Mubû Tadûl Farâkhaz

by Near Family

Summary

This is Erebor on the cusp of history.

Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór walks the battlement of the great gates of Erebor. A roaring wind comes down from the north, trees bend and creak under its force. On the gate and down in Dale, all gaze at the sky as if waiting...

The storm passes and Smaug never comes.

Erebor never falls. Dale never burns. Dwarves travel west in search of wealth, not sanctuary, and the Company of Thorin Oakenshield never forms. The wizard never plots (well... not precisely never...) and a perfectly respectable hobbit never hosts an unexpected party. But an adventure will be had. For the sake of an orphan, propriety will be set aside, mountains will be climbed, forests will be traversed and lakes will be sailed. A hobbit will come to The Lonely Mountain where sickness has been left to fester and grow and shadows lay waiting...

Notes
This is what I would like to think would have happened if Smaug never attacked Erebor. How things would have been affected, what the characters would have been up to. But I love The Company too much to keep them apart, so don't worry! I've got three relationships tagged because they're the ones I want to focus on, others will be added as they show up. Character tags will also be added as they appear in the story.

The first few chapters include some large time skips which I will try to make as clear as possible.
Bilbo Baggins is a young faunt at his grandfather's feet the first time he sees a dwarf.

It's a warm evening near midsummer, too early for fireworks as of yet, but with the wizard puttering around his cart the promise of great bursting flowers and whirling wizzpops hangs heavy in the air. Too heavy, in fact, for young Bilbo to sit still. He's abandoned the puppet show and even the tables piled high with birthday fair to run in the tall grass. Swinging his wooden sword in great arks, he beheads any dandelion within his short reach.

Up a small rise he runs, chasing nameless shadows in his mind, a great cape fitting enough for any hero (dark, slick leather like his mother's) trailing in his wake, his sword raised high. It flashes in the dying light, gleams as he brings it down on his enemy, crowing in triumph as -

“Steady on there, my lad!”

Bilbo squeaks and trips over his own feet as he turns, landing amongst the daisies. His grandfather smiles down at him over the curve of his pipe, eyes twinkling through the haze of sweet smoke.

“It seems Master Boffin's plays are not exciting enough to keep your attention, eh?” The Old Took chuckles, pulling Bilbo up by his suspenders. “Just like your mother, you are, hardly a Baggins at all!”

Bilbo grins up at the old hobbit, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “I want to see fireworks, Grandpapa!”

“Certainly, my lad.” His grandfather replies, “Just as soon as the last of the light has gone.” He takes a long puff on his pipe and, with great care, blows a smoke ring as large as Bilbo's head and sends it gliding out towards the setting sun.

Bilbo turns to race off after it when he sees them – dark shapes along the East Road heading west toward Waymoot. There are more than a dozen of them, taller than any hobbit Bilbo has ever seen and here and there along their line comes the occasional glint of metal.

“Dwarves, huh!” He hears his grandfather mutter darkly behind him. Bilbo trembles in delight. Dwarves! Dressed in shiny armor with great beards and dark cloaks, just like in his mother's stories. He stands on tiptoe in the hopes of getting a better look and thinks he can see, just maybe, the hint of an ax slung across a broad back.

“Where are they going, Grandpapa?”

“The Blue Mountains most likely,” the Old Took answers, his eyes narrow as he watches the dwarves walk on, tapping his pipe stem against his teeth, “Probably camp outside the fields... head north through Nobottle. Leave the Farthing day after next, hrmrmm...”

“Why are they going there?” Bilbo asks, calling his grandfather's attention back where it should be, on himself.
“They've got a mining settlement there, haven't they?” the Old Took says, scratching at his chin as he thinks. “Ought to send young Isengar to get word from the Bounders... yes, indeed. Can't have Outsiders lollygagging in our Shire, no.”

Bilbo stares after the dwarves as they continue their march westward. He greatly wants to see them up close, nearly as much as he wants to see the elves to the east, wants to see if they really have such thick hair on their faces as his mother says. He turns to his grandfather and sets his feet.

“We should invite them to your birthday party, Grandpapa!”

“Not likely, my lad!” Old Took scoffs, but his expression softens at Bilbo's pout. “Besides, I haven't got any gifts for them. You wouldn't want to make the Thain of the whole Shire look like a bad host, would you?” He chuckles as Bilbo shakes his head vigorously. “Good, now go off and bother our wizard about those firecrackers. Good lad.”

Bilbo skips and leaps down the hill towards the towering figure in his pointed hat and leaves his grandfather to watch after the diminishing figures of the dwarves.

Bloody nuisance, the Thain thinks as the group turns a corner and disappears into the treeline. He ought to send some stonemasons up past the North Farthing, help get the old Arnor roadways up to snuff. It would be worth the expense, he reasons, if only to keep so many dwarves from crossing the Shire on their way back and forth.

The Old Took nods to himself and puffs on his pipe as the first of the fireworks light up the sky.

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A decade on and the ancient thoroughfares of Arnor have greatly improved. The dwarven caravans of iron and copper and coal travel north of the Shire now and the dwarves have all but disappeared from its gentle hills. The Thain is satisfied with this, even when the Bounders bring word that their neighbors have dug up all their hard work to relay the cobbles themselves. Bloody dwarves.

The winter hits hard and fast.

Frost paints every window, turns every herb and flower in their gardens hard and brittle. The Water freezes over and the snow falls and falls. The sheriffs organize teams to dig families out of their smials and the Old Took sends word to all the great hobbit clans to portion out their larders and not to stint. Four meals a day is a necessary hardship. There's no telling how long the biting cold will last when the Horn-call of Buckland sounds the air is so crisp and clear that the echoes reach as far as Tuckborough.

The Thain takes up a rusty old sword, with an edge so dull that his grandchildren have played with it without fear of injury, sends his younger sons to board up the windows and doors, sends his daughters to chop up furniture for firewood. His dear wife cries quiet tears as she herds the fauntlings down to the root cellar. Belladona and her sweet little Bilbo are still in Hobbiton and she has no way of knowing if they are safe.

They cut back to three meals a day.
“Perhaps the dwarves will come,” his wife murmurs in the dark that night as he runs his fingers through her silver curls. “They’re a fighting folk.”

“What, and leave me with nothing to do?” he huffs, puffing up his chest and putting on airs, “I’m the Thain you know, master of the Hobbitry-at-arms! See, I’ve even got the sword.”

“That sword,” Adamanta begins, speaking sternly as though admonishing a faunt caught with a fist full of sweets before supper, “hasn’t been sharped, much less used, since the battle of Greenfields – long before either of us was born.”

“Yes, well, blunt force you see. I’ve always been better with clubs anyway...” He trails off as he feels her smile against his shoulder and lets out his breath. He is so very tired, but for her sake he will stay up and talk, if only to keep her smiling.

“We don’t know what’s out there.” Adamanta whispers as their family sleeps around them.

“I suspect we will by morning.” He replies and holds her tight.

“Perhaps they will come.”

“Perhaps.”

They do not come. Even as the days turn to weeks and the white wolves begin to dig down, down through the snow and sod above the ceiling – they do not come.

Chapter End Notes

So there's the intro to what I like to think of as my Giant Ass Hobbit AU of Oh Shit I'm Screwed. This is going to be a long one.

Next chapter: Dwarves!
The Fractured Bezel

Chapter Summary

The ruling family of Erebor throws a party.

Beta'd by the wonderful Re_White.

Chapter Notes

For those who are interested: a vielle is the medieval predecessor to the violin and related instruments. The krumhorn (more commonly spelled: crumhorn) is a kind of medieval wind-cap that sounds a bit like an oboe crossed with a didgeridoo played by a constipated duck and decorated with a crook on the end in case you feel the need to garrote the musician in front of you. I feel very strongly that it's exactly the sort of instrument that dwarves would take great pleasure in. ;)

A tunnel spider is an eight legged beast from the pits of hell. Do a google search for "African cave spider" and prepare yourself to run screaming from the room.

You're welcome. ^^

P.S. Thank you to everyone who's expressed interest in this fic. Your comments were all lovely and I greatly appreciated them. Thank you as well to all those who have left kudos and who have added this story to their bookmarks, it makes me all warm and fuzzy inside. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dis strides down the gallery with all the confidence of her station. She hardly spares a glance for the towering statues which flank her on either side, their hardened forms and hollow eyes as familiar to her as each intricate drape and fold of her own gown and just as unheeded. The polished granite echoes with the sharp click of her delicately forged heels, the muted beat of her shomakhâlinh's leather boots a familiar undertone as they make their way towards the stately doors of the Receiving Hall.

The guards on duty, dressed in azure velvet and ruby-gold plated armor, draw to formal attention as she approaches, fists folded together above their breastplates. Dis slows to a stop just in front of them. From behind the doors comes the muted rumble of a thousand voices entombed in stone.

“Emûlhekhizu.” They speak in perfect unison, eyes straight ahead.

“On your word, my Lady.” Glhîn recites from just behind her shoulder. There is a smirk in her tone, as there so often is.

“It is my pleasure to enter.” She replies, as etiquette dictates. Glhîn strides around her, chain-mail and leather jerkin gleaming in the lanterns. Her garments and armor are simple and well crafted, made for
daily use and well broken in. Ever practical, the gold beads adorning her auburn beard and thick braid are Glhîn's only concession to ceremony.

With a nod from her shomakhâlinh, two of the guards march inwards taking hold of the massive handles carved into the doors. Perfectly balanced and well oiled, they swing outwards effortlessly. The rumble of voices rises and fractures into a hundred sounds, conversations and laughter, the clink of mugs of ale and cutlery on plates, a harmony of harps, krumhorns, vielles and drums resonates, spilling like a great wave into the gallery. Glhîn enters ahead of Dis, bending down to whisper in the ear of the Èzûkhos Mednemahagrîfâl. He nods as Glhîn stands to the side, hands resting on her belt, and raises a horn studded with gems to his wizened lips. A high, piercing note rises above the clamor and a momentary lull in conversation follows as the music tapers off.

“Her royal highness, the princess Dis, daughter of Thráin, son of Thrór, King under the Mountain!” He intones, loud and surprisingly deep for his small stature. Dis is greeted with applause as she enters, chin held high, a magnanimous smile plastered to her face as she raises her hand in acknowledgment.

“Onward and to battle.” Her lips hardly move as she speaks, a bare murmur for her loyal guard's ears alone.

Glhîn smirks and follows her into the fray.

The music starts up again and Dis moves in time with it, steps light as she makes her way through the crowd. Here she returns a greeting, voices nearly lost in the bustle of the party, turns and slips by; here she tips her head in a gracious nod to the wife of a council member. Dwarrows in jeweled velvets and brocade, armor polished, hair and beards finely braided and woven with gems and gold whirl and part around her. Blazing chandeliers hang from the vaulted ceiling setting their adornments aglow. Rising above the heads of her people are the occasional men and women of Dale, officials and nobility come to pay their respects and partake in fine dwarvish ale. In a far corner Dis can just make out a meager contingent of Mirkwood elves, pale hair shining like curtains of silk in the candlelight.

“Keep an eye out for Dwalin's mohawk, would you?” Dis says, jeweled rings flashing as she brings her hand up to angle her voice more readily towards her guard.

“Aye, my Lady.” Glhîn replies, eyes never ceasing in their survey of the room.

“I'd like a quick word with my brother,” She continues, slipping past a cluster of courtly 'dams, “he always gets so irksome when surrounded by duplicitous jubilation-”

“My Lady Dis!”

Dis freezes her expression into a smile of pleasant surprise and turns. “Lord Náli, you look quite dashing this evening.”

Náli preens, running his fingers along the cut of his coat, hand tilted so that the many rubies and diamonds set in oversized rings twinkle and flash. Beneath his beard – waxed so heavily that each bended plait and gathered lock shines slick like oiled leather – his lips quirk into a smile so full of conceit it makes her teeth itch to look at him.

“I wanted to congratulate you on young Kili's coming of age,” He says, overly loud and holds his hand out, open in invitation. Dis rests the very tips of her fingers on his palm. Náli's hand curls around hers as he raises it and bends his head, kissing just above her first knuckle. His beard feels just as greasy as it looks.
“My thanks to you, my Lord.” She says when he releases her hand, just a moment later than is proper. “Though it was no easy task.”

“Ah, well, the flights and fancies of Nudûy,” Náli remarks, waving a dismissive hand, “They will do as they will.”

“Yes.” Dis replies, voice flat and smile just on the polite side of brittle. “So it seems.”

“My Lady,” Glhîn intercedes, bowing to them both. “If I might direct you onward, your attention is desired elsewhere.”

Náli glances briefly at the guard, taking in her soft leathers, iron greaves and scuffed boots. His lips pinch up to one side, the barest hint of a sneer.

“Of course!” Dis says and gives Náli the merest tip of her head. “If you'll excuse me, my Lord, duty calls. I'll be sure to convey your best wishes to my husband.” The dismissal is clear and he turns away as Dis glides off in the direction of Glhîn's outstretched arm.

“What an odious fellow,” She remarks, allowing herself a small shudder as she wipes her knuckles on her sash.

Glhîn chuckles beside her, keeping pace without effort. “He's a elf-skinned lickspittle, an' no mistake.”

Dis nods and trades greetings with a passing man of Dale. “I was most impressed with your little speech. You almost passed for civilized.”

“Aay, don' remind me.” She winces, tugging at a strand of her beard, hanging loose from the braid that curls back into her hair, “I sounded a right fopdoodle.”

The dance continues, noble to councilman to chief guildsman and round again. Dis makes her way slowly towards the refreshments table, throat parched and wishing for a small glass of barleywine. Just ahead of her the crowd shifts the barest fraction, allowing her an unobstructed view of plates piled high with savory meat pies, fruit tarts and strudel. Their flaky crusts are nearly as golden as the head of hair which ducks quickly around a column and out of sight. The crowd closes in again.

“What are you up to?” She murmurs as she comes to a sudden stop, twisting the gold band around her thumb as she thinks.

“Beg your pardon, my Lady?” the Lady Yurla asks, taken aback.

“Oh goodness, forgive me, Agûlabâlinh Yurla, I was thinking aloud.” Dis laughs, giving the counselor a light pat on the arm, as though sharing a private joke. “Tell me, how is your granddaughter? Doing better I hope?”

“Yes, very much so.” Yurla blinks, a small, reserved smile gracing her face. “Thank you for asking after her.”

A muted flash catches Dis' eye. On a silver twist of Yurla's hair rests a simple gold bead. Unlike the others scattered among her tresses, it is polished smooth, a roughly etched love-knot its only decoration. Dis hazards a guess and takes a chance. “How could I not, when she is so obviously dear to you?” She says, indicating the bead. Yurla's eyes follow the motion and when she looks back up her face opens like a geode hewn down the center, wrinkles deepening in her familial pride. “Such promising craftsmanship. But I mustn't keep you all to myself, enjoy the party, my Lady.”
“Certainly, your Highness.” Yurla responds, inclining her head a fraction more than etiquette would require. “And a happy birthday to the young prince.”

“My thanks.” Dis nods and moves off into the crowd. Her stride is smooth and sure, just fast enough to deter conversation but not so swift as to seem a deliberate avoidance. Her eyes dart from face to face and back along the refreshments and decorations.

“He's off behind tha' carving o' Durin.” Glhîn remarks.

“Oh good, you spotted him too.” Dis sighs and shakes her head. “What am I saying, of course you did. Right. Steel Tong maneuver, I'll go left, you go right.

They split ways, circling around the great sculpture. Carved from a single block of ice drug down from the very summit of the Lonely Mountain on the king's orders, it's taller than the very largest of the men of Dale and big enough around to hide a mining cart with ease. Or one conniving prince. Dis slows her pace as she comes around the back, walking on the balls of her feet to keep her heels from giving her away. She puts herself in line with a tall woman in sapphire silks, her own dress blending with the back of the woman's robes.

Her son stands at the sculpture's base, carefully examining something in his hand, golden locks falling around his handsome face. They don't obscure his grin as he stashes the thing away, folded into an inner pocket. He turns away from her, his stride confident and jaunty as he walks, nearly colliding with Glhîn as she appears like a sudden slide of rock in the deep tunnels of the mines.

Dis darts forward.

“Glhîn!” Fili yelps, jumping back from the grinning guard. “What are you doing back here? Where's -”

“Hello, my darling child.” Dis says, voice ringing like silver bells, just before Fili stumbles back into her. “my precious mudûmel.

“Amad!” Fili squeaks as he whirs to face her. “How wonderful to see you!”

“Oh, I'm sure,” Dis smiles ever so sweetly. She brings one hand up to straighten her son's wayward braids, takes one between her fingers and twirls it this way and that, admiring the play of pale, icy light on its strands. “Tell me Inûdoyuh, what are you plotting?”

“Nothing!” Is his immediate reply, face setting quickly into a picture of innocence.

“Really...” She pauses, gives him a considering look. His fingers twitch at his side, twice before he notices and stills. “Here you are, wandering seemingly aimlessly while your dear brother is off somewhere by himself -”

“To the right o' the center dais.” Glhîn supplies, looking off in an entirely different direction all together. Dis peeks under a frozen axehead and sniffs, giving her son a knowing look.

“Not alone it seems, but surrounded by admirers and well wishers,” She corrects herself, tipping her head and narrowing her eyes. Fili manages to hold her gaze for a few moments before looking away. “He does so enjoy being the center of attention, but we both know how he hates being pandered to,” Dis turns and begins to circle her son, pretending to straighten his furs, confident he won't try to slip away, “it confuses him so. Why, then, would you leave him in their clutches, all alone?”

“I'm sure I don't understand, Amad.” Fili answers in his best diplomatic tone, easy and bland. Dis smirks from behind him. He's been practicing.
"It can only be that he asked you to," She continues, stepping around to face him. "and he'd only do that if the two of you were up to something..." Dis trails off, locking eyes with her eldest child.

He doesn't flinch.

Dis winks and holds up a folded scrap of parchment. Fili lunges for it but Dis is faster, holding it up for Glhîn to pluck from her fingers. To his credit, he doesn't clamber after it once it's enclosed in the guard's formidable fist. Fili does, however, give his mother the stink-eye.

"A note from Kili, perhaps?" Dis asks, cool as the statue beside her. "What does it say, I wonder."

"Can't make head nor tail of it," Glhîn grunts turning it around and over in her hands. "Wrote it in their secret gobbledygook, he did."

"That is not a word," Fili fumes, "You made it up just now."

"Nay, I did not." Glhîn chuckles as she stashes the note under her vambrace.

"Fili," Calling his attention back to her with her tone, Dis shakes her head, folding her hands beneath her bust. "This all may seem frivolous to you both now, but as you grow you will see how important these sorts of events are -"

"Casual encounters are the mounting for the gem of diplomacy." Fili quotes with a sigh.

"Balin will be pleased to know you at least listen to his lessons," Dis remarks, "even if you don't heed them."

"We -"

"I'm disappointed in you, Fili, in you both." Dis emphasizes.

"Only because we got caught." He says, his expression cheeky but for his eyes. They are the eyes of a child worrying after his mother's love.

Dis knuckles at her son's growing mustache, nearly long enough to braid now, and graces him with her first genuine smile of the evening. She glances around, there is no one near enough to overhear, but she leans in and drops her voice anyway. Fili comes forwards to meet her, their noses but an inch apart.

"Was it going to be good?" She asks, gleeful.

"The best yet." He assures, eyes twinkling like polished jewels.

"Well, don't stint!" She huffs, giving him a poke in the ribs. "Details, mudûmel, details!"

"Oh, no! We're keeping some of our secrets, at least." Fili laughs, dodging her stabbing finger.

"Indeed? Well, just you remember, I brought you into this world -"

"- and you've got 80 years more experience so I should check my bedding for tunnel spiders?"

"Don't be silly, darling, I'm a princess of the line of Durin," Dis says, offended. "I'd never be so crude. Now off with you." She says, flicking her hands as though ridding them of droplets of water. "Go rescue your brother with your wit, if not your prank."

Dis follows him around the statue of ice and watches him slip off amongst the revelers, his honeyed
hair like a beacon in the sea of ebony and brunette.

“You mollycoddle them, my Lady.”

“Perhaps. Sometimes I can't help but feel as though my time with them grows short.” Dis sighs, staring after her son even as the crowd shallows him up. She shivers. “It's a nonsensical thought, I know, they have so much life ahead of them, but a mother has her fears.”

They stand for a moment in silence, the party going on around them. The musicians take up a reel and space is made for the dancers as they weave into interlocking rings. Skirts flutter and fly as dwarrowdams spin and whirl, colorful fabrics flashing like jewels set upon the revolving crown of the dance floor. Kili is among their number, dancing with a merchant's daughter, a grin splitting his face. Fili dances closer with his own partner and as they pass, instead of trading as they ought, Fili and Kili go careening off together, leaving a ripple of laughter in the wake of their antics.

Glhîn taps Dis on the shoulder and tips her head towards a group of nobles and guild officials. Rising above their heads is a dark fan of hair and below it, Dwalin's scowling face.

“Tell me, Glhîn,” Dis asks as they begin making their way closer, “are those knuckle dusters on your cousin's fists?”

“Aye.”

“Lovely.”

“I don' understand it, he pays as little heed to formalities as I an' yet, none give him a foul look.”

“He's near twice your size and has a bloody massive warhammer strapped to his back.”

Glhîn snorts. “And wha' use would that be? I've got daggers stashed in my skivvies.” Glhîn says, paying no attention at all to the scandalized stares that follow them. “Far more practical in a crowd and with the added bonus tha' no one knows I've got 'em.”

Dis stops and blinks at her. “Wouldn't you have to disrobe to get at them?”

“All part o' the strategy,” Glhîn winks, “shock an' awe, my Lady, shock an' awe an' a dagger through the liver. Works every time.”

“Never change, my friend.” Dis says, contemplating the buttocks of a particularly rotund member of the Miner's Guild before giving it a firm prod. She turns and scowls after an imaginary miscreant as the sejerûn startles and looks around. “What a naughty little scamp, jabbing decent folk in the rump! Oh, Master Nûnt, do excuse me, I require a word with my brother.”

“Er, yes, of course, your Highness.” Blinking, Nûnt wipes the befuddled expression from his face and turns to grunt with self ascribed authority. “Make way, you lot! Make way for Princess Dis!”

The group parts like shale under the hammer of a chisel, sudden and sharp, giving her room to move past. At the very center her brother stands with Dwalin at his back, face a stony mask as the dwarves around him try to gauge his mood and curry favor. His eyebrows are heavy, dipping down towards his nose in what Dis has come to recognize as a warning of a fast approaching boorish snit. Dis intercedes before the situation can escalate.

“There you are, dearest nadad,” She calls, throwing simpering smiles to those she brushes by. “Our Lord grandfather will be making his speech in not too much longer, pray escort me to the dais?”
“It would be my pleasure, namad.” Thorin offers her his arm and she takes it, resting her hand in the warm curve of his elbow. He doesn’t bother to excuse them, turning with a nod and leading them away. The crowd gives way before them without seeming to take note of their passing, giving the two royals privacy as they stroll together.

“That was quite the scowl on your face, dear brother.” Dis comments, glancing up at Thorin from the corner of her eye.

His expression darkens as he answers, “It is egregious enough that they speak of grandfather as increasingly inconsequential amongst themselves, but to hint at it in my presence is far more brazen than they should dare.”

“It's to be expected,” Dis replies, pinching Thorin's arm through his coat when he looks at her askance. “You have been telling me that he spends far more time in the treasury and with the exchequers than he does with council or in chambers.” She goes on when he nods. “He delegates more and more of his responsibilities to father, is less and less an active force in the court. In all honesty, it surprises me that it's taken them this long to start poking their noses in.”

“They want to consolidate more power for themselves.” He grumbles, voice low and unamused.

“Of course they do,” Dis laughs, “they're nobles, that's what they do! They're ever only a step behind us, nipping at our heels, keeping us on our toes...”

“Keeping us from what's important.” Thorin snaps as they ascend the marble stairs to the focal point of the Receiving Hall. The Grand Dais looks over the entirety of the great chamber, green granite columns rising up like distant towers to the vaults of the ceiling, cloaked in blazing candlelight and flickering shadows. Below, the floor is a swarm of dwarrows and Dale folk, tapering out around the edges to gathering tables and lounges. Their father rises from one such table, bowing to the king, he gestures towards Thorin and Dis. Thrór takes one last long drink of ale and rises, furred coat dragging as he makes his way towards the dais, Thráin two steps behind him.

“You'd rather walk the causeways and descend into the Deeps than attend a party.” Dis comments as they stop to stand on the middle stair, watching their kin draw nearer. “Just like the boys. The difference being, they can sometimes get away with it.” Dis smiles up at Thorin, a twinkle in her eye.

“A ruler must have an appreciation for all his people,” Thorin says, voice low. “Not just the ones beleaguered by gold and ego. I'd gladly leave them to your skillful manipulations.”

“In truth, neither of us is well suited to politics.” Dis murmurs, leaning against his arm. “It's a game I play of necessity, and one you seem to have been born weary of.”

They bow as Thrór climbs the stairs, passing them by with hardly a glance. Their father comes to stand a few stairs above them as they turn to regard the king. He stands before the throne, embossed in purest gold and set with opals and diamonds, the Arkenstone glows at its apex, brought from the Zabadogimel in the Royal Colonnade to adorn his seat. He stands waiting as silence flows out amongst the gathering.

“I miss him.” Thorin whispers, clutching her hand.

“We all do.” Dis blinks back any impending tears.

“He would have thrived here, I should have been the one to go-”

“It's in the past, there's nothing to be done about it now.” She holds his hand tightly, squeezing his fingers until he breathes out, one long breath. “Now. Smile for the King.”
“We gather here in gladful jubilation on the confirmation of Kili, son of Fiki and Dis, youngest of my line,” Thrór’s voice rings through the hall when the crowd has gone still. In the pause that follows a thunder of applause goes up, rising to the ceiling and echoing off the walls.

“Please,” Dis hisses, head angled back just a fraction, “tell me my youngest isn’t standing on any furniture.”

“Not furniture, no.” Gilhîn’s voice drifts up from the bottom step where she stands at guard. “On a plinth, more like.”

“Fili won’t let ’im fall.” Dwalin rumbles by her side. “Got a hand on his hip.”

“Mahal, that boy!” Dis sighs.

“It is with pride that I welcome you into these gloried halls, honored guests, that you may partake of the abundance of our hospitality until you reach repletion. The Line of Durin, most exalted of...” and so it goes, grandiose and droning, and Dis pays it no mind. She has heard its like a hundred times before and will a hundred times again; there are more important matters that require her attention.

She taps at the flesh of her brother’s hand with her thumb, drawing his attention, and speaks quietly so her voice will not carry. “Do you know what I caught Fili doing just before I came to you?”

“Nothing too ill-considered, I hope.” He replies just as softly, quirking one dark brow.

“Preparing to carry out Kili’s mischief-making,” Dis says, tamping down on a smile. “He wouldn't tell me what it was about, but he certainly looked pleased with their little scheme.”

“He wouldn't tell you?” Thorin asks, voice lilting up in his surprise. “You must have been feeling sentimental.”

“He thought I would put tunnel spiders in his bed to scare it out of him.”

“Did he?”

“As if I would.”

“Certainly not.”

“Far too pedestrian.”

“Do you know, I’ve grown rather fond of them.”

“You’re a demented individual.”

“It’s been through exposure, I should think.” Thorin says, tilting his head as though in thought. “It was your favorite trick as I recall.”

“Lies and slander.” She huffs. They glance at each other briefly before they must look away or risk falling to their mirth before the entire court. Thorin is smiling with his eyes and all is right with the world again.

“- and so it is in this place and at this time that I, Heir of Durin and King under the Mountain, do declare a campaign of such illustrious purpose and righteous aim that none would dare call it folly! Subjects of Erebor! Sigin-tarâg! Before my reign comes to completion, Khazad-dûm will resound with the thunder of dwarvish hammers!”
A cold chill runs down Dis' spine.

So loud are the cheers of the gathered crowd that Dis can feel their voices vibrating within her chest. The stomping of feet sends quakes through the granite floor, up her legs and into her bones. Above her, the chandeliers begin to tremble and shake, their ornaments clipping against each other with a sound like shattering crystal. Against all propriety, she turns her back on the king to stare out at the sea of dwarrows. It is like staring into the face of a dire beast. They are a writhing mass, heads thrown back as they cry out, eyes burning fierce, wet lips pulled back and teeth glistening in the flickering light of the chandeliers. They are enraptured with the king's visage, reaching out as though to grasp the promise of his words and horde it in their arms. At the end of the hall the tall doors stand open, the guards gaze in at a loss as the elves take their leave, fair and serene but for the hard lines of their faces.

Dis doesn't realize she's descending the stairs until Thorin's grip digs into her arm, holding her in place. She turns to him, eyes wide.

“'We cannot be seen to leave,'” He says, voice smooth but firm.

She turns to her shomakhâlinh. Glhîn stands at the ready, shoulders thrown back and jaw set.

“Find them.” Dis commands.

“No fear, my Lady,” Glhîn replies, hand over her heart. “I'll get 'em out.” Then she turns and pushes her way through the crowd, unstoppable as a rolling bolder.

“They'll be so upset.” Dis remarks softly, as though in a daze.

Dwalin lays his hand on his mighty hammer, standing with the other royal guards to deter anyone from pushing their way forward. In the background she can hear a quiet argument unfolding between the king and his heir.

“'Their safety comes before all else.'” Thorin assures her. “'They will see reason.'”

“No, it's not that.” Dis says, bringing a shaking hand up to her face. Thorin throws her a questioning glance. “'No prank they can dream up will ever top this.'”

She laughs as her stomach roils in her gut.

Chapter End Notes

Words marked by a (*) were created by me using existing words from The Dwarrow Scholar's dictionary because no canon word existed that would suit my purpose.

Translations:

Shomakhâlinh – guardian who is female

Emùlhekhizu – Your Majesty
Èzûkhos Mednemahagrîfâl* – Chief Doorkeeper (master of ceremonies type dude)

Nudûy – boys

Agûlabâlinh – female council member

Mudûmel – Comfort of comforts

Amad – mother

Inûdoyuh – my son

Sejerûn – tradesman

Nadad – brother

Namad – sister

Zabadogimel – Thrór’s throne (lit. Throne of all thrones)

Sigin-tarâg – Longbeards (i.e. Durin's folk)
Remarkable Daughters: Part 1

Chapter Summary

The rumor travels west and a dwarf travels east.

Chapter Notes

So this ended up taking longer than I anticipated, because it ended up being much longer than I thought it would be. The entirety of the third Chapter is nearly 14,000 words and it's not quite finished yet. Plus I think I'll need to work some things over with my Beta. So! I've decided to post the first half (which she and I both agree is good to go) for your reading pleasure while I finish up the second half. Enjoy!

Beta'd by Re_White. See End Notes for translations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rumor runs through the Lonely Mountain like a fracture through stone.

The crack first sounds in the capacious kitchens of Erebor as servers rush down from the Receiving Hall with empty trays and flagons. 'A campaign' they say, loud enough to be heard over the bubbling pots and sizzling meats. 'An army will march south to Khazad-dûm' they say as the Kitchen Master shakes her head in wonder. It travels with the Larder-keep to the Grand Marketplace on the first Rise and out the towering gates of the mountain. 'Glory and riches', it whispers in the ears of merchants and traders making their way towards Dale, 'our birthright' they whisper back as they make their way through its streets.

The rumor splinters, small chips breaking off amongst the men and women of the valley. It creeps under doors and through open windows, slips into the holds of ships and whispers through their sails. 'Greed, greed, greed' it chants, but also – 'opportunity'.

South, then west and towards the woods is where the main fissure leads, following behind a convoy of wagons. The rumor nests with letters and missives wrapped in bundles and tied with string. Ink traps it in the folds of parchment, keeps it pinned like an insect under glass. But around it the dwarves speculate and debate, 'how long to plan' they wonder, and 'how many to take'.

Their pipe smoke rises, curling around branches and lingering in the leaves fading to gold and orange and red, along the Old Forest Road. Here the rumor is a silvery web, shimmering across the minds of elves, their words like morning dew gleaming in the sharp light of day. 'Hubris and folly' they murmur between the trees, walking beneath the sun. Under starlight they turn their gaze south and in the dark they whisper other words.

Moria.

Balrog.
The words are carried on the songs of birds, in the last dance of the bees as the air begins to chill. They reach the ears of a colossal bear, watching from a high hill in the light of dawn as the Stone Children ford their wagons across the river.

At the foot of the Misty Mountains rumor and dwarves alike are stalled in their journey. Winter has come, bringing blizzards and rock slides. They must clear the Low Pass as they travel, slowing their progress by weeks and dwindling their supplies. The dwarves cluster around the cook fire at night, beards caked in frost, shivering from the cold and from exhaustion. They do not sleep well, can never fully relax, but not from the threat of goblin raids. The rumor is restless, a constant beat in their ears like picks chipping away at stone. 'Onwards, onwards, onwards'.

They follow the frozen Loudwater through the foothills north of Rivendell, not stopping for rest or trade. The rumor passes by the last house of elves, unheard but not unnoticed. Sharp eyes watch the procession as it moves onto the East-West Road. Word will reach them eventually and they will shake their heads at the rashness of dwarves.

West through forest and hills they travel, over the rushing waters of the Hoarwell. The hooves of their pack ponies and the wheels of their wagons clack and crunch on the stones of the Last Bridge, its three arches spanning high above the wide ravine below. As the end of winter approaches the shadow of Weathertop can be seen through the morning mist. The caravan turns north.

They press forward along the roadways of the Arnor plains, skirting north of the Weather Hills and the Shire with its insular inhabitants. Hunting as they go, their bellies are never more than half full – the rumor won’t let them tarry. 'Onwards, onwards, onwards'.

The first flowers of spring bloom in whites and yellows and pinks as they cross the fields south of the North Downs. In the distance the ruins of Deadman's Dike loom like jagged teeth. Shadows peer at them from behind broken walls, watching until the caravan fades into the distance.

Ered Luin's first watchtower stands at the bend of the Brandywine as it turns south towards the Shire. The water runs clear and fast, brimming with snow-melt running down from Lake Evendim. The sakhabâl on duty spots the lead wagon at midday, rubs at his eyes and looks again. He calls down to the other dwarves of the tower. They drop their brooms and dustcloths, abandon their attempts to get the way-station up to snuff for the coming year and ascend the tower steps in leaps and bounds. They jostle and clamber for the best spots, kicking at shins and pulling at braids. 'Traders already?’ they exclaim and stare as the wagon train approaches, wondering what madness could have brought them from the east in the dead of winter.

The wagons reach them in the mid-afternoon. They are in a sorry state, sides nicked and dented, wheels hastily mended and the merchants themselves are half starved, their braids mussed and their beards in knots. The watchmen rush them inside, give them stew and ale and wrap them in blankets. The stew goes cold, the ale untouched. The rumor strikes, hammer to chisel. 'Khazad’dûm, Khazad’dûm, Khazad’dûm!' is its cry. 'Glory and riches and honor!' is the fire it lights beneath their feet.

The bundle of letters is unearthed from the cargo, wrapped in a rain slick and tied to a pony. The rider leaves at a gallop, presses hard until the animal can take no more. He rests until the first light of dawn and presses hard again. He makes the next tower in record time and passes the bundle on. From tower to tower it travels, around the lake and through the Hills of Evendium, speeding west through storm and wind and under the warming sun and waxing moon until it reaches the River Lhûn. Rider and rumor turn north, passing the first coal shipments of the year, racing past at such speed that the wagons stop and turn back, fearing a goblin raid.

'Onwards, onwards, onwards'.
The last rider leaves the foothills of Ered Luin in the second week of Åfdurin just as the pansies and bluestars are at their peak and the yellow daffodils are fading. She climbs the winding path to the central colony, up past sharp crags and steep bluffs. Her pony is damp with sweat as she dismounts at the guard tower.

“What's this then?” A burly guard with a massive black beard asks, giving the bundle a suspicious once over.

“News from Erebor!” She answers, reveling in the looks of shock she receives. “News you won't believe!”

*~*~*

Bofur stands in the center of the room, hat twisted in his hands, and waits. Outside, the business of Ered Luin goes on, the clatter of carts and hum of voices seeping through the walls and under the crack of the door. Sunlight pours in through one small window, highlighting dust motes as they float in the quiet of the Healer's Hut. The *skritch-skritch* of quill on parchment tapers off as Healer Thivi sets his ledger aside.

“There now, what can I do for you Master...?” One silvery eyebrow arches as he waits.

“Ah – I'm Bofur, Vustmâhâl Thivi...” Bofur trails off, waiting for some kind of recognition. “Bifur's cousin?”

“Oh, yes! I remember now,” Thivi nods, curling a strand of his beard around one bony finger. “Not causing any more trouble, I hope?” He asks, chuckling to himself.

Bofur shifts and darts his eyes down. “Well, no, he's been keepin' to himself, mostly-”

“Good to hear! Very good.” Thivi cuts in, pulling a scribing board and piece of soft chalk off a nearby self. “What is it that brings you here then?”

“Well... it's just, you see, my cousin-”

“A different cousin?” Thivi asks, not looking up and poised to take notes.

Bofur pauses and takes a breath. “No... it's about Bifur,” Thivi sighs and sets the board and chalk aside, pinching at his nose. Bofur hurries on. “It's been years – and we're all mighty thankful that you fixed him up best as you could – and we've done everything you said, right to the letter. But it's been an awful long time now and he's just, he's not getting any better, you see...”

“He has a goblin's ax lodged in his brain, Master Bofur.” Thivi replies flatly. “It's not the sort of thing you can recover from.”

“I, yes, I know but,” The Healer rises from his seat and comes around his desk. Laying a hand on Bofur's shoulder Thivi begins to push him towards the door. “It's just he seems to be getting' worse! He gets confused and he goes on about goblins and wargs and dragons and other beasties – he hides things from us now and – and takes off south when he thinks we're not looking and-” Bofur catches his breath as he's herded out into the busy street, stumbling over the threshold.

“Master Bofur!” Thivi blurts. He glances around the bustling crowd, straightens his coat and lowers his voice. “An ax is an ax and there's nothing more to be done about it. All you can do is keep your cousin quiet and out of other folk's way. Good day!” He turns back and shuts the door in Bofur's face.
Bofur stands in the street for a while, watching the door and clutching his hat as dwarrows and 'dams pass him by. From inside a shade is drawn down over the window.

Eventually he looks down at his hands, sighs and puts his hat back on his head.

Slowly, he makes his way past shops and the miner's halls, none give him a second glance and he doesn't stop to browse or make conversation. There's some kind of commotion going on by the gate but he pays it no mind and turns right at the coal piles, walking past huts and shanties. Wooden structures intended to be temporary, they lean and list, propped up by random branches and mining struts. Their number grows thin and still he walks, out past the edges of the settlement where the road becomes a path, becomes a trail. Under trees and past a small stream, not bothering to keep his feet dry, Bofur turns round a bend and stops.

The house is better constructed than those that came before, walls built from stones fitted together just so, planks covered with miner's putty and strips of bark make up its roof and the windows have shutters that actually fit. A large pile of wood is stacked along one wall, sheets and tunics hang to dry from a line running out to a low branch on a nearby pine.

Bofur takes a breath, wipes at his face and squares his shoulders. He crosses the distance to the door in long, loping strides and throws it open, a wide grin spread across his face.

"I'm home!" He calls, shucking his outer belt and coat and hanging them on an empty peg by the door.

"It's all right, Bofur," Loti calls from the next room. "He's gone out for a walk with the boys."

Bofur lets his shoulders sag and works his feet out of his boots, kicking them into the corner by the wood-box. He navigates his way through the front room, skirting the hearth bench and stepping over discarded toys, and into the back. Loti stands over the fire-pit, stirring a pot of soup and balancing little Lomi on her hip. He comes to stand by her and takes a whiff of supper.

"Squirrel?"

"They've been at the walnut again." She sighs and wipes her forehead with her arm. Loti turns and studies his face, piecing his day together. "Yadi, Lomi, khajimzu Idad mim âzyung." She says and boosts her daughter in his direction.

Bofur plucks his niece up and pulls out a stool from beneath the table with his foot. Sitting down he sets Lomi on his lap and bounces her on his knee. She smiles and giggles up at him.

"Bo-Ida!" She laughs and tugs at his mustache.

"How bad was it then?" Loti asks, taking a sip of the soup.

Bofur sighs and winces as he loses a few hairs. "He threw me out. Didn't even listen."

His sister-in-law makes a frustrated noise and knocks the stirring spoon against the lip of the pot harder than is needed to remove any stray drops. "Some healer, he is!" She huffs. "Won't even listen to poor folk when they come for help!"

"He doesn't think he can help," Bofur says, running his hand over Lomi's soft hair. "Doesn't think there's anything to help."

"That, that... that horrible dharg!" She says, pulling out another stool and sitting down beside him. Reaching up, she loosens the ribbons holding the delicate golden braids of her beard up and out of
the way. They fall, just brushing the hood of her dress as she pats them straight. “When Bombur gets home I'll-”

“There's nothing Bom can do, Loti.”

Loti opens her mouth as if to protest, pauses and closes it again. She takes a breath in through her nose and nods, brings the edge of her apron up to dab at her eyes. Bofur pats one plump wrist. They sit together, gazing with dull eyes at the flickering flames and simmering pot. Their breaths come low and even and, together with the muted sounds of the passing afternoon, send Lomi to sleep. She's a warm weight in the crook of Bofur's arm.

“He forgot where he was this morning.” Loti's soft words break the silence. Bofur says nothing, brushing wispy strawberry hair back from his niece's face. “He was upset that you'd left before him, said you couldn't open the shop by yourself.”

“When have we ever had a shop?” Bofur asks, lips twisting up into a crooked smile.

“At least he didn't go rushing off to the mines like last month.” Loti sighs.

Bofur grimaces. The Irkatguchir had not been pleased to see Bifur pushing his way through the tunnels and had made his opinion known, loudly and in no uncertain terms. Bofur's gotten the more grueling tasks for weeks now in retaliation. Nothing is more brutal than hauling carts full of coal to the surface except, Bofur has found, hauling that other black lump that miners produce.

“He can't keep on like this.” Loti states, repeating words said many times before. “He's miserable.”

“There's got to be somethin' that can help him...” Bofur says, watching the shadows grow longer.

Loti squeezes his hand, hesitates, then whispers, “What if there isn't?”

“There's got to be somethin’.” He says, half to himself. Loti pats his hand, soft touch lingering for a moment before she stands and goes back to tending the soup.

The thought nags at him the rest of the afternoon and into the early evening, he hardly notices as his arm goes numb under his slumbering niece. Bofur gives his brother an absent nod as Bombur greets his wife with a kiss. Their chatter passes over his head like a gentle breeze, their worried glances go unnoticed. His nephews are a stormy gust as they come barreling into the back room, falling over themselves as they rush to recount their latest adventures. Lomi startles awake, mewing in distress. She's lifted from his arms before Bofur can even blink. Looking up he finds her in the careful hold of his cousin. Bifur makes faces at her until she quiets, blows raspberries until she giggles and buries her face in his beard.

Bofur rubs the pins and needles from his arm. He watches with half a mind as Loti fills bowls with soup for the table and the boys gather the remainder of the morning's bread and butter. He scoots his stool back towards the table as the family gathers round. Bifur sits beside him with a plate of raw carrots, the greens still attached.

“At least try some of the soup, cousin.” Loti sighs as she mashes brothy potatoes and shredded meat for Lomi.

“Ma blugi zurmmuzmnutû.” Bifur grumbles, crunching into his first carrot.

“I'll have his!” Bimfur calls, waving one arm in the air.

“Finish what you've got,” Bombur tells his eldest, “then you can have seconds.”
Bofur stirs his soup and watches bits of potato and onion bob to the surface. Dinner conversation goes on around him but it's all a wash of noise in his ears. He watches Bifur from the corner of his eye. It seems he's doing better at least, his cousin eats with quiet enthusiasm, hands steady and eyes focused. If Bifur sleeps well tonight Bofur might have him walk to the edge of the settlement with him in the morning. It's not fair, keeping him isolated in the woods, whatever Healer Thivi says.

"-and Zokhosál Ning says we'll start learning to write in Westron," Bimfur mumbles through a mouth full of bread. "Since we all speak it anyway."

"What's the point of that?" Bombur wonders, muttering under his breath. "Half the miners can barely read Cirth as it is. No offense meant." He adds, glancing at his brother and cousin.

Bofur just shrugs, it's never bothered him.

"You'll remember to get eggs from the hen-house before you go to lessons in the morning." Loti says, scooping potato off Lomi's face and back into her mouth. "You forgot today."

"Do I have to?" Bimfur whines. His mother gives him a stern look. "But Bifur-Idad's been hiding jerky in there again! They get mean when he does that."

The table goes very quiet. Bifur rises, the scrape of his stool grating in their ears, and heads down the back hallway, leaving the rest of his dinner uneaten. Loti looks down at her plate and sighs.

"Sorry, Amad..." Bimfur mumbles. Bombur pats him on one pudgy shoulder.

"Bifur-Idad doesn't love us anymore." Bemfur whispers, the first words he's spoken since dinner started.

"Oh, no, Muhudel that's not true!" Loti gasps, pulling him in for a sideways hug. "Your uncle loves us all very much."

"Then why's he always trying to leave?" He cries, voice muffled against his mother's ample chest.

Loti looks up to Bofur and her husband, at a loss for words. Bofur rubs his face with both hands and then rests against them. He hears Bomber take in a breath.

"Well, you see – he's restless is what it is. He can't work in the mines anymore and there just isn't much for him to do..."

"But he plays with us every day!" Bimfur protests.

"He can't do that all the time, sweetling," Loti says gently. "He's just looking for something new."

"Don't know what he thinks is so interesting over that way." Bombur waves his arm towards the south and east, Bifur's favored direction of travel. Loti glares at him over the bread-bowl, clearly he doesn't get the message. "Nothing there-about but that elf port," Bombur gives an amused huff, "and the Shire of course. Can you imagine their faces if Bif-"

"Hobbits!" Bofur shouts and shoots up, sending his stool crashing and bashing his head against the lantern. Shadows dance around the room as he stumbles back, rubbing at his head. "Hobbits! Right," He rambles and stumbles towards the back door. Throwing it open he looks over the dusty ground then down at his stocking feet. "Boots!" He blurs and spins on his heel.

"Bo, what're you doing?" Bombur asks, following his brother through the door and into the front room. Bofur ignores him, grabs his boots, stuffs a foot in one and stumbles towards the back, half
hopping along as he tries to force the other one on as he goes. “Can't talk now,” he says, brushing by, “need to get things in ordeeerr-Oooph!” Bofur scrambles up off the floor amidst the children's laughter, stomps his foot the rest of the way into his boot and hurries out the back door.

The chicken coop is behind the garden, but Bofur doesn't bother to cut around, just goes straight through, hopping over seedlings and dashing down the rows. He skids to a halt in front of the little door and dives in face first.

“Bofur! What on earth!” Loti yells from the back door, loud enough to be heard perfectly through the wooden walls of the coop.

Bofur kicks his feet against the ground and pushes his way further in, launching perturbed poultry out of his way and spitting out bits of fluff and straw. “Where's he stashed it – Aach! Shoo, shoo! Evil little sods. Ah-ha!” He cries in triumph, pulling a bundle of jerky wrapped in burlap out from under a particularly unhinged hen. “Stop it! Get orff. I ate yer mother with gravy and mash!”

Scrambling back on hands and knees, Bofur clamps the jerky between his teeth and takes off running, hat held firmly to his head. Behind him, the rooster crows and thrashes its wings in belligerent fury. The boys run back inside, shrieking as their uncle approaches, fuming fowl pecking at his heels.

Bofur jumps and grabs hold of the eave, pulling himself up. The rooster plows straight into the foundation stone, knocking the sense out of itself and bouncing back in a mess of feathers.

“Oh! Poor Leopold!” Loti cries.

Bofur hums gleefully, snatches a water-skin wedged under a beam and drops back down to the ground. He rushes through the house like a whirlwind, children chasing behind him as he jumps on furniture to reach the tops of shelves. He finds a rain-slick folded behind Loti’s best serving platter, a travel pack stuffed up the chimney and several snare wires at the bottom of the sweets jar. He's in the middle of dumping out the toy box, Lomi and the boys running around catching everything he tosses aside and throwing it up over their heads in excitement, when Bombur and Loti catch up.

“Look at this mess!” Loti shouts, Leopold stuffed under one arm. “Stop right this instant, put those toys down! No, not you dear, your uncle.”

“What are you doing, Bo?” Bombur asks, ducking a stray teddy.

“Looking for a whetstone and tinderbox,” Bofur responds, rummaging through a muster of wooden warriors. “He usually stashes them in here – yes! Here they are.” He stuffs them into the pack with the rest of his finds and pulls himself to his feet.

“I mean, what are you doing it for?” Bombur asks as Bofur ducks under his arm and back to the table. He grabs the last loaf of bread, snags a half-block of cheese off a shelf and wraps it up in a cloth, wedges them both into a small pot and shoves the whole lot into the pack.

“No time to talk, there's a skinnin' knife hidden somewhere callin' my name!” Bofur calls, trotting down the hall to the room he shares with his cousin. He pushes aside the curtain and heads straight for the chest at the foot of his bed. Bifur glances up from his carving as Bofur slams open the lid.

“Mâhizu yothurur kalat,” Bifur grumbles as Bofur pulls out shirts and breeches and rolls them up into the traveling pack. Bifur narrows his eyes and points at it. “Yadi khidu, rûmzhâshnikuduh!”

“I'm borrowing it.” Bofur says, grabbing a wad of stockings and cramming them into the disputed pack. “I'm goin' to the Shire for medicine.”
“Ganagi ya!”

“No. You've got to stay here, Bif.” Bofur says, pulling the tie-string tight and knotting it. “Loti'll need to take on more work while I'm gone. She'll need your help with the little 'uns.”

Bifur grumbles under his breath but Bofur knows he'll do as he's asked. He loves the children as fiercely as most dwarves love metal and stone.

“Right, now where've you hid the knife?” Bofur asks, getting to his feet. Bifur gives him an exasperated look. “The wood pile – o' course!” He says, slinging the pack over his shoulder and turning towards the doorway.

Bombur's heavy footsteps come trudging down the hall.

Bofur turns around again and dives out the window.

“Right!” He says. Dusting himself off, he straightens and makes a run around the house. He doubles back to the front door, darts his arm around to grab his coat and belt and takes off again, juggling the pack as he shrugs his arms into the sleeves. Around the corner and ducking under the clothes line, he stops at a likely looking gap in the wood pile and sticks his hand in. There, right where he expected, is the smooth leather handle of Bifur's skinning knife. Bofur pulls it out, buckles his belt over his coat and wedges the blade underneath it.

Hurrying back around to the front he finds the whole family waiting for him.

“Where are you going-” Loti starts before Bofur pulls her into a hug, spins her round and round and leaves her dizzy against the wall. He flits around the children, giving them each a kiss on the head. Bombur grabs at his arm and pulls him to a stop.

“Just stop an' let's talk about this!” He says, worry crinkling his eyes. Bofur knocks their foreheads together extra hard, sending them both stumbling back.

Free again, Bofur wobbles a bit, slaps Bifur on the back, turns towards the River Lhûn and takes off at a dead sprint.

“Bofur, stop!” Loti cries behind him. “It'll be dark in an hour!”

“Not as dark as the mines!” Bofur calls over his shoulder. “Sorry, can't doddle, I've a long way to go!”

“What do I tell the Irkatguchir when you don't show up tomorrow?” Bombur yells, confused. Bofur runs through the trees and out into the fields, tall grass whipping at his knees as he goes past.

“Tell him I got tired of hauling shit!” He yells back, not caring if they can still hear him.

The world is open at his feet and he races towards it head on.

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Two weeks of steady hiking see Bofur to the edge of the Shire. The journey had been fairly uneventful, aside from a memorable encounter with a rampaging nanny goat that had him running through the foothills for the better part of an hour. The rough terrain of the Blue Mountains had smoothed out as he'd gone, into rolling hills and sweeping meadows filled with the greenest grass and brightest flowers he's ever seen. Even the sky seems to have become bluer the farther he's gotten,
filling out into a startling periwinkle. He crests a gentle rise and sees a pond not thirty paces further, water clear as quartz trickling south out into a small stream. Purple irises and white daisies grow in clumps around the water and as he watches, darting streaks of silver flash below the surface. He's eaten very well the past week, catching nice, fat hares and finding plenty of mushrooms and tubers whenever he's stopped to look, but he's rather looking forward to a meal he doesn't have to gut and cook himself.

“You wouldn't happen to know where a humble traveler such as myself could get a hot meal, now would you?” He asks, looking out along what he can see of the horizon. If he didn't know for a fact that there was a whole mess of hobbits living in these parts he never would have guessed it. There doesn't seem to be any sign of civilized life as far as the eye can see.

The surrounding bushes say nothing.

He shrugs and follows a winding animal trail down to the pond. Reaching the edge, Bofur shucks his pack and unstraps his water-skin from the side. Pulling the stopper, he submerges it in the pond, filling it up to the very brim and then takes a hearty gulp. It's cold as ice-melt and twice as refreshing. The trailing branches of a nearby willow look like they'd make for a cozy retreat so he wanders over and sits with his back to the trunk, facing out along the pond.

And the bushes.

“It's just you've been following me for going on fifteen minutes or so,” he continues, turning his hands this way and that, examining the dirt under his nails, “and I was thinking—”

“Hah!” The bushes cry in triumph. “Shows what you know, we've been on your tail for neigh on an hour – Youch!” The bush shakes and vomits up a small fellow dressed in greens and grays. Bofur thinks it's a fellow anyway, he hasn't got any beard to speak of. Though he's currently rolling around on the ground clutching at his shins, Bofur's fairly certain that he's a good head shorter than the dwarf.

His head is covered in honey blond curls and his feet have hair on them.

So this is a hobbit, then.

“Tobbi, you dolt!” A rather higher pitched voice exclaims before a smaller, rounder hobbit crashes out, skirt catching on twigs and branches. “You've given us away!”

“You kicked me in the leg, you did!” Tobbi protests, scrambling to his feet and puffing up his chest. “That's unprofessional behavior, that is! Sent me out, bum over tea kettle, right in front of the enemy. I'll be telling the sheriff on you!”

“I wouldn't have kicked yeh, if you hadn't have spoken out like a right ninny!” The other hobbit snaps, poking Tobbi in the chest. Her hair is darker and considerably longer, curls pinned back away from her face. She carries a short, wooden staff which she waves in the air to emphasize her point. “Quietly, I says! Observation and recognizance, I says! But you—”

“Er, excuse me?” Bofur cuts in, pulling himself up and looking between the quarreling hobbits. “This enemy you mentioned...?”

“That'd be you, o' course.” Tobbi says, matter-of-factly. The lass bops him upside the head.

“What, me?” Bofur replies, choking down a laugh.

“Yes. No one else around, is there?” The lass answers, turning towards Bofur, one hand on her hip.
and her chin in the air. “We’ve got orders you see-”

“Right!” Tobbi cuts in, taking his life into his hands if his partner's glare is anything to go by. “We been warned, we have. You're an invading force, you are!”

“Really?” Bofur looks around and down at his dirt smeared clothes and raggedy pack. “All one of me?”

“You've got a knife.” The lass sniffs decisively.

“Well, you've got a staff.” Bofur points out.

“That's different!” She snaps back, thumping said staff against the ground. “I'm a bounder. We're supposed to carry staffs.”

Bofur quirks an eyebrow at her companion.

“Left mine in the garden.” Tobbi mutters, blushing and twisting his hands in his shirt.

“Weell...” Bofur says, raising his hands up, palms out, and far from the knife tucked into his belt. “I'm a dwarf. I'd have an ax too, if I hadn't have left in such a hurry.”

“Ah-ha!” Tobbi cries, pointing at Bofur with one stubby finger. “Admitting it, are you?”

“That I'm a dwarf?” Bofur laughs, “I'd think that was obvious.”

“No, that you're an invader.”

“But I'm not!”

“You said you were planning to come armed.” The lass states as if that's the end of it.

“No! That's, well I mean yes but-” Bofur rubs a hand over his mustache and starts again. “Look, what I meant was, you've got staffs – a staff – because you're bounders, whatever that means,” the two hobbits puff up like ruffled hens, “and I'm a dwarf, so of course I'm going to have a weapon or two. That's just how it is, I'm not here to invade.”

“Bounders, for your information,” the lass hisses the last bit like a curse, and glares at Bofur down her little button nose, “guard the bounds of the Shire. You, master dwarf, have crossed those bounds. If you're not here to invade-”

“Well he wouldn't say, would he, if he was?” Tobbi snarks. The lass ignores him.

“- then why are you here?” She finishes, giving him a suspicious once over.

Bofur gives her his best smile and bows, doffing his hat in an elaborate flourish. “Bofur, son of Bôfbur, at your service.” He says, and straightens up. “I'm here looking for medicine.”

“Medicine?” Tobbi scoffs. “You expect us to believe that? Do they not have herbs where you're from?”

The lass takes one look at Bofur's flushing face and whacks Tobbi on the bottom with her staff.

“Owwww! What was that for?”

She swings the offending weapon up across her shoulders and, resting her wrists on the wood, tucks
one foot behind her and lowers herself down into a curtsy. Bofur blinks, surprised.

“Lilac Gamwich, of the same.” Lilac says, still in her curtsy. She waits a moment then tilts, jabbing Tobbi in the ribs with her staff.

“Tobbi Cotton, of Gamwich.” He says, rubbing his side.

“You're really here for healing?” Lilac asks, standing straight and planting her staff in the ground.

“Not healing, no. Medicine is what I'd like to find.” Bofur corrects, pulling his hat back down over his ears. “It's my cousin, you see. He's got an ax in his head.”

They both stare at him for a long moment.

Bofur shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

“Dwarves.” Tobbi huffs and marches back into the bushes. He fades from view between one blink and the next. Bofur stands gobsmacked, staring into the shrubs and trees but can find no sign of him.

“You really were followin’ me for an hour, weren't you?” He whispers, awed.

“Yes... does your cousin really have an ax in his head?”

“Aye,” Bofur replies, “got it in the goblin raids seventeen years ago this winter.”

Lilac turns to look out over the pond, face serious and eyebrows drawn. Bofur waits patiently while she thinks. Bees buzz from flower to flower in the warm morning light, one settles to rest on Lilac's hand. She doesn't seem to notice. Finally she nods to herself and turns to face him.

With great dignity she says, “You'll be wanting to speak to The Daughters, then.”

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Bofur finds the Shire to be both the homiest place he's ever been and more confusing than a warren of demented rabbits.

The first village he comes across (“Follow the stream and then go south for two leagues after it turns east. That'll have you at Nobottle.”) appears so suddenly it takes his breath away. One moment he's wandering through low hills, wondering if he's lost all sense of direction, and the next he's in the middle of a circuit of homes being chased out of some poor biddy's garden. All around him the grassy hills are dotted with little round windows and heavy, circular doors painted in every shade from marigold to maroon. Delicate picket fences surround beds of flowers and chimneys crest the hilltops, letting out faint puffs of smoke that curl and dissipate amongst the branches of bushes and trees.

A stout hobbit with wispy white hair squints at Bofur from his seat along the cobbled path as he sucks on a long curved pipe.

“Is this Nobottle?” Bofur asks him when he catches his breath.

“That's right.” The old man rasps, looking Bofur over. “Here now... you're a dwarf!” He exclaims.

“Well spotted.” Bofur responds, “I suspect it's the boots that gave me away.” He glances down at the hobbit's hairy bare feet. They look big enough for someone twice his size. “I'm Bofur – from the Blue Mountains.” He adds, remembering Lilac's instructions. “I'm looking for the road to Hobbiton. If you could point me that a-ways I'd be right grateful.”
“What's a dwarf want in Hobbiton, then?” The hobbit responds, rudely.

“Er, well... I was told I could find one o' the Took daughters there.”

“Che!” He chides, blowing smoke out his nostrils. “Typical.”

“I'm sorry?” Bofur enquirers.

The old hobbit continues on, as though Bofur hadn't spoken. “Not proper behavior, consorting with Outsiders. Hardly respectable! Not that she cares what's said, I'm sure. Lost cause if you ask me, not that anyone does – youngsters these days! No respect.”

“All'right then,” Bofur says, taking a slow step back and turning. “I'll... just be off. Good day!”

“Suit yourself,” the hobbit grumbles, coughing on pipe-weed. “Everyone else does.”

Bofur starts walking down the path, letting out a relieved breath. Who knew hobbits would be so much trouble to talk to?

“Hobbiton's the other way, but you do as you like.”

Bofur stops, turns around and trudges back past the geezer. As he goes around a bend in the path and behind a hill Bofur swears he can hear wheezing laughter back the way he came.

The Shire seems to be mostly great rolling meadows interspersed by fields and groves. By evening a meandering river has come into view and Bofur makes camp just off the road under a chestnut tree with a good view of the water. He eats the last rabbit haunch in his pack for dinner and settles down to sleep. The night air is surprisingly warm.

He sets off again in the morning, passing a few hobbits driving carts pulled by hulking oxen (their answering 'Good Morning's sound questioning, as if they're beginning to have doubts), and just after mid-day he comes to a town that he thinks must be the one he's after. It's many times larger than Nobottle, hills covered in hobbit holes and several free standing buildings roofed in thatch line the river where it runs past. Everywhere he looks the Little Folk are going about their business, gardening and tilling soil, hanging clothes to dry and herding geese and sheep between the hills. A gaggle of curly-haired children run past, giggling and darting looks at him over their shoulders.

He crosses the bridge (decently built but with a good deal more mortar than necessary and all sorts of things growing on it, it'll crumble in a hundred years, sad really) leading to the largest structure. It seems he's come on a market day. The town green is filled with wooden stalls overflowing with spring vegetables and wares for sale. Colorful parasols and canopies cast shade on fresh fish, baskets of strawberries and bread still warm from the oven. Bofur is firmly reminded by his rumbling stomach that the only thing he's had to eat is a two day old roasted potato.

He stops in front of a stall topped with a mound of peaches and takes in a deep breath of their sweet aroma. His mouth waters.

“Excuse me,” Bofur asks the hobbit bent down behind the stall, “what are you asking for two o' these peaches?”

“Depends, friend,” comes the reply as the hobbit wiggles backwards, “are you paying with coppers or barter?” He asks, straightening up with a stack of small crates in his arms. He catches sight of Bofur's smiling face and drops the lot. “Here now, you're a dwarf!”

“Amazing!” Bofur drawls, “It's remarkable how you can tell just by looking.”
“Well, it's the hair on your face, see.” The hobbit answers in all seriousness. “Dwarves have all got it, even the lady dwarves, I hear.” He blinks and leans forwards, eyes wide. “See here, you're not a lady are you?”

“What?” Bofur laughs at the hobbit's expression. “I'm not a 'dam!”

“Well! That's no call to curse,” the peach seller snaps, “a simple mistake, it was. No need to be rude about it.”

“No, I wasn't-” Bofur assures, flapping his hands.

“You did!” The lass selling mushrooms one stall over butts in. “Cursed poor Mister Overhill as blue as the sky.”

“No, no, no,” Bofur says, trying to explain, “a 'dam is what we-”

“Again!” She blurts and points an accusing finger, “You did it again!”

“Shame on you!” The lady just next to him scolds, covering her son's wee pointed ears. “There are fauntlings present.”

Bofur turns and finds himself surrounded by a crowd of hobbits at least three deep, faces pinched above their colorful frocks and coats in various expressions of affronted disapproval. It's a bit like finding one's self waylaid by chattering squirrels, laughably adorable and yet, slightly unnerving.

Right, he thinks, I can fix this, and opens his big mouth.

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“When the cold wind's a-calling
and the sky is clear and bright,
Misty mountains sing and beckon,
Lead me out into the light!

I will ride! I will fly!
Chase the wind and touch-”

Bella is just rounding the Party Tree when she hears it – the sound of an unexpected ruckus. She stops mid-chorus and darts up the rise, looks over The Water towards the Green Dragon and shades her eyes. She rocks back on her heels and bubbles over with laughter.

Crossing the bridge at a dead run is a red-faced dwarf, braids flapping out behind him with half of Hobbiton chasing after him. He takes a right at the turning, rounds the mill and takes off over the sloping grass, likely hoping to outrun them over rough terrain.

“Oh, you poor bugger,” She sighs, resting her chin against one hand, “you've no idea, do you?”

He makes good progress and, as he draws closer, Bella can see him begin to relax, drawn into a false
sense of security by the Shires' gentle hills. Until he glances behind him. Then he snatches the funny hat from his head and really starts to book it.

“Gonna need to do better than that,” She comments and taps her lips with a finger. “Tilly Gussop is catching up.”

It seems he's noticed this as well. The dwarf cuts down closer to the river where the ground evens out.

“Well, that's better...”

And then trips over Wallid Minnowback’s chimney.

“Oh, you are hopeless.” Bella sighs. There's nothing for it really, she'll have to stage an intervention. Hiking her skirts up past her knees she takes off, jumping hedges and cutting straight across the grass, not bothering to stick to the foot paths. She loses sight of her target behind a rise as she makes her way towards the river but she doesn't worry. She has exceptional timing. As he comes round the bend – temporarily cut off from his pursuers – she jumps off one final ledge, down into his path.

The look on the dwarf’s face is priceless as she tackles him, sending them both stumbling into a tall thicket of buttonbushes growing in the shallows.

“Shhhhh,” She whispers, covering his mouth with an open palm. “We're hiding, Master dwarf.”

He nods against her hand, brown eyes wide.

The next moment her friends and neighbors are storming the bend and racing past, shouting as they go.

“Where’d he go?”

“Has he gone?”

“Right! You lot head up the hill and we'll go down The Water!”

“Tally-ho!”

“That's for foxes.”

“Dwarfy-ho!”

Bella waits a few moments, counting the seconds until the last of their footsteps fade away. When she can't hear them anymore she turns towards her hiding partner, shoulders shaking and snickers.

“What did you do to set them off?” She asks with tears in her eyes.

“Nothing!” The dwarf protests in a hiss. “I was just trying to buy some lunch an' there was a big misunderstanding – I couldn't get a word in edgewise!”

“Well, there's your problem.” She comments, shaking her head in mock reproach. “You shouldn't have tried to argue. We hobbits hate arguing – it disturbs the peace.”

He blinks back at her. “Oh, well... thank you for helping me.” He settles his hat back on his head as they trudge their way towards the bank. When they're back on dry ground he turns back and chuckles. “Can't believe it worked actually, none of them even looked our way and we weren't even that well hidden!” He says, examining the sparse covering of twigs and stems.
“Well, you don’t know hobbits very well then.” Bella says, lifting her skirts up and ringing out the hems. “Terrified of water, you see. None of them would think to look for you in there.”

He pauses in the middle of pouring water from his boots and looks at her, head tilted. “But... you’re a hobbit, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” She replies, kicking her feet dry, “But I’ve often been told that I’m rather remarkable.” And she leaves it at that. “What are you doing so far into the Shire anyway – if you don’t mind my asking? There haven’t been dwarves through here in almost twenty years.”

The dwarf stomps back into his moderately dryer boots. They make squelching noises when he moves. “I’m looking for medicine. One of those bounder types out west told me to come here.”

“You saw one of the Bounders?” Belladonna asks, impressed despite herself.

“Er, yes. A lad called Tobbi Cotton and a lass by the name of Lilac Gamwich.”

“Lally’s a Bounder now?” Bella says, half to herself and shaking her head. “Seems like just yesterday she was still in her tweens.” She sighs then forces herself to focus. “Why’d she send you here then? There are healers to the west.”

“She said I should talk to the daughters.”

“The Daughters, more likely.” Bella mutters.

“Yes,” the dwarf grins, “That's exactly how she said it! How'd you know?”

“Oh, the whole Shires’ like that.” Bella says, waving a hand dismissively. “Right then. Might as well get started.” Giving her skirts a final brush-down she starts making for the bridge. She turns back when she hears no footsteps behind her. “Well, aren't you coming?”

“Coming where?” He asks, then starts in realization. “You know the daughters?”

“Of course, Master dwarf. I'm one of them.” She sketches a bow and introduces herself. “Belladonna Baggins, daughter of Gerontius Took, at your service.”

He looks surprised by her dwarvish greeting but soon bows in turn. “Bofur, son of Bôfbur, at yours.”

“Excellent! Now that that's taken care of, lets get going.” She says and turns on her heel, heading for the bridge at a brisk walk. This time Bofur follows, jogging to catch up and walk beside her.

“Is heading back this way really a good idea?” He asks, looking worried.

“Oh, don’t worry, that lot are either half way to Bywater by now or they’ve gotten peckish and wandered off for tea.” Bella says with good humor. “Anyway, if we don’t take the Waymeet track we won't make it to my sister's in time for supper.”

“She won’t mind, will she?” Bofur asks, curling his hands around the straps of his pack. “Having guests drop in unexpectedly.”

“Oh, probably.” She replies, waving it off, “but once she hears that we've missed tea and dinner, she'll be dying to feed us supper.”

Bofur’s footsteps cut off abruptly. Bella continues on without him.

“How many meals do you lot eat?” He calls from behind her.
She grins and laughs at the sky.

They're across The Water and over the hill, snacking on peaches (several coppers wait for Mister Overhill upon his return) when Bofur next speaks. He looks vaguely uncomfortable and ducks his head, almost guiltily.

“Er, do you suppose you should have let someone know where you were off to?” He asks looking back towards Hobbiton.

“Oh?” Bella responds, looking her peach over for the next tasty bite. “Like who?”

“Well...” He hesitates, working things out. “You said you're Belladonna Baggins, not Belladonna Took.”

“I am, yes.”

“And if hobbit names are anything like the names of Men-”

“They're similar.”

“- then you're married to this Baggins fellow.” Bofur concludes. He scratches at his chin in a nervous gesture. “Wouldn't he be worried to hear you've wandered off with a dwarf – your kin-folk don't seem all that trusting of dwarves, I'm finding.”

“Try not to take it too personally,” She says, patting his arm sympathetically. “Most hobbits don't trust anyone who wears shoes.”

“But that's nearly everybody!” He sputters.

“Yes, it is.” Bella laughs. She pictures her dear husband, eyebrows quirked and mouth set in a worried line. She giggles. “And don't worry about my Bungo, honestly, he'd probably be relieved to hear I've run off with a dwarf this time.”

“This time?” Bofur asks, incredulous.

“Oh, yes, I usually run off with a wizard, you see.” She answers and winks.

“I'm thinkin' I may be in over my head.” He says and chews on the last of his peach apprehensively.

Bella tosses her pit off the track and watches it bounce and roll away. “That's not unusual, believe me.”

Bofur's thoughts turn inwards and Bella hums quietly to herself so as not to disturb him. They continue on in near silence for some time, passing fields of green wheat rippling like the wind on the sea, easy rolling waves across her memory, flowing out into the world around her. Flocks of sheep dot the hills like sea birds in the shadows of the White Towers overlooking the Havens. If she closes her eyes she can almost believe she's there, walking the road down to the gulf, a salty breeze brushing her face and her darling Bilbo skipping beside her all those years ago.

“That's a cheerful ditty you're humming,” Bofur says. Bella's eyes flutter open and she turns to see him smiling at her. “Is it a hobbit song?”

“Not really,” She answers and blushes before admitting, “I wrote it myself. I used to sing it for my son when he was a faunt.”
“You have a son?”

“Yes, he-” Blinking, she stops and gasps. “Ohhhhh! He's going to be so jealous!” She holds her belly and laughs. “I should think he'll never forgive me.”

“What, why?”

“He's wanted to meet a dwarf since he was a wee lad.” She explains, grinning. “And now he's missed his chance – off to visit Frogmorton with his father.”

“Sounds like he takes after you.” Bofur comments with a cheeky grin.

“He does, actually – oh!” Bella darts back a few paces and points down a winding foot path. “Nearly missed our turn. Not far now, it's just the other side of this grove.”

Bella moves briskly along the familiar track, Bofur following at her heels, soon they round the bend and Donna's little smial comes into view.

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Chapter End Notes

To be continued in Part 2, which will hopefully be posted in a few days. :)

I wrote most of this chapter while listening to music from the soundtracks of Brave and How to Train Your Dragon. The song Belladonna is singing is Touch the Sky from Brave. Listening to it, I couldn't help but think it really suited her and that it summed up her spirit and character nicely. I can easily imagine that Bilbo grew up hearing it in the background as he played.

Translation Notes:

Words marked by a (*) were created by me using existing words from The Dwarrow Scholar's dictionary because no canon word existed that would suit my purpose.

Khazad'dûm – Moria (lit. Dwarf excavations/halls/mansions)

Moria – Is the elves' name for the first kingdom of Durin. In Sindarin (one of the elvish languages) it translates as: mor – black/dark, iâ – void/abyss.

Balrog – A monster of fire and shadow. In Sindarin it translates as Demon of Might (lit. bal – power, raug/rog – demon).

Sakhabâl* – watchman (lit. looker/person who looks – there was no word for 'to watch', and I wanted something different from a guard.)

Âfdurin* – in short: Durin's month, the seventh month of the dwarven calender. (Ok, so the long of it is: the Dwarrow Scholar's dictionary lists the dwarven calender as having 13 months, but only months 1-6 and 8-13 have names listed. So I figured, what would the dwarves of Erebor name their seventh month? – well surely they'd name it for Durin, their patriarch and one of the original seven dwarf kings made by Mahal. As for what time of year this would be: the Tolkien Gateway says that Durin's Day is the first day in
their calendar. Some enterprising geek calculated that the Durin's Day mentioned in The Hobbit would have occurred on October the 22nd and so the first month of the Dwarvish calendar would begin around the end of October. Every month having 28 days – except for the 7th which has 29 to round out the year – this would land Áfðurin in mid-spring, beginning about the second week of April. Was this far more information than you were at all interested in hearing? Excellent. You're welcome!

Vústmâhâl* – Healer (lit. person who creates health)

Yadi, Lomi, khajimzu Idad* mim âzyung. – Here, Lomi, give your uncle a little love. (Idad is lit. lesser father)

Bo-Ida’ – Uncle Bofur (Lomi is the dwarf equivalent of a toddler so she's still learning to talk).

Dharg – troll

Irkatguchir* – supervisor of a mining crew (lit. mine-shaft master)

Ma blugi zurmmuzmûtu. – Not eating squirrels.

Zokhosâl – Instructor

Cirth – the runes dwarves use when writing Khuzdul

Bifur-Idad – Uncle Bifur

Amad – mother

Muhudel – blessing of blessings

Aach! – Ouch!

Mâhîzuzu yothurur kalat – You're making a lot of noise.

Yadi khidu, rûmzhâshnikuduh! – Here now, that's my pack!

Ganagi ya! – I'm going too!

Faunt – a hobbit child

Smial – a hobbit-hole
Remarkable Daughters: Part 2

Chapter Summary

The second half of chapter 3. Enter Belladonna's sisters!

Chapter Notes

Happy Valentines Day!

Instead of chocolates and roses, I give you sassy hobbit ladies being awesome. :)

Bit of a Warning: Bifur's mental illness is discussed in more detail in this chapter. For those who have had to live with mental illness (and how other people react and treat them because of it) this part of the chapter may bring up unpleasant memories. The discussion is fairly mellow (not sure that's really the right word but...) and I didn't find it triggering to write but I thought I'd give a heads up for everyone else.

As always, beta'd by the lovely Re_White. See End Notes for translations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bofur has seen a fair few hobbit-holes in the past two days and feels he has a reasonable grasp of what they're all about by this point. The home of Belladonna's sister is both the most and the least hobbity of holes he's seen so far. Carved into the hillside like all the others, its round door is painted a striking violet he's yet to see anywhere else, with a garden out front. All hobbit gardens seem a little wild, in a refined sort of way, but this garden is positively exploding at the seems. Flowers and herbs and trailing vines tangle in and around each other, overtaking the fence and pouring out like an advancing army. The whole hobbit-hole is smothered in them, even the eaves – where hobbits seem to favor thick, green grass – is blanketeted in the stuff. Bees and butterflies flit about the flowers like jeweled clouds, wings flashing in the light of the setting sun.

They don't have to open the gate as they continue up the front walk, it buckled under the tide of foliage long ago. As they approach the door Bofur notices that, carved into the wood just above the central door knocker, there's the image of a snake coiled in a spiral, its forked tongue sticking out as though testing the air.

“You're sure she won't mind?” He asks, giving the decoration a nervous glance.

“Absolutely!” Belladonna chirps. She stops on the front step, straightens the wrinkles from her bodice and pats her dark hair. Taking a deep breath and letting it out again she knocks thrice on the door.

It's thrown open almost immediately by a hobbit lass in teal skirts and a light green bodice embroidered with yellow daisies. A frilly little apron does nothing to save her outfit from patches of flour and spice.
“Bella, you goose!” She chastises, chestnut curls bouncing around her shoulders as she shakes her head in exasperation. “You were supposed to be here an hour ago. Donna's in a right tizzy – you know how she gets and – oh! Who's this?” Curious blue eyes turn Bofur's way, looking him up and down. As he's scrutinized Bofur notices that the lass shares his companion's high cheekbones and pointed chin, though she looks younger around the eyes.

“You must be Belladonna's sister?” Bofur hazards a guess.

“The youngest, yes.” Belladonna says rolling her eyes and shoos her sister out of her way. “Mira, this is Bofur of the Blue Mountains. Bofur, my sister Mirabella Brandybuck of Newbury.” She concludes her hasty introduction by pulling Bofur in by his lapels and closing the door behind them. She turns to her sister and huffs. “What on earth are you doing all the way out here?”

Mira gives her sister a long, blank look and then turns, stomping off down the hall and around a corner. “Donna! You owe me a strawberry tart – Bella forgot... again!”

“Oh, bother...” Belladonna mutters under her breath. Snatching a horsehair brush off the wall she leans down to dust off the soles of her feet. Bofur doesn't need to be told, one look at the gleaming wood floors is enough. He drops his pack on a handy bench and bends over to begin pulling off his boots.

The inside of a hobbit-hole is nothing like what he expected.

There's no sign of the earth and soil that surround them. The walls and ceiling are covered in spotless white plaster, smooth and free of any hint of a stone foundation. Polished wood beams run the length of the hall and border every archway and window. Everything flows in gentle curves. Bofur knows there must be little mirrors hidden somewhere, no space built underground could be so bright and sunny without them, and yet, he can find no sign of them. The whole place is soft and cozy, though not as open as dwarven halls, it's in no way confining.

“Let's go see what trouble I've gotten into this time, shall we?” Belladonna says cheerfully and leads him down the hall after her sister. They pass through a round archway and into what looks like a little sitting room. Cushy chairs and footstools upholstered in floral fabrics circle the hearth where a little fire burns bright. The walls are covered in watercolors of landscapes and colorful birds pictured mid-flight.

At the other end of the room is another archway leading into a room floored with tile and stocked with pots and jars and odd looking vessels blown from glass. Confused mutterings drift in with the scent of home cooking from around the corner.

Belladonna puts her hands on her hips and clears her throat.

Another hobbit marches into the room with Mira in her wake. She resembles the two sisters quite strongly, though her hair is longer and less curly and her skirts are a dusky mauve, rather plain compared to Belladonna's ruby red and Mira's delicate needlework. She stops in front of them, arms crossed and pulls herself up. Staring Belladonna in the eye she positively quivers with indignant reproach.

Belladonna clasps her hands under her chin and smiles, batting her eyelashes.

Another hobbit – Donna, Bofur is beginning to suspect – turns her glare on Bofur, he fights the urge to hide his sticky, dust covered hands behind his back. Her eyes flick down to his feet.

“Your stockings don't match, young man.” She sniffs.
“Are they supposed to?” He asks, looking down and wiggling his toes.

Belladonna snickers as her sister takes her by the elbow and begins pulling her away with a huff. “Can you believe I'm the eldest?” She tosses over her shoulder as she's drug from the room, leaving Bofur and Mira behind.

They exchange awkward glances.

“Sweet Yavanna, Bell, there's a dwarf in my parlor!” Drifts around the corner.

“Lovely weather we're having, isn't it?” Mira says, rather desperately. The fingers of one hand fiddle restlessly at a thin silver chain circling her throat. The links are delicate and perfectly round.

“That's very fine workmanship.” Bofur says, hoping to ease the tension.

“I'm sorry?” Mira asks, hand going still.

“Your necklace,” Bofur clarifies.

“Oh!” She gasps and holds it up, draped across the back of her hand, so it catches the light. A solitary, iridescent drop of pale gold hangs at the end. “I -- thank you! It was a gift from Bella, she found the pearl in the Grey Havens on one of her little adventures.”

“That's a pearl?” Bofur rushes to her side and leans down to examine it more closely. Sunlight dances across its surface like a fine mist. “A gem from the sea! I never thought I'd see one in my whole life,” he says in awe, tipping his head this way and that, eager to see the pretty bobble from all angles, “they're practically legends back in Erebor, most folk don't even believe they exist!”

“You don't say?” Comes Mira's strangled reply. Bofur looks up at her strained expression and jumps back, embarrassed.

“Achrâchi gabilul.” He says and bows. “I've made you uncomfortable.”

“Well, I-” She's cut off by an outburst from the kitchen.

“A peach! That's it?” Donna sounds outraged, as though personally offended by Bofur and Belladonna's choice of mid-day meal.

“I had a potato for breakfast.” Bofur calls, feeling that he should contribute somehow.

Mira stares at him, aghast.

A high, nasally noise comes from the kitchen, as though some small, furry creature is choking on its own tongue. It's followed by busy footsteps and the bang of cabinetry being thrown open.

“Mira!” Donna calls like a battle cry. “Get our guest settled!”

Bofur finds himself propelled across the parlor and through another archway into a room dominated by a long oak table. He attempts to regain control of his movement but finds himself sliding along the floor, stockings slipping over the polished wood and six stone of hobbit lass digging into his back.

“Don't make this hard on yourself, Mister Bofur.” She grunts, giving him one last shove and sending him toppling into a lovely little chair carved with vines of ivy. “My but you're hale for a starving man.”

“I'm not starving!” Bofur protests as his hat is plucked from his head. “I'm hungry, yes, but-”
“Don't be foolish, you silly man!” Donna barks, coming around the corner and advancing along the table like a soldier on parade. She puts a mince pie down in front of him. It's as big around as his head and has a fork sticking up out of the middle. “You snack on that while we finish making supper and then we'll see about getting you properly fed up.” She nods to herself, satisfied, and then marches back towards the kitchen.

Bofur lifts the fork out of the pastry and stares at it in amazement. It's plated in silver.

“There now,” Mira chirps, tucking a napkin under Bofur's chin, “no need to be flustered, we're all friends here.” She pats him on the head and takes off after her sister. Belladonna, having watched the whole thing unfold from the doorway, buries her face in her arms and laughs so hard she snorts.

Over the next half hour there's a great deal of productivity in the kitchen. Bofur can smell fresh bread cooling and can hear the sizzle of fish being fried in butter. As he eats his way steadily through his pie (with a sweet, juicy filling and flaky crust it's one of the most delicious things he's eaten in years) the three sisters dart in and out of the dining room, covering the table with plates and bowls of food. There's mounds of spring salad, looking like smaller versions of the Shire hills, baskets of crusty bread and pats of golden butter melting in the candlelight. Bowls of roasted potatoes dusted with herbs, and asparagus cooked with garlic and lemongrass are next, followed by sliced tomatoes and eggplant covered in bubbling cheese. Pride of place goes to a platter piled high with steaming trout, their skins nice and crispy.

Bofur gapes as the sisters come in with their last additions, a pitcher of elderberry cordial and several glasses, and take their seats. He hasn't seen a meal this size since Lomi's naming day.

“Do you always eat like this?” The words fall out of his mouth before he can stop them. He snaps his mouth shut with an audible click and ducks his head.

“Usually,” Belladonna remarks, taking what's left of the mince pie and replacing it with a clean plate. Mira serves him two whole fish and then sets to work piling on potatoes and smothering them in mushroom gravy.

“I'm afraid you've caught us by surprise, Mister Bofur.” Donna says, pouring cordial into glasses and passing them around the table. Her voice is much warmer now that she's not running about. “I was expecting a quiet evening in with my sisters, I'm usually a much better hostess.”

“Speaking of...” Mira gives Belladonna a pointed look from over a basket of bread.

“What? Oh, right!” Belladonna looks up and waves her hands to either side. “Donna, Bofur of the Blue Mountains. Bofur, my sister Donnamira Boffin of Waymeet.” She says then stuffs a slice of buttered bread in her mouth. Donna rolls her eyes heavenward.

“Belladonna... Donnamira... and Mirabella...” Bofur recites, looking to each of the hobbit ladies in turn.

“It's a good thing there wasn't a fourth, really,” Belladonna says, mouth half full as she winks. “Papa wouldn't have known what to call her!”

“Your mother let him name you?” Bofur asks, surprised.

“Well, certainly. Honestly Bella, swallow before you speak.” Donna answers, patting daintily at her lips with a napkin. “Papa took a great joy in it and Mama always used pet names for the whole lot of us anyway. She didn't much care what he chose...”

“Do dwarf fathers not name their children?” Mira cuts in, serving herself a large portion of
asparagus, briefly considers, then plops a few spears on top of Bofur's plate. His meal is growing faster than he can eat it.

“Only their sons,” Bofur says, he imagines what Loti would have had to say if Bombur had tried to butt in on Lomi’s naming and laughs. “No dwarrowdam would let her _husband_ name her daughter!”

“Really?” Mira leans in, eyes wide with curiosity. “Is she not considered his?”

“What? Of course she is!” Bofur sputters. “It's just... dwarrows name sons and 'dams name daughters. That's just the way it is.”

“Let our guest eat his supper, Mira, really.” Donna interjects, giving Bofur a nod and turning towards Belladonna. “Anyway, it's dearest Bella's turn to answer some questions.”

Belladonna groans over her salad. “Yes, it's our Spring Get-Together. I'm sorry I forgot, I was thinking on other things!”

“Like what reason you'd have to send Bungo and Billy-Bo-Button off to Frogmorton without you?” Mira says, smiling innocently as she sips at her drink.

“I do believe he asked you to stop calling him that.” Belladonna retorts.

“What he doesn't know can't hurt him.” Mira answers in a teasing song.

Donna meets Bofur's eyes across the table. “My family is a menace.” She says with a straight face. The conversation continues on in that vein for the rest of the meal, light teasing and familiar disagreements dropping in like old friends. Bofur tries to eat everything he's given but the sisters seem to think he's an empty sack rather than a dwarf as they just keep giving him more. By the time supper is finished he feels as big around as his brother and about ready to explode. The hobbit ladies shoo away his efforts to help clear the table and so he sits and digests as the empty dishes are carted off. Eventually they return with dainty bowls of blueberries and clotted cream.

“I'm sure I can't eat another bite.” Bofur says, sliding down in his chair.

“More for me, then.” Belladonna replies and snatches up his bowl eagerly.

“You poor dear.” Mira says, patting his hand. “You must have been going on very little for a long while to be so tuckered out.”

“Not really,” Bofur gives her a smile for her concern. “I've just never eaten this much in me life.” Donna and Mira stop with their spoons half way to their mouths. Belladonna finishes off her own bowl and starts in on Bofur's.

“No!” Donna blurts, her eyes round as saucers.

“Well he _is_ a dwarf,” Belladonna says as if it should be obvious. “They don't eat as much as we do.”

“But they're bigger than us!” Mira exclaims.

“So are the Big Folk and they eat less than us.” Belladonna eyes Donna's blueberries, makes a route around the sugar bowl and swoops in.

Donna deflects her sister's spoon with ease. “I'm convinced they filter something out of the air. Or they've got some kind of second stomach that mashes everything up again.” She says, relishing her
last bite of dessert. “Like cows.”

Bofur tries to keep from laughing but it's really no use. He's nice and warm, full of good food and surrounded by the most ridiculous and lovely people he's had the pleasure to meet in a good long while. So he fills the room with great bursting guffaws that soon have the sisters laughing as well, high and cheerful like little song birds.

“So, then,” Donna says when things quiet down again, “Bella tells me you came all the way here for medicine. Things must be rather serious for you to seek aid from the Shire.” She leans forward and folds her hands under her chin, regarding him with somber eyes. “Tell me what the ailment is and I'll see what I can do to help.”

“Just like that?” Bofur asks, amazed by her casual generosity.

“Of course!” Mira says, sweeping her curls over her shoulder she continues, having mistaken his meaning. “Donna's the most gifted healer in the four Farthings!”

“She's remarkable, even.” Belladonna adds, a touch sarcastically.

“Let him speak.” Donna cuts them both off with finality.

Bofur finds himself at the center of their attention, three sets of eyes watching him patiently as he gathers his thoughts. “Well... it's my cousin, Bifur, you see. We had a very bad winter coming up on two decades ago—”


Donna waves her hand for Bofur to continue.

“There're goblins and orcs to the north of us and a few to the south, you see, always have been. They come down sometimes on raids, nothin' big usually.” Bofur turns his gaze inward, looking over memories of snow and ice painted red. “But that year the winter went on so long we were half starved and so were they, only there's more of them than us. It was like every last one came out o' the mountains, hackin' at anything to fill their bellies.”

The shadows seem to get longer as he continues, the light from the candles flicking in the heavy air.

“We retreated to the mines, the whole colony all crowded in together. If we coulda blocked the entrance things wouldn't have got so bad but we hadn't dug far enough yet. Wasn't no back way out then, and not enough air-shafts to keep so many people breathin' fresh air if we did.” Bofur runs his fingers along one braid recalling the dark chill of the tunnels growing humid with shared body heat, with shared breath. And the constant threat of the seeping damp... “Couldn't even light candles to see by...”

“What happened to your cousin?” Donna prompts, voice soft and low.

“Bif volunteered to guard the entrance. I wanted to go with him but the Prince wanted me to stay and keep all the little 'uns entertained... I've always been good at entertainin'.” He takes a deep breath and continues, ignoring the way his eyes sting at the memory. “Lots went to fight and lots died doing it. Bif was lucky really. He got an ax stuck in his head but he lived, though none can figure how, not even Vustmâhâl Thivi.”

“Hmmm...” Donna hums in consideration, leaning back in her chair. “The axehead is still embedded, is it?”
“Yes.” Bofur replies.

“And the wound has healed, no lingering infection?” She asks.

“That's right.” He says.

“You're not looking to get it out again, are you?” Donna narrows her eyes at him.

“No!” Bofur blurts, he winces at his outburst. “No, Vustmâhâl Thivi says it'd kill 'im if we tried.”

Donna nods. “And you listened, that's good.” She gets up and starts to pace around the table, hands folded behind her back. “What sort of help are you looking for then?”

“Well…” Bofur hesitates recalling Thivi’s irritation at Bofur and his family's persistence on the matter. But this is Belladonna's sister he's talking to. He can trust Belladonna, the hobbit lass who came out of the sky like sudden lightening, a grin splitting her face and her eyes luminous with joy. He can trust her and so he can trust her kin. “He was doin' all right for a while, but he's never really been the same since it happened and lately he's been gettin' worse.”

Donna makes a thoughtful noise, as if none of this surprises her. It doesn’t seem to have bothered Belladonna or Mira either, they’ve sat through the whole thing quietly, hardly moving. “What are this Thivi's thoughts on your cousin's condition, he's your healer, yes? What has he been treating him with?”

Bofur's mouth falls open, Donna quirks an eyebrow at him. He shrugs helplessly. “He hasn't.”

She makes a rolling motion with her hand, prompting him to continue. “He hasn't...?”

“Been treatin' Bif.”

Donna stares at him for a moment, then takes a breath and leaves the room. Belladonna and Mira lean over in their seats as they watch her go.

“Did I-”

“Shhh!” Belladonna says, covering his mouth with a finger.

From the parlor there comes a sound rather like a lady screaming into a pillow.

“I'll just get the brandy-wine, then.” Mira says, getting up and heading into the kitchen. “Before she goes for something stronger.”

Donna returns in a flurry of skirts, a little red in the face, and returns to her pacing, much faster this time. She turns to Bofur and lets out a gust of breath. “Right, we'll start at the beginning. Tell me everything, what are his symptoms, any unusual reactions – this would be so much easier if I could speak with your cousin myself. Can he come to the Shire?” She says all in a rush. She shakes her head and tisks at her own question. “No of course he can't, or you would have brought him. Fine! Give me an overview, whatever you think is the most important.”

“Er, well, he gets confused sometimes,” Bofur starts, watching as Mira brings in a decanter of dark amber colored liquid and several small glasses from the kitchen and sets them on the table. Donna pours herself a generous amount. “He'll think he's somewhere he's not, or that he needs to talk to someone he's never met. He gets agitated easily.”

“The issue is mental then,” Donna says, tapping her fingers against her chin and she thinks. “What
sorts of things bother him?"

“Hard to say sometimes,” Bofur says, accepting a glass of the brandy drink from Belladonna. He takes a small sip. The burn as it goes down is familiar but it tastes like a drunken bowl of fruit decided to get up and punch him in the face. He takes another gulp anyway. "One day it's a sudden noise, other days because it's too quiet. Things scare him tha’ didn't used to, storms and creepy-crawlies and such. He doesn't trust anyone outside the family now.” He waves his arm back towards the front door where he left his pack. “That's his kit I'm usin'. He likes to hide it 'round the house and take off on his own. He never makes it far but that doesn't stop him from tryin'.”

“What was his life like before the raids?” Donna asks, sitting back down at the table taking a hearty swig from her glass.

“Like the life o' any miner,” Bofur says, then elaborates at the blank look he gets. “He dug through stone for coal and iron ore, bunked with me in the miner's hall, went out to the pub when we had extra coin. Visited with Bombur, er – my brother, and his family when we could.”

“And what's changed since?” Donna asks.

“Well... he's got an ax stickin' out o' his forehead.” Bofur hazards.

Donna flaps her hands in front of her face as though beset by a swarm of gnats. “No, no, no! Forget the ax, how has his daily life changed?”

“Oh, ah – we got a place outside o' the settlement now, to keep him away from others like Thivi said.” Bofur stops speaking as Donna chugs her brandy like the lone survivor of a goblin raid come home to drown their guilt. Belladonna smiles encouragingly and motions for him to continue. “Er... he can't speak Westron anymore and he can't work in the mines so he stays around the house mostly... um...”

“Wrong, wrong, wrong!” Donna laments as she bangs her head against the table. “Why do they always do exactly the wrong thing?”

“I'm sorry?” Bofur asks, rather worried by this point.

“Don't be,” Belladonna says, patting her sister's back and smiling over at him. “She always gets a little theatrical when she drinks.”

Mira hums her agreement, checking the level of Donna's glass with a critical eye.

“This Thivi fellow is a fobbing, beetle-headed pumpion!” Donna snarls and reaches for her glass. Mira very diplomatically removes it from temptation by downing the rest herself.

“What did that all mean?” Bofur asks Belladonna as her sisters squabble over the decanter.

“From Hobbitish to Dwarvish?” Belladonna remarks as she steals all the glasses and hides them in her skirts. “It means she thinks he's a right tonker.”

“Here now!” Bofur cries, put out. “Vustmâhâl Thivi saved Bifur's life!”

“Only to snatch it right out of his hands again!” Donna rejoins, giving up on the brandy. She reaches across the table and snatches up Bofur's hands, holding them between her own. “Your cousin isn't a pariah, Mister Bofur, he got hurt and now his mind doesn't work like it used to. But he's getting punishment instead of healing. He needed normalcy more than anything else but what he's gotten is a whole different life, one that's not his!”
It's like a hot lump of tar has settled in Bofur's chest, sticking to his ribs and bowing them inwards. Bifur's discontent had been obvious to everyone but it had always seemed to stem from the ax, to Bofur's mind. It had been easy to set the blame there, as though the weapon was some kind of infection sending dark tendrils through Bifur's life. Bofur had never considered that anything else could be the cause, and worse, he'd never thought to ask.

The family has been like blackdamp in the tunnels of Bifur's mind, slowly and silently suffocating, with none to hear the canary's song fade and die.

“What do we do?” Bofur whispers.

“He needs to contribute to the family again, rejoin the community.” Donna says, decisively.

“He can't go back to the mines,” Bofur says, shaking his head. “No Irkatguchir will have Bif in their crew.”

“Sod them!” Donna declares, “It's for the best anyway. Sunlight and fresh air will do him good once he's busy again. What else can he do for work, does he have any hobbies?”

Bofur stops to consider. The children's toy-box comes to mind, half full of little wooden creations carved with a careful hand. “He likes to carve wood, he's always making things for my niece and nephews.”

“There you are then!” Donna says, releasing Bofur's hands and rising from her seat. “That's a good place to start. Children always need toys, he could have his own shop!” She disappears into the kitchen with a flourish. “Mira, come help me with these herbs – and find some parchment somewhere, will you?”

“Coming, Donna.”

Bofur and Belladonna are left alone at the table for a few minutes, listening to the sounds of jars being opened and the rustle of dried plants being poured out. Bofur lifts a hand to rub at his eyes. A light weight settles on his shoulder.

“Don't dwell on past mistakes, Mister Bofur, focus on the future instead.” Belladonna says and kisses his temple. “You're a good dwarf who loves his family. You'll do fine.”

He blinks at her, stunned. Before he can think of anything to say Donna and Mira are on their way back in, carrying several small bundles, an undersized ale cask and a sheet of parchment. The items are spread out on the table in front of him. Mira hands him the parchment and Bofur looks it over as he takes it. It appears to be some kind of list but even if Bofur were better with letters he still wouldn't be able to read it. The writing is all curvy and round with little dots speckled throughout, nothing like the tidy lines and sharp angles of Cirth.

“That's my own recipes on there, so don't you lose it.” Donna remarks, shaking her finger at him. Bofur puts it down on the table and smooths it flat. Donna opens each of the bundles in turn, loosening the ties and pulling the cloth apart to show him their contents. “This is for tea, a cuppa in the morning and another at night. It's chamomile and hops mainly, but they're all in the recipe so when you run out of this you'll know exactly what to get. There's willow bark for pain, only as needed, mind.” She says putting it off to the side with special care. “These last two are valerian and lemon-balm, which will help him sleep if he's having difficulties.”

“Er... right.” Bofur says trying to remember everything. He reminds himself that the boys will have been learning Westron letters while he's been away. He's not completely lost in the deeps yet.
“What's the tea do?”

“It's my own special blend,” Donna says with no little pride. Taking the bundles of herbs, she tucks them into a cotton bag and ties it securely with twine. “You mentioned your cousin gets agitated and frightened easily, this will help. Very good for anxiety and stress, this is. He'll need to drink it every day for a couple of weeks before he really starts to notice a difference but give it time and it'll make things just that little bit easier for him.”

Bofur nods. It shouldn't be hard to get Bifur to try the stuff, he’s taken a special liking to flowers lately. Bif might even be enamored enough with the idea to overlook the smell. Bofur's gaze turns to the cask. It sits in the middle of the table, seemingly ignored. Curious, Bofur points to it. “An' what's in that?”

“This,” Donna says, laying a careful hand on the little barrel, “Is a very special variety of pipe-weed called Southern Star. Keep it in a cool, dark place well away from children,” She continues very seriously, “it's for emergencies only. When he's having a really hard day.”

“What does it do?” Bofur asks. He’s always thought of smoking leaf as something to do to pass the time. He’s a bit loath to find it's apparently more than just a sweet smelling herb.

“Well, it'll calm him right down.” Crossing her arms over her chest, Donna puts special emphasis on her next words. “But it can leave people feeling floaty and out of sorts, so Bifur's to be the one to say when he wants to use it, clear?” She asks, staring Bofur down, unblinkingly.

“Yes, very clear!” He assures her, holding his hands up in surrender.

“Excellent,” Donna nods and passes the bag of herbs to Mira. She picks up the small barrel herself and begins making her way around the table. “We'll just put these with your things and then get you settled in.”

“Settled in?” Bofur asks, blinking at them owlishly.

“It's getting late and you've got a long way to go in the morning.” Belladonna says, reaching for the parchment under Bofur's hand and folding it up into a neat little square. She hands it to Mira who tucks it in with her bundle. “You'll be wanting plenty of rest.”

Bofur jumps up and looks into the parlor and out its little round windows. The sunlight is nearly gone. He rushes after Donna and Mira, Belladonna on his heels.

“That's a mighty fine offer,” Bofur says as he comes around the corner, “but there's still enough light to travel a fair way, there's no reason to go to the trouble.”

“It's no trouble.” Donna says, quirking an eyebrow at him having tucked the cask in next to his pack.

“I really couldn't-” Bofur tries again, reaching for his boots. Mira blocks his path.

“Why-ever not?” She asks, hands on her hips. “You can't expect us to let you wander off into the night!”

“It's just, you've been so kind to me already.” Bofur says, cheeks flushing as he examines his threadbare stockings. He looks up at them, blinking back tears. “You're remarkable ladies, you really are.”

“Oh no!” Belladonna groans, burying her face in her hands. “Not you too.”
“What did I say?” Bofur asks as Donna rolls her eyes.

“That’s what the whole Shire calls us, the Remarkable Daughters of the Old Took.” Mira says winking. “It drives Bella mad.”

Curious, Bofur turns towards her and away from Bella’s scowling face. “Why do they call you that?”

“Well, me for my medicines, Mira for her art – that’s her work in the parlor,” Donna says, waving her hand back down the hall. Mira beams with pride. “And Bella for her less than respectable habit of going off on madcap exploits to parts unknown.”

“They aren’t unknown,” Belladonna protests, “they’ve got roads, you know.”

“The most remarkable thing about us, they say,” Mira remarks as she takes Bofur’s arm and leads him down the hall, deeper into the hobbit-hole, leaving Bella and Donna behind to trade quips, “is that we didn’t all end up like Bella!”

~*~*~*

“Now remember,” Donna natters on as Bella helps Bofur tie the cask of leaf to the bottom of his pack. “Follow the road up past The Pines and then west along the Bywater Road and continue on from there all the way up to Gamwich. The bounds aren’t far after that and you'll be on your way.”

“Hobbiton, The Pines, Bywater…” Bofur mumbles stomping his feet into his boots and grinning up at them, eyes crinkling in mirth. “I'm beginning to see a pattern here.”

“You shouldn't judge our naming conventions from such a small sampling, Master Dwarf,” Bella says impishly, playing along. “You haven't even been to Woody End, or Greenfields or The Hill, much less Overhill yet! We've got so much more to offer in overtly blatant nomenclature.”

“Are you sure you can't stay for second breakfast?” Donna asks, ignoring their little repartee.

“It's a fine offer, but I just can't be staying any longer, I – ooph!” Bofur's breath comes out in a burst as he hefts his pack onto his shoulders, under balances and topples back against the wall. Bella slaps a hand up over her eyes.

“Mira…” She says, exasperated. “When I said to pack up a few previsions…”

“But it is only a few!” Mira protests, eyes wide. She continues, ticking items off on her fingers. “A loaf of bread, a wheel of cheese, some salt pork, crab apples, mixed nuts, a handful of fruit preserves.”

“Fruit preserves?” Bella turns to her sister, hands on her hips. “He's got a two week journey ahead! What's he going to do with a bunch of jars weighting him down?”

Mira shrugs under Bella's gaze, half sheepish and half determined. “I thought it would be a nice treat.”

Bella rolls her eyes.

“It's not so bad,” Bella turns to see Bofur pushing himself upright. He plants his feet and boosts his pack further up his back. “I just wasn't expectin' the extra weight, is all.”

Mira smiles and gives Bella a superior look. Bella sighs and moves towards the front door, resigned. She opens it and steps out into the morning chill, Bofur follows her out onto the front step and
turns back towards Bella's sisters. They stand in the doorway shading their faces against the early sun, blinking overly bright eyes.

"You're sure about second breakfast?" Donna asks one last time.

Bofur laughs. "I'm still stuffed from the first one!"

"Oh, do be careful," Mira pounces, wrapping the dwarf up in a hug long perfected on unsuspecting nieces and nephews. "The wilds outside the bounds are no place for decent folk!"

"Oh, honestly..." Bella snorts as she helps Donna pry their younger sister's arms from around Bofur's neck. She comes away reluctantly, dabbing at her eyes with a lace hanky.

"Just remember everything I've told you about the tea and pipe weed and such," Donna says, shooing Mira off to the side and giving Bofur a few light pats on the cheek. "And give our love to your family, especially the wee darlings."

"O' course." Bofur replies, looking a little flummoxed by all the affection.

"All right, then," Bella cuts in, taking Bofur by the arm and getting him turned around. "Let's get you through to Waymeet and on the right road, shall we?" She leads them through the garden and down the little path. Glancing back over her shoulder she can see her sisters waving them along until she and Bofur round the little copse of trees and head up the hill.

Back on the Waymeet Track, Bella turns and gives Bofur a cheeky smirk.

"They've taken quite the shine to you!"

"Aye," Bofur replies, scratching under his hat. "Don't know what I did to deserve it." He shakes his head, brows furrowed in thought. "Your sister wouldn't even let me pay her for the medicine!"

Bella laughs, recalling the pinched look of outrage on Donna's face when Bofur had asked what he owed her. "She won't take payment for something like that, not when she thinks someone's been maltreated by another healer."

The track opens up into the town of Waymeet, smials boarding the road until it reaches the center green. Even at this early hour there are folk out and about, doing chores and getting their day started. Some notice the odd pair and watch them pass, expressions closed off.

"I don't like to think that Thivi did us wrong." Bofur says, lowly.

"But you were already thinking it," Bella points out, giving him a firm look when Bofur opens his mouth to protest. "You were, or you wouldn't have come all the way to the Shire to ask for help."

Bofur sighs, shaking his head. "I was just hopin' you'd have something he didn't."

"Common sense, Donna would say." Bella comments as they cross the green and angle right towards the pine road. "Compassion might be a better word." They pass the last few smials on their way out of the village. In the garden of one a mother herds her children back towards the door, throwing an indignant glare over her shoulder and muttering about borrowing trouble, she closes the door with a firm hand. "It's often in short supply when folk are confronted with anything... peculiar."

Beams of sunlight come down through the clouds, warming their skin as they continue on into the fields. They're well onto the road now and there's little chance of Bofur losing his way, but Bella finds herself reluctant to part ways just yet and so they walk on, intrepid hobbit and humble dwarf
side by side. Bella finds it comforting in a way she doesn't quite wish to examine.

“You must be very lonely.” Bofur says all of the sudden, startling her rather badly.

She turns to regard him with wide eyes.

“We've always thought, dwarves that is, that hobbits are very cut off from the world – that you wanted it that way,” Bofur says, shrugging. “But here you are and from what your sisters say, you've been all kinds of places. You say hobbits are scared of water, 'cept you aren't.” Bofur gestures back the way they've come, towards Waymeet and further on towards Hobbiton. “Hobbits don't seem much for anyone or anything unexpected – 'cept you seemed thrilled by it. I don't expect many hobbits run off with wizards either, or care to know any.” He smiles at her, eyes crinkling and warm. “Just seems like you don't quite fit here, lovely as it is.”

Bella turns to face down along the road and blinks rapidly. There's a lump in her throat that she can't quite seem to swallow.

“I didn't mean to upset yeh.” Bofur whispers.

“No, it's not that. You didn't, honestly.” She insists but accepts the cloth he offers and dabs at her eyes all the same. “It's just – you're right,” She can picture their faces, all the folk she's passed with her bag and traveling cloak draped over her shoulders. It's not the glowering faces or those with noses and mouths scrunched up in distaste, that bother her the most. It's the ones who watched her pass, expressions uncomprehending and incredulous that upset her. Looking as though the very idea of setting foot beyond the gentle hills of the Shire were unthinkable. “I love the Shire, I do! But it's just so small, so very confining, and I haven't really left in such a long time, it seems...”

“My family were some o' the first to leave Erebor for the west,” Bofur offers up as Bella's words run out. He looks up at the sky, eyes misty. “I was only a dozen years past my majority, my brother Bombur had just got married and the King, he says – Go west, dig for iron and coal and prosper!” He waves his hands in grand gestures about his head, nose stuck in the air and face pinched in imagined nobility. “An' we thought, by Durin's beard, why not? We were poor as dirt and our parents thought we could do well for ourselves, move up in the world. So we left.” Bofur says, shrugging. “It was grand at first, a right adventure, exploring a new mountain and digging new mines. But it creeps up on you, doesn't it? That sort of longing deep in yer bones. Been out here five odd decades, Bombur and Loti have the little 'uns now and we buried our parents in the stone. And yet...”

Bofur turns to look at her and she sees something of herself reflected in his eyes. “We don't really fit there, even before Bifur's trouble, though I can't say why. The mountains climb high and the tunnels run deep but nothing seems quite right, I don't know how to explain it...”

“Your soul isn't there.” Bella murmurs, with utter certainty. “Mine isn't here either.” Even now she feels a twinge of guilt admitting it. “My heart is, certainly. My family is extensive and loving and I adore my husband and son, but my soul is a wandering thing and can't be contained.”

They've come to a stop overlooking the winding expanse of the road as it dips down and away towards the towering giants of The Pines. The great trees dominate the landscape, one of the few remnants of the old forests that used to cover the farthings before the founding of Armër. When the Shire was wild and untamed and long before any hobbit had even seen the Brandywine, much less crossed it. How Bella wishes she could have seen it.

“You should visit.” Bofur says, the cheer back in his voice. “If you ever make it up, just ask after my brother, he's a Thakmâhguchir so anyone would know how to find him.”
“A Thackemahgucher, you say,” Bella smirks, “sounds important.”

“Yes, he – er, hrmnm...” Bofur makes a low note of discontent and squints at her, at a loss for how to continue.

Bella laughs. “You dwarves and your secret language – oh!” She snaps her fingers, recalling a thought that had nagged at her the night before. “The recipes Donna wrote out, is there anyone who can read them for you?”

Bofur blushes and stammers, looking down at his feet. Bella lays a hand on his shoulder and gives it a light squeeze.

“I never expected you to be able to, Bofur.” She says, drawing him in and wrapping her arm around his shoulder. Bofur hesitates then does the same. “Why would you learn to read Westron when you've had no use for it until now?”

“My nephews go for schooling most days,” Bofur meets her eyes again and smiles. “Their teacher knows Westron letters, or so they tell me.”

“Good!” Bella gives him a quick hug, pulls back then goes in for another. “I'm so glad to have met you Bofur, son of Bôfbur. And of course I'll visit! Just as soon as I'm able.”

“I'll hold you to that, Took's daughter,” Bofur says and pulls away with a wink. “I'd leave you with a dwarvish parting, but you've no beard to wish longer!”

“May your mustache grow so long you trip over it.” Bella says, pulling an expression she's seen on many an old hobbit, self-possessed authority with a side of mild constipation. Bofur laughs and tips his hat. He bids her well and departs with a spring in his step.

She watches him until all she can see is a bare speck on the horizon.

*~*~*~

When Bofur makes it back to Ered Luin the settlement is a mess of activity, dwarves rushing back and forth, some with packs and some with carts, all making their way towards the meeting hall. He stops to ask a passing guard what the commotion is about and gets an earful about some kind of quest to retake Khazad'dum. The colony is overflowing with dwarves coming in from outlying settlements, all wanting to hear the official word on Erebor's plans.

The guard asks him what hole he's been stuck down to not know nothing about anything. Bofur replies simply and honestly, he's been in the Shire.

The guard is equally blunt, wondering what Bofur could possibly want in that mess of elf-eared dirt eaters.

Bofur leaves him whimpering on the ground, clutching his stones.

The other guards loose interest in chasing him by the time Bofur's made it past the shanties and into the woods. He makes good time and reaches home around mid-day. The woodpile is considerably smaller than when he left and the roof has a new layer of bark. He hears laughter from the back garden and makes his way around the house.

Bofur and Lomi sit together under the warm sun. His niece bounces and giggles as squirrels romp and spring along the ground, chasing after shelled nuts as Bifur throws them in the air. Bofur watches them, drinking in the sight, until Lomi gets up to run after the furry critters, sending them
diving for the trees. Shucking his pack and coat, Bofur walks over to his cousin and sits beside him, setting his things down to the side.

Bifur looks at him expectantly but Bofur finds he can't quite speak. So he gives his cousin a watery smile and leans their foreheads together. Bifur seems to understand his silence and they stay like that until Lomi notices Bofur's presence and comes over to jump into his arms.

Back in the colony there's likely some kind of ruckus as rumors butt up against the measured words of official edicts. There'll be those who want to wait for the call for volunteers and those who want to get a head start and the mining masters will be all in a tizzy trying to keep things orderly. But Bofur hardly cares. He spends the afternoon out in the fresh air watching his cousin and niece eat their way through a jar of Shire-made raspberry jam with a spoon.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter - back to Erebor and Thorin pov!

Translation Notes:

Words marked by a (*) were created by me using existing words from The Dwarrow Scholar's dictionary because no canon word existed that would suit my purpose.

Achrâchi gabilul – a formal apology (lit. it pains me greatly)

Vustmâhâl* – Healer (lit. person who creates health)

Blackdamp – a mixture of gasses common in old coal mines created when exposed coal absorbs oxygen and releases carbon dioxide and water vapor. It has no obvious odor and the symptoms are slow to set in but can escalate rapidly causing mass asphyxiation if early warning signs aren’t caught.

Irkatguchir* – supervisor of a mining crew (lit. mine-shaft master)

Thakmâhguchir* – a mine architect (lit. mine, to create, master)
The Clouded Gem

Chapter Summary

A meeting is held and Thorin receives some advice. In the Shire, a hobbit lass meets a traveling dwarf.

Chapter Notes

Thorin is majestic and brooding because there's no universe in which he isn't and the political shenanigans begin!

Beta'd by Re_White, see End Notes for translations.

There is a haze over the Blue Mountains.

It creeps into the mind and seeps into idle musings and into dreams only half remembered come morning. The dwarves of Ered Luin find their eyes turning east when their thoughts wander.

In the summer a side shaft collapses and buries an entire mining crew alive. The colony digs day and night with pickaxe and shovel, erecting new beams and hauling out rubble. When the team is unearthed their faces are gaunt and pale in death, faces turned as one towards the sunrise in the deep dark of the stone.

That is the last year the shipments of coal and iron go out as planned, long lines of wagons stretching into the distance. The shadows of Deadman's Dike watch them pass as they have for decades. Dwarves come, dwarves go back again, trespassers in a land lost to legend.

The following years bring something more interesting.

It starts as a trickle. A few hooded figures here and there, tagging behind the wagons. Then the number grows. A few handfuls, a troop. Sometimes a squadron of guards come after, armor and weapons glinting in the changing light of the seasons. Sometimes they return empty handed, sometimes with travelers in chains. Sometimes they don't return at all.

The shadows watch, their curiosity piqued.

They look east and wonder.

*~*~*~*

("All attend! The annals shall reflect a congress between the Kingdom of Erebor and the ambassadors of the Iron Hills and of the Grey Mountains in the year 2931 of the Third Age on this, the tenth day of Âfizu.")

Thorin storms from the chamber, not waiting for the other members of the negotiations to finish their
parting words. Frustration radiates off him, from the stiff set of his shoulders to the brisk pace he sets through the narrow halls. Servants and attendants scramble from his path, clutching packages and documents close as he stalks past.

He has a headache coming on, which does nothing to improve his mood. Still, Thorin reminds himself as a dwarrowdam trips over her broom in her haste to get out of the prince's way, those who serve should not have to pay for it.

He slows himself to a more sedate pace and schools his features. His thoughts turn inwards.

("I had thought," Turak runs a casual hand over the steely gray braids of his beard, eyes cast down as he speaks, "that a topic of this magnitude would warrant the presence of the King himself."

Thorin stiffens.

"This is a preliminary negotiation only." Thráin responds. "There are other matters requiring the King's attention at present.")

Thorin's brow pinches together. Very few occasions have brought him into the presence of the ambassador of the Iron Hills. The stately dwarf had always been distant but unerringly polite, words carefully chosen and placed, like a jeweler faceting the crown of a gem. But formalities had not even concluded before Turak had begun his subtle criticism, calling into question Thráin's fitness to oversee the meeting. Each remark had been like a hairline fracture in the stone of the heir's standing, hardly enough to warrant further inspection but all together weakening its foundation.

None had seemed to take notice. Not Thráin or the dwarves of the Emùlhekhulagùlab, not even the other dignitaries. Thorin alone had seemed to take offense and had been unable to voice his discontent.

The heir of the heir does not speak unless asked.

"Gasatafra... Gasatafra... Oh – Birashagimi! Gasatafra..." Behind him a voice rises above the clamor of busy work. It's genial and sounds just on the edge of a warm chuckle as it draws steadily closer.

A white cloud of hair appears at Thorin's shoulder.

"You left in quite the hurry, lad. Something on your mind?"

Thorin glances down at the dwarf beside him and recognizes him instantly. Balin, son of Fundin, a noble of the Emùlhekhulagùlab and one of his father's advisers.

Thorin bows his head and does his best to look pleasant. They're cousins, however distant.

"Agùlabâlûn Balin, you needn't have concerned yourself with me. I'm sure my father could use your council more than I."

"None of that, now." Balin says, lips twitching above his snowy beard. "Your nephews have stuck me to my seat with binding glue far too often for us to be holding to formalities." He winks one twinkling eye, taking any sting from his words. Balin sighs then, folding his hands in his ample sleeves. "And I'd offer your father my advise but, at the moment, he will not hear it."

Thorin comes to a sudden stop, shocked into stillness by Balin's candor as much as his words.

They've come to a promenade overlooking the causeways of the First Deep. Balin moves forward to stand at the balustrade, looking out over the multitude of dwarrows and 'dams going about the business of the day. Around them lanterneers scurry back and forth with casks of oil and stacks of
thick pillared candles, polishing cloths hanging from their belts. Thorin is in the way, he knows, standing in the middle of an intersection.

Still, he hesitates to join the older dwarf at the rail.

(“The Iron Hills is honored that Erebor would turn to us for aid,” Turak's remark is not addressed to Thráin, but rather to Nár, seated to the left of the king's vacant seat. The grizzled councilor flicks his eyes up and dips his head. “However, we cannot help but admit that we are perplexed,” Turak's scribe nods fervently at the ambassador's words as he blots his notes, “Erebor’s wealth is vast, far exceeding that of the Iron Hills... particularly given the decrease in trade.”

“The settlement has been more productive than anticipated.” Thráin answers. Thorin can see his father's frustration in the slant of his mouth and the curl of his hand on the table.

“The caravans have experienced delays, I've heard,” Rhokim murmurs, as though to himself. Turak's brow furrows inwards, his expression briefly suspicious at the other ambassador's acquiescence. “Such a long way for them to travel, for something so simple as iron.”

“By your leave, Emùlhekhizu,” Balin speaks for the first time since the meeting began. At Thráin's nod he continues. “The King's concern is not funding or even resources. Rather, he seeks expertise in rough and mountainous terrain and the warriors who posses it.”

“The Grey Mountains cannot spare them.” Rhokim's answer is immediate and decisive.)

Not for the first time Thorin wishes that Dis had their grandfather's permission to attend these meetings. His sister would know far better than he, who was supporting their King's obsession and who was merely going through the motions.

In his mind Thorin hears the creak of the chamber doors, footsteps drawing all attention from the table. He hears the weight of molded gold set to rest on flat stone, heavy as the great hammers of the forge.

Can he trust Balin?

Thorin is torn from his thoughts when, body acting on decades of martial training, he steps lightly to the side, avoiding what would have been a very messy collision with a young dwarrow carrying crates of ink. The lad stumbles over his feet, gapes at Thorin with wide eyes and squeaks out an apology. Unable to bow with the crates stacked in his arms, the lad drops an embarrassing curtsy and dashes off, head ducked down in his many knitted layers.

“Poor lad,” Balin sighs. Thorin turns to see the old dwarf gazing off after the young dwarrow with a sympathetic smile. “Still running ink at his age, what a shame.”

“He hardly looks older than Fili and Kili.” Thorin remarks, though in truth the lad has more of a beard than either, scraggily though it may be.

“Oh, aye, I don't doubt it. But only the very youngest apprentices are made to run ink among the Bâhzundushkirthâlh.” Balin shakes his head, half resigned and half puzzled. “It would be kinder to turn the lad to another profession, if he has so little potential.”

“I had thought he was a scrivener’s aid.”

“No, he had a copper raven’s feather clipped to his forelock.” Balin remarks, giving Thorin a wry smile and a raised brow. “You ought to pay attention to these things, lad. Especially if we end up going through with this confounded campaign.”
Relief washes over Thorin like the warming caress of firelight on a cold evening. He goes to stand beside Balin, resting his arms on the balustrade, and looks down into the descending cavern. Below them lanterns strengthened by mirrors send steady streams of light over the stairways and bridges of the Deeps.

“Are against this folly, then?”

“Aye, though I can't deny I long to see those greatest of halls...” Balin trails off, eyes gone misty, lost somewhere in his own imaginings. His gaze turns darker suddenly and he shivers, coming back to himself. “Still, I can't help feeling... uneasy about this whole venture. I've a sense of foreboding about the entire thing, it makes my whiskers ache.”

Balin raises a hand to his pale beard, running his fingers through the stands.

Thorin chuckles. “You have no whiskers,” he says and is immediately overcome with mortification. His cheeks burn as he begins to stammer an apology.

But Balin is laughing and the sound is just as warm and merry as the old dwarf's voice had led Thorin to believe.

“True, enough!” Balin says with good humor, scratching at his bare upper lip. He smiles at Thorin's continued embarrassment and pats his arm. “I am loyal to Erebor, my lad, and to the line of Durin – but in this I find my sympathies lay with the Grey Mountains.”

(Thorin sighs, motioning for silence. Rhokim falters, his arguments cutting off abruptly.

“We are aware of the difficulties you face.” Thráin says, grimacing as he takes a sip of mulled ale long gone cold.

“They situation is dire,” he admits, rubbing his hand across his brow, “though it is partly of their own making.”

“Then you understand our reasoning-” Rhokim begins.

Gamul speaks over him, wizened lips twisted in distaste. “You would deny your King when he calls?” The ancient councilor asks, narrowing his eyes.

“The Lady of Ered Mithrin will deny King Thrór nothing that can be spared,” Rhokim snaps. Beside him the dwarrowdam who serves as his scribe puts quill to parchment for the first time that Thorin has seen. The ambassador visibly calms himself. “However, her first concern and greatest duty are to the dwarves under her protection. We cannot spare any warriors for this campaign when we need every last one to hold our own borders.”

“You have our sympathies, ambassador.” Thráin says.

“Forgive me, my lord, but we have no use for sympathy,” Rhokim answers, “what we require is your aid.”

Thorin sighs.

“You are against this folly, then?”

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“Their situation is dire,” he admits, rubbing his hand across his brow, “though it is partly of their own making.”

“That's not entirely fair, lad.” Balin says, the reprimand soft but there none the less.

“The Grey Mountains were lost to orcs and dragon-fire long ago,” Thorin crosses his arms and stares out over the First Deep. On the main causeway three guards barrel through the crowd, tipping carts as they give chase to a dwarf with oddly pointed hair. Thorin shakes his head and snorts. “They
should have come south with grandfather after Ikmurk’s attack. How many lives would be saved but for their stubborn pride?”

“Can you honestly say your pride is not equal to theirs?” Balin asks, arching one bushy eyebrow. “If Erebor were to be lost to Ikmurk’s wrath, or any other drake, wouldn’t you fight to your dying breath to retake it?” He raises a hand, forestalling Thorin’s reply. “You needn’t answer, my prince, I can see it like a fire in your eyes. Understand, it isn’t merely the Grey Mountains who stand to fall. The Cold-drakes are wingless but their cousins are not. In aiding our northern kin we forestall the ruin of our own halls.”

“I do not like to think that those worms would come so far south.”

“And yet, if the Grey Mountains fell, what would keep them? They’ve a lust for gold that far exceeds even the most covetous of dwarves.”

(The negotiations have regressed into a battle of words. The royal scrivener’s frail hand races across parchment, scrambling to keep up. Around his small desk his assistants work at a furious pace, loading new quills with ink, pen knives sharpening those that have been cast aside. Rolls of parchment are unwound and smoothed flat only to be snatched up one after the other. A young apprentice groans and tugs at his braids in dismay as he finds the supply of blotting paper has nearly run out. It speaks to the heat of the ongoing dispute that none save for Thorin seem to hear the breach in etiquette.

The meeting chamber is configured so that the King’s Seat is the focal point of the room and all but those who advise him are arranged so that their attention is drawn towards that one point. Everything radiates outwards from it and angles back again, hardly giving room for the eye to wander. Even so, when the great doors open every dwarrow in the room goes still and turns as though compelled.

The doorway appears larger than Thorin remembers, like a dark void drawing him in. At the center stands the king.

They all rise from their seats, hardwood chair legs scraping against polished stone. Thrór takes his time as he walks towards his seat. He does not speak and so none dare address him, not even Thráin. Even the scribes – generally regarded as particularly active furniture until needed – have stood at the king’s entry.

As Thrór reaches the head of the table he turns to regard the gathering. The lantern light from overhead brings attention to his crown, the ebony stone of the cresting ravens glowing dully. Gold glints and gleams from the circlet upon his head, down the clips accenting the careful angles of his beard, over the threads of his robes and the wide expanse of his belt, to every ring adorning his fingers. He is radiant with wealth and power, blazing like the fires of the Grand Forge.)

“... even grandfather...” Thorin whispers, apprehension over the king’s ever growing greed gnawing at his gut.

“I...” Balin sighs, expression grave and at a loss for words. Thorin turns to the old dwarf, looking him dead in the eye. The chill returns to his bones.

“What was in that box, Balin?”

(From the king’s shadow an attendant steps forward, unremarkable save for the item he holds. A small coffer wrought from gold, filigreed with shining strands of mithril so intricate Thorin’s eyes ache to look at them, rests on slats of silver threaded through the base. As one the dwarves watch as
of its feet meeting hard stone echos through the room like distant thunder.

The rest of the meeting passes in a golden daze, the resonance of the king's voice the only clarity to be had.)

“Oh, lad. I think we both know the answer to that.” Balin replies, shaking his head, his weary eyes meeting Thorin's gaze and not looking away. “Though neither of us are happy to think on it.”

“Thorin! You orc-skinned, tree hugging, fibbing lout!”

The bellow fills the narrow hall behind them and bursts out over the promenade. Above them a lanterneer startles and tips in his harness, dropping a fresh candle with a curse and watches it fall down into the shadows with an expression of quiet and long suffering resentment. Thorin turns to see his Shomakhûn storming towards them, his warhammer slung across his shoulder and shaved head gleaming with sweat. The crowd of servants parts like a cresting wave in the path of Dwalin's wrath.

“Well, doesn't he sound put out.”

Thorin sighs, rubbing his hand over his face. “I told him to wait for me outside the doors of the antechamber.”

“Only you left through the servant's entrance.” Balin tips his head and smiles up at him indulgently. “I'll just leave you two to talk it out then.” Balin gives him one last pat on the arm and wanders off towards a small stairway.

“Traitor.” Thorin grumbles after him. Balin only chuckles as he disappears from view.

*~*~*~*

Rhokim steps out onto a narrow bridge and shudders.

Erebor's vast cavernous halls are more unsettling than he had anticipated. Open air stretches out around him, shifting and brushing at his hair and beard in ways he doesn't expect. The great kingdom grows out of the walls in the same way that the cities of men grow out from the ground, carved from the stone and yet, not wholly a part of it. Even the supporting pillars (pillars, hah! What a meager word for such towering structures) are dotted with stairways and balconies, archways and windows. Though Rhokim knows they reach all the way down to the furthest Deeps, they remind him more of colossal stalactites than buttresses, however ornate the workmanship.

The iron nails in his boots make faint pinging sounds as he walks across the green granite. Though the distance is short Rhokim steps wearily. The greatest architects of the age are reputed to reside under the Lonely Mountain, it's just his luck that their genius seems to have come up short on the concept of rails.

“What kind of dim-witted urkhus builds a bridge without a railing, I ask you!” He grumbles, giving the offending bit of architecture a scathing glare as he exits onto a small enclosed balcony.

“It's an aesthetic choice,” a haggard voice answers him. It comes from a figure leaning against the arch of a small viewing window cut into the stone. Shoulders hunched around a portable scribing tray, Bakla writes with small, efficient strokes. “They're very fond of crisp, clean lines here. Not to worry though,” she adds, more sardonic than assuring, “the higher traffic areas have them.”

“That's hardly encouraging,” Rhokim mutters, coming to stand at the window. The old scribe has some odd contraption made from copper and crystals strapped to her head. She stares fixedly through
it as she works.

“It’d be a small comfort should I fall to my death from a lesser trafficked area. What then, hmm?”

“Then...” Bakla trails off, expression going slightly slack before she jots down a quick note and continues, “the Lavamâlh scrape your guts off the mining tracks and I send back home for a new ambassador.” She makes the whole notion sound like a minor inconvenience.

“Done it before, have you?” Rhokim snarks.

Bakla makes a minute adjustment to her apparatus.

“...Aye.”

Rhokim stares, decides discretion really is the better part of valor and leaves that disturbing tidbit well enough alone. He turns to face out the window. “What have you got that oversized jeweler's lens for anyway?”

“It's a viewing scope,” she corrects, clearly unsurprised but no less dissatisfied with his ignorance. “I'm using it to listen in on young Prince Thorin's conversation.”

Rhokim squints, gaze hunting along the far wall until he sees a figure that reminds him rather strongly of the youngest dwarf from Erebor's contingent. He's speaking with what must be a very large dwarf with a balding scalp. They look quite a long way off. He holds his fist out to measure them up and does a few quick calculations. “That gallery's a good two hundred feet away, how can you possibly hear them?”

“By looking at their mouths.”

“Huh.” He grunts. That makes about as much sense as anything the old 'dam has said since his arrival. “What are they saying then?”

“Nothing of note, it's mainly a litany of creative curses at the moment.” Bakla shrugs, placing a blotting sheet over her notes and folding the wooden tray closed. She corks her ink and places each item in her bag with care. The quill gets inserted into the plaited coil of hair atop her head after a quick cleaning on the hem of her tunic. There are a fair few woven in already, giving her the appearance of a rather bedraggled hen. “I was merely entertaining myself while I waited.”

“You were taking notes.” He comments as the scribe dismantles her 'viewing scope' and tucks it delicately amid folds of crushed velvet. When she lowers the lid on the case it looks like nothing more than a battered old quill box.

“Words are my axe and my shield, ambassador. It would be a travesty to let such raw potential go to waste.” With all her accoutrements stowed away Bakla levers herself up. She looks deceptively feeble beside his own bulk and that perception is only strengthened by her gait. Tottering and listing slightly as she goes, Rhokim follows close at her heels as the old scribe leads him down an interior stairway and out onto a, thankfully, much wider thoroughfare.

“I had wondered why you'd left so quickly.” Rhokim hazards an inquiry as they make their way through the evening rush.

“Forgive me, ambassador.” Bakla's smile is the very picture of apologetic chagrin. He finds it vaguely disturbing. “I found myself in need of some fresh air, and a little change of perspective.”

“Fresh air I can sympathize with,” Rhokim says, recalling the sudden, stifling weight of the
negotiation's conclusion, “but I can't see how a new perspective would help. Our position is clear, whatever angle you examine it from.” His mouth tugs downwards, grimacing. “Especially after...”

“Oh yes, especially after.” Bakla agrees, nodding her head. “Do you know why all parties to a negotiation bring their own scribes, ambassador?”

Rhokim huffs in amusement as he answers. “So they have someone to curse at them in the margins when they say something doltish?”

“That's certainly a bonus,” she replies, lips quirking, “but no, that's not it.”

“It's likely because we're all loath to trust the host's official transcript.” They pass under an archway and into a branching rotunda. Rhokim lets his shoulders drop, greatly comforted to be surrounded by solid stone once more. He allows the old scribe to choose their route, he doubts he'll ever feel truly confident navigating Erebor's many passages, however long his tenure becomes.

“The Iron Hills certainly think so, but that's because they're stupid.” Bakla snorts, not one for mincing words. “It's because we're invisible. No one notices when our eyes linger too long or cares where our attention lies. It's easy to be observant when you go unobserved.”

“And what was there to observe?”

“The King's allure is unnatural,” Bakla answers, voice low as they pass an armored patrol, “but not all are so easily taken in. There is room to maneuver yet, if we are mindful.”

“You have a plan?”

“I have many plans,” she remarks, gaze piercing as a sudden frost, “it simply remains to be seen which will come to fruition.”

*~*~*~*~*

Gordonia Sackville reaches Bywater on the first Trewsday of Halimath.

Camellia is waiting for her where the High Crossing trail meets Bywater Road, with young Otho at her side. They wear dull colors and matching cuffs of black ribbon, very much like her own. Her sister opens her arms wide and Gordonia drops her pack, rushing to meet her embrace.

“No tears, you hear!” Camellia orders, voice high with forced cheer. “If you start then so will I and we can't be having with that. What would the neighbors think?”

“I'm just so grateful, Cammy,” Gordonia sniffs, pulling back to wipe at her eyes. “I can't imagine living in the old smial now that Mama's gone too.”

“Don't be silly dear,” her sister assures, overlooking the use of her childhood nickname. “You're much too young to be on your own.”

“I'm thirty five, you know,” Gordonia pouts as they begin walking up the road towards her sister's home. Otho runs up ahead, too old to want to be seen with his mother and aunt, Gordonia's pack hanging from his shoulder. “I'm not that young.”

“Young enough.” Camellia says firmly, wrapping an arm around Gordonia protectively. “And you can't be too careful these days, I've heard rumors from the North Farthing. The bounders say-”

Gordonia is all too happy to take the edge off her grief with what's sure to be some choice bits of
gossip when their conversation is interrupted by her nephew's excited cry.

― Big Folk!‖ He shouts, pointing west. ―There's a Big Folk on the road!‖

―Otho, you come back here this instant!‖ His mother shouts as Gordonia races up to his side, raising her hand up to shade her eyes. ―Gordonia, you pull him away from there, do you hear?‖

―That's no Big Folk.‖ Gordonia remarks, making a half-hearted attempt to push Otho back towards her sister. ―He's not tall enough.‖

―He looks normal height because he's far away.‖ Otho insists. He's only just entered his tweens, so of course he knows everything. ―He's got hair on his face, that makes him a Big Folk!‖

―He's hardly far at all.‖ Gordonia rebuts. ―And anyway, Big Folk women don't have hair on their faces, don't you know anything?‖

Camellia stomps up behind them and grabs them each by the nape of the neck, steering them back down the hill and onto the road. They leave the lone figure far behind, Camellia not releasing them until they're well into Bywater, Otho batting at her hand until she relents.

―You utter ninnies!‖ She hisses, prodding them forward into a quick trot. ―That was a dwarf. You're not to go near them, not either of you, do you understand?‖ She demands, herding them up the lane to the fancier smials, built far from Bywater Pool. They reach Camellia's tidy garden and have to stop to catch their breath, leaning against the fence just by the mailbox, 'The Sackville-Bagginses' painted in dainty script across its side.

―That's what I was trying to tell you about,‖ Camellia pants, clutching a stitch in her side. ―There's been word from the bounders, about dwarves crossing through the Shire going east.‖

―What could they possibly want in the Shire?‖ Gordonia asks, opening the gate and heading towards the smials inviting crimson door. Otho beats her to it, throwing it open and dropping her pack thoughtlessly in the entry. ―Otho, you toad! There's delicate things in there!‖

Camellia snatches her wrist before Gordonia can go running after him, pulling her back so that they stand face to face. She's taller than her sister now, Gordonia realizes and feels rather mature for it.

―You listen to me, Gordonia,‖ Camellia says, blue eyes sharp as splintered ice. ―We've had things peaceful and quiet since that lot came west by leaving well enough alone. I don't know what's possessed them to come south into the Farthings but we won't be getting mixed up in it, not like that Belladonna, understand?‖

―That's really no way to talk about your sister-in-law...‖ Gordonia trails off at her sister's scathing look.

―Hear me! You're to keep Otho and the girls well clear of any outsiders, is that clear?‖

―Yes, Cammy.‖ Gordonia assures her sister and, with one last glance back towards the road, follows her inside.

The next few years are not so enjoyable as Gordonia had hoped them to be.

Living with her sister's family is comforting but beyond that there's nothing much else to be said for it. She spends her days helping in the garden and teaching her nieces to sew and knit. She makes a few friends among the local lasses and occasionally goes for tea or to pick flowers in the meadows. Her evenings are spent at home, even during the warmer months when there are dances a plenty.
More and more dwarves have been crossing the Shire each year and Camellia gets all in a tizzy if the whole family isn't home by the time the sun touches the horizon.

One evening her sister makes an off-hand comment about how few suitors come to visit and Gordonia pegs her square in the ear with a biscuit. They don't speak for a fortnight after that but when Gordonia concedes an apology Camellia agrees that a few festive outings just might be acceptable.

Which is how, on a Sunday in the middle of spring, Gordonia finds herself lost in thought on her way home from a dance. Dreaming of sweet candied fruit and even sweeter stolen kisses, she hardly pays attention to the path. The ground dips suddenly and she loses her footing on the cool grass, sliding down a knoll to land right in front of two booted feet.

They're rather dusty, is her first thought. Her second thought is that she's spending far too much time with her sister.

Her eyes travel up the line of his boots, up legs clothed in trousers of rough spun wool and over a heavy coat belted at the waist to the stranger's face, highlighted in the flicking light of his small campfire.

His eyes are green as forest moss and his thick hair is the color of rich loam. Though it's worn long and braided like a lass and his face is covered in coarse hair, Gordonia cannot help but to find him handsome.

The dwarf smiles down at her and offers his hand, large and layered in thick calluses, to help her stand. Gordonia's stomach flutters pleasantly as she takes it, being pulled upright with no effort at all. He offers her his seat (a large stone draped in his cloak) and his name (Hamad) with a bow and she thinks it may not be such a bad thing to get a little lost for the evening.

Camellia will be angry with her, she knows. But only if she finds out and Gordonia doesn't plan on telling.

Chapter End Notes

I had a lot of fun writing this chapter (after I scrapped my original idea of writing the entire negotiations from start to finish, what a pain that was!), though I worried a bit about conveying the political relationships without things being too explicit (which would have been dry and boring) or so vague as to be confusing. So I hope I struck a good balance, enough to get a good idea but also leave the reader with room to question and wonder... ;)

Next chapter: BILBO! WooHoo!

Translation Notes:

Words marked by a (*) were created by me using existing words from The Dwarrow Scholar's dictionary because no canon word existed that would suit my purpose.

Âfizu – the 11th month of the Dwarven calendar. (the 10th would be around the second week of August)
Emùlhekhulagùlab* – the ruling council of Erebor (lit. Majesty's counsel)

Gasatafra – excuse me (lit. may I pass)

Birashagimi – pardon me/sorry (lit. I regret)

Agùlabâlûn – male council member

Emùlhekhizu – Your Majesty

Bâhzundushkirthâlh* – the organization of scribes and messengers responsible to sending and receiving messages by raven (lit. Raven Writers).

Shomakhûn – guardian who is male

Urkhus – goblin

Lavamâlh – cleaners, rather like janitors, garbage collectors and night-soil men all rolled up into one.

Trewsday – the Hobbit name for Tuesday

Halimath – the 9th month of the Hobbit calendar, it begins towards the end of August.

Smial – Hobbit hole

Tween – the Hobbit equivalent of a teenager; a hobbit in their twenties.
Chapter Summary

Adventures are planned, affairs are had, and nothing goes as planned for anyone involved.

Chapter Notes

So it's been a very long time since the last chapter was posted (and I'm so pleased so many of you enjoyed it). Fact is I went through a period of being rather dissatisfied with my writing and I needed to take a break. Obviously, I've since gotten passed that feeling and quite enjoyed writing this chapter... when I wasn't getting depressed over the content.

So! For all you lovely people who've been waiting, I present the longest chapter of the fic so far! And BILBO BAGGINS WOOOOOOO! I honestly never intended to have it take so long to get back to him but the thing is - the first five chapters were only supposed to be THREE. And then things got away from me, as they so often do, and here we are, six chapters later. Sadly, this is the bit we all knew (at some level) was coming. Bilbo has to hurt before he can have his awesome adventure. Get out your tissues, my dears, if I've done my job right, this shit is gonna be sad.

Trigger Warning: For the purposes of the plot I have denied Gordonia her agency and the ability to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. I don't address this in detail but the implication is there. Please keep this in mind as you read.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Near the top of a hill, crowned by a stately oak, Bilbo Baggins lays beneath a common milkweed and watches one of the year's first caterpillars begin its transformation into an emerald chrysalis.

Its striped body ripples like a wave over still water, rhythmic and even until its delicate skin begins to split. The pale green of its inner body emerges from behind its head, fresh and supple, expanding rapidly into this new potential.

Bilbo can commiserate. He feels the same way sometimes, more often it seems these days, as though his skin is stretched too tightly and fit to burst. He wonders if his mother didn't feel the same way when she was young, younger than him in fact, looking out to the horizon, far past the borders of the Shire and wondering what waited for her there. Bilbo looks too, east towards Rivendell and the Misty Mountains, and finds himself filled with an equal measure of awe and apprehension.

The caterpillar makes it look so easy, suddenly becoming what it wasn't before, fast on its way to becoming something far grander, something it was always meant to be.

He huffs out a breath. What a lovely thing it must be, to be a caterpillar.
“That’s my job, Mister Bilbo.” A voice breaks through his thoughts. Rolling onto his stomach, Bilbo looks up to see Homan Greenhand leaning against the front gate. He chews on a piece of sweet-grass, the end bobbing up and down, up and down as he gives Bilbo a knowing look.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.” Bilbo says, cheeks going pink.

“You put aside whatever plans you’ve got for those little mites – don’t deny it, I see’d your face,” Homan shakes one dirt crusted finger at him having mistaken Bilbo’s intent entirely. “Your mam hired me to tend to her garden an’ that’s what I’m gonna do. So don’t you go interfering.”

Bilbo huffs, climbing to his feet. He brushes bits of grass off his rump before strolling down the garden steps and over to the gate. He sticks his hands in his pockets and looks off into the distance. “I’m bored, Homan. Distressingly so.”

“Find yourself a sweetheart,” Homan suggests with a wink, “you won't stay bored for long, then.”

“It's your day off,” Bilbo says, mouth pinched with distaste. Courting is the last thing he wants to think on. “Shouldn't you be off making calf eyes at Daisy Weaver, instead of tormenting me?”

“Excuse me for being helpful,” the gardener sniffs. He holds up a small bundle of letters and flaps them under Bilbo's nose. “Ran into the Runner on my way to the Green Dragon, your mam's got another letter from those dwarves up north.”

Interest piqued, Bilbo takes the proffered letters and sifts through them until he comes across the note in question. The paper is familiar, roughly made and dingy in color, the letters that strange angular style his mother's friend seems to favor. The address reads:

Belladonna, the Took's daughter
in Hobbit-toun, the Shire

Five years of letters and he still hasn't managed to get all the words spelled right - though, Bilbo must admit, he's improved considerably.

“Odd folk they are.” Homan comments offhand.

“Yes, I suppose so.” Bilbo replies, glancing through the rest. There's an invitation to a dance to be held in the meadows just north of Bywater Pond. Bilbo shudders. He'll be misplacing that at the first opportunity.

“Always wondered why as they're always writing to your mam,” Homan continues, missing casual indifference by a league. “I always heard they got no interest for not but gems and gold.”

“Why indeed... well! Good day to you, thank you for stopping by!” Bilbo spins on his heel, tucking the bundle under his arm and bounds up the steps and through the door with hardly a glance back. Not the most courteous behavior he must admit. There have been all manner of rumors regarding his mother and her dwarf friends and he has little desire to hear them repeated, and they've only managed to get more and more tawdry since... well.

Since.

Bilbo pushes the thought aside.

Morning light casts a warm glow on the plaster walls and wooden beams of the parlor as Bilbo makes his way to the kitchen. The parlor table is beginning to flow over with papers, embroidery, tea cups and dishes again, Bilbo notes with a sigh. He'll have to take some time to make it presentable,
goodness knows what the neighbors would think at the mess.

He slips the invitation under a plate crusted with week-old gravy. Waste not, want not, as they say.

Belladonna is exactly as he left her after second breakfast. Seated at the kitchen table, idly sipping at tea long gone cold as she gazes out the window, her expression unreadable. Bilbo sighs and takes the cup and pot, leaving the bundle of letters in their place.

“I'll just make some more, shall I? Something nice and light to go with elevenses?” He drops the dishes in the sink and pulls the kettle from it's hook, filling it with fresh water from the pump. Stoking the fire until heat pours off it in waves, he hangs the kettle to boil. “Homan brought the mail by, there's a letter in there from Ered Luin.” Bilbo can, at least, feign casualness better than their gardener.

He hears the rustle of paper behind him, ears twitching back, and nods his head, satisfied. He crosses the hall to the pantry and when he returns, arms laden down with strawberries, apricots, sweet cream and a fine honey loaf, his mother has already sliced open the envelope and begun reading. As he prepares their meal he listens to the sound of his mother's quiet breathing.

She used to read them aloud. Every word recited bright and cheery, not in her voice but another's. Each letter sounded like bits and pieces of a grand tale all their own, full of dwarves he couldn't keep straight with names that all sounded alike. Stories of run-away miners and petitions to princes and scouting goblins run to ground, though it wasn't all so exciting. There was plenty about grades of ore and test shafts and bits of gossip which never made any sense (who knew dwarves were so picky about how one wears their hair?) and Bilbo finds that he misses it all very, very much. He misses so much about life before the accident.

Belladonna huffs out a small breath.

Bilbo nearly slices his thumb right open cutting the top off a strawberry.

He waits a few heady palpitations of his heart, straining his ears and staying very still. Just as he begins to believe he misheard, shoulders heavy and sinking like his heart, it comes again. That small puff of air, a near silent ghost of a laugh.

Bilbo tips his head to the side, just enough that he can sneak a glance back over his shoulder.

His mother's face is half hidden by the pages and her hand and so he can't see her smile but around her eyes are deep crinkles of amusement, an expression he hasn't seen on her face in a good long while. As he watches she reaches the end of her letter, sets it down and runs her fingers over the ink. She chuckles softly, a brief burble of joy.

“Your friends are doing well, then?” Bilbo dares to comment, turning away to pull the kettle off the flame as it starts to whistle. Belladonna is silent for a few moments too long and Bilbo almost can't bring himself to look at her again, knowing he's shattered her thoughts and not wanting to face it.

But when he does –

“I think...” His mother says, staring back out the window, gaze far to the west and face clearer than he's seen it in years. Some sensation, bright and fizzy, starts in his toes and works it's way up, up, up to the top of his head, standing his curls on end. “I think it's about time we had an adventure.”

*B~*~*~*~*

Bilbo is shoved unceremoniously out the door on the fifth of Thrimidge at around four o'clock in the
afternoon. He is not pleased to be missing afternoon tea and makes this known, in no uncertain terms, to his aggressor.

“Bilbo Baggins,” His mother replies, arms crossed and nose in the air, “you will go to one dance this year if it kills me! You will eat lots of tasty food, and dance until your feet are sore and you will have fun. Our Jessamine will be there and she'll tell me if you don't!”

Cheeks burning pink, Bilbo puffs up in indignation. “I do so go to dances! I go to the Lithe dances every year!”

“That's not the same and you know it.” Belladonna sniffs and glares at him. “Everyone goes to those, even old fuddyduddies like your uncle Isumbras.”

“Well, of course he does, he's the Thain!” Bilbo crosses is arms, uncrosses them, waves his hands about in exasperation. “The Thain presides over the whole thing. You! Are being terribly unreasonable.”

“Hardly,” his mother drawls waving what appears to be a dance invitation in front of his face, very much whole and looking nothing at all like a small, inconspicuous pile of ashes. “Or did you forget we'll be missing Lithe this year? No, I see you haven't, you conniving lad.”

If looks could burn, the dreadful letter would be smoking. “I'm quite sure I burned that.”

“Ha! You burned the first one. I got this off Protea Smallburrow at the market this morning.” Belladonna says with no small degree of satisfaction. Her expression turns cool then and she leans forwards, voice gone soft. “You'll go to this dance, my dear child, or I shall tell your aunt Belba you aren’t holding to your responsibilities.”

His mouth falls open, jaw working as he grasps for something to say. He feels rather like he's been struck in the gut with a ball of ice, a cold so crisp and sharp that it cuts. He can't bring himself to believe she'd use that against him, not so soon after -

“Fine!” Bilbo snaps. His mother holds out a red velvet coat, one of his finest, and he shrugs it on as he stares fixedly at her feet. “I shall return in the evening.” He informs her and heads down to the gate, back held straight and stiff.

“Not too early.” She quips.

“As early as I please!”

Bilbo sets off for Bywater Pond in a foul temper and fights every step of the way to retain it. Unfortunately, his better nature prevails. Try as he may the image of his mother's smiling face, eyes twinkling with mischief, surfaces again and again in his mind's eye. It's been so long since she's taken an interest in anything outside their cozy smial that Bilbo almost feels obligated to enjoy himself for her sake.

Confound it.

He arrives at the party half starved, to his mind, and just in time for the first wave of meat pies and eggy tortes. There are more Cottons and Diggles than he could shake a stick at crowding the tables but Bilbo's a Took by nature if not by name and knows more than one way to outwit a crowd. He's just wiggled his way past the outer flanks when a cool hand wraps around his ankle and, with a firm tug, drags him back out again.

“Hello, Jessamine, Dahlia,” he huffs, rolling over onto his back and blinking up at their grinning
faces. “On chaperone duty, I see.” He adds, noticing the crowns of ivy woven with star-jasmine placed prominently on their curled hair.

“I thought that was you, Bilbo Baggins!” Dahlia laughs, dropping his ankle from her clutches. She wags one dainty finger at him, face pinched in an expression of mock rebuke. “What would your Aunty Belba say if she saw you crawling through the grass for a meat pie?”

“Keep a lookout for mushrooms while you're down there?”

“Not likely.” Jessamine snorts with a sound like cotton ripping and blushes in embarrassment. She hands him a torte from her own neat little stack, which he accepts gratefully, and shakes her head at him. “Honestly, Bilbo, you can hardly expect to make a good impression with grass stains on your trousers!”

Bilbo pulls himself to his feet and takes a nibble at the torte. It's lovely and warm, early summer greens and grape tomatoes giving it a pleasant texture and slight tang. He sniffs at Jessamine's obvious dismay at his social irreverence. “I hardly care to make good impressions, dear cousin. If it weren't for my mother's wishes I wouldn't be here at all.”

“Ohhhh!” Jessamine stamps her foot down, puffing up in indignation. “And why do you think she wanted you to come? You've been a bachelor long enough-”

“I'm not even fifty! I'm hardly a spinster.” Bilbo interjects but his cousin continues on with no regard for his objections. Dahlia rolls her eyes skyward from over Jessamine's shoulder.

“- and it's beginning to be remarked on.” Jessamine utters the word with a shudder. She takes hold of his free hand, her brow creasing in concern. “You'd be a catch if you only smartened up a bit, especially now that – no, dear, I know you don't like thinking on it but it's true.” She insists upon seeing his stony expression, giving his hand a firm squeeze. “Just try to have an open mind, please? I know for a fact Myrtle Burrows fancies you, she's just over by the -”

“Oh, leave off him, Jessa!” Dahlia laughs, laughs louder still at the look on Bilbo's face, making his cheeks flush hot. “You can lead a lad to the dance but you can't force him to court as the saying goes.” She doles out that bit of hobbit wisdom with a quiet authority not often seen in any hobbit without a full head of gray hair – the effect only ruined when she then attempts to shove an entire berry tart into her mouth. “Leh 'im eat 'is tor'e, ee haf a jo' oo do.”

“Just over by the lemonade and such, do at least say hello!” Jessamine calls over her shoulder, her crown of ivy tipping down across her forehead as she's drug off in search of wayward tweens hoping to indulge in more than just stolen kisses. The last he hears, before they get lost in the crowd, is Dahlia insisting that a few pickles dipped in jam would really hit the spot.

Bilbo finds himself a handy tree root to sit on, well away from the lemonade thank you very much, and sets about finishing his torte. At the far end of the green the band tunes their fiddles and blow a few notes on their flutes. The drummer takes up a beat and the others follow, a simple ditty to warm up their hands and fingers. When the crowds around the tables thin out they'll dive into their jigs and reels and the meadow will fill up with dancers, skirts and coats in as many colors as the flowers decorating their bouncing curls swirling through the air. Already the evening is brimming with excitement and nervous jitters, every lad and lass eager to show off their finest steps.

Bilbo isn't eager, though he enjoys a good jig as much as the next hobbit.

Dance, he is unerringly reminded as a dark haired lass gives him a shy once over and a not so shy smile as she passes him by, is not the point of this event. It's merely the excuse. He won't be getting
caught up in this cordial charade, all pleasant smiles and modest touches. Happy chance and near traumatic injury were good enough for his parents (his dear mother having nearly run his poor father over with a pony) and he's sure such an occurrence would be preferable to this coy game.

No, he thinks, swallowing the last bite of his torte, he'll have his fun – eating whatever looks tasty and watching the younger lads tripping over their own feet – and steer well clear of the dancing. And should some lad or lass gift him a sprig of chickweed (he blushes even to consider it) he'll return the blossom right back to the curl it was plucked from.

And so he's rather astonished to find himself being handed off on the dance floor, little Prisca Baggins (a number of years shy of her majority, hair bedecked in wilting peonies and far too anxious to ask any but her dear cousin Bilbo to dance) waving apologetically after him. Jessamine hands her off to young Wilibald Bolger, looking far too pleased with herself.

“Good evening, Bilbo.” Myrtle says cheerily, drawing his attention back to his new dance partner. She looks up at him as they weave between the other dancers, smiling so widely it almost looks strained. Her hair is woven up with hyssop, red Valerian and bluebells, though they look very pretty against her ash blonde hair Bilbo finds himself feeling vaguely ill. “I was hoping I'd get to dance with you this evening,” Myrtle giggles as they spin and step and spin again. She flutters her eyelashes. “I did so enjoy your company Midsummer last.”

Bilbo feels he may faint.

“Pardon my intrusion!” A mischievous voice pipes up beside them. Before Bilbo can blink his hands have been taken up, leaving a distraught Myrtle to collide inelegantly with Gruffo Boffin. Bilbo can hardly get his bearings, being led in a tight twirl step off and away.

“Excuse me... if I might - ” He pleads to the blur of dark hair and yellow skirts holding him captive. “I'd like to slow down, if you don't mind!”

His captor laughs but slows them into a more sedate three-step all the same. “No need for the fuss, you only had to ask!” She giggles up at him, the flowering fern, sprigs of parsley and – good gracious – larch twigs tucked haphazardly into her hair add an unnerving quality to the spark in her blue-green eyes. “Excuse me for coming to the rescue, only you looked about ready to lose your dinner!”

“I beg your pardon, I would never!” Bilbo huffs, horrified at the very thought of it.

“Come now, I was merely jesting,” His captor, perhaps rescuer, smirks. “Really, you shouldn't be out dancing if you aren't enjoying yourself.”

“Yes, well, this wasn't my idea.” Bilbo replies. He can't believe he ends up in these situations, reluctant dance teacher to object of unwanted affection, to faunt-in-distress all in less than one tune. His mother would be laughing at him if she were here.

He firmly resolves not to tell her any of it.

“Honestly, this is the most fun I've had in ages, but have it your way.” The lass sighs, switches direction and leads them off in a canter. With one last twirl she releases his hands, sending Bilbo stumbling out into the open air. “Here's where we part then, goodbye!” And she's off with a smile and a wink, jumping enthusiastically back into the fray as though there's no place she'd rather be.

Bilbo slowly makes his way to a soft looking patch of grass behind a rather handy bush, still a little dizzy, and sits down to rest. The sun is setting in the west, painting the clouds overhead in vibrant
orange and gentle pinks, soothing his agitation down into an easily tolerated hum. Some part of him feels guilty to be hiding. Myrtle is a nice enough girl and he knows Jessamine is only trying to help in her own way.

Out here, overlooking the meadow and Bywater Pond, the noise of the dance is muffled somewhat, the music not so sharp and the laughter not so shrill. Bilbo takes his first deep breath of the evening. Tipping his head back he closes his eyes and sees himself surrounded by flowers and leaves of gold and orange and red, brilliant blue butterflies dancing in a soft breeze. The party fades away, leaving him with the sound of foliage rustling and the smell of deep forests and far distant waters. When he opens his eyes he feels calm, settled in a way he rarely feels without his little daydream.

He relaxes, tension leaving his shoulders as he accepts this brief reprieve from the subtle burden he carries, the too tight, gasping on stale air feeling that lingers in the back of his mind like a constant shadow. Everything is made dimmer by its presence, simple festivities and pleasant meals, the laughter of fauntlings and the lovely rolling hills of the Shire. Only his dreams seem to escape it. Too often he finds himself staring off into the distance, a point of light where even the shadow can't reach, a great ache in his chest as though a part of him were reaching out for something, desperate.

Bilbo looks to the west, towards the Blue Mountains, though they can't be seen. Perhaps he'll finally find out, on this little adventure his mother is planning, whether he's simply some sad broken hobbit, the odd one out.

Or whether the Shire is his chrysalis and he's just been waiting to break free.

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If Belladonna had had her way they would have left the week of the letter. Bilbo, ever the voice of reason where his mother is concerned, had put his foot down and hadn't budged.

“There's simply no way,” he'd said, not effected in the least by his mother's pouting face, “that we can leave for such a long journey without the proper preparations. It simply can't be done!”

They’d sparred over the method and provisions, Belladonna determined to hike with not but two packs and the clothes on their backs and Bilbo adamant that they rent a cart and pony. How his mother thought they'd make a two week journey – at the very least! – with only what they gathered and snared along the way for their daily fare was beyond his reasoning.

They'd settled on leaving in the second week of Forelithe which would hopefully have them arriving a few days before Mid-years Day. A month was sufficient time in Bilbo's opinion, far more than necessary in Belladonna's but she had let him have his way – on everything in fact, save one small but vitally important detail.

“No, of course I haven't written them.” Belladonna snipped, sipping at her tea. There'd been a fair bit of that lately, leaving Bilbo exasperated by his mother's childishness. “Travel between the Shire and the Blue Mountains is sporadic at best, why write a letter about visiting if it's only going to arrive after we have?”

“That may very well be,” Bilbo interjected, not at all convinced that this was indeed the case, “but a gentle-hobbit simply can't go visiting unannounced, it's not done! We at least have to make an effort.”

“That's such a Baggins thing to say!” Belladonna had muttered, coughing and patting her chest when a crumb went down the wrong tube.
Bilbo left her to her little fit, snatching up the last scone and stomping away, hissing to himself, “I am a Baggins!”

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The petty arguments lapse and fade from their lives but the cough lingers like the musty scent of rot. Forelithe comes bright and warm leaving rosy patches on Belladonna's paling cheeks. She's taken to sitting in the garden, gazing out over the West Farthing and warming her chilled hands in the afternoons. A cold she assures him, inconvenient certainly but not worth any bother. The healers have more important things to worry over than a case of the sniffles.

Bilbo hardly pays it any mind, it being a well-established routine to his mind. His mother will wallow and complain for half again as long as really necessary, just to prove she can, and then throw herself headlong back into daily life with a vengeance. They have time for her recovery before they are set to travel, even with her stubbornness.

So he finds he's in a bit of a daze when he calls on Whitty Smallburrow. They won't be requiring the loan of cart and pony until Afterlithe, beggin' your pardon and thank you kindly. It's hubris, his mother says, for them to plan on Bilbo not catching her cold as well.

He doesn't.

And as Lithe approaches and her cold still hasn't gone, Bilbo begins to wonder if he oughtn't to be concerned after all.

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“I'm to tell you, dear chap.” Herugar says, clapping Bilbo on the shoulder and giving him a firm squeeze – which is how Bilbo knows the night isn't likely to end well for him. “That if you don't dance with Myrtle Burrow my generously loving wife will personally lace your drink with poke root and revel in all misery that follows.”

Bilbo gazes down into his tankard despairingly. The ale has been particularly fine this Lithe.

“Come now!” Herugar chuckles, slapping Bilbo's back, “It's only Mid-Year's Day! You've got the rest of the evening and all of tomorrow besides to enjoy yourself.”

“And then die a very messy and socially awkward death.” Bilbo grouses, mostly joking. Jessamine is, after all, a healer's apprentice and so won't actually poison him if he fails to live up to social expectations.

Probably.

“It's only one dance, Bilbo, and she is rather pretty.”

It's never just one dance though, Bilbo internally laments, even as he relents and asks Myrtle to join him for a lively reel. Lithe is the largest event of the year, the crowd spilling out well past the edges of the Green, orbiting the Party Tree like a whirlpool. Hobbits from as far away as Tookbank and Frogmorton have come to Hobbiton for the festivities and Bilbo could swear he ends up dancing with half of them. It should be fun, would be fun, but every third circuit of the Green seems to land him on the receiving end of his Aunt Belba's appraising gaze.

“A girl could loose all her gussy, the way you're staring off like that.” his current dance partner remarks arcing one pale brow as they step and spin. “Spotted a lass prettier than I, have you?”
“Wha- no! That is, I would never -” Bilbo trips over his words and nearly his feet as well. And blast it, he can't quite remember her name, though he knows she'd given it. He thinks she must be a Rushock, from up by Overhill but isn't sure. How mortifying.

“Relax, Mister Baggins,” She laughs, tossing her hair, pale as corn silk over her shoulder, “I'm not but teasing! What's got you jumpy as spring crickets, anyway?”

“Not what so much as whom, I'm afraid.” They pause with the other dancers, clapping sharply and kicking their heels before wheeling off as the pace picks up.

“Not another word then,” his partner replies, rolling her luminous gray eyes. “My grammy is after me as well, thinks it brings good luck to meet your match over Lithe. Natters at me about every lad I dance with.”

“For Aunt Belba, it's less about romance” Bilbo mutters, “and more to do with taking the responsibilities of my position seriously.”

They whirl past the band, under a canopy of flowers woven into garlands, thick ropes of fragrant lavender and larkspur, cascades of wisteria and roses of every color bursting like fireworks. Bonfires and lanterns cast a warm glow over the Green and all things in it, under sparse clouds gone orange and pink in the light of the setting sun. The revelers are swathed in lilting music and laughter, the scent of cinquefoil drifting, heady and sweet on the breeze. Bilbo finds himself partial to the sentiments of his partner's dear grandmother. It would be quite lovely to meet one's match during the joyous evenings of Lithe.

The song winds down and Bilbo brings their dance to an end, ready to wet his parched throat and search out a quiet spot to rest his feet.

“At the risk of giving my grammy high hopes,” his dance partner says, grasping Bilbo's hands in hers before he can take his leave, and smiling cheekily, “Listen, alright? Relax. Don't worry over what your aunty thinks. They've all a mind, don't they? That this is all supposed to go like a fairy tale out of stories... life isn't like that.” She really does have pretty eyes, soft even as she smirks. “You don't meet someone and just know, there's no true love like that. You meet someone and have fun... and maybe you meet them again later and have fun again. Don't worry about finding that perfect someone,” she tips her head and giggles up at him, “or your aunty's perfect someone! You'll miss out on all the imperfect, not quite right but wonderfully pleasant someones that are all around you.”

She looks up at him expectantly, pale curls glowing with firelight. Bilbo can't quite meet her gaze but smiles and bows over her hands. He hears her sigh, not sadly, but resigned.

“Thank you for the dance, and for, well – Thank you.” Bilbo says and pauses awkwardly. It really is mortifying. “Erm...”

The lass snorts and pats his cheek, not unkindly. “Verbena, from Overhill.” Then turns and skips off to tap her next perspective dance partner on the shoulder.

Bilbo wanders off towards tables piled high with fresh fruits and savory pies, feeling a bit dazed by the conversation. Verbena's words were sensible, almost too sensible he finds himself feeling. Perhaps growing up on his mother's whimsical tales and adventures has made him a bit of a romantic. Not the worst fate certainly but perhaps rather inconvenient, Bilbo thinks, stepping so a pair of hefty Proudfeet stand between himself and his aunt's favored table.

Speaking of...
Belladonna perches on the edge of the wizard’s cart, ankles crossed and a mug cradled in her hands. Bilbo finds himself filled with a pleasant fizzle, inordinately pleased that his mother hasn't spent the whole evening in the chair where he left her. Gandalf himself stands beside her, ale in one hand - held almost as if he's forgotten it's there - and the other resting lightly on Belladonna's shoulder. Bilbo feels his amiable mood fade to something more akin to bemusement. Something isn't quite... “Bilbo! There you are,” Bilbo jumps at the sudden roar of Sigimond's voice, right over his shoulder. His cousin claps him on the back and steers him away from the feast and towards one of the many bonfires. “We've been looking all over for you, it's time to walk the Bounds!”

Bilbo snatches glances over his shoulder as he's pulled along – his mother's face, oddly blank – Gandalf leaning down as if trying to catch his mother's words, too soft to hear. Belladonna's hand coming up to pat the wizard's where it rests on her shoulder, as though he needed some kind of reassurance. “Your token, Bilbo. Bilbo, are you listening?” Dahlia calls, bring his attention to what's in front of him. He smiles sheepishly and accepts the small bundle, birch twigs and fennel and St. John's wort secured with a bit of string. “Ooohhh, perhaps someone's caught his eye!” Jessamine winks, bouncing little Hugi on her ample hip. “Enough of that,” Herugar interjects, taking up a branch from the fire. “If we don't hurry we'll fall behind!”

They dash after the procession, led by Hobbiton's sheriff and a score of Bounders, their staffs topped with spears of lavender and white ribbon. The Thain ought to be leading them himself but, knowing old Isumbras, he's likely found a jug of ale and a quiet place to nap. Along the line fauntlings dart and dance between their elder's feet and tweens fill the air with whistling flutes and the rat-a-tat-tat of drums. Family heads hold burning branches aloft, lighting dim windows and crops growing in shadowed fields as all who are able walk the outskirts of the town, a ribbon of light against the growing dark. By rights Bilbo should be holding a torch as well, though he has no wife and no faunts of his own. He clutches his token tightly and tips his chin up. Let Aunt Belba grouse all she likes, Bilbo couldn't care less. He's surrounded by cousins on all sides, Tooks and Boffins and Bulgers alike and that's good enough for him.

He can wait he thinks, spotting Verbena's pale curls bouncing, laughing with a lad on either arm. They crest a hill and Bilbo falls back and off to the side, gaze turned east toward the rising stars as the procession carries on without him. Not quite perfect and wonderfully pleasant... it's a comforting thought in it's way. Still, he can't help but think, there are enough hobbits in the Shire that surely there must be one, however far off, who would complete him the way his father had completed his mother.

The first fireworks burst blue against the sky and scatter like butterflies on a breeze.

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Bilbo is just about to turn into the pantry in search of a midnight snack when he hears it. The sound echoes soft and low through the darkened halls as he tips his head to better catch it. Cautiously he moves past the kitchen and into the east hall, stopping just at the entrance to the parlor. The sound reminds him of the mournful coo of a dove, growing steadily clearer until it settles into a faint and muffled sobbing.
Chest growing tight, Bilbo steps lightly under the wooden arch and down the narrow passage, fully intent on comforting his mother as he's done so many nights since his father's death. She'll be seated in his favored chair, its cushion dented and winged arms threadbare from the nights his mother has spent in front of the fire, staring up at Bungo's picture and smoothing her hands over the fabric, searching for his warmth. With Belladonna's enthusiastic insistence on their now postponed adventure Bilbo had thought her mourning had come to an end. He chastises himself now for being so short sighted. He'd heard it said all his years as a faunt – the only thing Belladonna had loved more than the open road and a clear horizon was the placid, drab and entirely respectable Bungo Baggins.

He should hardly be surprised that the eldest daughter of the Took would not be so easily swayed from her grief.

Bilbo has hardly come level with the polished wood pilaster of the corner wall when he darts back, crouching down into the shadows of the side table, breath caught in his throat.

Belladonna sits in her high backed chair, body turned away from him, the drawn lines of her face highlighted by the flickering light of the fire. Kneeling at her feet is a dark haired lass in dirt smeared skirts, head resting in his mother's lap as Belladonna combs bits of leaf and twigs from her wild curls. His mother's cheeks are dry, her eyes lidded in concern as the girl cries into the patched velvet and brocade of Belladonna's dressing gown.

"I don't – I don't –" She gasps between sobs, breath hitching as she tries to speak.

"Hush now, Gordonia." Belladonna says, voice soothing and low. The same voice she had used to send Bilbo's childhood nightmares far away. "You've nothing to fear in this smial."

The words seem to console Gordonia, her shaking shoulders going still and her breath coming more evenly in short order, as though the phrase were more than just a simple reassurance. As if the words were old friends that she'd come to trust.

"Cammy's been so insistent. She thinks he's some gentle-hobbit from the west – that I'm embarrassed to introduce my family to him!" Gordonia raises her head from Belladonna's robe, gazing up at her imploringly. Though the lighting is dismal and her cheeks are puffy and streaked with tears, Bilbo recognizes her face. He'd danced with her in the spring, though he'd never gotten her name and hadn't seen her after.

He supposes this must be why. She'd found herself a beau, one she hadn't wanted anyone to know about. Bilbo's cheeks flame hot, abruptly realizing that he's eavesdropping on what must be just one of many private conversations. Slowly, he begins to inch his way back down the passage, hands propped on the floor and wall to steady his hunched posture, reprimanding himself as he goes. He's heard too much already, far too much to be comfortable with.

"If she finds out I've had a dalliance with a dwarf she'll have my hide." Gordonia moans in distress.

Bilbo finds himself frozen in place, as if the words were thick mud sucking at his feet. His breathing sounds far too loud in his burning ears. He brings a hand up to cover his mouth.

"She won't though, will she?" Bilbo hears his mother say, steady and unflappable. Fabric rustles and he can see her clearly in his mind's eye, bringing her hands up to frame Gordonia's face, gaze unwavering in her assurance. "He's long gone by now, you said yourself that you could find no trace of him."

It seems to have been the wrong thing to say. Gordonia hiccups wetly and lets out a breathy wail.
“But she will, she will!” She cries. “I'm weeks past my bloom and still there's nothing! If I'm – if she finds out I'm –” From there she dissolves into wretched sobs that have Bilbo tearing up in sympathy.

“Oh, Gordonia, weren't you taking the Staying tea?” There's no reply, but Gordonia must have shaken her head because Belladonna continues, “oh foolish girl. Poor, foolish girl.”

“She would have known if I had! She would have realized...” Gordonia's breath comes fast, panting like a hare run to ground. “He'll come back, he has to. He said he adored me. I just have to hold out till then, babies all look the same anyway – no one will know! And then when he comes back I'll give it to him and then – and then –”

“He's not coming back for you, Gordonia.”

The parlor goes very still, the only sounds are the faint crackle of burning logs and the pounding of Bilbo's heartbeat in his ears.

“But he will...”

“He won't. If you're going to make it through this you must give up on him coming back.”

“No, he'll come back!”

“Dwarves only love once, Gordonia. I warned you of that when you first came to me.”

“Yes, yes of course!” The lass replies, suddenly buoyant. “We have lain together and he adores me, he must come back, then. He will realize it and –”

“That's not how it works!” Belladonna snaps. There's a moment of quiet and then she continues, voice gentler. “Hamad does love you, Gordonia, but there are many kinds of love. The love for a child, the love for a parent, for a sibling, for a friend and yes, for a lover. Dwarves have all these, the same as any hobbit.” His mother's voice goes distant, almost doleful, and Bilbo finds himself drawn in, each utterance settling in his mind like the Valar hung stars in the sky. “But they have one other, a love so consuming, so all-encompassing that it's etched deep in their bones. It burns inside them, a constant ache, a singular longing that hounds them all their lives. Aulë made them incomplete, souls broken in half to live a life of yearning, constantly searching for the One who can complete them.”

Belladonna laughs darkly. “Some would think that sort of thing is romantic, even desirable, to know there's a person in the world meant just for you. But I think the truth is that it's terribly cruel. Many live their lives searching only to die alone.” His mother continues, voice faintly tempered by compassion. “Can you imagine what that must be like? Knowing that perfect person is out there and knowing equally that you are likely never to find them?”

Bilbo's heart skips and stutters. He feels exposed and vulnerable, his own thoughts, so intensely private, having been plucked from his mind and laid bare.

“Perhaps Aulë meant them to be that way, or maybe it was Eru's punishment for creating living beings when that was His providence alone. It hardly matters, either way it changes nothing.” Belladonna sighs, softening her tone but still resigned. “You are not his One. If you were, he would have realized it and told you. It's not something a dwarf can leave unsaid.”

Weighty silence follows this revelation. The whole smial feels draped in it, muffled as though wrapped in thick, carded wool.

“What was that, dear?” Belladonna asks of a sudden.
“I don’t believe you.” The lass whispers, just loud enough for Bilbo to catch.

“Gordonia...”

“No!” It comes out sharp and Bilbo hears the clatter of metal hitting stone, and can only think that the iron tool stand has been knocked over. Gordonia's next words come out in a screech so startling Bilbo smacks his head against the wall as his whole body recoils away. “You don’t know everything! You think you’re so smart just because you’ve left the Shire, think you know so much since you’ve been so many places! Well, you don’t,” Gordonia hisses, footsteps leading across the parlor floor towards the front hall. “You'll see, Hamad will come back and then everything will go back the way it was and I'll show you.”

Her feet smack against the tiles as she dashes towards the door, slamming it behind her with such force that the picture frames rattle where they hang.

Bilbo leans against the wall, body curled inwards, Gordonia’s parting words ringing in his ears. It must be terrible, he thinks, to feel your life crumbling around you – your only hope so derisively rebuffed.

“It's not her fault, you know.”

Bilbo's breath catches. Lowering his head in shame he crawls forwards like a wayward faunt, out of his hiding place and past the hall table, stopping just short of the firelight. Gathering his courage, Bilbo looks up at his mother through his hair.

She is turned away, face hidden from his view as she gazes out the parlor window into the night. Her voice is low and melancholy as she speaks, not to him Bilbo realizes, but to someone far off.

“She has time before anyone will realize what the babe is, but when they do...” Belladonna trails off, shaking her head, the silver streaks in her hair flashing. “Life won’t be easy for her. We are a content people, unprepared for the unexpected and so we resent it, you were right in that, my friend. I can only hope she won't resent me too much, when she realizes he's not coming back... what a mess...” Her thoughts devolve into a coughing fit, Belladonna's shoulders shaking as she brings a kerchief to her mouth.

Using the noise as cover, Bilbo tiptoes back into the east hall and waits for his mother's breathing to come easy again. When she's settled and quiet he makes his way back to his bedroom, careful to make no noise as he goes. He settles under his covers, cool to the touch after his long absence, and stares at the ceiling until the dawn crests their little hill, worrying over more than shuttered faces and secret whispers.

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Bilbo is watching the butterfly kings feeding on milkweed nectar, their bold wings of orange and black flashing amidst the dusky pink blossoms in the late summer sun, when Donnamira comes for her first visit.

His aunt appears on Bagshot Row just after luncheon, trudging up the path with a large pack strapped to her back. The mid-day sun catches in her hair, nearly as much silver as brown in recent years. Bilbo springs up and dashes down the front steps, flings the gate open and rushes to Donna's side.

“Aunty! Here, let me take your pack for you.” He says, already reaching out for the straps.

“You needn't bother, we're nearly at the gate.” Donna says, but relinquishes the pack all the same.
It's heavier than Bilbo had anticipated, though nothing he can't handle. Donna shades her eyes as she looks up at the smial. “How's my sister, then? Has her appetite improved?”

“No.” Bilbo sighs, feet dragging as they turn into the garden. “She's still eating lightly at meals and sometimes she skips Elevenses and tea altogether! Aside from that, her cough has gotten worse and she's taken to napping in the afternoons.”

His worry is reflected on his aunt's face, her eyes clouding and mouth pinching down as they enter the front hall. “You did the right thing in writing me, she wouldn't have done it herself, she's stubborn like that.” Donna sighs, brushing the travel dirt from her feet. “Well, first things first. I'll get my things unpacked and then we'll see whether dear Bella's feeling cooperative when she wakes.”

“I've made up the spare room for you.” Bilbo says, and leads the way.

Belladonna is up in time for afternoon tea.

She walks into the kitchen, patchwork robe hiked up around her shoulders, and hardly blinks when she sees her sister pouring tea. Belladonna sits in her usual seat, accepting her cup with grace. She asks after Bilbo's cousins and trades quips and gossips with Donna as though it was one of their get-togethers.

Bilbo eats his mother's share of the scones, if only so the plate doesn't look so distressingly full.

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Bilbo opens the door to the Green Dragon and is immediately awash with the sounds of clinking ceramics and hobbit-chatter.

“Bilbo, over here!”

Looking past the servery with its impressive carved serpent and into the dinning room Bilbo can see his cousins waving for him to join them. He eases his way through the other patrons, tables half full even this late in the afternoon, with gentle-hobbits enjoying tea and dainty sandwiches. His cousins have claimed a table near the fireplace, its stones cool and bare. The weather would hardly warrant any extra warmth, the days are still lovely and sunny, the leaves only just beginning to turn.

“Oh, Bilbo, tell me you didn't bring gifts!” Jessamine pouts as Bilbo takes his seat between her and Jago. “It's only tea, not a party...”

“Hush you,” Bilbo says, setting his basket on his lap, “it's my birthday, bringing gifts is only proper! Besides,” he continues, pulling aside the cloth covering to reveal the small jars within, “they're only trinkets, hardly worth such a fuss.”

“And a happy forty-forth it is! Oh – jam! That's lovely.” Jago exclaims, offering a hand to help pass them around.

Bilbo hums in agreement, feeling himself relaxing as his cousins accept their gifts. “It's boysenberry, we had a lovely batch this spring.”

“I do so love boysenberry.” Jago's wife, Peony, gives Bilbo a wide smile as she hands a jar to Sigismond. “Are we expecting anyone else, Bilbo?”

“No, this is all.” Bilbo replies, passing the last jar over the table to Flambard. “Unless someone shows up unexpectedly.”
He shivers, as though caught in a sudden draft.

“But there's none here from your father's side.” Jessamine points out, looking around the room and out the windows as though expecting random Bagginses to pop out of the woodwork. “Surely they aren't all busy?”

“Of course they aren't.” Bilbo sniffs, serving himself an egg and cress sandwich. “I just didn't invite any of them.”

“Oh, Bilbo!”

“Don't act so taken aback, Jessa,” Jugo chuckles as his sister makes a face, “or have you forgotten that he doesn't like any of them?”

“That's not true,” Bilbo protests, “I'm rather fond of Drogo and Dora but they live all the way out in Buckland.”

“They're in Rushy, dear.” Peony corrects, having lived out east before marrying into the Boffins. “That's nearly Buckland.” Bilbo says as Peony rolls her eyes upwards with a smile.

“What about that lass, the one living with your aunt and uncle in Bywater?” Jessamine taps her fingers against her cheek, refusing to give up on Bilbo's slacking propriety. “Gordonia, isn't it? She's a lively one, I've always thought. You should have invited her, Bilbo!”

“How's Dahlia feeling, Sigi,” Bilbo interjects, desperate to steer the conversation away. “I had thought she was coming?”

“Her back is bothering her,” Sigismond answers, his handsome Tookish features pinching in mild distress. “I asked if she wanted me to stay home with her, but she ran me out!”

The table falls into a fit of laughter at his expense, the girls' curls bouncing as they shake their heads and press their hands to their hearts. Bilbo laughs the loudest, if only because he's had so little reason to of late.

Flambard inserts his elbow under Sigismond's ribs and chuckles, “Enjoy being kicked out while it lasts, soon you'll be a servant to her every whim!”

“I'm looking forward to the birth, myself.” Jessamine says happily, attention successfully diverted. “Mother's asked me to assist, isn't that exciting!” She tips her head up, clearly proud that her training is progressing so quickly. Bilbo's certainly impressed, Donnamira is well known for being very particular about midwifing. “Besides, it'll be lovely to have a younger cousin for my little Hugi to play with.”

All in all, Bilbo's birthday tea goes rather well. There's a good deal of talk about babies (the Tooks are expanding as rapidly as ever) and Jessamine is not at all subtle about fussing over Bilbo's continuing bachelorhood. They eat crumpets and jam until the dinner hour rolls around and they decide that, since they're already comfortably seated and have worked up a bit of an appetite with all that chewing, they might as well stay for shepherd's pie and hard cider.

By the time Bilbo walks through the door of Bag End the sun is dipping towards the horizon. He's feeling pleasantly tipsy and so it seems like a splendid idea to try sneaking up on his mother like he used to when he was a faunt.

Flattening himself against the wall, Bilbo squeezes in between the old mahogany chest and the cloak-
rack, hiding behind its narrow sideboard. Still and poised on the balls of his feet, he is like a deer in
the morning mist. Graceful and elegant even while motionless, he observes his surroundings, ready
to dart at a moments notice as he -

He deflates, no longer able to suck in his protruding belly.

Sticking his head out just far enough to see down the hall, he listens intently. The smial is quiet and
dimly light, except for a bright beam spilling out from under the smoking room door. It is unbroken
by movement from within and any sound is too soft and muffled to hear properly.

Excellent.

He's gone unobserved.

Stepping lightly, Bilbo makes his way down the hall, arms raised and fingers splayed as though
easing his way through the air. Tottering forward, he lists slightly – left, then right, then left again –
ever quite stable and never quite noticing. He slides one foot around the banister and into the oak
hall, the rest of his body following with a roll like pudding prodded by a small, impatient finger.

The floor creaks.

Fiddlesticks!

Bilbo ducks, spins and stumbles behind one polished root. Pressing his back to the wall he covers his
mouth with one hand, stifling his giggles. This game is as much fun as he remembers! He creeps
around the root and finishes his trek down the side passage on all fours (standing is no longer in the
cards, oddly, but he won't let that stop him) and, reaching the door left slightly ajar, peeks through
the opening. If his mother is facing him, Bilbo will have to double back and try again through the
pantry hall, not the best of options as it tends to echo. But if she's facing away...

Blinking, his eyes slowly adjust to the candlelight. When they do, all mirth leaves him.

His mother sits in a wing-backed chair leaning forwards as her mouth gapes open, taking slow,
heavy breaths. Aunt Donna is on her knees in front of her sister, holding a cluster of herbs tied tightly
with string above a wooden bowl. The herbs give off a blueish smoke which curls up around his
mother's face, drawn into her body with every breath.

She coughs, rough and wet, and turns her head away.

“Try to breathe in as much as you can.” Donna says, tapping the bundle against the rim of the bowl,
knocking off the ash.

“Easy for... you to say...” Belladonna mutters between coughs. When they finally abate she lets out a
sigh and stuffs her hanky back up her sleeve. “That stuff is foul! What on earth did you put in it this
time?”

Donna brings the herbs back up and swishes it back and forth, creating a haze around their heads.
Belladonna opens her mouth again and dutifully sucks it in.

“It's all the same as my last visit. I thought it was working rather well.” Bilbo can't see his aunt's face
but she sounds satisfied, almost cheerful. Bilbo bites his lip, something very like hope bubbling up
inside him. Perhaps his mother's illness is finally coming to an end. “If you improve over the next
few days I'll have Bilbo continue this treatment with you when I leave.”

“It's hardly difficult, I should manage fine on my own.”
“Don't be ridiculous, Bella.” Donna huffs. “The poor boy worries about you a great deal. Let him assist you, if only to ease his own mind.”

“I keep telling you,” Belladonna frowns down at her sister, shoulders drawing back. “There's nothing to worry over! I've dined with elves at the foot of the Misty Mountains and crossed the Fords of Isem to ride with the Horse Lords on a great, hairy pony! I've swum in the Gulf of Lhün. A silly flu won't get the best of me.”

She says it all with conviction, voice hardly even strained though her breath still comes at great discomfort. And yet.

His mother cannot seem to meet her sister's eyes.

“It's been over a month!” Donna snaps, shaking the herbs with such force that bits of ash go flying over their heads. “That I know of! How long did your son suspect before he wrote to me? How long have you been hiding your aches and pains? This is no simple flu!” Donna bows her head, brushing stray hairs away from her face with her wrist. “And I'm quite certain that you've known that for some time.”

“I...” Belladonna's shoulders shake, body wracked by a sudden coughing fit. She pulls her hanky from her sleeve, cupping it around her mouth. The sounds she makes as her chest convulses are wet and sickly and go on for far too long.

Just when Bilbo thinks he can hear no more of it, it ends. Belladonna breathes deep and folds the hanky up, reaching to tuck it into her sleeve.

Donna stops her, clasping her sister's hand in her own, bowl and herbs set aside.

They stay that way for a few silent moments, neither moving nor backing down until Belladonna relents, opening her hand. Donna plucks the wrinkled cloth up and brings it close, parting the folds to examine its contents.

Bilbo crawls away from the door, comes to his feet and stumbles to his room in a daze. He buries himself in blankets and pillows, curled up like a faunt on a cold winter's night. Later, when his aunt comes to see if he's returned from his day out, he will feign sleep and skip supper altogether.

Red used to be his favorite color.

*~*~*~*

“That Gordonia, she's coming right along.”

“Won't say who the father is, I've heard.”

“Shameful, it is. Why –”

Bilbo turns and strides away from the gossiping lasses, pulling at his scarf with one hand until it settles more snugly around his neck. The crisp fall air bites at his nose as he makes his way through the market. The stalls are still packed with fish and eggs and autumn vegetables but Last Harvest is fast approaching.

He comes to a stop at Wallid's stall, looking over the day's catch.

“How long until the fish stop biting, do you think?” Bilbo asks.
“Not for a few more weeks, Mister Bilbo.” Wallid answers, holding up a particularly fine trout for Bilbo to inspect. “Me an’ me boys have been at the smokehouses for the past month, though. Got plenty of kippers if you’d like some for the ol’ pantry.”

“He ought to come forward, take responsibility!”

“That’s right! It’s quite horrid of him, whoever he is, leaving it all up to poor Gordonia.”

“But why won't she call him out? Surely by now –”

Bilbo winces as the elder hobbits pass by, caught up in their discussion, and tries to focus on Wallid’s earnest face.

“Yes, thank you. About two dozen should do.”

“Right you are, Mister Bilbo, we can have them by Bag End in the morning.” Wallid makes a note in his little water-stained ledger and then looks up, his sincere smile deepening his wrinkles until his face looks like mud dried and cracked by the sun. “And how's your mum doing? Haven't seen her out and about lately.”

“She's doing well, as well as can be expected.” Bilbo answers taking a deep breath.

“I feel sorry for her, the poor gal, caught up in an affair with a lad who won't do his duty.”

“But why won't she name him? It'd solve everything.”

“Probably thinks she's better off without him. Can't say I disagree, considering.”

Bilbo chokes out a hasty 'good afternoon' and turns on his heel. His shopping is only half done but he just can't bring himself to listen to any more nosy babble. It leaves his stomach feeling queasy.

“Mister Bilbo! What about this trout?” Wallid calls after him.

“Not today, thank you!” Bilbo calls back and hurries on.

He weaves through his fellow shoppers, dodging arms and baskets and crosses the bridge at a trot, feet slapping against stone warmed by the autumn sun. He doesn't slow until the chatter of voices no longer reaches his burning ears. Standing still for a moment, Bilbo lets the afternoon breeze cool his face, tipping his head back towards the sky. The clouds pass overhead, fluffy and white, free of the world's troubles.

It's all well and good now, he thinks, setting a steady pace up the hill towards Bag-End, when the whole of Hobbiton thinks Gordonia's been left to drift in the wind by an irresponsible lover. But the truth will out and it'll hardly be any comfort to the poor lass that what their neighbors all think happened is essentially the truth – with one small, unexpected and entirely unprecedented detail.

It'll hardly matter that the mother and little faunt have been abandoned by the father when the father is a dwarf.

There have been no more late night visits to Bag-End, of that Bilbo is sure. His mother has asked after Gordonia, in that round-about way she has – as if she's looking to be amused by the silly gossip of their fellow hobbits. Belladonna worries about her, and Gordonia will need that care when her little world comes crashing in around her.

Perhaps Bilbo can pay her a visit, work at mending that bridge. It would be good for both of them,
Gordonia and his mother, to have someone to speak with who understands – if only a little.

Bilbo drifts into the front garden, basket feeling heavy where it rests in the crook of his elbow despite its meager contents. A flash of color catches his attention from amongst the long faded milkweeds.

A lone butterfly rests on a solitary twig, striped wings spread wide as it suns itself, soaking up the last of the heat the sunlight has to offer.

“You should really fly south, you know.” Bilbo offers his advice, watching as the butterfly sits unconcerned. “You're brothers and sisters are already on their way to Gondor. You'll be left all alone.”

The little king twitches it's wings once, twice, but remains at rest. Bilbo sighs and turns away, opening the door and stepping inside to set his basket on the floor. Reaching for the brush to clean his feet, Bilbo goes still, nose twitching as an insistent scent curls in his nostrils.

The fruity bouquet of red wine is drifting far too strongly down the hall. Bilbo rushes forward, worried that his mother has dropped a bottle and may be hurt, down the hall and past the parlor until he comes to a sudden stop just before the kitchen.

Muffled sobbing drifts out.

He peeks around the entry. The curtains are closed against the autumn sun, and a fire is burning in the brick oven. Its flickering light refracts through the bottle and glass on the table, tinting the walls red. It highlights the silver in his aunt's hair, flowing over her shoulders and across the smooth wood as she cries into her folded arms. Belladonna sits beside her, rubbing soothing circles along her sister's back. She stares into the fire with dull eyes.

“I don't... I don't...” Donna gasps, hand weaving along the table in search of her glass. Belladonna slides it into the curve of her sister's palm. “I've tried everything, everything. Nothing works like it ought and I don't understand.”

Donna lifts her head and gulps the last of her wine. Her face is haggard, worry lines etched deep around her eyes and mouth. Bilbo's mother is thin and frail beside her, the only color to her skin coming from the orange glow of the fire. Still, his aunt looks far older than Belladonna in that moment, aged by sorrow and fatigue. Bilbo slumps against the archway, curling around the dark growing pit in his chest, half hiding his face against the wood.

“It's all right, Donna, I know you've done your best.” His mother says, looking down at Donna's tangled curls. She brings her hand up to pet her sister's hair. “This is beyond you. It's all right, you can stop fighting now.”

For a moment Bilbo is lost in dissonance. This cannot be his mother. She wears Belladonna's face like she wears his mother's clothes but the voice is that of a stranger, foreign and unrecognizable. She sounds defeated.

His mother has never given up on anything in her life.

“No!” Donna growls, digging her nails into her palms. Her shoulders heave as she battles through her tears to speak. “I won't, I won't and don't you dare! If I can't do this, then what was the point? What's the point in being the best if I can't – if I can't –”

“Shhh...” Belladonna consoles, bringing her sister's head to rest against her chest. She rocks them gently, in slow calming movements, back and forth, back and forth.
Bilbo's vision grows blurry.

He rubs at his face with his sleeve and blinks rapidly, trying to dispel the sudden moisture. His throat burns with the effort of holding back his tears.

He chokes on a sob.

Belladonna looks up and sees him watching. She smiles at him, broken - though she tries to mask it, and for a moment her eyes shine like they used to. Reflecting far distant skies. Bilbo crosses the room in three strides, drops onto the bench and buries his face in his mother's shoulder.

The three of them stay like that until the fire burns low, rocking themselves through their sorrow until they are too numb to cry.

*~*~*

In the morning Bilbo ventures into the yard and collects the pale fluff off the milkweed seeds. He's at it for hours, picking each white, silky tuft from where they've caught in the garden and between the stones of the garden wall and in the tall grass of the meadow across Bagshot Row. The seeds he discards and places the fluff in a burlap sack, intent on filling it to the brim. When there are no more seeds to be found he returns to the garden and the old milkweed plant. He breaks open the silvery pods with his nails, robbing them of their contents, continues until his fingers feel scratched and tender.

That night he waits until he hears his mother head to bed, late – far later than is healthy – and pads into the parlor to steal away her favorite cushion. He picks away at the stitches and removes the old stuffing, mixing it with the new, and carefully packs it back in. Sifts and smooths and works it until it's lush and even throughout. He sews the side back up, squinting in the candlelight and starting over twice. Only when the stitches resemble the precise, even technique of his mother is he satisfied.

Belladonna sighs as she sits down to breakfast, leaning back onto the cushion with a small smile. She doesn’t say anything and neither does he.

*~*~*

“You can go in and see her now.” Donna says, voice soft as feather-down, her hand warm on Bilbo's shoulder.

For a few moments he can only blink down at his folded hands. Then Mira reaches out and places her hand atop his, giving a gentle squeeze, and he finds he can breathe again. He rises slowly, not quite trusting his own legs. When he reaches the door into the atrium he turns back to watch his aunts draw close on the kitchen bench, twining their fingers together as Mira whispers forgiveness for Donna's self-recriminations.

Bilbo makes his way down the hall, past the pantry filled with far more food than one hobbit needs to get through the winter. Whispers haunt his footsteps as he turns towards the study, a faunt's twitters of joy and a mother's laughter.

The study is a mess of herbs and mortars, glass jars and poultices, a healer's craft layered atop his mother's maps and papers, strewn over the cracked foundations of his father's quiet haven. The window above the desk is cracked open, a muted breeze ruffling the pages of journals and books left open. The faint noises of play, Mira's youngest, drift in with the pale sunlight and brings with it a vision, a memory. Bungo Baggins hunched over his papers, quill scratching against parchment as he studiously attends to the business of a clan head, Belladonna's soft singing echoing through the smial,
the melody of his childhood.

Bilbo turns those thoughts away and reaches for the bedroom door, hesitating. He gathers his courage, what little is left, and turns the knob.

The window is open and the curtains pulled back but the light still seems dim here, leaving his mother's face looking wan and sallow where she's propped up on her pillows, favorite cushion held in her lap. Her eyes flutter as he takes a seat beside her bed, her breathing shallow and raspy.

He smiles for her, as best he can, and pulls folded parchment from his vest.

“A letter?” His mother asks, hardly more than a whisper.

“Yes,” he replies, smoothing it flat, “it came just this morning.”

“Here you are, my dear.” Mira had said, tucking it under his coat with trembling fingers. “Bella should be the first to read it. It's a tradition, you know.” He'd nodded his head, not trusting himself to speak.

“Read it to me?” Belladonna asks and lets her eyes fall shut.

“O-of, course.” Bilbo clears his throat, holds the pages up to better catch the light and looks over the odd letters, angular and sharp.

“My dearest hobbit lasses,” he begins, recalling his mother's chipper recitations, doing his best to mimic them. His voice sounds strained to his own ears, try as he might. “You'll be pleased to hear that business goes well, despite so many leaving for the east. Old Gözle?” Bilbo squints at the strange markings, takes his best guess and continues. “Er, yes. Old Gözle stopped in again begging me to come back to the mines. Too many are running off without leave and every crew is shorthanded. But I owe no debts and remember how he's treated me and mine. So I told him to shovel his own sh- oh dear, that can't be right...”

His mother laughs, the sound thick and wet, her open smile slightly pinched as she clutches at her chest. Bilbo surges to his feet, pages left to flutter to the floor, steadies her shoulders as he helps her sit up. He rubs circles on her back as she presses her handkerchief to her mouth. When her breathing is even again he settles her back down.

She tucks the soiled fabric away before he can spot what's in it.

“He isn't one to mince words, our Bo.” She says and smiles up at Bilbo. “You would like him, my dear, and I know he would adore you.” Her breath is short when she finishes, her eyes watery from her fit. “I so wanted to see it...”

For a moment she has the same dreamy expression she used to have looking over old maps and then her face blurs and Bilbo finds himself curling inwards, unable to face her.

“I'm sorry,” he gasps, chest aching with the crushing weight of his regrets. “I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry!” He falls forward, guided by frail hands, onto his mother's lap, face buried in her cushion, breathing in the fading scent of milkweed and autumn dew.

“Hush,” she whispers, running her fingers through his curls as though he were a faunt again, crying over nightmares of bitter cold and echoing caverns leading him father from the sun. “I don't blame you, sweet child... I never have, never, never...” His mother rasps, breath coming in fits and starts as she consoles him. “The tranquil ventures of your youth... were enough for me. That I was able – to see your smiling face... that was enough for me.” She is panting by the end, the words stealing her
breath away and leaving her shaking.

“You wanted to leave!” Bilbo wails, guilt rending his heart, ugly tears with jagged edges. “I understand now, I understand. It was your last adventure, you could have made it – there and back again – if I hadn’t... if I hadn’t...” He cannot finish, throat seizing around his choked sobs.

“Oh, sweetling,” his mother gasps, wet and horrid, “oh, dearling – I only wanted to... live out my time,” his mother pets his hair as she searches for breath, “with you. And we have... we have...”

Bilbo shakes his head, pressing his face against embroidered fabric. He can hear the longing in her voice.

Bilbo weeps into his arms, burying his face and with it his guilt, deep and away where his mother can’t see it. Cool breath tickles at the fine hair around his ear, soothing over his flushed skin.

“My soul is a wandering thing... that cannot be tamed.” She sighs, almost too soft to hear, bowed down over him, a guard against the world. “But my heart... has ever been in your hands... to watch over you – wherever you may go.”

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Belladonna Baggins passes in the night.

Bilbo wakes to her cold fingers in the curve of his hand, rises and leaves at Mira's request as Donna prepares to dress her sister and lay her out. He sits in the front garden, a single blanket between his trembling frame and the crisp morning air. His skin feels too tight and though dawn has broken the air tastes stale on his tongue. He feels his chrysalis harden around him and knows he'll never break free.

Below the old milkweed are two vibrant wings, old and brittle, broken by the year's first frost.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry, it had to be done.

Someone noticed a while back that Bilbo's father was alive when he ought to have been dead already (when Bofur visits the Shire). While I do mess a bit with the canon timeline of events in the fic, this particular instance was unintended and entirely an oversight on my part. Still, it worked out rather well in the end as having his death occur later helped out a bit, character motivation wise. I like to see the silver linings. :)

Next Chapter: Dwobbit birth and back to Erebor for more political shenanigans. Plus a bit more of Bofur and Co if I can manage it. (I've got chapter outlines! I've got story arcs! I'm getting this shit done!)

Thrimidge – the 5th month of the Hobbit calendar, it begins the 22nd of April.

Forelithe – the 6th month of the Hobbit calendar, it begins the 22nd of May.

Afterlithe – the 7th month of the Hobbit calendar, it begins the 24th of June.
Lithe – a three day festival commemorating the middle of the year. The first day is 1st Lithe, the second day is Mid-Year's Day (the summer solstice and longest day of the year) and the last day is 2nd Lithe. Mid-summer festivals are pretty important to agrarian societies and since that's what the hobbits are, Lithe is one of the biggest events of the year.

Smial – a hobbit hole.

Faunt – a hobbit child

Tween – the hobbit equivalent of a teenager, a hobbit in their twenties.

Valar – the most powerful of the Ainur created by Eru to shape the world and set his plan in motion. They are immensely powerful and immortal, being divine spirits. Early men considered them gods.

Aulë – one of the Valar, he is called the Smith of the Powers and his domains are rock, metal and crafting. He created the dwarves (who were given life by Eru after Aulë was chastised for overstepping his bounds) and so they call him Mahal (The Maker).

Eru – the name of the creator of the universe, the Valar and the Maiar, the supreme god of humans and elves. More formally known as Eru Ilúvatar.

The Language of Flowers:

In my headcanon Hobbits, like many human societies, have ascribed certain meanings to plants and flowers which they will use to communicate messages, either by decorating their hair or putting together an arrangement for decoration, or by presenting them to the intended recipient. In this case the flowers the hobbit ladies have in their hair are meant to broadcast their intentions or their personal qualities to everyone at the dance. For instance:

Ivy: friendship, fidelity, marriage
Star-jasmine (actually Madagascar jasmine or stephanotis): marital bliss

The chaperones at dances wear crown wreaths made from ivy and star-jasmine in their hair because they're already married and are there to support and keep an eye on all the single lads and lasses running around. As for the rest:

Chickweed: rendezvous – hobbits present a sprig of chickweed to those they would like to have a bit of x-rated fun with. If you accept it then you are agreeable to the arrangement. If you put it back in the offerer's hair it's a polite refusal. Throwing it to the ground conveys insult or anger.

Peony: bashful
Hyssop: cleanliness
Red Valerian: an accommodating disposition
Bluebells: constancy

Flowering Fern: reverie
Parsley: festivity
Larch twigs: boldness
Myrtle is displaying the qualities that would make her a good hobbit wife. While our mystery dancer is just showing how f*cking happy she is to even be there. ;)

If anyone is interested, this is the site I use to get flower meanings:
http://www.languageofflowers.com/
New Beginnings

Chapter Summary

It's a Dwobbit!

Ori is adorable, Donnamira is her awesome self and Bilbo deals (after a fashion) with his mother's death.

Chapter Notes

I think we can all agree that Camellia is a reprehensible person: trigger warning for ableist and misogynistic language.

Beta'd by my dearest Re_White. See end notes for translations, etc.

Donnamira has been a healer of the Shire for over forty years, a remarkable accomplishment given her age. She remembers studying herblore while other lasses were still playing with hoops and dolls, remembers taking the oath and serpent rod when she ought to have had a decade more on her apprenticeship, she remembers aiding in her first birthing before she was old enough to bear her own babes.

She cannot remember any birth so arduous as this.

Gordonia stands on the birthing blocks, naked from the waist down and trembling, face red and streaked with tears.

“I can't do this, I can't!” She whimpers, keening as her belly contracts. Donna checks her channel, working more salve over the tender flesh, the lass is opening just as she ought but it doesn't seem to be enough.

“You're doing fine, dear, just fine.” Donna soothes. She glances up at the girls supporting Gordonia on either side, faces vaguely familiar the way nearly all lasses are to her now but without names to match. Her tone is gentle but firm. “Keep her steady, now, easy does it.”

Damn the Sackville girls, sitting on their hands in the parlor – no use to anyone. She'll put the fear of Ulmo in them next chance she gets. Only not now. Later.

“Jessa, is the water down from a boil?” Donna asks. Her daughter crouches by the fireplace, tending the pot, fresh linens folded at her feet. This is her third birthing, she doesn't know enough to be worried yet. “It can't be too hot.”

“It's coming down fine, healer, it'll be ready.” Jessamine replies, giving a nod, gaze steady.
“It hurts!” Gordonia groans, long and low, head tipped back and eyes pinched shut. “Why isn't it coming out? It needs to come out!”

“There now, it'll come,” Donna soothes her, rubbing her swollen belly, “it'll come, given time – shhhhh... shhhhhhh...”

It does come, though the wait is far too long. The lasses holding Gordonia steady flinch as the poor girl wails and clutches their hands. Donnamira guides the head down, has had to cut to prevent a tear – something she’s been forced to do only a handful of times. Blood drips and pools between the birthing blocks, square and plain with nothing to adorn them, may the absent father be cursed into deep waters.

Gordonia sags and nearly collapses when the babe is free. It’s but a minutes work to hand the bundle off to Jessamine, to tie and cut the cord.

“She's so big...” Jessamine murmurs, taking up an oiled reed to clear out the babes nose and mouth. Her daughter will have to handle the babe, the new mother will require all of Donnamira’s attention for a while yet.

She guides her through expelling the afterbirth, cleans her up and has the girls lay her down. The aftercare is more extensive than normal but goes much easier when the babe begins to cry as she's bathed and swaddled. One less thing to worry over.

Donnamira sends the lasses out to inform the family and takes up a damp cloth, dabbing the sweat and tears from Gordonia’s face. Her breathing is still heavy and labored, eyelids fluttering as if she’s half dreaming.

“There now, you've done it,” Donna says, tucking stray curls away from her brow, “You've got a little girl, hale and healthy, and what a big lass she is.”

Gordonia begins to cry, little hiccups escaping between tears. It's been a difficult ordeal, even for a first birth, so Donna picks up one shaking hand and holds it to her breast, lacing their fingers together.

“No, no, no...” Gordonia moans, face twisting and voice hoarse.

“Hush, dear, it's fine, everything is fine.” Donna soothes, but the lass isn't listening.

“Don't tell Cammy, please.” Her plea is absolutely wretched. “She can't know, don't tell her you know!”

Low, quiet murmurs are what’s best at this point. Donnamira has heard her share of incoherent ramblings, lacking any context and so, nonsensical to any healer who hears them. This too is part of the craft, open ears and a closed mouth. Jessamine walks up on Gordonia's other side, rocking the new faunt, ready to hand her over to her mother at the proper moment. Donna gives her a meaningful look and Jessa casts her eyes skyward. She's heard the lesson often enough and doesn’t like being reminded.

“Bella, Bella – she can, she knows,” Gordonia gasps, dragging their attention back to her like a cracking whip, “Bella can – she'd find him, she has to find him...” the lass mumbles, words going breathy as her movements slow, exhaustion pulling her down into a fitful sleep.

The two of them stay motionless for a moment, the words settling in their minds like stones cast into the murky waters of Bywater pool. Donnamira turns her gaze to the babe in her daughter's arms, dark tufts of hair just visible under the swaddling cloth.
“Bella? As in Aunt Be-” Jessamine begins.

“Hush!” Donnamira hisses. She jerks to her feet, throwing the rest over her shoulder as she marches to the door. “We speak of this to no one, not even each other. Stay with them, I'll return shortly.”

She takes care to close the door softly but does little else to damper her passing, down the hall and past more bedrooms, past the little library with hardly a book in it and the smoking room where the men are mingling, voices loud and brash. She stops at the parlor, runs her eyes over the scene, Gordonia's two friends still breathless and flustered from the whole ordeal, and her sisters...

The Sackville sisters sit on dainty little chairs, sipping tea from dainty little cups, dresses and petticoats crisp and perfectly pressed, curls pinned up with ribbons, not a hair out of place. Frilly kerchiefs lay folded on their laps.

“You should have been with her.” Her voice is rough and she turns away, striding down the hall before any defense can bubble up from their wide-eyed, slack-jawed faces. She's out the front door and stomping through the snow in half a tick, stopping at the edge of the garden to stand and let her outrage cool.

Her arms are bloody to the elbows. She finds she can't bring herself to care.

Donnamira thinks about dances and lasses whispering in the streets. She thinks about elder hobbits, hair gray, eyes buried in wrinkles, and outrage – quiet and polite so as not to impose. She thinks about wandering strangers and rumors that jump and soar. She thinks about the babe, head too big and ears too round.

She thinks about her sister, dead near four months.

“What is it you knew, sister dear...”

She heads back inside. Gordonia and the babe will need tending.

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Balin stands on the battlement of Erebor's Great Gates. Night is falling, leaving the valley and all beyond shadowed. Past the stone guardians (hardly given more than a glance, despite their massive size) the lights of Dale begin to glow in the frosty air, clear and gold, reflecting off the Long Lake. But along its edges and in the valley between other lights come to life. Orange camp fires blaze and send smoke into the sky, rising to the stars and giving the moon a ruby hue. Dwarves from the west returned to seek fortunes and glory, stuck under the open sky, legally bound to the mines of Erid Luin and so without leave to enter the Lonely Mountain.

“Honorless scum,” Dwalin rumbles from beside him.

“Mind your words, brother,” Balin cautions, stroking his beard. “Word has it that the King favors their boldness, if not their method.”

“If we had enough cells I'd have them all in shackles.”

“You're in a foul mood,” Balin chuckles, turning from the battlements and descending the steep stairway to the Grand Colonnade.

“I've been given the night off.” His brother gripes as they join the flow of dwarves through the cavernous space.
“Undoubtedly, it is the Forge Day Fest after all.”

“Fest or no fest,” Dwalin grumbles, elbowing past loitering merchants from Esgaroth gaping at the high ceiling, “there’s negotiations going on and I should be there! Guarding Thorin's back!”

“You aren’t his only guard, brother,” Balin takes in the warrior's stiff shoulders and half formed fists, “if you don’t stop acting like it you’ll wear yourself down to the stone.”

“Shouldn’t you be running along?” Dwalin snaps, glaring down from beneath bushy brows. “You’ll be late.”

“I, like yourself, have the night off,” He sighs and offers a wry smile at his brother’s blank stare. “Apparently, tonight's meeting with the Iron Hills is a mere formality – his majesty and heir to Durin's line will not be requiring my council.”

“Thráin said that?”

Balin stops and stares, head tipped back to look Dwalin fully in the face. His brows are pinched together, forehead wrinkled in honest confusion. Only in the heat of battle is Balin’s brother anything less than an open book to everyone around him.

“Thráin said that,” Balin resumes their course, overcome with the sudden desire for movement. “I'm adviser to the first in line, not the second.”

“That so?”

Balin is saved from a reply, rather thankfully, by the surge of voices as they approach the end of the hall and the towering doors thrown open, an invitation to all to enter and marvel at the grandeur on display in the Gallery of the Kings. The most renowned smiths of the kingdom, and quite a few others besides, have gathered to exhibit their finest workmanship – lining the gallery with axes of all sizes, halberds and swords, maces and shields, suits of armor both battle ready and ornamental. Jewelry of gold and silver and bronze flashes in the light of candles and torches, gems gleaming like stars.

“Do you know, brother,” Balin muses as they make their way beneath the archway and into the gallery, “that a showing rather like this has been arranged in the deeps as well?”

“Oh?” Dwalin grunts, scanning the crowd.

“Yes, mining picks and tools, cook pots, cutlery – odds and ends and such apparently. Perhaps I'll take the lads down to – ” A blaze of light catches in his eye and Balin squints, angling his head slightly to the side and away from the colossal effigy looming at the end of the gallery.

They must light it like that on purpose, great bloody thing –

“Cousins!” A voice cuts through the crowd, hearty and warm.

“Vissa!” Dwalin booms out in reply, a wide grin splitting his face. Balin follows in his brother's wake as the warrior hews a path through the crowd. They wade in amongst the crowd of silversmiths, skirting displays and dodging the enthusiastic cries of hawkers, until they see Vissa's distinctive auburn coils of hair. Dwalin rushes forward and gathers her up in a crushing hug.

“Ooph!” Vissa laughs, slapping the warrior's back. “Down with me, afor I burst apart!”

Dwalin drops her to the ground, her boots slapping against granite. Balin waits as she brushes the
wrinkles from the brocade of her frock before offering a more sedate tap against her forehead.

“Are you showing a piece this year?” he inquires, tamping down on a grin as Dwalin attempts a surreptitious search at knee level. Why he seems to think the children will be hiding in their mother’s skirts Balin doesn’t know. Gimli and Glissa were never all that intimidated by his size, even as babes.

Vissa beams, eyes twinkling, and nods. “Aye, a fine bangle, if I do say so me-self.”

Dwalin pats at his tunic and breaches as Vissa leads them to a nearby display. On a swatch of smoky velvet a silver cuff studded with emerald spheres, smooth as polished marble, stands out from all around it. Balin must admit, Vissa has always had an eye for bold design. “Wonderful! Tell me, what inspired the cabochon cut to –”

“Candied nuts?” Several of the morsels go spilling onto the floor as Dwalin near rips the bag from his pocket. His ears go red as he glances about, eyes darting, as though expecting to be set upon at any moment – perhaps by little red-headed dwarflings with a liking for candy.

“And where, then, are the rest of your family?” Balin asks, taking pity on his brother.

“Oh, Glóin’s hauled the wee ones off to admire all things sharp and poky.” Vissa laughs as Dwalin’s head snaps around and gives his massive shoulder a playful shove. “Go on then, you great lump, they left but a moment ago, if’n you can’t track ’em down I’ll be much surprised.”

They exchange amused glances as the warrior heads back into the crowd, rising head and shoulders above most everyone, in search of Glóin and his two favorite dwarrows.

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Thorin takes his seat at the feasting table and reaches for a hunk of thick, dark bread. He takes a bite, chews and swallows, takes another. He does not look to the high table, where the King quaffs ale, as much frustrated as he is satisfied with this evening’s accomplishments. Thorin doesn’t turn his gaze to the many dwarrows and ‘dams who try to catch his eye. He serves himself mutton and stewed mushrooms and doesn’t let himself dwell on the petty squabbles that pass for diplomacy.

“Ale, brother?”

A tankard of the rich, black variety chosen for the night’s feasting comes down at Thorin’s elbow. He glances up the bearer’s arm, at a face that — for a moment — he can’t help but think should be far away and long gone. Then the prince blinks, dismissing the intrusive thought, and nods at the empty seat beside him, takes a pull from the tankard to show grateful, and more, to hide that moment deep.

“How does the night treat you, then?” Fiki asks, filling his own plate with the closest offerings at hand. His golden braids are held back from his face with simple clasps of steel, the same favored by miners, or rather, those who employ them.

“Well enough,” Thorin answers, turning back to his dinner. “And you? Where are Dis and the boys?”

“The boys are nowhere to be found,” Fiki chuckles, cutting into a juicy chop. “My lovely wife is hunting them down as we speak, and cursing herself for giving Glhîn the night off for the festivities.”

“They’ll miss the presentation.”

“Psshhhh! It’s hardly interesting. Everyone knows it’ll be a battle axe, it’s an axe every year,” Fiki argues, waving his fork for emphasis.
“Armor is not uncommon,” Thorin sighs.

“Tell me, brother, we aren’t really going to sit here debating the winner of the Khebabnurtamrâg, are we?” His brother-in-law smirks, brown eyes shining with good humor. “Let’s speak on more interesting matters! What golden nuggets have you brought from the negotiations?”

Thorin lets his fork and knife fall from his fingers to clatter on his half emptied plate and leans back from the table. He glowers at Fiki who, as always, is unperturbed. Thorin gives in. “Turak has pledged a battalion of the finest soldiers the Iron Hills has to offer.”

“Progress!” Fiki cheers, raising his tankard high and nearly dousing an old ’dam in ale as she passes by.

“By inches,” Thorin grunts.

“Progress, regardless.”

They sit in silence a few minutes, Fiki filling his belly; Thorin is without appetite and so watches the feast continue around them. He wonders, not for the first time, at the slow but persistent momentum of the King’s proposed crusade. Nearly a decade has passed since Thrór’s pronouncement and in that time little headway has been made. The King insists on the cooperation their allies are so loath to give, demands ships be built to ferry troops and stores set aside to feed them and then balks at the price. Some days Thorin can’t help but feel the whole process is going in circles, and worse, that this state of affairs seems agreeable to both those who support and those who oppose the blasted endeavor. What can anyone hope to gain, to achieve from it is beyond him. Better to get on with it, wholly and without hesitation, or declare it folly outright and be done.

“I know you don’t approve, and I can understand your reasoning,” Fiki cuts into his thoughts, running a lock of his golden beard through his fingers. “But would it really be so bad? To reclaim that which is rightfully ours?”

“Have you forgotten why we fled in the first place?” Thorin snaps, the words bitter on his tongue.

“But that was generations ago!” Fiki argues, arms spread wide. “Things are bound to have settled down since.”

Before Thorin can reply the bugle of trumpets fills the hall. Representatives of the many smithing guilds are marching in through the doors, a double-headed axe inlaid with gold Cirth, sharpened edges gleaming like finest silver raised at the head of their column. Fiki smacks Thorin's shoulder with an open fist and goes back to his ale.

*~*~*

The slopes of Erebor are cracked and jagged, dusted with snow from the summit and down into the foothills like a blanket over Dale and the Long Lake. Inside Erebor is a marvel of architecture, bridges and causeways and halls carved from the stone of the mountain – but from the outside only the Great Gates with their towering guards, blank eyes ever watching, give any evidence to what lies within. They are, in fact, as far as any visitor has ever cared to look.

Look further.

Past the gates and up, up over broken stone and ice to a flickering light, a small window in a small tower half hidden by rock, overlooking Dale and the lake and Ravenhill with its clamorous rookeries. A young dwarf sits at the window, his flimsy sketchbook propped on the ledge, a quill in hand, scritch scritching over rough paper. On the page, as below, are the many towers and domes of
From out in the night a dark shape glides closer, circles as though to better assess the occupant of the tower then darts down to the window, landing on the ledge, inky feathers rustling. The raven hops closer to the young dwarf, head tilting this way and then that – a careful examination.

“Hello, Roäc,” Ori greets his friend and tilts the page up to better catch the light. “What do you think?”

“Needs more dead things,” Roäc croaks, clicking his beak.

“Dale is very clean, Roäc,” Ori sighs, giving the bird a reproachful look. “They don't leave dead animals in the streets. It's not hygienic.”

“Ungrateful is what it is,” The elderly raven sniffs. Ori hates it when he does that, it sounds rather like he's sneezing backwards. “Flying messages down the lake ain't a spring breeze, not that they'd notice! The lake people have those little flat boats, whatchamacallims, full of fish heads and innards, all up and down the lake – now that's respect.”

“Barges, and those aren’t actually for you, you know,” Ori says, setting his quill aside to dig into his bag. “They go to the farms, they bury them to help the plants grow.”

“Phaw! What do you know, whelp?” Roäc snaps, but there's no bite to it. He's much too interested in the hastily wrapped, slightly smelly package Ori has set on the windowsill.

“I asked,” Ori parts the folds of burlap and watches, head angled down and bashful, to see what his friend thinks of the gift. “It's not much, just something I found in the middens...”

“Chicken heads!” Roäc gargles happily, pecking out one milky eyeball. “This is good stuff, not even runny yet.”

Ori waits patiently while the raven eats, looking out over the lights of Dale to avoid the unseemly stretch and snap of tongue removal. He shifts from foot to foot, picking at his knitted gloves.

“Spit it out.”

“I'd like to work on uncial script tonight!” Ori turns to his small desk, pulling out the rough made paper he uses to practice on. The desk is scratched and rickety, one of the legs propped up with a stone and has a tendency to creak but it's undeniably his. The other apprentices squabble and draw lots on the others – who gets the desks closest to the little furnace and who has to share – but Ori has this one all to himself.

None of the others want it.

Though they occasionally nick the stone.

“Where's your text, whelp?” Roäc waddles along the windowsill until he can look down over Ori's papers.

“Ah – it's here,” Ori unties the string from around a ratty old book, cover scuffed and illegible. He lays it down and opens it, handling each page with care, the binding glue long having lost its hold on many of them. “It's a collection of poetry for the children of Men, it's really very interesting – though some of the pages are missing...”

“Can't be helped,” The raven croaks, adjusting the fold of his wings. “Copy a few lines and we'll see
how they look and remember, whelp —"

“Even pressure, even spacing,” Ori recites with a small smile. “I have been —”

The sudden rasp of wood over stone freezes them both.

Ori turns towards the door leading into the tower proper. He’d left it slightly ajar and through the crack he can just make out a flickering — as though someone is passing by the candles, briefly obstructing their glow.

A strangled squeak escapes him as talons dig into this shoulder.

“What are you doing, sitting here like a great lump?” Roäc hisses into his ear, “Get out there, whelp!”

“I’m not allowed!” Ori whispers back, slightly frantic, “Master Snek told me —”

“There are cyphers in that room.”

“Yes, but they’re locked away.”

“Tell me of your brother again?” Roäc snarks, ruffling his feathers.

“Nori would never —” Ori bristles.

“Not the point, whelp!”

Ori sighs, stands and slowly shuffles towards the door. He doesn’t like this, not at all. No one was expected to be coming up here, not during the Khebabnurtamrâg feast — it’s the only reason Ori was left to station the tower all alone.

He can see the scrivening tables through the crack in the door, the glow of candlelight on the polished granite, but no sign of anyone in the room. Ori reaches for the brass knob and hesitates. It’s very quiet in the main room... a messenger or a noble’s servant would call out, wouldn’t they? And one of the guard would be rather noisy, too much armor not to be. What if it’s really —

“I will peck you on the noggin,” Roäc hisses, “repeatedly...”

Taking a deep breath, Ori opens the door – just wide enough to lean around.

There’s a dwarrowdam bent over a notary desk, doing a remarkable job of sealing a small wooden tube by herself, holding it as well as a taper and stick of sealing wax perfectly balanced in her wrinkled hands. Every muscle in Ori’s rather scrawny frame melts with relief at the sight of her well-worn but undeniably merchant class clothing.

Roäc squawks indignantly and launches himself from Ori’s suddenly slumped shoulder, up into the rafters.

The dwarrowdam seizes up briefly and then fumbles the items in her hands, all but the burning taper falling to the ground.

“Goodness now, I’d thought there were none here but me!” She says, free hand fluttering over her heart. “Good evening, lad, who might you be then? An apprentice?”

“Um – yes,” Ori steps out into the room and blushes, remembering his manners, “I’m Ori, at your service.” He says and bows.
“Bakla, daughter of Keig, at yours,” She smiles, seemingly unaware of Ori's breech in etiquette, as though it hadn't happened at all. “And who's your friend up there?”

“Oh, he's -”

Roäc sticks his head out and croaks, the long feathers at his throat fanning. Then he turns his back on them both and flicks his tail.

“- rather grumpy today,” Ori finishes lamely.

“Not to worry, lad,” Bakla chuckles good-naturedly and begins what looks like a rather long and arduous process of bending down to retrieve her dropped items. Ori blushes and darts forward.

“I'll get those for you!” He blurts and plucks the tube and sealing wax up from the floor, placing them in the 'dam's waiting hands.

“Akhmirmuki astû,” She drops the wax into a convenient pocket and then blinks at the taper in her other hand, as though she'd forgotten she was holding it.

“Ya harmu,” Ori responds and holds his hand out. Bakla smiles and gives him the little candle which he blows out and deposits into an open box with the rest.

“Are there any more ravens about?” the elderly 'dam enquirers, following Ori to the main desk. “I'd so like to send this out tonight but I'd hate to inconvenience you.”

“Ah – well you see,” Ori stammers, “apprentices aren’t allowed to log or clear missives without supervision...”

“Oh dear... I didn't know,” She's nice. She's so achingly nice that Ori decides to break the rules – but only a bit, hardly breaking at all really, just sort of bending.

“If, um, if you write down the recipient and destination it can be logged first thing in the morning though!”

Bakla beams at him, plucking a bedraggled quill from the pile of braids on her head and a scrap of paper from the folds of her dress. Ori scrambles for a jar of ink and uncorks it for her. “You've been such a help, lad. It's rather silly of me I suppose,” Bakla muses as she writes in slow, neat Cirth, “it's just I always used to spend the fest with my cousin, she's a blacksmith you see, and after seeing such splendid work on display... well, she would have loved to see it is all...”

The old 'dam trails off and shrugs, handing Ori the scrap of paper.

“It's very nice of you,” Ori assures her, “family's the most important thing in the world!”

“What a lovely lad you are! It's three crowns for the Grey Mountains, isn't it?” She asks, tugging the drawstring open on a little purse.

“Ah, two crowns, six pence.”

“Well keep the extra then,” she smiles and pats him on the cheek, “buy yourself something warm to eat on the way home.”

Coins in hand, Ori watches as she ambles out, listing slightly to one side, stopping only to give Roäc a little wave of her fingers. He ignores her.

Ori fingers the fat coins sadly, apprentices aren't allowed keys to the moneybox and he doubts very
much that any of the Masters will let him to keep the four pence change.

“Let's open it,” Roäc demands, landing on the desk as soon as the outer door has closed.

“No!” Ori yelps, snatching the little tube out from the raven's reach. “How could you, Roäc?”

The raven clacks his beak impatiently, “A feast day message to her cousin? By Bâhzundush? Don’t be ridiculous, she's suspicious.”

“She's nice,” Ori insists, stowing the paper and tube in the logging box.

“I don't like her.”

Ori sighs and heads into the back room, returning to his desk and his papers. Feathers brush his ear as Roäc glides past. “You don't like anyone.”

“Phaw!”

*~*~*~

Donna sips her tea and waits for Belba Baggins to say her piece.

The old biddy will eventually, given enough time. Donna knows all the tricks of a clan matriarch, had learned them at her mother's feet, and has a lifetime of waiting hour on hour for babes who won't be born until they're good and ready, thank you kindly. No one can wait out silence like a healer.

She sips her tea and studies Belba's neat little smial with tiny flicks of her eyes, hardly noticeable from beneath her lashes. The walls are perfectly white even where candles would normally leave the stain of smoke. Delicate porcelain dishes glitter in the sunlight on spotless shelves. Even the bricks of the fireplace gleam as though freshly scrubbed.

Thank goodness she wasn't raised a gentlehobbit, regardless of what Bella used to say to the contrary, Donna thinks. What torture it would be to have nothing better to do than keep the grate free of ash.

“I must say how nice it is that you could take the time to visit,” Belba says, setting her cup down into its saucer with barely a sound, “I know how valuable a healer's time is.”

“I was in the area,” Donna responds, picking over the scones until she finds one to her liking, “it was no trouble at all I assure you.”

“Checking up on Gordania's girl and the Sandyman lad, yes?” The matriarch's lips purse together as she thinks, wrinkles forming around her mouth like a sunburst. “Whatever did they name that boy, I can't recall.”

“Ted, short for Tedmilton.”

“Hmm.”

“Indeed.”

They sit a few moments, sipping tea. Donna watches the clouds crawl across the sky through the parlor window. Across from her Belba folds her napkin across her lap, picks at it then lifts it up to fold again.

Tedious.
“And how are they?” She wonders, words drawn out as though prompting a response from a faunt forgetful of their manners. “The babes?”

“I am a healer,” Donna reminds her, eyebrow arched.

“And the girl a faunt of my clan,” Belba snips back.

“Then surely Camellia will be glad to tell you all about the wee thing over tea.”

Nostrils flare with Belba's sharp breath, head tilting to one side, chin tipped up. She stays like that a moment then reaches for the sugar bowl, dropping one cube, then a second into her cup and stirring with a little more vigor than strictly necessary. She taps the spoon against painted porcelain and sets it aside. When Belba has finished her mouth is less tense and her shoulders have dropped.

She takes the cup in her hands but doesn’t drink.

“She has been...” Donna hangs on the other woman's words, intrigued. “rather recalcitrant in my regard.”

“Well, she is a Sackville as well as a Baggins, there's always been a bit of animus between the two.”

“And I have no standing on which to insert myself,” Belba nearly hisses, fingertips gone white where they press against her cup, “Matriarch I may be, but clan head I am not.”

Donna would bet two barrels of pipe-weed that the fact had been asserted in no uncertain terms by Camellia herself on more than one occasion.

“Perhaps Bilbo can inquire then? He's never been close to Longo and Camellia but...” She trails off as Belba perks up.

“As to that...”

“Ah,” She ought to have known.

“Yes.”

“It's to be two birds with one stone, then?”

“Just so.”

Donna sighs and takes another scone, adding a generous amount of clotted cream. “I'll see what I can do.”

Her nephew will be hearing an earful for this and no mistake.

*~*~*~*~*~*

It's been near a month since Donnamira has last been by Bag End. The last of the snow has melted and the early buds are beginning to sprout. The garden is tidy at least, all the fall and winter die-off has been cleared, and the trees have been pruned. Donna doesn't let this affect her expectations however. Bella had the same gardener for years, and it's unlikely that Bilbo would have let the man go, he's always been sentimental.

She makes her way through the gate and up the front walk, opens the door without knocking. The parlor is empty and unkempt when she glances in, books and papers are stacked on tables and chairs, empty tea cups are scattered across every surface, and the candles along the wall have wax drippings
hanging from them like icicles. A path runs through the fine coating of dust on the floor, from Bella's chair in front of the fire and back into the kitchen. She follows it past the breakfast table and sink (stacked high with dirty dishes) and out into the hall. Dust bunnies stir against the sideboards as she passes through the atrium and down the west hall. The last door on the left is slightly ajar.

Bilbo sits in a chair by the window, a quilt draped over his shoulders. Tangled curls frame his pale face.

Donna sighs.

“I know you're disappointed, you needn't say it.” He says, gaze fixed on the scenery.

It's like that then. Fine.

Donna makes her way into the room, stepping lightly around discarded clothes and a sterling tea service, pieces strewn about at random. “Your Aunt Belba is asking after you.”

“No, she isn't. She was here last week.” Flat. Even. Simple facts.

“Did you let her in?” She asks, taking in Bilbo's rumpled shirt, the blot of mustard staining his trousers. There's that at least, condiments are always a good sign.

“Of course I did. I'm not a Sackville.”

Donna snorts. “So she's told you about that, has she?”

“In detail.”

Dust on the mantel but ash in the fireplace, still interested in keeping warm then, and more books stacked about than shelves to hold them. Donna takes a deep breath, the air is dry but not musty, tinged with the musk of a body gone without washing, long but not too long.

She can work with this.

“And what do you intend to do about it?”

“Why should I do anything at all? It's their business if they don't want to invite her in for tea.” Bilbo snaps, emotion entering his voice at last. His eyes narrow, glowering as his shoulders curl inwards.

Time to push, just a bit, where he's tender. “You have a responsibility to your relations-”

“Do I? A responsibility, really?” One fist smacks down on the windowsill, startling her, as Bilbo's voice cracks. It's been too long since he's really used it. “Why should I? Perhaps I don't want it, nobody asked me!”

“Your father is dead!”

For a moment there's silence as dust motes drift in the air. Donna takes a long, low breath.

“Your father is dead and his family, your family, has been very understanding.” She begins, moving to stand next to her nephew, where he can't escape her silhouette even if he refuses to meet her gaze. “Everyone expected him to recover after the accident but he didn't and you were given time to morn. And then Bella was ill and after... After there was more time to morn.

“You are young, so young to take on this role. But you must do it. Your uncles are married to the last of the Sackvilles and Chubbs,” Donna pauses, thoughts drifting briefly to a little faunt and her too
quiet mother. But only briefly. There will be time for that particular issue, but it isn't now. “Clans
their sons will have to head one day, and your father's cousins weren't brought up for this. The other
clans will only accept Belba's handling of the family affairs for so much longer and then people will
start to talk.”

She lets the silence stretch. Her piece has been said, there's nothing more she can add until Bilbo is
willing to engage. So she waits.

She waits and watches the afternoon pass by on the other side of the window. Clouds drift across the
sky, a breeze stirs bare branches, a squirrel digs up a hidden cache, chatters angrily when he finds it
empty. Donna stands by the window, filling the air with steady even breaths and slowly her
nephew's shallow, raspy breathing comes to match.

No one can wait out silence like a healer.

“Sometimes I shutter all the windows.” These first words are hesitant, half choked as they pass over
Bilbo's lips. He takes a few shaky breaths and wets them. He draws his hands beneath the quilt,
pulling it tight as though wrapping himself up to be tucked safely away and out of sight. “The light's
so bright it burns my eyes and I just want to wrap myself in my smial and forget that anything is out
there. It's so warm in here and nothing changes at all.”

His words come more easily now, spilling out to fill the space between them.

“Sometimes I can't stand looking at these walls, I can't stand to stay in these rooms. I itch under my
skin and behind my eyes and the only relief is to leave, get out and walk and walk, in circles if I have
to, down paths and trails I could walk blindfolded and not come back until morning. Sometimes I
reach the door and – and I can't open it. I can't even reach for the handle I'm so afraid.”

Here he trails off, eyes staring at something beyond the horizon.

“What are you afraid of, Bilbo?” Donna whispers, encouraging.

“That my feet will touch the path and the path will lead me to the road and the road will sweep me
away. That I'll walk and walk and never come back.” A slight tremor runs over him, head to toe, and
Bilbo blinks at the wetness around his eyes before he continues. “The pull is so strong sometimes
that I can't breathe, but I daren't give in because if I do – if I leave there'll be no returning to this
place, warm, familiar and mine. I don't think I could bare it if I opened my door to something cold
and strange.”

When all his words have run out Donna stands silent, waits until Bilbo's eyes are drawn to her own,
seeking comfort and assurances. Only then does she speak.

“Your mother's greatest regret was not living while she had the chance,” Donna says, voice soft as
cotton down. “Don't let it be yours as well.”

Then she turns on her heel and leaves.

*~*~*~*

There's something wrong with the wretched thing.

It's happened before, Camellia knows. She's heard tell of the boy the Cotton's keep down in Pincup,
well out of the way of any decent folk. Stocky, flat faced and soft in the head is what he is – not that
she's ever seen him but she knows those as have and she makes it a point to stay well informed. A
good thing too or she'd have to get a healer up to take a look at the child and she'd never live the
shame of it down. It was hard enough getting that Donnamira out of their hair in the first place, the horrid woman would never leave them be if she knew.

Near two years of age and still only crawling, babbling nonsense, not even close to using words yet.

It's alright for a girl to be slow if she's pretty too, gentlehobbits too old to be picky will fall for a comely face even when all other qualities are lacking. But Camellia is too practical to hang any hopes that Callalily will grow into a beauty. In nearly all ways she's plain as rocks, hair a dull brown with hardly a curl to it, ears too stubby and her feet small with unseemly patches where they're nearly bald. Indeed, the only lovely thing about the babe are her eyes, a soft green like wood moss.

Camellia has told her sister this often and Gordonia flinches every time, though she ought to be resigned to the facts by now. The faunt is slow, ugly and misshapen, and only seems more so every day that goes by.

There's something wrong with the wretched thing.

It's only when she finds her sister plucking wispy hairs from girl's tear streaked cheeks that she realizes exactly what it is.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: We check in on Ered Luin, things really get rolling in Erebor and the situation in the Shire comes to a head.

As always, I use the Darrow Scholar for my Khuzdul.

Translations:

Khebarnartamrâg – “Forge Day Fest”: a celebration honoring smiths and their craft which marks the end of winter (around the third week of February). Dwarven smiths forge their best pieces in honor of Mahal (the valar who created them), the most talked about of which is often presented to the Lord of the Hall.

Akhmirnruki astû – a formal thank you

Ya harmu – a formal response to being thanked.

Cirth – the runes dwarves use when writing Khuzdul

Bâhzundush – raven
Chapter Summary

Things come to a head in Erebor, hard choices are made in Ered Luin and Bilbo makes a discovery.

Beta'd by Re_White

Chapter Notes

It's been a long wait but here's a nice, long chapter for you all (the longest so far at over 12,000 words). This is mainly focused on what the various dwarves are up to, next chapter will contain a LOT more of Bilbo and the Shire.

WARNING: A minor character commits suicide in this chapter. This happens at the end of the first section, which (aside from the first two paragraphs) deals mainly with her deteriorating emotional state. Please take care of yourself and skip this section if you need to. The pertinent details are: the Sackvilles are awful people, Gordonia dies and Callalily is found physically unharmed. In addition, the last section has some dialog concerning Gordonia's death/disappearance. Skip the dialog after Bilbo asks about Gordonia, the gist is no one is sure what happened and Camellia and Franklinia are terrible. They also speak about Callalily as if she is an object instead of a person.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In this world there are many endings. Some are colossal things, pulling history in their wake and upending the very nature of all around them, the end of nations or the end of Ages. One such ending approaches, far to the south in the barren lands where dread things dwell, but this ending does not concern us. Our eye is drawn to a lesser event, far simpler and much more common. The sort of ending which happens every day, though it's frequency makes it no less sad.

But remember, endings are not alone, they bring beginnings trailing after. Often of the same import and kind but not always. Some endings are like peddles tumbling down the slopes of mountains, they bring avalanches roaring down.

This is one such ending.

Gordonia lives in a haze, vision clouded like winter fog settled in the hills. Every task is done by rote, broken down by parts and mechanical like the inside of Cammy's prized clock, tick-tick-ticking on the mantle. There's a weight to her that feels permanent now, lodged beneath her ribs and pulling at her, making her ache all over and leaving her weary from dawn til dusk.

Cammy sends her away when summer comes, the air still and sweltering, south to Green Hill country and their middle sister, Franklinia. She spends the first day of Gordonia's stay flitting about, plumping cushions and offering pretty little morsels which Gordonia dutifully eats.
The country air will be good for the girl, her sister says. Posh living is all very well for those as like it, Franklinia sniffs – the two eldest have never seen eye to eye. The poor dear's been far too coddled, her sister insists, throw her out the door and let her have at it – that'll catcher her up to the other faunts her age.

Franklinia plucks the squirming bundle from Gordonia's unresisting arms and bustles off to wash the travel dust from the child, cooing as she goes – my, isn't she big and hale? Can she say 'Aunty'? Shy little Callalily, say 'Aunty' now, dear.

When the bath is done Gordonia's child is given back to her in silence.

Franklinia never looks at the girl again.

Each day Gordonia walks down to the Shirebourn and sits in the shade of the trees, gazing at the water as it flows past. The hot summer sky reflects off the river as though it were a mirror, disturbed only by darting silver fish catching flies, leaving ripples in their wake. She rises to bring Callalily back beneath the shade before she can crawl too far, to feed her when she cries, but is otherwise still.

The folk of Woody End learn to pass her by.

Sometimes she stands and walks into the shallows, water cool around her ankles, and stares to the east. Sometimes her eyes burn but she never cries, the weight in her chest holds all her tears deep down where they cannot rise. Sometimes she wonders when it will drag her down and crush her.

One day when the late summer heat is stifling she keeps walking, water rising to her knees, to her waist, to her shoulders. She keeps walking and never comes out again. A pair of fishermen hear wailing as evening comes on. They search the banks until they find little Callalily, hungry and tired amongst clumps of purple hellebore, beneath the drooping arms of a willow tree.

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Thráin strides through the halls to his chambers with martial grace, movements clipped and precise, his furred cloak hardly touching the floor as it ripples in his wake. As he turns a corner Shòka falls into step beside him, keeping pace without apparent effort despite his short stature.

“Have they arrived?” Thráin asks, curt and to the point.

“Yes, your majesty,” His secretary responds, ledger clutched tightly as they approach the doors to Thráin’s audience room. “They are rather curious as to the nature of this meeting.”

“Are they now?” He says, voice low and laced with a grim satisfaction. His guards march ahead, station themselves on either side of the hall and salute as he passes, the last pair pull the doors open at his nod. His advisers leap to their feet as he sweeps past them to the head of the table. Thráin doffs his cloak, draping it across his seat, but remains standing, hands folded at his back.

The silence stretches as he considers each of his advisers in turn.

Náli, though younger than the others by a fair margin, stands still and confident. Too confident, stroking his beard, waxed to a sheen, with bejeweled fingers and his eyes trained on Thráin's face, though he hesitates just short of meeting his one remaining eye. Perhaps not so cocky as he'd like to appear.

Lónu meets his gaze easily, dark eyes considering. She's angled herself just slightly away, hands folded below her bust. She's read his mood perfectly.
“Good afternoon, emûlhekhizu,” Balin greets, voice genial despite the heaviness of Thráin's gaze. “It was your pleasure to call upon us and so, we have come.”

Thráin waits a minute longer, staring the old dwarrow down, waiting for Balin's gaze to break and dart away.

In this too, Balin fails to meet Thráin's expectations and so he snaps, “Are you not my advisers?”

This, at least, causes Balin to blink, surprised. Thráin regards the other two and finds that they too seem caught aback.

“Are you not pledged to me?” He continues, deep voice resonating in the modest chamber. “To be my voice amongst the people, my ears in far flung corners?”

“Aye, tis as you say, emûlhekhizu,” Lónu says, looped braids swaying as she tilts her head, cautious.

“Tell me, then, why I have received word from Lord Birien,” Thráin thrusts out his hand. Shòka, ever attentive, has the document ready to drop against his open palm. “Conveying his formal complaint against the camps of dwarves in the foothills. He asserts that livestock have gone missing from the leeward farms. That the numbers have increased. Each of you have contacts among Men, why is this the first I'm hearing of it?”

He throws the papers down on the table and turns his back on them in disgust.

“Your majesty, my contacts are among the merchants and lords,” Náli asserts. “They've no interest in discussing cattle.”

The last word is spoken in disdain.

Thráin whirls on him. “And do merchants not trade in cattle, do lords not eat it?”

“What I mean to say, your majesty-”

Thráin cuts him off with a sharp slash of his hand and turns his attention to Lónu. She's taken the papers from the table, skimming through them with a critical eye. One hand strokes the tuft of gray hairs on her chin as she considers.

“I've heard nothing of this,” she remarks, setting the pages aside. “I'm sure your majesty recalls, I speak more oft with the people of Esgaroth than those of Dale. They have nary a qualm with the... transients fishing the headwaters of their Lake. We dwarrow are, admittedly, woefully bad at it.”

At this she allows herself a quirk of her lips, gaze flicking across the table to Balin. Her expression smooths when the old dwarrow fails to join in her mirth. A weathered hand strokes the white expanse of his beard, brows furrowed over eyes turned inwards.

Ah.

“And you, Balin?” Thráin prompts, drawing the other's attention outward. “What have you to say?”

“I had heard tell of this from Birien's son,” The words come slow and deliberate, still half caught up in his own thoughts. “He was more inclined to think it wolves come south from the mountains than the act of dwarf or man.” Balin shakes his head, a quick tip to the side. “It's a long ways around to the leeward side when there's hunting closer to hand. No, I doubt our kin have anything to do with this.”
“And did you not think to pass these discussions along?”

“It hardly seemed -” Balin begins, waving the concern aside.

“To my son, perhaps.” Thráin growls, narrowing his eye.

Balin jerks back a half step, eyes going round at the venom in Thráin’s voice. Realizing, for the first time perhaps, his error and the enormity of it. The room has gone still around them, the others hardly daring to breathe.

“My prince I -”

They’re interrupted as a guard scrambles through the door, armor clanking as he stumbles to attention and makes his announcement, words coming fast and clipped.

“Satnarîn ishmikhî Thrór, Melhekh id-’urd undu!”

The king strides into the chamber, followed closely by his personal guards and counselor Gamul who limps in the rear. Thrór paces the room, examining carved reliefs on the walls at his leisure. When he deigns to acknowledge the gathering he turns to Thráin, feigning boredom.

“I had expected to see you in the treasury, Inùdoyuh,” Thrór says, casting his gaze about the room still tense with confrontation. “Instead I find you here. Is there some matter of urgency I’m not aware of?”

“Nothing of concern, Melhekhuh,” Thráin assures him. He’s not been sure how his father will react to anything these past few years, and there is nothing to be gained in waking a sleeping dragon. “A minor issue concerning Dale and the camps.”

“What of the camps?”

“If I may?” Náli does not, however, wait for either Thráin or the king’s assent. He continues, jewels flashing on his rings as he gestures. “Melhekhuh, the men of Dale are increasingly dissatisfied with the continued expansion of the camps. They question their purpose and now throw out baseless allegations.”

“What sort of allegations?” Thrór turns to Náli, interest piqued.

“Theft, emûlhekhizu.”

“This is an outrage!” Gamul snarls, wizened lips slick with spittle as he rages. “Your highness, do the men of Dale not owe us their wealth and prosperity, their very existence? And now they slander these loyal dwarrow with villainy, these multitudes who have come to serve you in your greatest endeavor? These noble Khazâd trapped between their devotion and law?”

“This has gone long enough!” The king growls and turns his gaze onto Thráin, accusing. “I entrusted this endeavor to you, my son, at your own behest. I see now that I misjudged. I will not see my people maligned further when the solution is obvious.” Shòka scrambles for clean parchment and a quill as Thrór continues, “By my right as king I conscript all those who returned to Erebor without leave of their patrons. In the spring they will march south with the armies of Erebor.”

“Melhekhuh, we cannot make the necessary preparations in less than a year's time-” Thráin tries to intercede.

“My word is law!” Thrór shouts, pounding a fist down on the table. “Ten years have been
squandered by your wavering and the fickleness of our allies, no more. See it done!"

With one last burning look around the room the king leaves, trailing Gamul and his guards behind him. The doors are shut and silence descends on the chamber.

Thráin sighs and lowers himself into his chair.

“So it shall be.” He says, resting his head on one hand. He is so very weary. “Spread word to the rest of the Emûlhekulagulal, there will be a gathering in three days time to discuss the details.” He turns to his secretary as his advisers file out. The dwarrow is very slightly quivering, lips pinched with outrage of his prince's behalf. Here at least is one he can count on in all things. “Shòka, send for Lord Börek, we must discuss the training of the new conscripts.”

*~*~*

“Again!” Börek barks.

Dís watches as her youngest brings his blade up, level with his shoulder. Kíli sets his feet wide on the hard packed dirt, lowering his center. Börek walks a circle, face stony as he examines Kíli's stance with a critical eye. His wooden rod flicks out, striking just above the elbow. Kíli winces, sweat trickling at his brow and adjusts his hold. Beside her, his brother grunts in sympathy.

Börek waits, making the young prince hold his stance a minute longer, then nods. “Proceed.”

Kíli swings his sword up and around, stepping forward. He flows from one stance to the next in time with the rap of his trainer's rod against the ground. The sound is dulled by the soil and tapestries hung along the walls of the royal training grounds. Motes dance in shafts of light, flowing warm and golden through high windows carved into the mountain slopes. Cool air drifting at their backs brings the clang and clamor of guards making their rounds on the battlements below. Benches line the space but none are occupied save her own.

From across the grounds Dís can just make out the pinched look on Glhîn's face as she stands guard at the entrance, the other Shumûkh at her back.

Dis huffs out a breath.

“Again!”

This time it's a smack to the calf and Kíli turns his heel slightly inward.

Fíli shifts sharply where he sits.

“Breathe, mudûmel.” Dis murmurs, reaching out to press her fingers into his sweaty palm.

“Do you find this tedious, my prince?” Börek calls as he gauges Kíli's movements, eyes darting sharply to each flaw. “Do my exacting standards bore you?”

The rod darts out, catches the prince behind the knee in an attempt to stagger him. Kíli recovers his balance quickly, stepping into the last sequence with confidence if not grace. He comes to rest in a blocking stance, blade angled low. Börek strikes at the tip, testing Kíli's grip.

“You are slow to progress with your training because you lack discipline beyond these lessons.” Another swing, striking against the flat of Kíli's blade just short of the crossbar, jarring the prince's hold. A third sends the blade clattering to the ground. “You must focus on every movement of your body and blade, every line and angle, dedicate yourself to its mastery.” The blademaster drops his
voice to a growl and crowds in close. “Or would you rather brawl with the guards than perfect the martial forms?”

Dís can see the tension in Kíli’s face, the stiff set of his shoulders, but he doesn't rise to the bait, keeping his frustration tampered down. Fíli's grip tightens around her fingers.

“Again!”

“My Lord Börek!”

Kíli gains a reprieve as all eyes turn towards the entrance. A runner stands under Glhîn's watchful gaze, chest heaving as he catches his breath, Thráin's standard gleams bright in thread of gold against the dark cloth of the dwarrow's tabard. Dís stands, curious.

“What matter has brought you here,” She inquires, drawing the runner's attention. “You impose on the private lessons of my sons, could your message not wait?”

“I beg your forgiveness, uzbadnâtha,” The runner bows deep, his beard brushing the ground before he rises. “I would not have but at the insistence of his highness, your father.”

Dís feels a pricking along her skin. She recognizes him now, not a runner at all but Shòka, her father's own secretary. A bristly fellow, she recalls, insistent on the privileges afforded by his station and not one to weary himself with ignoble tasks. And he hasn't answered her question she can't help but notice. Glhîn tips her chin towards the shorter dwarf, tapping her thumbs against her belt. Dís splays her fingers, hand half hidden in the folds of her skirt. Better not to push just yet.

“What word do you bring then?” Börek asks, as curt with Shòka as he is with the princes.

“His highness requires your attendance in his chambers on a matter of great consequence,” Shòka gives a short bow and gestures back the way he came. “If you would, my Lord.”

“By your leave, uzbadnâtha,” At Dís' nod he follows the secretary out, turning to dip his head to the three royals before he rounds the corner and is gone.

“What was that about?” Fíli asks, as curt with Shòka as he is with the princes.

“Don't curse at gold found while prospecting for iron, nadad.” Kíli comes to join them, panting slightly and giving his brother a playful shove. “I'm thankful, at least. That one is never satisfied with anything.”

“Lord Börek is one of the foremost tacticians in Erebor, as well as an accomplished duelist.” Dís reprimands, but there's no force behind her words. Kíli loathes these sessions, she knows, and only puts up with them because his brother excels. Neither of them have ever backed down from a challenge. Fíli hands Kíli his scabbard and the younger sheaths his blade before rucking his shirt up to scrub the sweat off his face.

Dís swats the back of his head.

“'Amad!” Kíli whines at her as Fíli snorts in amusement.

“A proper dwarrow does not expose his belly in view of a lady.” Dís sniffs, but her eyes twinkle and crease at the corners. “Honestly, if I didn't know better I'd think you were raised in a mining backwater.”
“Yer brother approaches, me lady,” Glhîn calls. Beside her the other guards are already standing to attention, fists pressed to their breastplates. Fíli and Kíli perk up, faces splitting into matching grins. Their uncle doesn't often join them in the training grounds but when he does they seem to come alive, throwing themselves headlong into the fight, pushing themselves further than any of their trainers can coax them, so eager are they for his praise. Normally Dís would like nothing more than to stay and watch, there is a sort of openness and vulnerability in these matches Thorin rarely allows himself, something which Dís finds a certain comfort from seeing. But if she's going to ferret out information it's best to do it while the boys are distracted.

Thorin passes the guards, catches Dís' eye and motions for her to join him as he settles himself on a nearby bench. She hears Kíli breathe out a murmur of disappointment as she walks away. Dwalin gives Glhîn a nod as he enters the grounds, throws Dís a wink as she passes.

“I see yer lesson 'as ended early,” Beneath Dwalin's rumbling voice, just audible over the slide of the towering dwarrow's axes being freed from their harness, Dís can hear Fíli groan.

“Oh, Mahal's stones.”

Dwalin charges at the boys with a roar as Dís takes a seat next to her brother. They draw their blades and dart apart, forcing Dwalin to choose between them. As the warrior rushes Fíli, Kíli darts in from the side.

“Hah!” Glhîn crows and rubs her hands together. “Now this is more like it. Fight hard, lads, the winner gets to wrestle me!”

“That's not an incentive!” Kíli yells, ducking under Dwalin's back swing. But even as Kíli gets kicked back, the wind knocked out of him, and Fíli has his blades swatted to the side like nothing more than irksome flies, their eyes glint with exhilaration.

Dís turns her attention to her brother.

She expects him to be watching the match with an appraising eye. Instead he gazes right through it, brows drawn low over stony eyes. One hand strokes the single braid of his beard.

“What troubles you, nadad?”

“I passed master Börek and Shòka on my way here,” Thorin mutters low, so his voice doesn't carry beyond the two of them. “They are not the only of father's advisers I've seen hastening through the halls today. I wonder at their purpose.”

Kíli's sword is knocked from his grasp, hits the ground and tumbles across the hard packed dirt to rest at their feet. Fíli rushes in swinging both blades to draw Dwalin's eye.

“I too am curious, none have ever dared intrude on these lessons before,” Dis agrees, recalling Shòka's somber expression. He'd hardly spared her a glance despite his deference. “Aside from Dwalin and yourself, of course.”

“I should think we'd be welcome.” Thorin huffs, lips twitching.

Kíli darts forward, kicks his feet out to drop down and skid to a stop, reaching out for his blade only to find the thick sole of Thorin's boot and Dís' polished heel stamping down to trap the sword where it lays.

“Really?” Kíli pants, gaping up at them.
“Keep your wrists loose if you don't want to lose it,” Thorin instructs, arching a brow at his nephew's tone.

“Ugh.” Kíli groans before rolling to his feet and darting back to the fray. He jumps up, kicking out hard into Dwalin's back with both feet and spins with the rebound, landing on his toes. Fíli takes advantage of the warrior's momentary stumble to toss Kíli his off-hand sword.

Dís watches the flash of blade and ax a few moments. Dwalin pushes the boys hard but they make him work for every inch. Fíli and Kíli have always shined brightest when side by side. “I was thinking of stepping out just as you came in, actually. There are a few who might shed light on these events.”

“I wish you better luck than I,” Thorin grumbles. “Even Balin wouldn't pause to speak with me,” He pauses a moment and then continues, somewhat pensive. “He seemed troubled to my eyes, though he hides it well.”

“Hmm,” Dís hums as she stands to take her leave. Her boys don't notice her crossing the grounds, too absorbed in fending off the whirlwind of Dwalin's axes. Glhîn sighs, casting a despondent look back at the skirmish as she turns to follow Dís out.

“Oh, stay and watch, I'm not going far,” Dis laughs, indulging her guard's enthusiasm. “I'm sure my sons would be most disappointed if they managed to beat Dwalin and you weren't here to keep good on your promise.”

“Aye, my lady,” Glhîn smirks and taps one of the door guards on the shoulder. He salutes and follows at her heel.

The inner halls seem gloomy after so much time in the sunlight and it takes a few minutes for her eyes to adjust to the smoldering light of the lanterns. Dís makes straight for the far end of the royal apartments, passing through the towering doors, carved from stone and plated with gold and silver, that partition them from the rest of the upper Rises. She doesn't hesitate to decide on a course, knowing just who she wants to track down and where to find him.

Erebor's grand library is on the north side of the mountain, far from any natural light that could dim the ink on priceless documents. It's a bit of a trek but keeping to the higher causeways saves time. On the paths and stairways farther below Dís can see the lilting rush of bodies not used to making haste, furred cloaks and velvet coats thrashing as councilors scurry about. Runners weave in and out of the crowds of high born dwarves at near sprints, leaving nobles sputtering in affront.

Dís picks up her pace.

She descends a stairway carved into a massive granite spire that takes her to a balcony extending in front of the library's lofty entry. Her guard follows her in, armor clanking audibly. Bookcases and scroll racks climb high around them, muffling the noise of the Rises and turning the lantern light to murky shadows.

“Ahem,” A passing librarian grunts, staring pointedly at the guard's chainmail and armaments. Her guard glares back.

“Wait at the door, I shouldn't be long,” Dís commands when the dwarrow puffs up in affront. Her guard waits a moment, adjusting his swordbelt pointedly then complies, bowing before he turns to stand at attention.

She brushes the librarian aside before he can ask after her needs.
The archives are deep in the back where the shelves close in forming musty chasms of old wood and dusty pages bound in cracked leather. The elvish texts are the farthest back of all, left untouched by all but the most intrepid of scholars. This is where she finds him, the old dwarf who's habits she memorized just as astutely as she did his lessons.

Dís slows as she approaches, taking in the just perceptible tremor in his shoulders and the quick staccato of his breathing.

“Balin.”

The old dwarrow's breath hitches at the murmur of her voice. She gives him a few moments to collect himself, gaze turned aside. When he turns to face her she does him the courtesy of overlooking the tremble of his fingers where they lay folded over his coat buckle.

“Princess Dís,” Balin says, giving her a shaky smile. “I hadn't expected to meet you here, my lady.”

“I came looking for you,” She gives a short bow, an gracious deference to her old tutor. “My brother mentioned you seemed ill at ease when he passed you in the halls.”

“And so you came here,” He's not surprised. Though it's been many years since they've discussed anything aside from her sons in more than passing, they still understand each other well enough.

Dís moves closer, until they stand but two paces apart. “What troubles you so?”

“I – I have dedicated myself to your family – to your father – for more years than I can count,” Balin's voice catches and he squeezes his eyes shut for a moment as though speaking pains him. “I had thought myself held in the highest trust and yet I find I've been mistaken.”

“I cannot believe that is so!” She rushes to assure him. “Father has spoken favorably of you since I was a youngling, he trusted you to educate me in the ways of the court – and my sons as well and that's been no easy task,” That prompts a chuckle from him and Dís continues, stronger now. “My father would not cast aside an honorable dwarrow who has served so long and so faithfully...” She trails off as Balin shakes his head.

“I have not,” His expression becomes drawn, one hand clutching and twisting in his beard. “I have not, I should have realized – too often I seek out your brother when I have tidings or council.”

“You speak with Thorin over ale and when you chance upon each other in the halls,” Dís pries his fingers from the snowy strands, holding his hand between her own. His skin is thick and weathered but warm. “No one could argue that is forsaking your oaths.”

“The form hardly matters,” Balin sighs, eyes turning inwards. “My allegiance has shifted, though I did not notice...”

Dis has been taller than the old dwarrow since before she reached her majority but this is the first time in the long years she has known him that he appears small before her eyes. “Balin...”

“Enough of my troubles, there are far more pressing matters at hand.” Balin pats their joined hands before pulling away. He takes a deep breath then slips by her, heading for the less crowded expanse of the archives proper. “Come, Thorin will want to hear of this, and my brother as well, I've no doubt.”

“Hear of what, Balin?” Dís turns to follow, remembering her original purpose. She was right to come to him, it seems.
“The campaign,” He calls over his shoulder. “We march to the gates of Khazad-dûm in the spring, by the king's decree.”

There’s a ringing in her ears.

Surely this cannot be. Summer has only just begun, to take so little time to prepare... what could her grandfather be thinking? Dís casts out a hand to steady herself, dusty scrolls fall to the floor from their perches, knocked aside by her grasping fingers.

“My lady?” Balin's voice comes to her as though from a great distance. She pays it no heed.

Her boys. Her joy of joys. They will want to go south, so eager to prove themselves, so ready to fight. What will she do? How can she stop them?

Her chest feels tight.

They will leave her, they're so young but they'll march and they'll fight and they'll die on battlefields far from her sheltering arms.

Where has the air gone? She cannot breathe.

“Uzbadnâtha!”

She comes back to herself, gasping on shallow breaths. Balin cradles her face in his hands, dark eyes soft with concern. They're kneeling on the floor, she realizes, scrolls and tomes scattered atop her skirts. A shelf on the nearest bookcase hangs askew.

“I – I don't...” She begins, stops to wet her mouth, suddenly dry and scratchy. “I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me.”

“None of that, my lady,” Balin's voice is gentle as he helps Dís to her feet with a tender hold at her elbow. “Walk with me and we'll say no more about it.”

She rests her hand on the crook of Balin’s arm and allows him to lead her from the archives, her guard falling in behind them. Dís finds herself glad to have left Glhîn behind in that moment. She has no desire to explain her pallid face and halting steps, her shomakhâlinh has never been one to let things lie. The journey back to the royal training grounds gives her time to compose herself, Balin's benign conversation easing her heart into a slow, steady rhythm.

They enter the training grounds to find Dwalin trapped in a headlock, Fíli and Kíli howling with laughter as Glhîn uses her cousin's superior weight against him, leading him in circles as he scrambles to buck her hold. The announcement goes over much as Dís expected. Thorin and Balin step aside to discus the situation in detail and Dís feels her heart sinking as her boys watch with a keen interest, hanging on every word.

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The air is feverish. Everywhere dwarrows and 'dams gather in chattering groups, choking corridors and bringing foot traffic on the causeways to a sluggish crawl as dwarves work their way around the hubs of gossip. Miners with greasy beards and dusty coats scowl at the disruption, too weary to give much care to any news brought down to the Deeps. Their bellies are empty and their limbs are heavy, the plans and undertakings of the Rises have rarely done anything for either.

Merchants try to hock wares to dwarves wading through the crowds, runners shove their way past those milling about, intent on timely deliveries. There haven't been crowds this big since the
campaign was first announced.

It's very good for business.

Nori's sort of business anyway. A quick flick of his dagger and a fat little purse falls into his waiting hand and is tucked away into one of many hidden pockets. It's his third this evening. The middle Deeps are Nori's hunting ground of choice, high enough to have those with enough wealth to be worth stealing from and low enough that patrols are fewer and far between. The upper Deeps are more lucrative but chancy. But tonight... well, tonight he might give it a shot.

He slips through the crowds easily, knows just how to tilt his shoulders to sneak through a gap, when to dart ahead and when to hold back a step, how to set his expression so he appears to bustle busily ahead but not with anything that important. More than slight of hand or fancy blade work, this is the secret of his trade. Being unremarkable anywhere he goes.

“Did you hear? The break-bonds 'ave been recruited!”

“Those petty layabouts? Stealing food out of our mouths and now this?”

“Might as well spit in our beards while they're at it.”

“Here, now! Are you loyal to the king or no?”

The voices die away as Nori turns down a side passage and up a flight of stairs used most often by lanterneers and the Lavamâlh. He's been hearing more or less the same thing all evening. He doesn't really have an opinion one way or the other. The inflow of break-bonds over the years has been nothing but a set of new opportunities for him and his crew, now they'd be a different sort of opportunity for any with the wits to take advantage.

Nori considers himself especially witty.

Slipping from the stairway and into the crowds Nori sets to work casing the area. The wider spans make for less crowding and better movement, a patrol marches further ahead, their backs to him. Bit of luck there, guards on the move are much easier to avoid than those standing watch. Not twenty paces up the causeway stand three smiths, arguing right in the middle of the crowd. Dwarrows push past, knocking shoulders in annoyance, the smiths are too wrapped up in their debate to care.

Perfect.

He's halfway to his mark, a large dwarrow with a great mane of red hair and a beard bunched and gathered with over a dozen guild barrelclasps, when a scrap of paper is tucked expertly into his half closed fist. His first instinct is to snap round to see who's done it, but Nori knows better than to try. The quick movement will only draw attention and he won't be able to catch them. He never has before. So he keeps walking like nothing has happened and passes the smith by, unmolested. Only amateurs thieve when they're flustered.

A brief slow in the pace of the crowd gives him the opportunity to bring his hand up close enough to read.

*Don't forget the fish.*


He jams the note into a pocket and angles himself toward the market. It's not the shortest of detours so he has the time to settle himself, roll a bit of the tension out of his shoulders. When he makes it to
the market's edge he's gotten back into the swing of things, his steps a little lighter and his pockets a little heavier. The stalls are still doing good business, probably won't close until after the fourteenth bell, if he's lucky he won't have to wait that long. Nori heads straight through, skirting past the gossips and darting through shifting gaps in the crowd. He palms a hunk of jerky from a vendor too busy bartering to pay attention. The fishmonger is the last stall, right at the end of the colonnade with the tinkerers and tool smiths. No one wants the reek of aging fish to sink into their offerings.

Nori walks right by it; right past and around the corner, through a narrow passage and up a stairway half carved into the virgin stone. Torches and lanterns hardly reach this span of cavern wall so Nori picks his way carefully as he climbs, one hand always grasping a handhold until he reaches a relatively flat overhang. Here he settles down with his back to the rock, legs spread out towards the drop off. The stink of fish wafts up from bellow.

He rips off a piece of the jerky and waits, chewing.

He doesn't have to wait long.

“You made good time,” a raspy voice drifts out from a gaping crack by his shoulder. He's tried peeking through it before, even brought a candle he nicked once for better light. Whatever lies on the other side is too deep in to make out. Nori's tried hunting for the room, or ledge or whatever is back there, but hasn't had any luck. There isn't a single stair or passage that leads in the right direction.

“This better be worth my while,” Nori grumbles around a mouthful of smoked meat. “This is looking to be a very good night for me an' I don't want to be wasting any of it.”

“I won't keep you long,” the voice answers. It's hard to tell anything definite about the voice, not even gender, but Nori thinks it sounds wry. “I wish to contract your group for a few odd jobs in the near future.”

“Oh?” Nori asks, intrigued. “At what rate?”

“The usual, plus reimbursement for reasonable expenditures,” the voice pauses a moment before going on. “There will be no allowance for bond and fees should any of you be caught, of course.”

“Of course,” Nori mutters, thinking it over. Their Mystery Friend, as his crew has taken to calling the voice, has been contracting them off and on for a few years now. The pay has been pretty decent and a fair few of the tasks they've undertaken haven't even been anything illegal as far as Nori can tell. Sounds like that's about to change, though. Not that Nori has any standing to judge, and anyway that bastard Snek has been upping his rates for keeping Ori on. It'd make things a bit easier to have a steady income for a bit.

“All right, we're in,” Nori announces, stuffing the last bit of jerky into his mouth.

“Excellent,” the voice replies, “Check the drop in Copper Bottom tavern, after the seventh bell two days from now, for a list of new dead drops and your first job.”

After a minute the air settles in a way that Nori knows means the owner of the voice has gone. There's still some time before the upper Deeps settle down for the night, before the crowds thin enough that Nori will lose decent cover. He heads back down to the market and nicks a few coins from loose purse strings on his way back to the causeways. He drifts from one area to another plying his trade until only the most determined of gossip-mongers are still about and the guards have started their night patrols. It's been a successful night and he's feeling pretty good by the time he decides to head home, leaving the upper, then the middle Deeps behind.
Nori heads lower into the Deeps, toward the outer ring. The walkways have cleared somewhat, leaving the Lavamâlh free to go about their duties. He falls in at the end of their little cart line, more out of habit than necessity, breathing through his mouth to avoid the stench of night soil left clinging on their coats. The group is given a wide berth by those still about and Nori makes decent time. They reach the end of the last bridge before the perimeter causeway. Here Nori grips the rail and swings himself over, lowers himself hand over hand down to the supporting trusts. Below is a narrow switchback road carved into the granite wall, passageways open onto it, leading to homes that hardly deserve the name.

There's a little niche in the stone, just where the trusts meet the wall, big enough for one dwarf to perch if they've no fear of heights. Nori has spent hours tucked into it, escaping his brothers for some time to himself or waiting patiently until it was late enough to sneak inside. There's no need to wait tonight, it's far too late for anyone to be up. He drops a few spans, catching the ledge of a small window. Sometimes he finds himself wondering, as he hangs about listening for any movement from inside, how much Dori had to beg for one of the outer apartments, what service he had to trade for decent air flow and a view.

A few minutes pass without a peep so Nori plants the balls of his feet against the wall and levers himself up until he can hook his arms over the sill. One heave has him rolling through the window and onto the floor, soft leather boots hardly making a sound. He stands and gives his eyes time to adjust to the darkness, the torches outside the only source of light.

The room is tiny, hardly big enough to fit the rickety dinning table and chairs, Ori's scrivening desk and their mother's old cushioned stool. The iron stove is cold and dark.

Nori unbuckles his belt and shrugs off his coat as he crosses the room, plucking his ill gotten gains from the inside pockets. The last peg by the door is bare so that's where he hangs them. He checks the latch and smiles wryly when he finds it locked. The next matter at hand is the wooden box above the stove. Nori takes a look inside and clicks his tongue. A few silver coins and a handful of copper get dropped in from the night's haul, not so much that Dori is likely to notice but enough. Next he crouches down and swipes a finger between the stove's iron feet, just at the edge. It comes away clean. With practiced ease Nori stands a gold crown on its edge and gives it a little nudge, watches it roll into the dark recess, listens as it tilts and circles, clattering as it comes to a stop on the stone floor.

A little surprise for the next cleaning day.

The only other room is cordoned off by a blanket hung across the doorway. Nori twitches it aside and slides through, careful to keep his steps light. The only bed is a deeper shadow in the darkness, the sounds of soft breathing drifting up from the large lump in the middle. Nori keeps one hand to the wall as he counts his steps to the blankets dividing Dori and Fim's half of the room from Nori and Ori's. A small smile tugs at the corner of his mouth when he finds it already half drawn aside.

Ori's always been thoughtful like that.

Nori strips down to his underthings, clothes piled on top of their shared chest and boots against the wall, and swings up into his hammock. As he settles down, a ratty old blanket pulled up to his chin, he can't help but imagine what sort of jobs his mystery friend has lined up for him this time.

He drifts off to sleep with a smirk on his lips.

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From the highest battlements, far above the heads of the stone guardians, the tents in the camps appear as small as the flecked impurities of river stones. Throughout the summer the mass has shifted
away from Dale and the Trade Road, pushed out to the edges of the foothills, it now borders the east shore of the River Running. Well in the view of Men but no longer at their doorstep. What were once loose clusters are now ordered rows and blocks enclosing training fields and the slowly increasing stores of weapons and armor and all the necessities of war.

In the night the campfires give the illusion of sparks cast off from a forge, coming to rest and cool on the dark stained floor of a smithy, smoldering pinpricks of light.

Thorin packs his pipe with leaf, arms resting on the ramparts, stones still warm from the day's light. He strikes a sulfur headed match against it, lighting the dried herbs with a few deep puffs. It doesn't taste right, brought up from the lands bordering the Sea of Rhûn far to the south. He's always had a preference for the leaf grown west of the mountains but trade with the elves has been decreasing of late. The Woodland Realm has always been fickle.

A breeze brushes against his face, lifting strands of hair and sending his pipe smoke dancing up and away. It brings the scent of wood smoke and the heady perfume of flowers drifting up from Dale, some sort of harvest celebration.

“You've come out to brood, I see.”

His father's voice rumbles deep behind him. Thorin turns and offers a brief bow which Thráin waves aside. He offers his father his leaf pouch but the older dwarrow declines, lifting a mug of ale to his lips and drinking long and slow. The two stand for a time looking out over the valley and river, into the distance where the twinkling lights of Esgaroth can just be seen, out on the Long Lake. Thorin doesn't often have the chance to simply indulge in his father's company. He has taken on many of the responsibilities of the king and Thorin has his own duties to see to. There's a warmth when in his presence that reminds Thorin of his childhood, before his mother passed and his brother was sent far away. Things were simpler then.

“How goes the negotiations with Dale?” Thráin asks, breaking the silence.

“As expected,” Thorin taps the embers from his pipe and watches them float away on the breeze. “They've had bountiful harvests and have agreed to sell half their surplus at fifteen percent off our treaty prices.”

“That's in addition to our annual acquisition?” Thráin asks. That should go without saying but on occasion Thorin finds his father still treats him like a youngling under the tutelage of his advisers, almost expecting oversights.

“Yes,” He answers bluntly, though he tries to cover his frustration. “They've also guaranteed additional supply from their dry-stores, twenty tons of beans and lentils, forty each of barley, buckwheat and millet, five of dried fruits, and four hundred head of cattle for smoking.”

“And the price on those?” Thráin hums into his ail.

“They want treaty price and a half for the dried goods and twice treaty for the cattle,” Thorin rubs a hand over his face. “I've been trying to talk them down.”

“Do they mean to beggar us?” His father slams his mug against the ramparts, glaring down at the lights of Dale.

“They're pulling from famine stockpiles all over the region,” Thorin has never understood agriculture, Erebor does little of its own, but from what he's been told in the negotiations this is a generous and rather risky action on their part and only feasible because of thoughtful planning.
“Honestly, we're lucky they've been putting away extra – they expected a hasty departure on our end, even if we did not. And don't get me started on the cattle,” His frown deepens, the back and forth on this item has been particularly aggravating. “The herdsmen didn't want to sell us a single head in the beginning, I've no idea what Birien said to change their minds.”

“Ah yes, that issue with the wolves.” Thráin huffs.

If it was indeed wolves, Thorin thinks and hums something noncommittal.

“When is your next meeting?”

“Three days hence,” He's not looking forward to it.

Silence falls for a few minutes and Thorin is just considering having another pipe-full of leaf when Thráin clears his throat. “I've heard from your sister that you've been taking Fíli and Kíli with you on these excursions.”

“Yes... though I had intended only to bring Fíli,” An intent which had lasted no more than a day. Thorin discovered upon returning from the first meeting that Kíli has become quite inventive in avenging any perceived slight. He takes after Dís in that way. “I've found, however, that enduring Kíli's reckless asides is far preferable to the misery he causes when left behind.” Thorin says, smiling fondly even in his exasperation.

“Your great love for your sister-sons is commendable, Thorin,” Thráin sighs, shaking his head. “But you should not indulge them so often.”

“It is not wholly indulgence,” He's been waiting for an opportune time to broach this topic with his father and, Thorin realizes, he'll likely never come across more favorable circumstances than this. “The thought has long been growing in my mind and, given our present enterprise and its unpredictability, I believe it prudent to name Fíli my heir. It's for this reason that I'm acquainting him with my duties.”

“This is some notion of Balin's, is it?” Thráin grumbles, his one eye narrowing.

“It is my own, I have spoken with Dís and she is not opposed.”

“And what of Fiki? Fíli is his son, not yours.”

Thorin hasn't consulted with Fiki on this matter and is more than comfortable leaving that conversation in the very capable hands of his sister. “I have no sons of my own and with this campaign looming -”

“This matter is easily rectified,” Thráin brings his open palm down on the stone beside them and gives Thorin a steely glare. “Find a suitable dwarrowdam, marry her and spend every night in her bed until she is with child.”

“Father, I -”

Thráin cuts him off, gesturing sharply with his hands. “This matter has been put off for far too long. Your mother wished to indulge you, and I continued to do so after she passed, my own folly.”

“I've made my own views clear, they are unchanged.” He needn't state them again, this is a conversation the two have had many times before.

“You're being unreasonable,” Thráin does not plead. An heir of Durin would never show such
weakness, not even to their kin. There is, however, a low note of appeal in his father's voice, an
entreatment in the curl of his hand over Thorin's shoulder. “Many nobles marry before finding their
One. Many never do, but for those who are so lucky allowances are made. Do you think you'd be
given less leeway because you are a prince?”

“That does not concern me.” Thorin has never considered a political marriage and so has never
thought on such accommodations. His father's next question has him choking on his own spit.

“Then is the issue with their sex? So long as you are discrete you may have as many male bed-
partners as you please.” Thorin would sooner bugger an orc than discuss his sexual proclivities with
anyone at all, not least his father. Thráin takes his silence as assent and continues. “Concerning siring
an heir you must simply lie back and let your wife do as she pleases. This is not difficult, Thorin.”

“Mahal abbanhu...” Thorin groans.

“You have a duty to your line and your people,” Thráin snaps, bring his hand down on the rampart
again.

“I have a duty to my soul!” The conversation has swung wildly out of control and Thorin no longer
intends to rein himself in.

“You are being irresponsible and selfish!” Thráin roars, face like a thunderhead.

“Never! Never, but for this one thing!” Fury loosens his tongue, Thorin does not yell but each word
cuts through the air like a fine honed blade. “Have I not dedicated myself to our people and our
king? Have I not toiled daily, even as a child, to learn our history and our laws? When I was
determined to lead the expedition west to the Blue Mountains, did I not bow my head at our king’s
behest?” The memory still leaves him sore with remorse. “I have no Omrib to channel the longing.
‘Adad, would you deny me this balm, this one easement I can give my heart?”

The heirs of Durin do not beg. This is a reprisal. Thorin will not be cowed.

“Is this the speech you used on your mother?” Thráin sighs, but Thorin can tell by the downward
cast of his father's eye and the heavy set of his shoulders that he has won this argument, for the
moment at least.

“I gave no speech,” Thorin admits, not so much gentle but mild, to ease the sting. “She saw herself in
me and desired only that I have no regrets.”

“Aye, she would at that.” These are the last words they will exchange until morning. Thráin departs,
heading back inside to the royal apartments, but Thorin remains on the battlements, letting the air
cool his agitation.

Somewhere to the west, he's certain without knowing how, westward toward the sleeping sun lives
his Sanze, his True One, the only one who can complete him. He's never told anyone of this. There's
a shadow over his mind, a wrongness to this knowledge that worries him. The longing is an empty
void, it offers no respite except in obsessive toil, and no hint to use for pursuit and yet...

And yet Thorin is drawn past the Greenwood and the Misty Mountains to the lands known only by
his brother and those that followed him and whatever peoples may dwell there. Perhaps, he thinks
(wishes, hopes, prays), they will come east to join in his grandfather's campaign or to fill the gaps left
by those who do. Perhaps he will finally find them.

It is a foolish dream. But oh, how he dreams.
Summer gives way to fall in the Blue Mountains, the blaze of autumn foliage starts in the valleys and pushes its way upward past streams and waterfalls and onto the high crags. Goldenrod and heather add bursts of yellow and fuchsia as leaves fall, crinkled brown husks blanketing the ground around beams of blackened timber, iron nails left to rust. Birds flit from tree to tree, branch to branch, never perching too long in one place.

Gradually the forest will reclaim what was taken, first by industry and then by fire. Creeping and slow over paths and broken hovels, bare bones discarded and left to rot. Vines will smother and crush, mold and mildew will devour, saplings will burst from the rubble.

The forest takes up where dwarves left off and pays no heed to something so fleeting as shadows in the night, the flash of steel and teeth.

“All set, then?” Loti asks, straightening Bomber's coat, brushing stray bits of lint from the fine brown wool. “You've got your papers?”

“Yes, dear, in me bag.” He replies, patting the leather satchel at his side.

“And your kerchief,” His wife hums to herself, buffing a brass button with the edge of her apron.

“I've an extra just in case,” Bomber assures her.

She turns her attentions to his mustache, smoothing it over with trembling fingers. “Are you sure you don't want a few more rolls? The prince is awfully busy, you might be waiting a while and it wouldn't do to be getting hungry—”

Bomber stills her hands between his own, far larger and softer – she works so hard at the loom and spindle, how is it that Mahal has blessed him with such a tireless and determined wife? He smiles as Loti lets out a shaky breath.

“The prince is a fair minded dwarrow, Atamanel, I'm sure he'll hear me out.” He squares his shoulders and rocks back on his heels, a stance he's been told he adopts when presenting a particularly clever mine diagram. She's not entirely convinced, he can tell, but pats his cheek and wishes him well as he heads out the door.

Bomber walks down the trail towards the settlement through sunlight filtered orange and red by the autumn canopy, fallen leaves crunching beneath his boots. A high shriek in the distance brings him to a sudden stop, heart pounding and on the verge of running back. It tapers into something rough and nasally and dies away. The call sounds again, alone and distant. Bomber lets out a breath and chuckles to himself.

“Just some elk, Bom,” he mutters, giving himself a shake, “looking to find himself a lady.”

He continues on his way, down through the trees and over streams until the forest breaks and opens onto the edges of the settlement. Everywhere there are signs of transition, shanties abandoned for weeks or months, new ones built from bits and pieces of the old, some areas thinning out while others become cluttered. The roads are gouged with deep ruts, wagons and carts coming in and going out again. A dwararrow down on his luck hocks wares cobbled together from other's leavings.

Bomber passes the miners' halls, unnaturally quiet and unkempt. A sign outside the tavern reveals that the price of ale has gone down again, he ought to buy a cask before the next wave of travelers
On the other side of the square stands the Mountain Hall. Even now, so many years after it was finished and with a fair number of accomplishments under his belt, Bomber still feels a sense of pride looking on it. There are not many dwarrows back in Erebor who can say they've worked on a grand hall built above the ground. Though, Bomber concedes as he walks under the front archway, there also aren't many darrow in Erebor who would find such a venture praiseworthy either.

“Shamukh,” a dwarf with ink stained hands and droopy eyes calls out as Bombur makes his way across the hall. “State your name and business.”

“Bombur, son of Bôfbur, here to speak with the prince.”

The old dwarf shuffles through the various papers and ledgers on his desk, consults a slate covered in cramped writing before huffing in annoyance. “You've requested a private audience, have you?”

“Erm, yes,” Bomber replies, shifting from side to side. The door guards have glanced his way in interest. “I can come back another day if his majesty is too busy...”

“Not necessary, take a seat beyond the door, his majesty will see you at his convenience,” Ink stained fingers make a quick note then wave him off. Bomber hears the old dwarf mutter under his breath as he turns away, “Least some are still asking.”

One of the guards opens the door for him. Bomber picks a bench in the antechamber and makes himself comfortable. He opens his satchel, digs out one of his wife's lovely oat rolls and gives it a few nibbles, contemplating.

He's spoken with the prince on numerous occasions (can't help but chuckle at the thought – him, speaking with royalty!), about mining and colony expansion mostly, and so feels like he shouldn't really be as nervous as he is. The prince has always been, in Bombur's experience, a thoughtful and practical dwarrow, attentive to his duties and open to counsel from any who've a mind to offer it. Still, Bomber has always felt slightly at odds in his company for no reason he's been able to fathom.

An insistent little noise, the exaggerated clearing of one's throat, breaks Bomber from his thoughts.

“His majesty will see you now,” Master Dreig, the prince's aid, drawls. Beetle bright eyes flick down to Bombur's shirt and back up again, clearly unimpressed.

Bombur glances down, flicks crumbs from the fabric and shuffles to his feet, the remains of his roll quickly tucked under the flap of his satchel.

Dreig leads him through a narrow hall, wood panels effortlessly transitioning into polished stone as they enter the mountain. Bomber can't help but draw himself up as they pass into the cooler air, it's a deceptively simple thing, the merging of hall and cavern, the technique easily his greatest innovation.

They enter the prince's audience chamber. The room is wide with a high ceiling but quite plain. Master Viti, may he forever feast in Mahal's Halls, had intended to adorn it with intricate carvings of Cirth and protective runes but the prince had refused. There were far more important tasks that warranted the craftsman's time. The prince himself sits behind the single distinctive feature of the chamber, a massive lump of quartz, cut and polished across the top to serve as his desk.

Lamp light catches on its facets and imperfections adding a glow to the space that lights the prince's braids and beard, giving them the appearance of brushed bronze. He glances up to regard them as Dreig draws himself to attention.
“Imdin!” Dreig intones, staring straight ahead, back rigid with authority. “Zu tawdirthi emulkekhu uzbad-dashat Frerin, Thráinul, Thrórul, Melhekh id-'urd undu!”

Bomber taps closed fists to his chest and bows low, “Shamukh ra ghelekhur aimâ, emûlhekhizu! Bombur Bôfburul zai -”

“Let us dispense with the formalities.” The prince interjects.

“Y-yes, your highness.” Bombur stammers and raises his head.

“I confess I’m intrigued by your request for this meeting,” Prince Frerin says, steepling his fingers in front of the many ornaments and fastenings woven into his beard. Bombur feels that familiar mental discord, the sense that he should be seeing something simpler, humbler. “Especially as no purpose was detailed.”

Bomber draws himself back to the matter at hand, trying to shake the vague feeling of disloyalty. “I come seeking leave to return to Erebor for myself and my family, your highness.”

“I confess I’m surprised, Master Bombur,” the prince leans back in his seat, eyebrows rising steeply. “I hadn’t thought you to be the type for military campaigns.”

“I’m not, your highness, me and mine are wanting nothing to do with any fighting.” Bomber breathes in, stalling the rush of words. His hands begin to pat at his belly, jittery as he tries to find the right words. Respectful words. “The thing is, you see, your highness, it’s a matter of, well-”

“Master Dreig, please retire until I summon you again.”

The dwarrow starts at this sudden instruction, eyes flicking from the prince to Bomber and back. After a moment’s hesitation he bows his head. “Aye, emulkekhizu.”

The silence stretches out as the prince’s aid crosses the room and exits through a small wooden door, continues as Bomber listens to the dwarrows steps echo across the stone floors.

“Bombur.”

He focuses his gaze back to the matter at hand. “Your high-”

“Frerin.” The prince insists.

“Prince Frerin.” Bombur demurs.

“Prince Frerin.” Bombur answers honestly, even if it sounds ungrateful. At least Dreig isn’t here to glare at him, appalled. “Sixty years and in that time you’ve proven to be a dedicated and loyal dwarrow and the finest architect I could have asked for. Half the mines and this very hall do you credit. You’ve built a legacy for your children here, why would you cast that aside?”

“It’s for the children that we want to leave.” Bomber meets the prince’s gaze. “Sixty years and in that time you’ve proven to be a dedicated and loyal dwarrow and the finest architect I could have asked for. Half the mines and this very hall do you credit. You’ve built a legacy for your children here, why would you cast that aside?”

“I know.” The admission comes out on a sigh as the prince lowers his gaze.

Bomber rounds his shoulders down, attempts to make himself smaller in the face of his prince’s shame.
“I feel adrift.”

“Your, highness?” Bombur asks. The utterance had been low and half a murmur, he's only half convinced that he'd even heard it.

“I feel adrift. I had such high aspirations for this venture,” Prince Frerin says, half to himself. He extends his hand and runs it over the flat plane of quartz at his back.

The Prince pauses for a time, staring at the walls, or staring through them. When he continues his voice is different, empty somehow, in a way that brings to mind the shacks he’d passed in the settlement, husks of homes with function but not purpose. “I don't think I was meant for this. I feel detached from all around me, like a specter saying what needs said, doing what needs be done, but without substance or impact. I feel drawn out past reason.”

Bombur shifts from one foot to the next, the air feels too heavy to breathe. He's no word smith, not like his brother. What can he say to comfort a prince when he hardly understands what he's hearing? “You've done well by us, my prince, the world has gone all mad but that isn't at your feet.”

“And what more can a prince ask for, than the gratitude of his people?” Frerin brings his hands together in one swift motion, the sound sharp and startling. “Come then, Bombur, I assume you've brought your papers?”

“Yes, your highness.” He replies and digs into his satchel, much relieved to be moving onto matters better understood.

“Master Dreig!” The prince calls as he rounds his desk. Immediately footsteps can be heard coming down the hall. The aid darts through the doorway, giving his master rapt attention. “Retrieve Master Bomber’s contract.”

It takes only a few minutes before Dreig is back, parchment in hand. Prince Frerin takes both copies and amends each with a careful hand, Dreig standing at his shoulder with a bottle of ink and blotting paper. As he writes the prince gives his formal assent.

“Bombur, son of Êfbur, your obligations to the colony have been met, you are free to pursue other opportunities at your own discretion.” Frerin hands Bomber's copy back himself, a small, tired smile on his lips. “The best of luck to you.”

“Thank you, your highness.” Bombur accepts the document gratefully and backs himself to the door, bowing every few steps. When he reaches the hall he turns to leave.

“And Bombur?” He turns back, sees the prince giving him a look he's not sure he can read. “Mukhuh Mahal bakhuz murukhzu.”

Bombur bows again, as low as he can manage. Then he leaves, pulling at the loop of his braid, immensely relieved.

*~*~*~*

Bilbo discovers the note tucked into a journal of pressed flowers, half buried in an unruly pile of his mother's correspondences.

The whole of the study is like that, a mishmash of random trinkets and papers overflowing one surface to colonize another, all blanketeted in a layer of dust. He hasn't entered this room since his mother's death, even as he pulled himself back from the edge of wasting despair. There's too much of her here. He can't help but shy away, even after all this time, from the bits and pieces that remain of
her dreams, can't help the sharp constriction in his chest. It's because his eyes dart from the angled script on crumpled parchment worn soft from many readings that he sees the little scrap of paper.

He sets aside his rags and duster, runs his fingers over smooth leather and lets the thick pages fall open. The note marks a flower the size of his palm, once white but yellowed with age, five petals furled like lace at the edges pressed above emerald leaves the shape of spearheads. Gordonia's namesake.

The letters are looped and graceful, his mother's hand.

*I never meant you pain.*

He finds himself, much to his surprise, striding down the road to Bywater in his shirtsleeves and vest, trousers still dusty from cleaning and without a coat. The air is cooling as the afternoon bleeds into evening, even so he hardly misses it. Still, it's not done to go visiting only half dressed. He doesn't even have a handkerchief. He hasn't sent a note. He's going unannounced.

A burble of laughter bursts past his lips.

Aunt Belba will be appalled when she hears of it.

He presses on, picking up speed, heart pounding in his chest.

Curious glances follow him, those out for an evening stroll and faunts readying their nets and jars for the last of the season's lightening bugs. He pays them no mind and makes excellent time, the dark expanse of Bywater Pool appearing in no time at all it seems. Fishermen line the shore, hoping to tempt a bass or trout to nibble on their bait and dragonflies zip along the surface, darting after midges and gnats. It's an idyllic sight, catching the pinks and oranges and reds painting the clouds and setting them dancing across each ripple and wave. Bilbo turns his back to it and continues into Bywater proper, making his way up the gentle hills with little springing steps.

He rounds a bend and slows as the Sackville-Baggins' smial comes into view. Young Otho sits on the steps, expression sullen as he watches his sisters play in the garden. As Bilbo comes closer he hears voices from inside, at once shrill and then quiet, an argument just on the edge of hearing. The girls squeal and run to hide behind their brother as Bilbo opens the gate.

"It's just cousin Bilbo, you shrilling chickadees, shove off," Otho says, pushing them away.

"You ought to be nicer to your sisters, you know," Bilbo says, watching as the girls dash past and out the gate.

"And now I have to run after them, thank you so much," the lad grumbles and rises to his feet. "I could be walking out with Lobelia Bracegirdle, you know."

"She's a bit young for you, don't you think... only just... twenty... I'm sorry, what on earth is going on?" The voices from inside have risen steadily in volume and pitch and can now scarcely be ignored, though the actual words still allude him.

"Aunt Franklinia has shown up with Gordonia's thing," Otho calls as he slams the gate behind him. "Mother isn't happy about it."

"I beg your pardon?"

He doesn't get an answer as Otho trots off down the path. Very possibly he's being ignored. Bilbo turns to consider the smial's scarlet door. It's shut tight against the autumn evening's air, as are the
windows and the curtains too, he notices with some bafflement. Surely they should be drawn back to let in as much light as possible while the sun is dimming in the sky.

He sets the thought aside, there are more important things to see to. Not much can be done about his appearance but he takes a moment to straighten his vest and dust off his breeches anyway. When he’s satisfied that he looks at least half way presentable he gives the cord a pull.

Nothing much happens.

The bell is little more than a faint tinkle and the voices neither quiet nor pause. He reaches up and gives it a good sharp tug, hooks his thumbs into his vest pockets as he waits.

Still nothing.

He rocks on his heels, debating whether he should leave and come back again, properly dressed and announced this time, but finds himself very much reluctant to do so. A sort of feeling is settling in him, something between an itch and a sneeze which leaves him restless and a bit anxious.

What had the lad meant by Gordonia's thing?

He spends a few moments staring down the doorknob then grasps it firmly and slowly, slowly opens the door.

“I'm being unreasonable?” Camellia Sackville-Baggins shouts, Bilbo would recognize her reedy voice anywhere. “You dragged the thing half way across the Shire! What are people to think?”

“You aren't listening, you never listen!” Franklinia, at least Bilbo is quite sure it isn't Gordonia, snaps back. The argument continues as he peeks into the entry hall. “I'm not keeping this thing any longer, not without Gordonia, folk will ask too many questions.”

“Excuse me,” Bilbo calls, making his way down the hall towards the heated voices. “Hello?”

“I've done more than my fair share.”

“Oh? Oh? At least you knew what you were getting into! You didn't tell me anything, didn't even send a letter!”

He finds them in the parlor, faces red and fists clenched in their skirts, curls in disarray. Each glares at the other, eyes fiery and their words dripping venom. They haven't enough attention to spare for Bilbo's entrance though he makes no effort to hide.

“Of course I didn't, you nitwitted goose, what if someone else came across it, what if they read it.”

“Nitwitted am I? I'll have you know-”

“No, now, I'm sorry but I really must interrupt,” Bilbo says, raising his voice above the din. The two women whirl on him, eyes round as saucers. Camellia rears back, sputters something incoherent through her shock and outrage. “You can hardly complain, I could hear the both of you from outside on the path. I should think I wasn't even the first to notice.”

The sisters go pale. Franklinia lowers herself into a chair, pulling a kerchief from her cuff to fan at her face. Camellia's nostrils flare as she breathes in deep, lips pinched and shoulders gone ridged. She glares down at her sister, as though the blame could solely be placed at the younger's feet. In the relative silence that follows Bilbo notices a strange sound, repetitive and oddly wet. It comes from somewhere low to the ground.
“Do... do you hear that?” He asks, darting glances around the room.

“Certainly not,” Camellia snaps, “now I must ask you to leave at once, you've intruded on a private, family matter.”

“No, I'm sure there's something...” He steps further into the space, ignoring Camellia's icy glare. She tries to step in front of him but he sidesteps her easily. He's sure – yes, quite sure now – that the muted noise is coming from beneath the love-seat and so he bends down to lift up the lacy dust ruffle, Camellia hissing vehemently behind him.

“This is unseemly! Not that I'm at all surprised -”

Bilbo stops listening after that, not in a conscious effort to disregard what his uncle's wife has to say (that would be quite rude) but because he is so utterly astounded by what he finds that there's no room for anything else between his ears.

Curled up amidst the dust is a dark haired faunt, cheeks wet and splotchy, eyes puffy and red, sucking on one tiny fist as she stares vacantly ahead. Her smock is dingy and threadbare, her hair pulled back into a bonnet that does little to hide the grease and snarls. Bilbo reaches out, tentative, to touch her. Mossy eyes shift to watch, her breath coming swifter and shallow, but she makes no sound when Bilbo brushes his fingers over her shoulder. He lays himself down on his side, can hear Camellia snap something indignant about it, and reaches with both hands to take a gentle hold beneath her arms. She whines briefly but doesn't fight him as Bilbo pulls her out from beneath the love-seat and, sitting up, holds her in his lap.

Camellia closes her mouth with an audible snap and looks away.

“This is Callalily,” He says, voice hardly more than a whisper. There can be no doubt, there's no other faunt this young in the Sackville clan. But she's too young, and too big to be so young. It leaves Bilbo lightheaded and shaky, but what other explanation is there? “Where is Gordonia?”

“In the river, the vile girl!” Franklinia groans, wringing her hands.

“There's no proof of that, don't be hysterical,” Camellia scoffs and tips her chin up, looking down at Bilbo with disdain. “She's run off, mark my words. Pity, if she'd done it before the thing was born she'd have saved us all the trouble she's caused.”

“But Camellia -”

The argument continues but Bilbo doesn't hear it. Everything seems to have gone foggy around him, sounds come as if through a layer of thick packed wool, he looses focus on the scene in front of his eyes, feels a strange sensation pricking at his fingers and toes. Callalily shifts where he has her propped up and he looks down at her, to doleful eyes gazing right through him and feels his blood turn to ice.

Gordonia's thing.

He does something very un-Baggins-like indeed.
Thorin is a Disney princess with a sword, a beard and majestic eyebrows who WILL MARRY ONLY FOR LOVE! He's not a stud horse. Thorin has FEELS.

As I said in the beginning notes, the next chapter will contain a lot more of Bilbo and goings on in the Shire. It's also where things really start moving. I told myself it wasn't going to take me this long to get to that point, but it did. I'm kinda hoping the next chapter won't be as long as this one, but I'm not going to kid myself, it'll probably be longer. ^o^, I might end up splitting it into two parts, we'll see.

As an aside, I'm an iceberg writer. Meaning I've got a lot of notes sitting around about stuff that may never even get mentioned in the fic, if there's something you'd like to see, or something that was mentioned that you'd like to read more about - let me know and I'll try working it into the narrative! I'm also open to answering questions (provided I can do so without spoilers).

TRANSLATIONS:

All Khuzdul was translated using The Dwarrow Scholar's dictionary or taken directly from various helpful documents provided on the site. Words marked by a (*) were cobbled together using existing words from The Dwarrow Scholar's dictionary because no canon word existed that would suit my purpose.

faunt – a young hobbit, a child

Emûlhekhizu – Your Majesty

Satnarîn ishmikhî Thrór, Melhekh id-'urd undu – Stand and all hail Thrór, king under the mountain!

Inûdoyuh – my son

Emûlhekhulagûlab* - the ruling council of Erebor (lit. Majesty's counsel)

Mudûmel - Comfort of comforts (an endearment)

Uzbadnâtha – princess

Nadad – brother

'Amad – mother

Shomakhâlinh – guardian who is female

Lavamâlh* – cleaners, rather like janitors, garbage collectors and night-soil men all rolled up into one.

Mahal abbanhu – Mahal's stones (essentially: God's balls. Generally considered rude)

Omrib: art/skill of the soul (a craft or profession which a dwarf can pour themselves into with single-minded abandon. This helps them ease the longing they feel for their One.)

'Adad: Father

Sanze*: perfect (pure/true) one. Word for a dwarf's One. The other half of their soul.

Shamukh! - Hail/greetings
Imdin! Zu tawdirthi emulkekhu uzbad-dashat Frerin, Thráinul, Thrórul, Melhekh id-'urd undu. - Enter and make yourself known to his highness Prince Frerin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór, King under the mountain.

Shamukh ra ghelekhur aimâ, emùlhekhizu! Bombur Bôfburul zai – Hail and well met, your majesty. Bombur son of Bôfbur at your-

Mukhuh Mahal bakhuz murukhzu. - May Mahal's hammer shield you.

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