilted in thought. “Long enough,” he replied unhelpfully, smirking once more. “Though my time in this vessel is running out. I wonder if I should make the Lord Elf mine for gold in his overly large cavernous nostrils before the contract is complete. What say you?”

“Thorin!” Bilbo cried, aghast, though he coughed to hide his laugh, knowing his own eyes sparkled with mischief at the thought. “Don’t you dare!”

Seeing Lord Elrond throw his head back and laugh so maniacally was something Bilbo didn’t think he would ever forget. They still snickered together after they mostly composed themselves. Bilbo’s hands were squeezed again. “I must return the vessel to its proper owner, now.”

Bilbo deflated in his chair. “I don’t think we’ll be able to do this again,” Bilbo lamented, tears threatening to spill once more. “It wouldn’t be right… Lord Elrond has been very kind but…”

“Worry not,” Thorin replied, caressing Bilbo’s knuckles again soothingly, which made Bilbo’s stomach flutter with confusion over it every time. “We shall be seeing each other soon, I wager. I have no doubt you will master the art of waking while dreaming. For you are the cleverest person I’ve ever met, Bilbo Baggins.”

Bilbo felt his cheeks flame instantly, and his heart nearly burst in his chest with pride and giddiness.

Thorin’s soft smile pulled into a fierce and exaggerated frown. “And I won’t have to share the body of an elf next time.” His grin returned when Bilbo let out a scoff. “Until then, my burglar, I will be near, though you cannot see me. I give you my word.”

Bilbo nodded, a brief dazed smile on his face from the way Thorin had used his former moniker in the possessive. It had always sounded more like an endearment after The Hug, but adding the “my” in there made Bilbo slightly light-headed.

Slowly, Elrond leaned back, the tension easing, the grip on Bilbo’s hands softening. The elf’s eyes fluttered open, the familiarity of Elrond's presence returning in an instant. He gave Bilbo’s hands a gentle pat before releasing them. “The contract is fulfilled, and Thorin is…” he trailed off, glancing over Bilbo’s shoulder. “Apparently still here. Did you not make peace?”

Bilbo blinked, trying to catch his breath as he took his hands back, wiping at the tears that streaked down his face. He sniffled, shaking his head with a genuine, if small, smile. “My… my grief does not keep him here,” he murmured, his voice hoarse. “He… he said he’s where he wishes to be.”

Elrond nodded, eyes knowing. “I think you’ll have better luck now with your task.”

Bilbo smiled. “I think so too.”

If Bilbo Baggins left the room a bit too quickly to be proper, no one could blame him. He had a dwarf king waiting on him, and Bilbo could barely wait to sleep.

Bilbo found himself wandering along the paths, his footsteps light on the stone, the peace of the place wrapping around him like a comforting blanket. This dream felt different from the

others; there was no urgency, no panic. It felt like drifting on a gentle current.

Perhaps it was because of the faint melody that reached his ears—soft, soothing, and familiar. Bilbo followed the sound, drawn to it like a bee to a dandelion. As he rounded a corner, he saw the source of the music. There, sitting on a beautifully carved wooden bench under the full moon, was Thorin.

The dwarf king's fingers moved delicately over the strings of a large harp, the notes cascading like water over rocks. His eyes were closed, his brow relaxed, and a peaceful expression graced his face. He was humming—a low, gentle hum that carried on the cool night breeze. The sound tugged at something deep within Bilbo, a memory of warmth and camaraderie, of days long past.

For a moment, Bilbo stood rooted to the spot, barely breathing. The moonlight made Thorin's dark hair shimmer, and the glint of the diamond patterns on his armor seemed to flicker softly. When Thorin began to sing, Bilbo felt the world around him blur, as if all that existed was the song and the dwarf playing it.

The words were soft, in a language Bilbo recognized but could not understand. The emotion behind them was unmistakable. It was a song of longing and resilience, of hope and loss. Bilbo stepped forward, almost unconsciously, entranced by the melody and the sight of Thorin alive and well, his voice resonating with an unspoken depth.

It was a surreal, blissful feeling, and in that moment, the line between dream and memory blurred beyond recognition. Bilbo wasn't sure if he was still dreaming or if he was somehow awake in a world where everything he had lost was still within reach. But it didn't matter. Thorin was here, and Bilbo felt a peace that had been absent for so long.

Bilbo had never seen Thorin play, though he knew he could, so the oddity did not trip him into fully realizing he was dreaming. He approached slowly, not wanting to break the spell. The closer he got, the clearer the song became, wrapping around him like a soothing balm. The sight of Thorin, sitting there under the moonlight, seemed as natural as anything, and Bilbo felt a sense of joy blossom in his chest.

When Thorin finished the song, he let his hands rest on the harp, and slowly, he opened his eyes. His gaze met Bilbo's, and a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I was hoping," Thorin said, his voice rumbling warm and familiar, "that a gentler introduction might help. It seems that it has, for you are still here."

Bilbo blinked, his heart fluttering at the sound of Thorin's voice addressing him so casually, despite how cold he'd treated Bilbo at the onset of their quest. Wait… the quest… it had already happened, hadn't it? The thought flew from his mind as quickly as it had entered.

"Of course I'm here," Bilbo said, almost in a daze. He couldn't stop the smile that spread across his face. It felt so natural to be standing there, to have Thorin looking at him with that same fondness and warmth. He had been waiting for this, hadn't he? Wasn't this how things were meant to be?

“I’m glad you came,” Thorin said quietly, his voice carrying the softness of the night around them. “I’ve been waiting.”

Bilbo found himself nodding, his hands clasped nervously in front of him, though the nervousness wasn’t from fear. He felt as though he were trying to remember something important, but the thought kept slipping through his fingers, lost in the gentle haze of the dream.

Thorin seemed to sense Bilbo’s confusion, and he spoke gently, “Stop trying to think so hard, burglar.” He paused, studying Bilbo with a quiet intensity that made the hobbit feel seen, truly seen. “It’s alright that you cannot grasp it yet. For now, let this be enough.”

Bilbo exhaled softly, some of the tension he didn’t realize he was carrying melting away. He didn’t need to understand everything right now. All he needed was to enjoy this moment, to savor the presence of his friend whom he had grown to care for so deeply.

“You’re being awfully nice to me,” Bilbo finally said, his voice as casual as he could make it with his heart fluttering the way it was. “I was quite certain you did not want me on this quest at all.” The words felt odd to him, out of place and time, but he shrugged it off.

“Ah… I see. No, I did not make you feel welcome, I recall to well,” Thorin replied, his smile growing a little wistful. He patted the space next to him on the bench. “Will you sit with me, Bilbo?”

The leader of the Company wanted Bilbo to sit with him! Bilbo had not anticipated this development and had previously wondered what he’d have to do to win some of the dwarf king’s favor. Now was his chance to make a better impression on the dwarf king! Without hesitation, Bilbo nodded and took the seat beside Thorin, still feeling as though he were floating, disconnected from the world and yet so very present in it.

“Shall I play some more?” Thorin asked him kindly.

Bilbo beamed with excitement. “Oh, yes, please. You play so beautifully, and your voice is so captivating!” There was only a moment where Bilbo wondered if he’d been too truthful with his words, but then Thorin smiled so wide at the compliments that Bilbo didn’t care.

The dream held steady as Bilbo let himself relax into this half-state of contentment, lulled by the lingering echo of Thorin’s song and the soothing stillness of the elven city around them.

For now, that was more than enough.

For the first time in what felt like an age, Bilbo woke slowly, without the jarring rush of reality snapping him back to wakefulness. His eyes fluttered open, sunlight streaming in through the ornate windows, casting intricate patterns on the ceiling. He took a deep breath, letting it out in a contented sigh. It felt as if a weight had been lifted from his chest, replaced by a quiet joy that he hadn’t felt in so very long.

After several moments of lying there in serene stillness, Bilbo truly registered what had happened. Pushing himself up slightly, he took a deep breath and murmured, almost to himself, “Thorin? Was that… was that real? Did we truly meet in a dream?”

Two soft knocks echoed from the wooden beams near the door. Bilbo’s eyes widened, and a large grin slowly spread across his face—one that felt both entirely new and deeply familiar. He laughed softly, almost giddy with the realization, and whispered, “Thank you.”

The feeling of connection remained, solid and unwavering, and with it, a profound sense of gratitude filled his heart for the first time in nearly two years.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> I'm really excited to dive back into this one! This is probably my favorite chapter, and I hope you find it just as amusing! lol
>
> If you didn't know, I'm a huge Beetlejuice fan, and in my fanfics, I've already explored ghost/living relationships through lucid dreams and all that fun stuff—so it's been a blast bringing those elements into Bagginshield.
>
> If you are not aware, As the Raven Flies is now complete! So go check it out if you have the time... it's kinda huge.

The weeks that followed were marked by both triumphs and frustrations. Bilbo's journey into lucid dreaming was a winding path, one where every step forward seemed to be met with two steps back. Some nights, he reached that half-aware state caught between dream and memory, where his mind treated Thorin as if he were alive and still on the quest. And other nights, despite his best efforts, the dreams would sweep him away into aimless wanderings before he could even call Thorin's name.

In the half-lucid moments, Thorin was endlessly patient. Bilbo would approach him in the dreams—sometimes in Rivendell, sometimes in Bag End, and occasionally in places they had once traveled together. They'd exchange words that felt meaningful in the moment, even if most drifted like smoke from his memory upon waking. They would sit together, talking as they might have if fate had been kinder, with Thorin offering him a warm, understanding smile and the occasional chuckle at Bilbo's dreamy babbling.

But even as these moments filled Bilbo with a quiet joy, he wanted more. He wanted clarity and awareness. He wanted to truly speak with Thorin, not just flit between half-formed conversations while the world around them shifted with the whims of his subconscious. Thorin deserved better than a half-awake hobbit who barely knew where he stood.

Elrond had warned him of this. That staying fully aware in a dream required a delicate balance. It was like walking along a riverbank, knowing that one misstep would send him tumbling into the rushing current. If he relaxed too much, he'd lose himself to the dream's ebb and flow. If he concentrated too hard, his logical mind would seize control, and the dream would dissolve.

Which is why Bilbo really should have expected that disaster would strike at some point...

He was in Bag End, standing in his kitchen, the scent of roasted fish and freshly baked bread absent, though that was exactly what was on his plate for dinner. The world had a softness to

it, a golden hue that didn't quite match the true light of his home, but Bilbo didn't notice. Not yet.

Then came the knock.

His heart stuttered, a strange, nagging recollection threading through him. Something stirred in his chest—an inkling, a whisper of doubt. He turned toward the door, hesitating, hand hovering over the table where he had been about to set down a spoon. The grain of the wood felt solid beneath his fingertips, reassuring. Real. He glanced down.

The spoon was gone.

Bilbo frowned, confusion tickling the back of his mind. He hadn't moved it. Had he? Some reality checking was in order but he skipped a couple of steps, instead he pressed his palm to the table, feeling the grooves of the polished wood. It felt real enough. He was awake…

The knock came again, more insistent this time. The strangeness of it all dissolved beneath his curiosity, and Bilbo made his way to the door.

Who could be knocking at this hour? He wondered, a flicker of something uneasy stirring in his chest. Had he been sent back in time to the evening the dwarves had arrived to whisk him away on an adventure? He scoffed at the ridiculous thought—but something constricted inside him.

When he swung the door open, his breath caught in his throat.

Thorin stood before him. Smiling.

This wasn't possible. The quest was already complete. Thorin had…

But suddenly, he couldn't remember. His mind felt slow, thoughts slipping between his fingers before he could grasp them. All he could think was: He's alive. He's here. He's alive.

Dreams, it seemed, stripped away inhibitions, revealing truths buried too deep to acknowledge in waking hours.

Without meaning to, he threw himself at Thorin, arms wrapping tightly around the dwarf's neck. Thorin instinctively caught him, strong hands steadying Bilbo as he lifted onto his toes and kissed his dwarf straight on the mouth. The hobbit wept with joy. He pulled away only to press more kisses along Thorin's cheeks, his nose, his jaw—gods, even his eyelids. He smelled the leather, the familiar musk of oil in Thorin's hair, the warmth of him.

"Oh, thank goodness! I didn't know! I swear, I didn't know, or I would have never left!" Bilbo pulled back abruptly, staring into Thorin's eyes to make sure he was real, to make sure Thorin could see his sincerity. Had he known Thorin was still alive, he would have never left Erebor. He would have stayed by his side forever.

But then he noticed Thorin's expression.

Thorin was still holding him, but he wasn't reacting. His blue eyes were wide, shining with surprise, his mouth slightly open in complete shock.

"Thorin?" Bilbo whispered. "You do believe me, don't you? Please don't be upset with me! If I'd known you were still alive, I would have never left you. I promise! Oh, I'm so happy! How long are you staying? Tell me you're staying long enough for me to pack everything and come back with you! But… What is the King of Erebor doing all the way over here? You didn't have to come yourself, you know, oh, but I'm so glad you did...! Thorin?"

The dwarf blinked, his mouth opening and closing. His gaze shifted, searching, as though struggling to find words. Finally, those blue eyes settled on Bilbo again—shining now with unshed tears. His brow furrowed, sorrowful.

"Bilbo," Thorin rasped. His name sounded like it had been dragged over jagged rocks. "I… did not survive."

Bilbo frowned. Of course, Thorin had survived. He was standing right here on his doorstep.

But then the truth started to settle in. Like his mind was clearing of some heavy fog, and the weight of realization hit him all at once. It was like a hole had ripped open inside him, growing wider and wider, consuming him from within—a black hole of devastation and mortifying recognition.

"Bilbo," Thorin said gently, haltingly, like he could sense Bilbo standing on the very edge of breaking.

And Bilbo knew. He knew what Thorin was about to say next. He already understood, but he didn't want to hear it. If he heard it, that last thread inside him would snap.

"This is a dream."

The spell shattered.

Bilbo gasped, wrenching himself free of Thorin's arms. He stumbled back too quickly, tripping over the entryway, and before he could hit the ground…

His eyes snapped open, and he was back in his bed in Rivendell, the dream lingering with stark clarity.

"No-no-no-no-no..." Bilbo muttered as his vision blurred, his breath hitching in sharp, uneven gulps as panic crashed over him like a tidal wave. He squeezed his eyes shut, groaning into his hands. What had he done?

Somehow, the devastation of remembering that Thorin was not, in fact, alive, didn't crush him nearly as much as the unbearable weight of knowing he had kissed him—had kissed him with all the longing he had buried for years. Every scandalous detail replayed in his mind, making his skin burn with mortification. And yet—his lips tingled with the memory of Thorin's, warm and surprisingly soft, pressing against his own. It had felt so real, so achingly real.

His chest tightened, the world tilting, and no matter how hard he tried to gulp in air, it never seemed to be enough. He clawed at the sheets, his body trembling, his thoughts spinning too fast to catch.

A series of sharp knocks sounded on the headboard. Thorin. Thorin was there.

He'd kissed Thorin.

Bilbo squeezed his eyes shut, covering his face with his hands again as he choked out, "Get out!" His voice cracked, shrill with panic. He was unraveling faster than a frayed tapestry left out in a hurricane, his mind a tangle of panic and mortification. His thoughts swirled like a storm, crashing into each other with humiliating force. He kept shouting, kept demanding Thorin leave, desperation turning his words into frantic, breathless sobs.

But Thorin did not leave.

Another knock. Firm. Loud. Final. A single, resolute beat: *'No.'*

"Fine then," he snarled, shoving back the covers. "I'll leave!"

Bilbo threw on his clothes with frantic, jerky movements, his fingers fumbling clumsily over buttons and buckles. His shirt was half-untucked, his suspenders twisted, and his curls stuck out wildly from where he had yanked at them in frustration.

He unlatched the door and pulled on the handle, but just as the door cracked open, it slammed shut again with an almost mocking finality. The latch clicked right back into place.

Bilbo froze, his blood pounding in his ears, and for a moment, he simply stared at the door as if he couldn't comprehend what had just happened.

"How dare—!" he spluttered, grasping the latch and tugging with all his strength. It didn't budge. "Let me out this instant!" he shouted.

A single, deliberate knock in reply. The same firm, unyielding beat as before. *'No.'*

Bilbo let out a sharp, frustrated growl, dragging both hands through his already disheveled hair. He felt feral, his skin hot with humiliation and anger. "You think you can just keep me in here? You are mistaken, sir!"

He slammed his fists against the door, the wood rattling under the force of his blows. "Help! Help! Help me!" he screamed at the top of his lungs, his voice raw with desperation.

The door unlatched instantly and flung itself open with a violent slam.

"Ha!" Bilbo cried in triumph, but his victory was short-lived. He charged forward, only to slam straight into something solid.

No—someone.

Strong hands steadied him before he could fall back, and as Bilbo stumbled, blinking up in shock, he found himself face-to-face with Gandalf.

The wizard looked battle-ready, staff raised and glowing, his sharp eyes scanning the room for danger. "What is it? What's happened, Bilbo? Are you alright?"

Bilbo's mouth worked soundlessly. He couldn't turn any redder because it was physically impossible to blush any harder. "Nothing happened!" he screeched, then cleared his throat as he held up a finger. Not knowing what else to say or do, he then pointed down the hall. "I'm leaving!" He declared, then gave a curt nod and marched away.

Gandalf spluttered before finally asking, "Well, where are you going?"

"I don't know!" Bilbo shot back, stomping down the hall with the determined gait of a hobbit who absolutely did not have a plan but refused to let that stop him. His feet barely made a sound on the stone floor, but his wild energy made up for it.

Gandalf sighed and, with long strides, easily caught up to him. "Bilbo, might I suggest—"

"No!" Bilbo snapped, throwing a hand up to silence him without breaking his stride. "No more suggestions, no more knocking, no more—no more of this nonsense! I am reclaiming my dignity, and I shall do so..." He faltered, suddenly realizing the flaw in his grand escape plan. Where could he go that Thorin would not follow? He was a ghost! He could go anywhere, with no regard for doors, walls, or a hobbit's need for personal space to die of shame in peace!

Bilbo's eyes darted wildly as he grasped for an answer, something—anything—that would give him the upper hand. Then, inspiration struck. He straightened, a manic sort of triumph flashing across his face.

"–aha–In the library! Yes, yes. Can't be knocking around in there! Wouldn't be proper, no, not at all! That's where I'm going. Where I can do some light reading on how to banish ghosts!"

Bilbo strode into the library with a sense of triumph, convinced that here, at last, he would find refuge. The moment he stepped through the grand archway, the air shifted, cool and still, imbued with the quiet reverence of centuries of knowledge. The scent of parchment, ink, and aged leather hit him like a balm, and for the first time that morning, he could breathe properly. The steady hush of the library wrapped around him, the only sounds being the soft rustle of pages turning, the scratch of quills on parchment, and the measured steps of the elven librarian organizing scrolls with meticulous care.

He exhaled, relief washing over him. Thorin wouldn't dare disrupt the sanctity of this place.

Knock–knock.

Bilbo stiffened. Every single elf in the library turned their heads in perfect unison, their gazes landing on him. The weight of their collective attention sent him deeper into the stacks, his heart hammering.

He spotted an elf seated at a long table, dutifully transcribing a text, and, without thinking, Bilbo sat beside him—an odd choice, considering the abundance of empty chairs. Still, he reasoned that sitting as close as possible to an elf might serve as a natural Thorin-deterrent. The elf looked up, their expression a perfect mask of calm curiosity. An awkward moment stretched between them as Bilbo forced a thin smile. The elf mirrored him with an equally stiff and uncertain expression, and Bilbo quickly looked away, nodding once, gulping hard.

It was only then that he realized—he had nothing to read.

Cursing under his breath, he stood abruptly and strode toward the nearest aisle. He had no idea what section he was in, his mind racing too fast to focus, so he simply grabbed the first few books that looked promising. Perhaps translations. Yes, those required deep concentration. He gathered a few, then made his way to retrieve parchment, an inkwell, and a quill. Equipped with everything he needed, he returned to the same area, this time sitting one seat away from the elf to give the poor fellow some space—but not too far, lest Thorin feel emboldened to act up.

As Bilbo settled, he reached for one of the books, only to watch in stunned silence as it slid away from his grasp.

He blinked, hand still outstretched, lips pressing into a thin line. His fingers curled into a fist as he bit his lip, inhaling sharply through his nose.

The elf beside him subtly side-eyed the movement.

Bilbo slowly turned his head to look at him, but the elf quickly averted his gaze, pretending to be entirely engrossed in his transcription.

“Behave,” Bilbo hissed very softly, barely moving his lips.

He reached for another book—only for it to go flying further down the table. The elf beside him cleared his throat but still refused to meet Bilbo’s eyes.

Bilbo clenched his jaw, exhaling sharply through his nose, quickly deciding he was going to research how to murder someone who was already dead. “So sorry,” he whispered to the elf, before turning his head completely away and mouthing, “Stop it, or I swear I will never speak to you again!”

For a terrifying moment, he feared he had gone too far—so much so that he nearly blurted out an apology, worried he had wounded Thorin’s feelings. After all, it wasn’t Thorin’s fault that Bilbo was so hopelessly, foolishly in love with a dead dwarf king. He certainly didn’t want Thorin to leave—not forever, at least. He just needed a little space to gather up the dignity he’d shredded to pieces in one stupid dream!

A sudden chill settled over the room, the air growing heavy and oppressive. Every hair on Bilbo’s neck stood on end.

Then the library exploded into chaos.

Books flew off the shelves in a sudden cascade, scrolls unraveled midair, and parchment fluttered like a storm of scattered leaves. The elves leapt into action, frantically catching the priceless texts before they hit the floor. A few cried out in distress, scrambling to protect the delicate scrolls. The librarian gasped in horror, their long fingers snatching at books before they could meet their doom.

Bilbo, frozen in absolute mortification, could only watch as disaster unfolded around him. His face burned as he stood in the eye of the storm, helpless and seething. Before he could say or do anything, Lord Elrond and Gandalf arrived.

Elrond strode into the room with the air of a king descending upon an unruly court. His voice rang out in Sindarin, a single command. The books tumbled to the floor with a final cascade of thuds, a few scrolls still unfurling until, at last, the chaos ceased. The elves stilled, their frantic movements halting as an eerie silence settled over the library.

For a brief, blessed moment, there was silence.

And then, a lone tome, apparently unsatisfied with the sudden stillness, detached itself from its shelf and plummeted to the floor with an echoing thud.

Bilbo winced. It was the most deliberate, smug book-drop he had ever witnessed.

Elrond arched a brow, unimpressed. "An explanation would be appreciated."

Bilbo, at his absolute wit’s end, clutched his own hair, barely holding in a scream. He hadn’t eaten, he’d kissed Thorin, and now—this.

Gandalf cleared his throat. "Are you and Thorin having a row?"

Elrond sighed and waved a hand, dismissing the gathered elves. They abandoned their attempts to restore order and quietly exited, leaving the mess behind. Once the last had departed, Elrond gestured to a chair. "Come. Please sit."

Bilbo plopped onto it like a schoolboy caught misbehaving. "It's nothing," Bilbo muttered, rubbing his temples.

Another book flung itself from the shelf, slamming onto the floor.

Elrond gave him a pointed look. "It seems Thorin has a different perspective." He turned his gaze upward. "If you would, Your Majesty, please refrain from further damaging the books."

Another book had been in the process of sliding out of place, but at Elrond’s words, it hesitated, then slowly, almost begrudgingly, slid back into its spot as if to say, *Fine.*

Gandalf chuckled nervously. "I think it would be best if you simply told us what happened. We can help you both through this misunderstanding."

"There is no misunderstanding," Bilbo snapped. "I just need my space, and he won’t give it to me."

A sudden gust of wind swirled through the library, ruffling pages and making Bilbo’s curls dance. Then, a tingling sensation crept up his left hand, spreading up his elbow. His fingers twitched involuntarily, his wrist cracking—not painfully, but unnervingly—before his hand jerked forward of its own accord.

The inkwell tipped over.

Bilbo gasped, trying to wrest control back, but his fingers seized a quill in jerky movements, dipped it into the spilled ink, and began to scrawl across a fresh sheet of parchment. He could do nothing but watch in growing horror as his own hand scratched out uneven, crooked runes in Khuzdul.

The moment the quill lifted, the tingling ceased. Bilbo flexed his fingers, staring at them like they had personally betrayed him, rubbing his wrist to dispel the lingering sensation.

All three of them stared at the parchment.

Bilbo swallowed hard. "What... does it say?"

For the briefest moment, Elrond's usually composed expression faltered—his eyes widening ever so slightly. Bilbo could swear he even saw the faintest hint of pink dusting the elf lord’s otherwise impeccable composure.

Gandalf, on the other hand, suddenly became extremely interested in his pockets. With an exaggerated air of innocence, he fished out his pipe.

Elrond cleared his throat pointedly.

Gandalf blinked up at him, all wide-eyed innocence. "Hmm? Oh." He sighed and tucked the pipe back into his robes.

Bilbo threw his hands in the air. "Excuse me? Hello? Can either of you tell me what that says, please and thank you?"

Elrond exhaled through his nose, and with great patience, turned back to Bilbo. "It reads, *Amrâlîme.* "

Bilbo blinked. "Amra-what?"

These were uncharted waters. Never in his life had he imagined confessing his feelings to Thorin. It was absurd. It was terrifying. And yet, he really should have expected that his feelings would come bubbling out somehow. In fact, part of him had known—had even hoped—that his dream-self might do something reckless to push things into motion. But a much larger part had been too frightened to admit it.

Bilbo sat on his bed, the parchment resting in his hands, the weight of the crooked runes pressing into his thoughts. He barely remembered leaving the library after Thorin’s message had been translated. The elves had quietly returned to pick up the mess, working around him as he sat there, unmoving, lost in a relentless loop of memories.

He had spent all that time searching, combing through every moment he could remember between himself and Thorin, looking for signs—anything that might prove Thorin had felt the same while he was still alive. And there were moments, weren't there? Lingering glances that lasted just a breath too long, a crooked smile that had seemed almost flirtatious, banter that felt like something more. The gift of mithril, given even in the throes of dragon sickness.

And then, one moment in particular—an exchange so intimate that, for a fleeting breath, Thorin had seemed to forget the gold and that wretched stone entirely. And for that same breath, Bilbo had almost confessed… before they had been interrupted.

He had spent years convincing himself he had exaggerated it all. That he had wanted too much and seen things that weren't there. But now, with Thorin's own words staring up at him from the parchment, those memories refused to be put to rest.

At some point, his feet had carried him to the kitchens, where he had told himself he wasn't that hungry, that he would only have a little something just so that he wouldn't faint. But the moment food touched his tongue, he blinked again, and suddenly, two plates were empty before him.

Now, here he was, alone in his room, staring at Thorin's handwriting, his fingers brushing absently over the ink.

He wet his lips and took a deep breath. "You there?"

Two soft knocks.

Of course, he was there. And very close, judging by the sound of it.

Bilbo swallowed. His fingers trembled slightly as he weakly waved the parchment. "Is this —?" He exhaled sharply, shaking his head, trying again. "Do you really mean it?" That was not the question he had meant to ask, but he also couldn't remember what he had planned to say in the first place.

Two knocks. Soft but sure.

Something in his chest loosened, something that had been strangling his heart for nearly two years. His shoulders sagged, and he let out a long breath, closing his eyes against the sudden wave of emotion.

Then the bed dipped beside him.

Bilbo kept his eyes shut, savoring the sensation, unwilling to open them and break the illusion. He could picture Thorin sitting there, solid and warm, right where he belonged. It wasn't fair. None of this was fair.

"Well, if it's not obvious by now," Bilbo murmured, voice quiet in the stillness, "I also have…" He swallowed hard, his fingers tightening around the parchment. "Strong feelings… for you."

He forced himself to look up—only to find exactly what he had expected. Nothing.

And yet, the bed creaked, though he had not moved.

With nothing to look at, he turned his gaze to his own hands instead, only now realizing how tightly he had been gripping the parchment. He slowly uncurled his fingers, flexing his aching knuckles, and reached over to his bedside table. He pulled open the drawer, placed the piece of parchment inside, and then hesitated for only a moment before retrieving a small wooden box carved with delicate oak leaves.

"I think you already know what's in here," he murmured, brushing his fingers over the lid. He opened the box, revealing the acorn that lay within—the very one he had shown Thorin on their journey, the one he had promised to plant. It was the same acorn he had cradled in his palm just before his foolish heart had nearly convinced him to confess his feelings... before everything went so wrong.

Bilbo let out a breathless, humorless laugh. "You were right. I did not plant my trees or watch them grow." His voice faltered, thick with something raw and aching. "I couldn't. I couldn't because it felt like burying you all over again—"

He choked on the words, bringing a fist to his mouth as if he could physically stop the grief from rising. And then—

A weight settled on his shoulder. A hand, firm and steady, squeezing just enough to ground him. There was the faintest tingling sensation, but it wasn't intrusive. It was comforting.

Bilbo let out a shaky laugh, scrubbing at his eyes with his sleeve. "I'm sorry I'm such a mess!"

One knock.

Then, from the open drawer where he kept his extra handkerchiefs, something shot out with sudden force, landing directly in his lap. Bilbo blinked down at it, startled, before recognizing the familiar fabric.

Bilbo let out a startled laugh, a breathless, incredulous sound that bubbled out before he could stop it. He picked up the handkerchief and dabbed at his eyes. "Thank you," he whispered.

Bilbo splashed cool water onto his face, letting it drip from his chin before grabbing a cloth to pat himself dry. The act felt grounding, a small ritual of normalcy after the whirlwind of emotions that had consumed his evening.

He lingered in the washroom, fingers absently tracing the fabric of his nightshirt before pulling it over his head. But just as he was about to tug it down, he hesitated.

A deep blush crept up his neck and across his cheeks as he stared at himself in the mirror. His nose twitched, betraying his nerves. He looked… healthier. There was color in his face, a fullness to his features that hadn't been there before he'd arrived in Rivendell. His frame was still small compared to the broad-shouldered dwarves, but he wasn't as gaunt as he had been.

Still, insecurity nagged at him.

He wasn't going to lie—he remembered exactly what Thorin looked like naked. The journey's lack of privacy and communal baths had made sure of that. Thorin had been all thick muscle but a soft belly, solid and powerful, a warrior's body sculpted by years of battle. Compared to that, Bilbo felt… a tad lacking.

His fingers curled around the hem of his shirt, heart thudding in his chest. And then, with a deep breath, he set it aside. Thorin's note had been very clear—Love of mine or Beloved. Bilbo was loved. He had to trust that. More than that, he wanted to show Thorin he was done hiding his own feelings, done pretending he didn't long for him.

His cheeks burned, his skin prickling with nervous anticipation, but he lifted his chin. He wouldn't shrink away from this. Not anymore.

Leaving the shirt behind, he stepped back into his bedroom in just his smalls. The moment he crossed the threshold, the air shifted—thickened—and a shiver ran down his spine. He felt it then, unmistakable and searing, the weight of unseen eyes tracing over him.

The room was eerily still, the silence pressing in as he made his way to the bed. He swallowed, forcing himself to move naturally, to pretend he wasn't acutely aware of every inch of his exposed skin under that phantom gaze. Blowing out the candle, he slipped beneath the covers, trying to ignore the way his body had already broken into goosebumps.

He stared up at the ceiling for a long moment, just listening for any hint of movement. "You can join me if you like," he offered, though his voice lacked the confidence he had hoped for.

The silence stretched, but then—just as he was beginning to doubt himself—the blankets rustled, and the mattress dipped ever so slightly. A faint, cool pressure settled on his hip, making his breath hitch. Bilbo swallowed, forcing his heart to steady itself.

"You know," he murmured, voice softer now, "I have a good feeling about tonight's dream."

Two soft knocks, encouraging and certain.

That night, Bilbo dreamed in warmth and quiet longing, in hands mapping every curve of his body with reverence, in whispered names and laughter that melted into breathless sighs. The flicker of candlelight danced against stone walls, casting their tangled forms in golden glow. The scent of pine and fire-warmed furs surrounded him, grounding him in the dream's embrace. He dreamed of Thorin's breath ghosting against his ear, of rough fingers threading through his curls, of lips tracing the length of his throat with aching slowness.

He dreamed of broad hands gripping his waist, of a steady, unspoken promise in the way their bodies fit together beneath silken sheets. There was no urgency, only the quiet unraveling of restraint, the giving and receiving of everything they had never been able to say in life. Kisses softened into murmured confessions, touches lingered, memorizing, as if time had no hold on them.

When Bilbo's form shifted in his sleep, his lips curved ever so slightly, his body instinctively curling into a presence that could not be seen but could be felt. And in the quiet of his room, the blankets rustled ever so faintly, as if someone had tucked him in just a little more securely.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

What began as a struggle to keep hold of the ephemeral connection to his lost love soon became second nature. Bilbo learned to let go of disbelief and lean into his instincts, allowing Thorin's presence to shape itself around him, awake or not. They found ways to bridge the chasm between their worlds until Bilbo could almost believe that death had never truly parted them at all. Almost.

And so the queer Hobbit of the Shire returned home with a new set of peculiar habits, reinforcing the nickname of Mad Baggins. He was rarely seen without a book or something to write with, had a habit of muttering to himself or chuckling for no apparent reason, and though no longer as much of a recluse, he resumed his long walking holidays—often in the company of dwarves.

Children claimed they'd seen him pause at crossroads to bow and whisper as if greeting someone, only to walk on smiling with no one beside him. On more than one occasion, neighbors reported seeing Bilbo abruptly shift to the side as if making room for an invisible companion on a bench. He'd sometimes pause mid-conversation with a fellow hobbit to laugh at something unheard, or gesture in a way that suggested he was listening to someone else entirely. Though these quirks confused many, they didn't alarm them. After all, it was just Mad Baggins being Mad Baggins. But those who watched closely might have sworn that, sometimes, his shadow didn't move quite in sync with the sun.

Bilbo perfected the art of lucid dreaming, though it was never an exact science, shaping his nighttime wanderings into long, vivid encounters where he and Thorin could sit together, talk as they once had, make love, or sometimes simply exist in each other's company. There were nights where they relived quiet moments from the quest—sitting by the fire, watching the stars over the plains of Rhovanion—but there were also nights filled with new experiences, Thorin guiding him through halls of Erebor as they should have been, as they would have been had things gone differently. Bilbo would wake from these dreams with a lingering warmth, the phantom sensation of strong fingers wrapped around his own, and he would spend the morning basking in their afterglow, reluctant to leave them behind.

Even when awake, Bilbo was not entirely alone. If he was deeply engrossed in a book or lulled into a meditative state while smoking his pipe, he could catch glimpses of Thorin more solidly—just at the edge of his vision, just enough to reassure him. Sometimes, it was the flicker of a shadow near the window; other times, the brief sight of blue eyes watching him with something soft in his gaze. As the years passed, Bilbo found he could sometimes catch Thorin's words more clearly, hear the subtle cadence of his voice like a whisper over his shoulder, and see him for longer stretches before the vision faded.

Never, not once, did Thorin speak of leaving. There was no sense of unfinished business to bind him here, no lingering regret that needed to be resolved. Thorin stayed simply because

he wished to, and Bilbo, in turn, had come to accept his presence as something natural, as inevitable as the changing seasons.

And not only Thorin—Bilbo, to his surprise and occasional discomfort, began to see other spirits too. They did not speak to him often, nor linger long, but they came and went like echoes on the wind, acknowledging his awareness with silent nods or distant gazes.

At least until he got the scare of his life on his 99th birthday, when two very dead hobbits suddenly appeared—just as he was swallowing down a biscuit, nearly keeling over in the process. One moment he was enjoying a quiet afternoon with tea and jam, and the next, there they were: his poor, deceased cousins, looking exactly as they must have in their final moments—drenched and pallid, water dripping in ghostly rivulets onto his freshly polished floors. He'd reared back with a choked scream, part of the biscuit flying from his mouth and the other half launching a spirited attempt to lodge itself in his lungs.

Coughing and flailing, Bilbo managed to compose himself just enough to snatch up the journal he used to communicate with Thorin, his fingers trembling as he opened to a fresh page. But in the end, he didn't need it. Primula's voice rang through the room with chilling clarity—her shriek sharp and piercing, echoing off the walls: "SAVE HIM!" And then, just like that, she vanished.

He didn't need to ask who. There was only one person it could be. In a blur of motion, he was up and moving, throwing on his mithril shirt with practiced ease, strapping Sting to his belt, and barreling out the door. He tore through the Shire on foot, moving faster than anyone might expect a hobbit of ninety-nine to manage, his heart pounding and purpose clear. He reached Brandy Hall in record time.

He had always known of Frodo—his little cousin who shared his birthday and whose parents had died tragically—but he had not attended the funeral. At the time, Bilbo had been far from the Shire.

In the years that followed, Bilbo made a habit of checking in on Frodo from a distance. Letters exchanged with relatives, second-hand reports from visiting hobbits, and the occasional Brandybuck who passed through Hobbiton all painted a reassuring picture: the boy was well-fed, had a roof over his head, and no shortage of cousins his age to play with. Bilbo, thinking Frodo was surrounded by family and comfort, saw no need to interfere. He had entertained the idea of adopting the boy once or twice, but convinced himself that Frodo would be happier among children his own age—those he had already grown up with.

But all those assumptions came crashing down the moment he burst through the doors of Brandy Hall, chest heaving and eyes alight with urgency, only to be met with a grim-faced elder shaking their head. Frodo had run away, they told him, with a weariness that suggested it was far from the first time. Frodo was apparently a troubled lad—given to long silences, and known to disappear without warning for hours. The words hit Bilbo like a blow to the gut. He should have done better, having known what it was like to lose his parents so young. He would do better.

Bilbo marched back outside with a lamp clutched in one hand, its glow barely cutting through the pitch-black night. There was no moon to guide them, and others were already deep in the search, calling Frodo's name into the darkness.

"Thorin, please find him," Bilbo hissed beneath his breath, desperation thick in his voice. A sudden weight landed on his shoulder—reassuring, firm—and squeezed gently before vanishing.

Minutes later, Bilbo heard a crunch of leaves and twigs. He spun toward the sound, and there at the edge of the woods stood Thorin, silent and cloaked in shadow. Without a word, he raised one hand and pointed.

Bilbo didn't hesitate. He ran.

He found Frodo curled up at the base of a tree, shivering with sobs, his ankle swollen to the size of an apple and just as dark.

Later that night, back within the safety of Brandy Hall, Bilbo sat Frodo down by the fire and gently offered him a choice: to stay or to come live with him at Bag End. Frodo didn't hesitate. With wide, tear-glossed eyes and a soft, eager nod, he accepted the offer as if it were the first solid ground he'd been given in years.

Bilbo had gained a nephew and heir who eventually inherited Bag End and everything in it—including his lucky ring. Thorin had long insisted he leave the ring behind. Bilbo knew Thorin despised the little band of gold, and of course, he understood why. Lately, Bilbo had spent too much time murmuring to it, caressing it, turning it over in his fingers when he thought no one noticed. And Thorin noticed. Bilbo knew it terrified his love.

He suspected the dragon-sickness had finally caught up with him in his old age. He felt stretched thin, as if Smaug's curse had simply waited for his mind to begin slipping. So he promised Thorin he would leave it behind. And when the time came, Thorin made certain he kept that promise.

At the door of Bag End, just as Gandalf called to him—

"Bilbo, the Ring is still in your pocket."

—Thorin’s figure appeared before him, blocking the way, his face drawn tight with emotion, his blue eyes pleading. Then came a whisper, soft and aching, and a ghostly caress across Bilbo’s cheek, "Please, amralime."

Bilbo let the ring fall.

And as he stepped out into the night, he felt he could finally breathe again.

He had meant to go back—all the way to Erebor—and retire there, living out his days surrounded by mountain halls and old friends. But age had a way of creeping in all at once. One moment he was walking with purpose, and the next, the weight of his years settled into

his bones like winter frost. It soon became clear that the journey east would never be completed. He would remain in Rivendell.

Thorin was gracious about it—quietly so, without complaint. But Bilbo could feel it in every glance, every lingering touch of presence in the room: there was nothing Thorin would deny him now, no path he wouldn't follow if Bilbo needed him to. The poor dwarf hadn't the heart to begrudge his rapidly aging love a single thing.

As the days passed, Bilbo saw more of Thorin—day and night blending together, his dreams folding seamlessly into waking moments until he could no longer be sure where they parted. There were hours when Thorin sat beside him, gaze fond, chatting idly, looking almost as solid and real as he had in life. Sometimes Bilbo would blink and the chair would be empty again. But in those moments, with the veil so thin and time so soft, it hardly seemed to matter.

And then Bilbo was faced with the greatest shame of his life. Frodo—his dear, sweet Frodo-lad—had paid the price for Bilbo's past mistakes.

"My boy, my boy! Did you see, Thorin, what I did to him? What I've done? I felt such hate for him in that moment. I raised my hand to him! Oh, Thorin, how can I live with myself now?!"

"I know, ghivashel," Thorin murmured gently. "The burden you carry now is heavy. But he forgave you, just as you forgave me. In time, this wound will heal—though it may leave a scar."

"Oh, my dearest, please! I must beg a favor, if it's at all possible—!"

Thorin knelt before him, placing ghostly hands over Bilbo's, flooding the space between them with a shimmer of tingling warmth. "Peace, my heart. You have given Frodo the mithril shirt—the token of our bond. It will be my anchor, and I shall do everything in my power to keep him safe."

"Thank you," Bilbo gasped, tears slipping freely down his cheeks. "Thank you."

"Hush now. It is no hardship. I have come to love him dearly."

Bilbo gave him a watery smile. "I know, my dear."

"I shall return to you, I promise. Think you can wait for me?"

"Oh, I plan to outlive the Old Took, make no mistake. But should the quest take longer than that—well, I'll find my way to your Maker's halls, even if I have to trade the curls on my feet for a beard and smooth out the points of my ears!"

"May it not come to that, for I have come to adore those dearly as well."

Thorin eventually returned with Frodo—more or less in one piece, if one didn't count the missing finger or the years of pain etched into Frodo's very soul. So deep, in fact, that in time

both Frodo and Bilbo would set sail for the Undying Lands beyond the sea—a final adventure.

"I cannot cross with you, kurdume," Thorin whispered into his ear as Bilbo drifted between wakefulness and sleep.

Bilbo let out a small, distressed sound—half protest, half grief—before he felt the ghost of tingling lips press against his temple.

"Fret not, my love. Come find me when you are ready, and we need never part again."

It did not take much longer for Bilbo's weary body to release him. When he blinked open his new eyes, in a young and unburdened form, he found himself standing before the most beautiful lady he'd ever seen—surrounded by green rolling hills, sun-dappled woods, and vibrant blooms. The air was warm and sweet, and for a moment, Bilbo thought he could stay there forever.

"You can," said the lady, her voice melodic and impossibly beautiful.

Bilbo smiled softly, but shook his head. "Oh, no, my lady. I cannot. I've a fair guess where I am, and with all due respect, my place is not here. As lovely as your garden is, there's one thing missing that I cannot do without."

"By chance, is it a dwarf?" she asked with a wide smile and a twinkle in her eye.

Bilbo blushed and shuffled his feet. "Erm, yes. And I've missed him terribly. Would you mind telling me where I might find your husband's halls?"

With a tinkling laugh, the Green Lady did one better—she whisked him there herself. Then, with a knowing smile, she guided him to a glowing doorway set into the base of the greatest mountain Bilbo had ever seen.

He stepped through the light, and when it finally faded, he was nearly knocked off his feet by a group of dwarves. He laughed and wept at the sight of so many beloved faces—some still absent, still living their lives.

And standing just beyond the joyful chaos was Thorin Oakenshield.

More solid than Bilbo had ever remembered, Thorin stood clad in fine garments Bilbo had never seen before, tailored and embroidered with craftsmanship beyond imagining. They suited him—made him look impossibly regal and heartbreakingly handsome.

"You have a beard!" Bilbo cried out with delight, launching himself into Thorin's waiting arms.

Oh, how glorious it felt—no tingling, no half-there shadow. This was real. Thorin was warm, strong, soft in all the right places, and he smelled like home: hair oil, forge-smoke, and the faintest touch of sweat, even!

"I've always had a beard," Thorin laughed, wrapping him up tightly. "It's just longer now."

Bilbo couldn’t help himself—he reached up and cupped Thorin’s face, his fingertips grazing the curve of cheekbone and the sharp line of jaw. Not a wrinkle, not a scar out of place. His heart swelled with awe and love and disbelief. He poked at Thorin’s cheek, then prodded the bridge of his nose, even gave one side of his face a gentle pinch just to be sure it was all real.

Thorin caught his wrist with a chuckle and silenced him in the best way—with a kiss. Their true first kiss. It was warm, certain, all-encompassing and everything Bilbo had dreamed of for decades. No dream had ever come close to the feeling of Thorin’s mouth moving against his, of the realness of it, the shared breath and familiar scent. Bilbo melted into it, hands sliding up into Thorin’s hair.

When they finally parted, faces still close and breath mingling, they both grinned like fools.

"At last," Thorin murmured, his voice low with wonder. "You took your time."

Bilbo huffed a laugh. "Well, I had to at least try and catch up. You left the world at 195—I think 132 makes things more appropriate."

Thorin threw his head back with a rich, full-bodied laugh. "Indeed," he said, voice warm and teasing. "How scandalous we’ve been, amralime."

"Like Old Mad Baggins gives a wit!" Bilbo shot back, his grin going lopsided as he leaned into Thorin once more, their foreheads gently resting together.

And so they remained—surrounded by laughter, a reunited Company, and the quiet blessing of peace that never wore thin. Bilbo Baggins had found his way home at last.

And this time, it was forever.

Chapter End Notes

The end! I know this chapter was more of a quick epilogue than anything, but I hope you enjoyed it regardless. I want to move on to other stories now (maybe give Take My Heart another go or rework my Shamed and Shorn series into one long fic and even extend it to Bilbo's pov). I do have a few other plot bunnies.

So, if you'd like to read my future works, don't forget to subscribe to me as an author! Just click on my username and hit subscribe towards the top! You can also follow me on Tumblr (https://www.tumblr.com/blog/mordellestories), YouTube, TikTok and Lemon8 (Lemon8 might get banned with TikTok so idk) I'm also on discord!

Thank you so much for ALL the kudos and comments! Each and every one is dear to me.

End Notes

Let me know what you think! This *should* be short. Trying to keep this under 5 chapters..... (please... fandom gods... please no more than that).

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!